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THIS IS NOT A BURDEN, IT’S A JOY: An interview with Ben Ratliff

Ben Ratliff is an American journalist, music critic and author. Ratliff is the son of an English mother and an American father, growing up in London and in Rockland County, New York. From 1996 to 2016, he wrote about pop music and jazz for the *New York Times*; his books include *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound* (Faber, 2011) and *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen to Music Now* (Penguin, 2017). He is a Visiting Assistant Professor at New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

*Every Song Ever* is a fascinating book, because it embraces popular music in all its diversity and multitudinous rather than focussing in on any specific genre or type of music. Ratcliff, like me, appears to revel in the possible connections and networks between all the different music available to us in the 21st Century thanks to the worldwide web and aggressive reissue campaigns from most record labels. The music of the present and the past mingle like never before, asembled into playlists, recommendations and sprawling digital music collections. *Every Song Ever* encourages the reader/listener to engage with music without reservation, but not without critical faculties intact; it's a kind of manual for making connections, a lively, witty and engaging one at that. Having greatly enjoyed my read, I tracked down Ben Ratliff online and asked for an interview.

Rupert Loydell (RL): *So, I’ve come a few years late to* Every Song Ever*, which I found in the bookshop only last week. As I flicked through the book, I was intrigued by the range of music listed at the end of each chapter, and the suggestion that the way we listen now to music is different. Finally, I thought, someone might be listening to music in the same way I do. It turns out that isn’t totally correct (I’ll come back to that), but the book does seem to offer a way of listening based on particular associations and themes rather than genre or type. Do you think that’s a fair assessment?*

Ben Ratliff (BR): Yes. My issue is breadth—I would like for people to listen broadly, and think about how and even why they’re doing it—and even, as Pauline Oliveros suggested, to be aware of when they’re not listening. The book is a suggestion for ways to be curious about music that aren’t constructed along the usual lines for selling music, which often boil down to genre, though not always by that name. The book offers twenty possible ways, inevitably shaped by my own experience; they’re not the only ways, and my hope is that the reader will start thinking about their own. We have direct access to a lot of music now. Are we going to do something with it? It’s not so much a question of ‘how do I access it?’—that’s probably going to result in a discussion about internet platforms and I want to leave that to you—but rather, ‘how can I create a spirit of curiosity toward it?’

I like tradition in music a lot, because tradition is about participation with commitment—both to music-making and community—and inherent to tradition is the idea of a slow change over an endless amount of time. I like genre much less, because I think genre is best used for selling. Selling’s fine, sometimes even necessary, but it’s limited.

One nice thing genres do is they can help bring people together a bit faster, especially when a genre is associated with a scene. (You’re into hardcore? Cool, so am I. Where are you from? Etc.) As Christopher Small put it in *Musicking—*a book I love—being a participant in musical culture is often a form of saying ‘this is who we are’. Aligning yourself with a genre can help define ‘who we are’ for you—if you desire that help.

Music provides comfort and emotional security; likewise, it creates fear and anxiety, for people of all ages—fear of wasting time with the wrong music, or of being aligned with people who might not be ‘your type’. Spotify, Apple, Tidal, Google, Youtube, Amazon—they know how this anxiety works. They are very smart about using it to their advantage. They use it to sell to you more efficiently.

Genres and moods—fine for sorting out music, as far as they go. But I don’t want to be restricted, or self-restrict, by genre or someone else’s non-thinking definition of a genre or a ‘mood’. And I definitely don’t want to be reduced to a dataset by streaming services and recommendation engines, which/who are very sophisticated at defining the tastes of ‘someone like me’—not me, but someone of my approximate data-set. I know they can recommend outside of one’s preferred or usual genre, whatever ‘preferred’, ‘usual’ and ‘genre’ mean; I know they value the notion of ‘discovery’; but I don’t buy it. I don’t want to be sized up and preyed upon as a pile of data which can only, and in the best circumstances, represent who I was yesterday. I didn’t get into music to be treated like that.

