



Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty

Ben Ratliff

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What does it mean to listen in the digital era? Today, new technologies make it possible to roam instantly and experimentally across musical languages and generations, from Detroit techno to jam bands to baroque opera—or to dive deeper into the set of tastes that we already have. Either way, we can listen to nearly anything, at any time. The possibilities in this new age of listening overturn old assumptions about what it means to properly appreciate music—to be an “educated” listener.

In *Every Song Ever*, the veteran *New York Times* music critic Ben Ratliff reimagines the very idea of music appreciation for our times. As familiar subdivisions like “rock” and “jazz” matter less and less and music’s accessible past becomes longer and broader, listeners can put aside the intentions of composers and musicians and engage music afresh, on their own terms. Ratliff isolates signal musical traits—such as repetition, speed, and virtuosity—and traces them across wildly diverse recordings to reveal unexpected connections. When we listen for slowness, for instance, we may detect surprising affinities between the drone metal of Sunn O))), the mixtape manipulations of DJ Screw, Sarah Vaughan singing “Lover Man,” and the final works of Shostakovich. And if we listen for closeness, we might notice how the tight harmonies of bluegrass vocals illuminate the virtuosic synchrony of John Coltrane’s quartet. Ratliff also goes in search of “the perfect moment”; considers what it means to hear emotion by sampling the complex sadness that powers the music of Nick Drake and Slayer; and examines the meaning of certain common behaviors, such as the impulse to document and possess the entire performance history of the Grateful Dead. Encompassing the sounds of five continents and several centuries, Ratliff’s book is an artful work of criticism and a lesson in open-mindedness. It is a definitive field guide to our radically altered musical habitat.

Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty Details

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From Reader Review Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty for online ebook

Gphatty says

This book is surprisingly really good, despite its poor title/subtitle. The proliferation of different methods to access music is not really the focus. Instead, I came away thinking about the many different ways I already approach listening to and thinking about music, ways that I had not yet put to words. (Plus many other concepts I am dying to put into practice.) Ignore the title -- if you like obsessively listening to music -- if you are inspired by writing that makes you want to seek out what is being described -- this is a great book for you.

Cody says

After hearing Ben Ratliff speak on What's the Point, I was somewhat surprised by how little of *Every Song Ever* directly deals with the internet's effect on music (this is the core subject in the podcast interview). That's probably for the best, though, as plenty has already be said about the current and future state of art in the digital age. Instead, Ratliff sets out to remind us of the prodigious amount of sound that we have at our fingertips and urges us to make the most of it.

To help us out with this, Ratliff offers up twenty ways of listening more meaningfully, including a handful of themes, ideas, traits, etc. to listen for. For instance, try resisting the urge to bounce from half-finished track to half-finished track and, instead, dive deeply into a body of work. Or challenge yourself to concentrate at length on, say, a two-hour-long Morton Feldman piece (which, thanks to digital technology, can finally be heard as an uninterrupted recording). If nothing else, listen widely--there is a nearly limitless world of incredible music just a click or two away, so don't let Spotify or Pandora pigeonhole your playlists. This last point, in particular, Ratliff really nails, as he pulls together a wonderfully varied playlist from each chapter, reminding us that even the most disparate sounds can yield insightful common ground.

In short: listen, listen, listen! We have no excuse not to. After all, "Algorithms are listening to us. At the very least we should try to listen better than we are being listened to." (P. 8)

Michael says

It's rare that I write reviews anymore these days--despite the ongoing wish to write more of them--but today I feel the need. I need to WARN PEOPLE ABOUT THIS BOOK.

Read the title of the book, including the part that comes after the semicolon. Now, understand this: The book is NOT THAT. This is a collection of twenty brief essays about a variety of concepts as they are applied to music across a broad variety of genres. They are interesting, and if this book had just been titled something more accurate (Maybe "Some Music Essays," taking a cue from Earl Sweatshirt), I would have given it three stars.

