



The Jazz Ear: Conversations Over Music

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An intimate exploration into the musical genius of fifteen living jazz legends, from the longtime *New York Times* jazz critic

Jazz is conducted almost wordlessly: John Coltrane rarely told his quartet what to do, and Miles Davis famously gave his group only the barest instructions before recording his masterpiece “Kind of Blue.” Musicians are often loath to discuss their craft for fear of destroying its improvisational essence, rendering jazz among the most ephemeral and least transparent of the performing arts.

In *The Jazz Ear*, the acclaimed music critic Ben Ratliff sits down with jazz greats to discuss recordings by the musicians who most influenced them. In the process, he skillfully coaxes out a profound understanding of the men and women themselves, the context of their work, and how jazz—from horn blare to drum riff—is created conceptually. Expanding on his popular interviews for *The New York Times*, Ratliff speaks with Sonny Rollins, Ornette Coleman, Branford Marsalis, Dianne Reeves, Wayne Shorter, Joshua Redman, and others about the subtle variations in generation, training, and attitude that define their music.

Playful and keenly insightful, *The Jazz Ear* is a revelatory exploration of a unique way of making and hearing music.

The Jazz Ear: Conversations Over Music Details

Date : Published November 11th 2008 by Times Books/Henry Holt and Company (first published 2008)

ISBN : 9780805081466

Author : Ben Ratliff

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Music, Nonfiction, Jazz, Biography

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From Reader Review The Jazz Ear: Conversations Over Music for online ebook

Barry Hammond says

Ben Ratliff has compiled a very interesting book of his interviews with giants of jazz, wherein he doesn't start by asking the normal journalistic questions they've probably been asked a thousand times before. Instead, he asks them to pick four or five examples of their favourite music and they listen to the tracks together. This begins a usually relaxed and informal conversation that goes off in unexpected directions and sometimes winds up in the very core of what each artist is about as a musician. His choices of interviewees is as varied as the conversations themselves and I learned about several people I was unfamiliar with, such as pianist Andrew Hill, trombonist/composer Bob Brookmeyer, pianist Hank Jones, and composer composer Guillermo Klein, as well as different sides of more familiar figures like Pat Methany, Wayne Shorter, Sonny Rollins, Ornette Coleman, Bebo Valdes, Roy Haynes, Branford Marsalis, Paul Motian, Maria Schneider, Diane Reeves and Joshua Redman. A must-read for any jazz fan. - BH.

Mike says

I found this set of conversations with jazz musicians about their idols and inspirations to be greatly readable and enjoyable. You don't have to know much about the technical aspects of music to follow along, but it does help to have a basic knowledge of (and interest in) the basics of jazz history. I knew little about most of the musicians included in this book, but enjoyed reading about them anyway, and now feel inspired to track down some of their recordings and get acquainted with their work (especially Guillermo Klein and the solo work of Wayne Shorter and Paul Motian, to name a few).

And the interview with Ornette Coleman is priceless. Like his music, that dude is *out there*.

Liam says

Ben Ratliff will probably feel like stabbing me to death if he ever reads these reviews, hahaha... O.k., in a nutshell I think Mr. Ratliff's taste in music is, for the most part, pretentious in the extreme- typical white boy hipster bullshit. Having said that, and I realise it's an extraordinarily cruel thing to put down in print, he is so erudite and such a talented writer that it is worthwhile to read his work anyway... [more to follow]

Andrew Scott says

A great and I mean great book of meetings/conversations that Ratcliff has with 15 living jazz legends concerning there take on not just jazz music but music in general. He asks each of his interviewees to pick a handful of tracks that they can listen to and talk about during their time together. Most of the artists don't even pick jazz tunes which gives a great insight into how they come about their style of play outside of the traditional jazz scene. Highlights for me are the chapters with Ornette Coleman and Branford Marsalis.

Moktoklee says

This book was a very interesting read. All the interviews were fun. Pat Metheny as always is excellent at verbally expressing his ideas, a skill not necessary for a musician. Wayne Short was hilarious. I found Brantford Marsalis' interview very insightful. I sort of have better understanding for point of view of the Wynton now, although I still don't agree with him.

Another thing. Someday I want to write like this, in the big magazine interview style. Maybe it's the knowledge that what's being said and what's going on is real that give the writing a mythic charm, but there's something to it that I just love.