A, I like music a lot; B, I want to keep moving toward what I do not know. For me B follows from A. There is a great amount that I don’t know, and few thoughts make me happier than that. But I do like to have some prompts or pointers, things to remind myself to focus on. I need ways of listening. Keys, basically. You know how building superintendents walk around with huge key rings on their belts, sometimes maybe 50 keys? I want to have 50 keys to music at all times, and I want to change up those keys regularly, adding new ones and outgrowing others. And I do not want the keys to be provided by an algorithm, or even a combination of a person and an algorithm.

Music has been a great part of what has helped me grow up and evolve—not just figure out who I might be in static form. I like the spirit of ‘this is who we are’, and I also feel wary of it—too often, it becomes ‘this is who I have been’. I do have allegiances to traditions and scenes. But I also want to listen with my ears and body first. I prefer to respond to something right in the music itself, in the listening to it (or playing it) in real time, rather than how it’s been sectioned or apportioned or sold. I am fascinated by the way music moves and how that motion echoes the complexity of human motion (and emotion), and answers certain environmental needs—the speed of life in certain areas, the rhythm of certain circumstances, etc. I’m generally skeptical of the boxes around music. I would prefer to keep changing up the things that I’m sensitive to. I would like to be able to open new doors with my new keys.

Let’s say you’ve heard Scott Walker’s ‘Nite Flights’? (The Walker Brothers, 1978) If you have and it stuck with you, you might remember the insane polytonal tension in the strings at the beginning? You might hear it again in 808Melo’s backing track for Pop Smoke’s 'Welcome to the Party’. (2019) What is that tension doing in those two songs? How else can you connect them? When you make this connection, at the very least, your ears are opened—you may be on the lookout for that feeling in other music (and there is a ton of music that has this feeling), or other analogous details. The seller has no place in this scenario. If I like Scott Walker and Pop Smoke, the seller has no clear strategy to keep selling to me. Great. It’s up to me. I’ll keep listening actively. This is not a burden, it’s a joy.

I like to take two things that are thought to be far apart and put them side-by-side in order to see the relationship between them, without meaning disrespect to either. Generally I can do this by moving toward what I do not know. Often it just means opening my ears—music is around many of us a quite a lot these days. Sometimes it means turning on a radio station you’re not familiar with or taking up a suggestion from something you read. Sometimes it just means listening to stray things in the street and instead of reflexively thinking ‘not for me’, thinking ‘that, too, might be for me’.

Then, when you find something that fascinates you, you can find out about what lies behind it: the people who made it. Listen to their music, go to their performances, talk to people about them, and when their music becomes your own music, start wondering: what does this music do for you? What do you seek from it?

RL: *One of my ways of judging a music book is that it makes me want to listen to the music it talks about. Your book certainly did this, in various ways: sometimes it gives a new specificity to a piece of music (‘listen to the drum break 2 minutes in’), sometimes because of the thematic context you situate work in. How did you come up with your twenty ways*?

BR: I think I began with repetition because I love the effect of it music created (or changed) by Conjunto Libre and James Brown and Tom Moulton and Steve Reich, etc.—repetition is in most music, and I often wonder about the mystery of it. Then I thought about other things I listen for, or tend to attune myself to. In general, the book’s focus moves in the direction of objective (things that may be demonstrably there in the music) to subjective (ways a listener responds to it).

RL: *And when did you decide to not use music theory or specialist language in your book? Is that something you avoided when writing your reviews previously?*

BR: I’m glad you feel that I don’t use music theory or specialist language, because some people tell me I do. No decision there—it’s just my training and what sounds right to me. I’m not an academic, I’m a journalist. I hang out every day with people who aren’t into music that I’m into. I would like them to be curious about what I’m into, just as I’m curious about what they’re into.

RL: *In your chapter ‘Blue Rules: Sadness’ you state that ‘[t]here is a culture around any music, and how you understand that culture influences how you hear. Listening is augmented hearing, hearing through certain layers’ (Ratliff 2017:95) and go on to discuss the ‘consensual code’ that exists between maker and taker (or maker and listener?); you also use the phrase ‘intellectual filter’. Could you expand upon that? Might there be a non-consensual code as well? Is your book attempting to create new intellectual filters through its thematic discussions and grouping of music?*

BR: I am imagining ‘codes between maker and taker’ as consensual. But yes, I’m definitely trying to imagine new filters. More than that, I would like it if readers thought in terms of imagining their own filters, or their own cultures of listening. Many of the old cultures of listening have been corrupted by analytic tools, and the people who program them, which/who are trying to become the custodians of our cultures of listening, and succeeding. So we have to at least rebuild these cultures of listening, if not come up with new ones.