But NO! My assumption about this process is that the query letter for "Some Music Essays" was not super-

compelling to agents, so the author added an introduction that makes some broad comments about how accessible music is these days, and how we have such a variety of music at our disposal, mostly for free.

And then, the rest of the book has **NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT**. There's not even an epilogue or conclusion that somehow draws all of this to a close. The 20 chapters don't tell you shit about "ways to listen," unless things like "listen for loudness!" "Listen for quiet!" "Listen for improvisation!" count in your book. They don't count in mine. Not in mine!

Does this book wrestle with issues of ethics in modern music listening, when you can with the mildest of effort, hear most music without ever paying any of the artists? Nope, nothing touching on that. Does it wrestle with the changing role of musical artists in this new landscape? Nope. Does it even give a basic run down of some of the actual ways one might listen to music, given the plethora of online options for discovering new music? Nope, nothing there either.

None of these topics actually pertain more to an age of "musical plenty" than they would have to music in the 1970's. They have nothing to do with now, other than the fact that you can now hear most of these songs without buying them.

However. I finished the book, and being a huge music geek, I also enjoyed it.

But do you know that feeling you get when you take a sip of a beverage, expecting it to be one thing, and it turns out to be something completely different? That sense of shock and disappointment? You thought it was lemonade, but it's Mello Yello? You thought it was Dr. Pepper, but it's Diet Pepsi? You thought it was coffee, but it's just very dirty water? Think back to all those times that has happened. That's the feeling I had throughout this book, whenever I glanced back at the cover, and thought about what could have been.

Last whine, then I'm done: In these chapters, he doesn't even go as far as to say "Listen for X." That would have been a clearer book structure. Nothing is actually cast as a way to listen to music . . it's all just essays on broad concepts.

Okay, that's it. I'll shut up and move onto the next book now.

Jason Das says

I tried to read it over a couple of weeks and just can't make it happen. I enjoyed reading several promotional interviews, and I'm sympathetic to and interested in the thesis, but as a book I just don't get the point. It's like reading philosophy, which is about the most boring and pointless kind of reading for me. There's probably potential for a great 15-page essay to be extracted from here? Should be a magazine article or a pamphlet, not a fat book.

Josh O'Kane says

From my *Globe and Mail* review:

As much as it pains creators, songs are now eminently discardable. Without anchors to keep listeners coming back for more, they can easily vanish into the ear's ether without leaving a trace in the brain. This is where Ratliff's new tools come in. They're a series of connection points to draw between songs and bodies of work that don't rely on genre – itself a corporate construct, really, with geographic and socioeconomic implications – for their definitions. Drake and the Ramones emerged from very different cultures, but the listener's background – where they're from; who their friends are; what their parents listened to – is no longer a reliable predictor of taste.

Every Song Ever compels a very specific, almost distracted, kind of reading. It, too, is tailored to life in the stream. I found myself with headphones shoved in my ears, toggling to a new song on Spotify every few minutes. It was necessary to keep track of all the little moments Ratliff wants readers to connect. I think, and write, about streaming a lot. The technology has introduced me to hundreds of artists I'd have never encountered without it, all thanks to ease of access. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't usually rely on genre to guide me.

Ratliff, on the other hand, wants to tear down the barriers those kinds of constructs impose. So it's handy to have YouTube or Spotify or Tidal or Apple Music fired up as he draws you through dozens of fanatically detailed analyses of, and anecdotes about, songs, albums and artists to find mutual connections and new ways to enjoy them. Drake once suggested that nothing was the same; Ratliff is trying to say that in some way, everything is.