Nan Santamaria says

Quite insidery, but it has very interesting anecdotes from the jazz greats. Also puts the genre in present context.

Rebecca says

This is a fabulous collection of interviews with a variety of jazz musicians, including Wayne Shorter, Branford Marsalis, Guillermo Klein, Dianne Reeves and Ornette Coleman. But this is not a series of transcripts. Ben Ratliff captures subtle inflections of character in these conversations centered around a shared listening experience. Ratliff sits down with each musician to listen to music of others, and in so doing, reveals how these artists react to and dialogue with their musical influences. Sometimes the "set list" from one of these visits creates an intriguing link between the interviewees (such as Joshua Redman's experience with listening to Sonny Rollins, who is interviewed in the third chapter). In addition to the observations made by the musicians, Ratliff's ability to unobtrusively insert himself as both commentator and investigator makes this a superior reading experience to most "meet-the-artist" type books.

What I appreciated most was the variety included in these listening sessions. Sacred Harp, Kyrgyz music, Frank Sinatra, Rachmaninoff, Wagner...all of it is fair game for these musicians, who unapologetically cross the lines of categorization to search for organicism and authenticity as both performers and listeners. The questions of how performers/composers listen is one that is underexplored, and I would hope to see more of this type of study incorporated into a discussion of compositional and improvisational aesthetics.

Kristen says

Ratliff asks jazz musicians from several different generations and styles to select several songs that point to "what matters" most to them. It's an interesting approach, and he gets a wide variety of responses, covering jazz, pop, and classical.

The selections also serve as a framework for some biographical history and great anecdotes about other jazz musicians.

Although many of the subjects are well known even to casual listeners, Ratliff makes all of the interviews interesting and enjoyable, whether the reader is familiar with the musician or not.

Jonathan says

Some nice stuff but actually a bit disappointing - less discussion of the music than I hoped for and some contributions from less than exciting modern performers.

Al says

This book is a series of short essays based on discussions between the author and various jazz musicians. The discussions take place in the course of listening to various music selected by the musicians as most meaningful to them. I liked the book, although I understood virtually none of the technical music discussions (and sometimes not much of the musicians' philosophical musings either -- they were "far out, man...") But Ratliff is a good writer, and it was interesting to view the distinct personalities of the musicians, many of whom are well-known names, even to jazz ignoramuses like me. (Plus, it's fun to have some of the music to listen to; thanks, Jack!) Mike, I think you will like this; I'll save it for you.

HBalikov says

I enjoyed the fresh approach to interviewing great musicians. Focusing on music pieces that were key to their development allows Ratliff to go in various directions depending on the music (which they then listen to together) and you learn something different depending on whether the artist is familiar to you or someone you might want to listen to in the future.

James says

My rating is based entirely on my satisfaction with the reading experience, which was compromised by the fact that much of this book is seriously over my head. Some very technical discussions of music. Might very well be a five-star book (people who are a lot smarter than I am seem to think so).

Jesse says

This was a pretty fun book to read. Although I felt that most of the segments were a little short. It seemed like what made it into the book was just the surface of what Ratliff and the musicians probably got into when they met. My two favorite chapters were the Pat Metheny and Paul Motian. Metheny because he listed and talked about Paul Bley's solo on All The Things You Are from Sonny Meets Hawk, and Motian because he's one of my favorite musicians these days. I enjoyed the Maria Schneider chapter as well.

Paula Koneazny says

Not as enthralling as Ratliff's previous book about John Coltrane, but all the same, some decent conversations about jazz and music in general with eminent jazz musicians like Diane Reeves, Maria Schneider, Branford Marsalis, Joshua Redman, Sonny Rollins & Wayne Shorter. There are listening lists following each segment plus a discography of notable music written and/ or performed by Ratliff's interlocutors. Nevertheless, a CD or DVD would have been a welcome complement to this compilation.

Jim says

These interviews to music feel a little less artificial than the average newspaper puff piece and give you a sense in places about how musicians might actually talk between themselves. Ornette Coleman's digressions into what he thinks of as philosophy seem a little unlikely for everyday conversation, but he could be like that. The only frustration is my not knowing enough music theory to really understand the references to various chord progressions.