RL: *I’ve always thought that music is most interesting when it hybridises and evolves, taking on board both new technologies, new concepts and new influences. Would you agree?*

BR: I do feel that manifest innovation/hybridization/evolution in music is great. Sorry, here’s a list: Hildegard of Bingen, Bach, Debussy, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Morton Feldman, Charlie Parker, John and Alice Coltrane, Bo Diddley, Tom Jobim, Steve Reich, Caetano Veloso, Violeta Parra, Can, Joni Mitchell, Betty Carter, Brian Eno, David Bowie, Prince, Björk, Ornette Coleman, Joan La Barbara, Funkadelic, Café Tacuba, Outkast, Grouper, Frank Ocean, Earl Sweatshirt, Jason Moran, etc.—these are heroic people. All of them are innovators, hybridizers and evolvers. It’s not just that I love their music; I read their stories and they give me courage. I’m sure you feel the same.   
  
And having said that let me put a big asterisk on it. My listening has probably been shaped most by listening to jazz, so I’ll use jazz as an example to describe why I am wary about placing hybridization, evolution and innovation above other values. If I were to favor structural innovators above people who play with beautiful tone, rhythm, economy, or even virtuosity but are perhaps *not* structural innovators, I’d be misunderstanding what jazz is about. This isn’t just a ‘musicianship’ issue—the question of whether Sonny Stitt is a technically better player than Ornette etc.—it’s a communication issue and maybe even a generosity issue. In jazz, rhythm and tone communicate really seriously; they are such high-level human functions. I don’t think they can be placed below hybridization, evolution, etc.

RL: *I was quite surprised to even see mention of the notion of ‘truth and honesty’, which you mention in passing within your chapter on virtuosity (Ratliff 2017:84). Isn’t this something that really can’t be judged? Surely it really is an assumption by the listener, dependent on when and how they hear the music? Even if it’s intended by the musician to come across as such, is it not a sleight-of-hand using established musical, lyrical and other triggers? (I’d also suggest that a lot of this might involve non-virtuosic, or seemingly non-virtuosic, music rather than virtuosic, or indeed what you also refer to as ‘flash’. [Ratliff 2017:88])*

BR: I wrote a bit more about virtuosity and ‘truth’, sort of a continuation of this chapter, in an essay for *Virginia Quarterly Review*. (Ratliff 2018) I think your scepticism about truth and honesty is right on the money—this is a very slippery subject. There is a particular kind of virtuosity that turns me off which essentially gets beyond even the possibility of ‘truth and honesty’ because it seems to revel in its rhetorical powers—it seems to say to the listener, even if in a charming way, ‘shut up: I’m nailing this; I will have the last word, and you will like it’. A lot of shredders make me feel this: they practice a kind of virtuosity which seeks to dominate you. I prefer music in which the listener can get in there somehow, share in the song and find a place within it, rather than just having to stand back and bow in ritual awe.

I gave a talk on this a few years ago and someone in the audience afterward said ‘but you know, some people actually like to be dominated’. He’s right. And also, some of the most platinum-level dominators—I cited Sarah Vaughan and Art Tatum—are quite capable of letting you in when they want. I think Sarah Vaughan could do both in one song: dominate you and let you in.

RL: *Readers of* Punk & Post-Punk *will, I think, be interested in the way you discuss punk and metal in you chapter ‘Blue Rules: Sadness’, where you set them up in opposition to each other:*

Punk is busking and journalism and dogma and accountability and unity and the humanities. Metal is virtuosity and philosophy and disposition and rumor and misanthropy and science. It is both higher and lower class than punk. It values virtuosity, as a practical matter, as pure get-me-out-of-the-projects striving. At the same time it chases after highly abstract and almost decadent notions about darkness and blasphemy. It’s not always smart, and it is seldom very kind, but it tries to feel inevitable. It wants to rule you.

Metal is weighed down with ideas, with all the burden of being heretical.