The full review: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/b...>

Lee says

Loved this, more or less -- here's the official playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/fsgbook...>

Devon says

This book is really wonderful when Ratliff's bringing his passion for music to one particular song. He's clearly got a huge library of musical knowledge, and in describing the particular virtue of one piece of music, he'll make references to other pieces of music from diverse genres. For example: "...the first movement of Henryk Gorecki's famous Symphony no. 3 does something related to both Lawrence and Faure, also through chorale-like means: it starts and ends with figures rendered in deep bass tones, layering more and more figures that are progressively higher in pitch, building a stack of moving parts. The piece creates an atmosphere, a weather that keeps changing and becomes mottled, a mesmerizing and stupefying pattern, with lonely details poking out in the cycles of each layer, a bit like the accent notes played on guitar in Nick Drake's 'Road.'" That's the kind of enthusiasm that pushes you to go out and take advantage of your instant access to Gorecki's piece, to listen to whatever inspired that passion in Ratliff. There's lots of passages like this in the book, great entryways into music.

My bigger issue with the book is when Ratliff takes a macro view of things, he seems to reach for a grandiosity that just isn't earned. The most bizarre passage comes in a chapter where he's discussing the completionist instinct for fans of the Grateful Dead. Here's the metaphor he uses:

"You don't strike a child, because you understand the child has qualities that will redeem whatever he did that made you mad at him. He will be affected by your hitting him, possibly forever, and his eventual greatness of soul might eclipse yours. He is not a fact; he is a story, and his story is yours, too. To live is to follow that story."

There's nothing else quite this egregious, but Ratcliff is prone to soliloquizing about his chosen topic in ways that are frequently tedious or poorly supported. It's as if there were times where he feels his passion for music is too gleeful, and he needs to add some gravitas to add more appeal to the high-culture market.

It's worth checking this book out, though, because Ratcliff's way of constructing paradigms for listening is a departure from most other writing about music appreciation. There's chapters on repeating notes, slight discrepancies between musicians, and perfect moments in music. Yes, there's a lot to roll your eyes at here, but there's also a lot of great recommendations wrapped in often-great contextualizations.

Sarah says

I quit reading this book for a few reasons... it wasn't what I expected from the premise and introduction, and I didn't like how the author wrote about music. It came across as pretentious and a bunch of references to songs you didn't know without describing them... I couldn't get through it. Not to mention statements that assert nick drake couldn't have made music if he were depressed, rather than just sad... I couldn't do it. Would not recommend, unless you need some stock phrases to sound pretentious.

Greg says

The title is completely misleading. This book has nothing to do with the ways we can listen to music (files/vinyl/videos/cds/etc.,) but talks about slowing down music, speeding up music, etc. Good grief, DJs have been mixing/changing speeds, etc., for at least 40+ years, rendering this book absolutely pointless. "Maybe we need slow funk. Is there anything more worthwhile, more worth slowing down for?" asked this author early in chapter 2. Well, how about a first kiss, a great meal, maybe the best sex ever, maybe slowing down to the speed limit so we won't get a speeding ticket. Maybe our hand motion as our fingers close in on a nuclear detonation red light. Maybe general hand motion in other situations. Maybe life in general. How this author duped anyone into publishing this is beyond understanding. But I know one thing: I can't take this book back to the library fast enough. BS book of the year.

Indran Fernando says

The playlists have some interesting stuff from off the beaten path (Derek Bailey!). But Ratliff's diverse tastes in music and metaphor-laden writing style fail to conceal his lack of insights. Basically, take a verbose Pitchfork review, subtract most of the substance, then expand it to 200-some pages, and you have this book.

Other complaints:

- 1) Ratliff suggests that music appreciation needs an update for the age of the cloud. Far from achieving that update, he didn't even convince me why it's necessary. Eclectic tastes in music are not new, and neither are eclectic mixtapes.

2) As others on Goodreads have pointed out, Ratliff starts by critiquing genre as a capitalist construct, but then spends the rest of the book describing music in exactly those terms (psychedelic rock, ghettotech, doom metal, etc).

3) In his eagerness to find common ground between disparate styles of music, he tends to strip it of its context, which leads to some pretty absurd generalizations. Example: Playing music fast is like "putting a sweater on a dog" (it's for show). I think it's pretty obvious that this isn't **always** the case, and that various tempos can reflect various feelings or muses.