(Ratliff 2017: 98)

*So my first question would be: do you really see punk as journalism and dogma? My own take on it would be that is joyful rebellion and self-expression, not only political and social in nature, but also involving a musical freedom from the virtuosity of much 1970s music. (I’m aware that US and UK punk have different roots).*

BR: I think it’s an important part of punk, if not a necessary part, to be taking a position—the non-virtuosic, desperate little person setting up a little bit of equipment with limited means, in a temporary state of specific agitation, doing it themselves, yelling ‘enough!’—'I won’t open letter bombs for you!’, ‘oh bondage, up yours!’, ‘I don’t want to walk around with you!’ Or the Big Boys’ ‘Fight Back’: ‘Are you ready to take a stand? Make a fanzine, make a band!’ (1993) Whereas metal kind of sits in awe or horror, feeling broader and more continual emotions. Metal is more grandiose in sound—it conjures horizons— and says more grandiose things, like ‘could it be the end of man and time?’ (Black Sabbath, 1971) or ‘Fall on to your knees for the phantom lord!’. (Metallica, 1983)

RL: *And could I ask you to expand on that idea of metal being ‘both higher and lower class than punk’?*

BR: Metal has a bigger ambit and bigger ambitions… the seeds of it existed many centuries ago. In that respect, it can float a bit freer of class. But it’s pretty blurry. When DRI (Dirty Rotten Imbeciles) went metal in 1985 everything got scrambled.

RL: *As someone who doesn’t really engage with metal much, I’m amused by your note that ‘[i]t’s not always smart’ but also somewhat taken aback by your claims that it is ‘weighed down with ideas’ and the ‘burden of being heretical’. Is that theologically or musically heretical? And what ideas? Surely, metal too – apart from subgenres such as Death or Black Metal – mostly revels in sexuality, lust, drink and drugs; the archetypal ‘having a good time’ that rock, in many ways, has abandoned? What am I missing?*

BR: This question reminds me that metal is so vast. Sometimes I struggle to understand what is at the root of it, and whether those roots are still rooting. Strictly by numbers, at this point there must have been more metal bands from the vexed and haunted subgenres than there have been of good time metal. ‘Having a good time’ was there in the background of Black Sabbath, even if the lyrics were often full of a very old and serious dread about war and greed and religion. I mostly mean theologically heretical but yes, also musical.

RL: *How would you think about or locate post-punk as a genre?*

BR: The first thing I think about post-punk is that it was where I came in. When I first learned about punk I was heartbroken that it was basically done—the Damned were already making terrible records. But I had family in England, and on one visit there as a kid I remember seeing PiL play ‘Death Disco’ on *Top of the Pops.* (1979)I knew that this was the man from the Sex Pistols, but so much of the rest of it was confusing. That was one of the best confusions I’ve ever had, I think, right down to the ‘is it music?’ level.

In the following few years I learned much about what we now call post-punk from the radio—often WNYU, the New York University radio station—which in 81-84 was playing a span of music on its afternoon show that generally suggested something like ‘post-punk’, though did anyone other than a few music critics use that term back then? (I have never looked into this—do you know?) On WNYU in 1981 you’d hear both spinoffs of the Sex Pistols—PiL and the Professionals—as well as the Revillos, Fad Gadget, Bush Tetras, the Fall, Liquid Liquid, ESG, Kid Creole and the Coconuts, and the first Duran Duran single. Some of those bands would finally be understood as ‘post-punk’ according to the way Simon Reynolds laid it out in *Rip It Up And Start Again;* some wouldn’t, I guess. (Reynolds, 2005) There was a lot of pop in it, and also a lot of funk in it and a lot of noise in it. The Minutemen—they were pretty post-punk, no? Even if they’re not in Simon’s book. (I like Simon’s book.)

Categorizing isn’t my favorite sport. But I think post-punk (if we are going to generalize as we did with punk and metal) generally takes the question of ‘let’s rock’ or ‘could it be the end of man and time?’ and instead, through sound and word, says ‘what is rock?’, ‘what is man and what is time?’ It also seems to have an interest in media and ritual and symbols.

Also, the live music I saw in New York City before I could get into bars legitimately was mostly hardcore edging into whatever it edged into—sometimes a kind of post-punk. Bad Brains, Minutemen, Black Flag, Flipper, Urban Waste, Void, DRI: these were my bands, because there was so much going on in them—motion and weird energy—and even if they were mostly rooted in rock, they used speed or slowness or entropy or dynamics that would make you wonder if they’d just blow apart. It was something I hadn’t heard in any other music and had never imagined.