Critics are notorious for being out of touch with the creative process, but this critic's out-of-touch-ness somehow still managed to surprise me. I'm just glad I know where to find a detox :D
<http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/D...>

Deke says

Fantastic premise, fantastic introduction, and then... no. Rather than providing true insight into the mechanics and perception of music, it reads like a music critic's proudly diverse iTunes account. Yes, many great songs mentioned, but knowledge or taste does not equal insight, and exposure does not equal perspective.

Seth Fiegerman says

It's been said that social media creates a "filter bubble" for news consumption, which only reaffirms our existing beliefs as echoed by the friends and contacts we use to choose to follow on Facebook and Twitter. In this book, Ratliff effectively suggests that the recommendations of streaming services create a similar filter bubble for our musical tastes.

In these twenty creative essays, Ratliff attempts to break that bubble by pushing us to think beyond genres like Indie Folk and Punk Pop and focus on concepts that run through a more varied mix of music. Concepts like loudness and virtuosity and repetition.

At their best, the essays provide a history of music and a new way to listen to songs we may already know.

Slowness, he writes, is the ultimate trust fall between artist and audience. The audience must trust that there will be a payoff to the slow progression; the artist must trust the audience won't give up and leave. It also tends to be the hallmark of more mature or aging artists who are slowing down themselves -- but not always. And speed, it's opposite which he also writes about, what is the point there but to dazzle? Is that enough?

Sadness, on the other hand, may not be what you think it is. The blues, he writes, was not intended to be remorseful so much as resilient and mobilizing. But we hear what we want to hear, or what pop culture now tells us to hear.

If nothing else, you are guaranteed to find plenty of new artists and songs to stream thanks to this book.

Ian Hamilton says

Proof that even one's favorite and consistently trusted critic can be way off the mark sometimes. This collection of 20 essays accomplishes almost nothing, especially failing to espouse the book's subtitle: Twenty Ways to Listen to Music in an Age of Musical Plenty. This is little more than 200+ pages of an author's self aggrandizement. And to think I actually paid for this book...UGH.

Herzog says

The unfulfilled promise here is that this book is going to help you better appreciate the enormous amount of music available on the streaming services. As a consumer of the music on those streaming services, I could definitely use some help, but this book didn't deliver it. That said, I couldn't help but to be impressed with Ratliff's knowledge of the music, from a very wide range including jazz, punk, rap, classical and more, that he used to illustrate the qualities of listening discussed in the book. I believe that writing about music is difficult because it doesn't really lend itself to description.

I read this book in a paper edition. Every time I read a book about music, I am frustrated because short of going to Youtube or a streaming service, the music being discussed is not readily available. Ratliff seems to be a friend of Alex Ross. Ross's book *The Rest is Noise*, incorporates the music directly into the book - a technique that I wish all authors of books about music would incorporate. It's even easier these days with e-books.

The concept behind this book is certainly to be admired, but don't expect it to deliver what it promises.

Stephen Jenkins says

I'm a musician and this a book about music. I guess it's not surprising that there was much about it that troubled me. My biggest problem is my own high expectations for a NYT critic to help with the huge onslaught of music available to us this day. I think his subject was too big for him. At any rate, there's too much purple/confused prose and outright errors. Example of the former: "A perfect moment is often wordless, or indirect if has words. It is the song blushing: an unplanned or perhaps only semi-planned occurrence in which the music suddenly embodies its own meaning. The conscious mind of the singer or the instrumentalist goes out the window." Example of the latter: "The other thing "My Baby" did was to put three loud eighth notes on the four to close out every four bars." If the drummer played three eighth notes in the fourth beat, it would make the fourth beat one eighth note two long unless the time signature adjusted for it.

I did enjoy his lists of music at the end of each chapter and made playlists on Spotify to find out what the pieces he wrote about that I didn't recognize sound like.

This book reminds me of David Byrne's "How Music Words." Both of these writers are like the blind men with the elephant. They have a piece of the story, but are missing out on the overview.