I still listen to new hardcore bands who have slowly developed that swing and that attack from the early 80s: Gouge Away, Torso, Blackball. They are fabulous and (not but) not particularly innovative.

RL: *I’d like to pick up on how we listen in the 2010s and 2020s. You start the ‘Introduction’ to your book with the declamation that ‘We are listening in the time of the cloud’. (Ratliff 2017:3) This is indisputable, even if we don’t actually use the cloud, as a statement about how much music is now available to us, but I was somewhat taken aback by your suggestion in ‘Purple, Green, Turquoise: Endless Inventory’ that ‘[w]e can pretty much wave bye-bye to the completist music-collector impulse’. (Ratliff 2017:112)*

*Why was I taken aback? Because I am one of those completist music-collectors, and actually you mention several artists whose work I collect: Anthony Braxton, Nurse with Wound, Fela Kuti, and to a certain extent Coltrane and Evan Parker. (I’d want to add Sun Ra to your list, perhaps* Marquee Moon *era Television too. [1977]) But those individual collections sit within a much more general collection, and they are also pertinent to a couple more points.*

*Firstly, my – and I suspect many others – inability to simply be content with one album by an artist, and secondly the fact that whilst the music may be accessible online (or ‘in the cloud’) I know I am not alone in still collecting vinyl and burning CDs. You can call it fetishization of the object, but I don’t want my music, my accounts, my creative writing and my telephone texts all in the same place... I still sit down and listen to music, I still want a cover, even a handmade CD cover, and tracklist to look at whilst I do so. Vinyl with lyrics sheets and 12-inch square art is even better!*

*The inability to simply appreciate one album is a foible, I know. If only I’d just stuck with Nico’s* Desertshore *(1970) and not bought the rest, if only I’d only bought the best three Van de Graaf Generator albums once I’d bought* Still Life *(1976), and not everything they ever did… But that urge to know it all, to listen to everything took over. Like your book, albums lead to other albums, artists flag up other artists, and it never stops; the net has just facilitated that, in both the present and historical sense. It might be my age or disposition, but I don’t think obsession and collecting has gone away. How convinced are you?*

BR: Physical collecting of music hasn’t gone away among those who started doing it 40 years ago, or whatever—I would never assert that it’s gone away in you!—but I think it’s vanishing among younger people. That’s what I meant. Among my college students at NYU, many of whom are deeply interested in music, I almost never meet physical completists. They’re just not interested in the step-by-step, acquiring the objects, filling-in-the-stamp-album thing. Rather, they are ‘obsessed’. They get into the state of mind of the musician, and click into a collective appreciation of the musician. They relate, and their relating is not grounded in a physical assembly of stuff.

RL: *Now I’ve confessed all, perhaps we could discuss how you got such a wide-ranging knowledge of, or taste for, music? How is it that some people can be so eclectic and others not-so? Is it openness or simply being indiscriminate? What is music for anyway?*

BR: All criticism is autobiography. My music-critic job at the *New York Times* for 20 years was, theoretically, to write about all music except for classical-tradition music, because there were four or five critics at the paper doing that alone. So I wrote about as much as I could and looked out for as much as I could—music that could be described as jazz, metal, R&B, hip-hop, Mexican and Caribbean and Brazilian and African music, etc.—and I was happy that way. I went against specialization mostly because I don’t like being a member of a club, although I did get to know a lot about a few musical traditions in particular. What do you know: now I seem to write about the positive effects of interdisciplinary listening and I teach at an interdisciplinary university.

I also think one’s tastes are a direct result of what’s available to you at any point. For me, growing up an hour north of Manhattan in the 70s and 80s, that was disco and Philly soul and rock on local pop radio; temporary and unusual crazes aided by the record and film industry that that sold a ton of records, like Scott Joplin and the *American Graffiti* soundtrack (Various artists, 1973); early MTV; then New York-area jazz radio, post-punk on WNYU, and all-ages CBGB matinees.

But these days, ‘what’s available to you’ means what you allow yourself to be available to you, since a whole lot may be available to you.

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