

[PREVIEW] Tim Riley Interview

From: **Music Journalism Insider** | info@musicjournalisminsider.com

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How did you get to where you are today, professionally?

I started out in choirs all through school and church in Boulder, Colorado, at St. John's Episcopal and later in the Fairview High School Festival Chorale under Ron Revier, the choirmaster who ran a booming program there. He encouraged me to compose, and I did my first conducting there. I wanted to be Leonard Bernstein, who still visits my dreams, and watching his Norton Lectures on PBS as a teenager lit me up. I could tell by what he was doing with "musical metaphors" in Beethoven's Sixth Symphony applied to the Who's *Quadrophenia*.

By the time I got to high school, I had grown very serious on the piano and did well in concerto competitions. I majored in performance and English as an undergraduate at Oberlin, and then did a Master's in Piano at Eastman. I was very lucky, I had supportive parents and teachers, and a thirst for the repertoire. I kept thinking I would master the piano and after a while step on to conducting, but I just kept playing and learning more music, playing for violists and fiddlers and as many chamber groups as I could.

At Oberlin, a Winter Term course assigned some G. B. Shaw, and that writing just floored me, he championed Mozart in London in the 1880s, imagine—Mozart needed championing. I developed a Beatles ExCo course, and chasing down a bibliography I sensed a space for a general-interest musical critique, and it seemed odd to me that so many major critics at that time hadn't done this yet.

So I found very helpful mentors who helped me grind out a book proposal with a complete outline and two sample chapters. At that point (c. 1984), the discrepancies between the Parlophone and Capitol catalogs remained largely misunderstood, and I felt that to make the argument about this band that UK track sequencing seemed very important. Then, when the book appeared in 1988, those first Beatles CDs appeared all with UK track layouts, so it all came together nicely. I can't tell you how many people recoiled when I described the project, "The last thing we need is another book on the Beatles!"

Did you have any mentors along the way? What did they teach you?

Piano teachers count the most, first Doris Lehnert and Eloise Ristad (for composition, author of *A Soprano on Her Head*) in Boulder. Then Eugene Pridonoff at the Eastern Music Festival and Arizona State (for one year), then Joseph Schwartz at Oberlin, and finally Rebecca Penneys at Eastman. Along the way, contact with figures like Malcolm Bilson (fortepiano) and Lee Luvisi and Claude Frank (both at Aspen) kept pushing me. I loved going to music camp in the summers, taking scores to orchestral rehearsals, talking with players. If you were a musician growing up in Colorado, you pointed yourself towards that Festival tent. We called Juilliard the Aspen of the East.

[Robert Gottlieb](#) bought *Tell Me Why* for Knopf in 1985. When I got that first contract, I chased down everybody I

could. The very kind [Vince Aletti(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vince_Aletti)] gave me good advice, cued me into me how little response he'd gotten to all these amazing *Rolling Stone* essays I'd read growing up. I took [Robert Christgau](#)'s rock history course at the New School, and [Dave Marsh](#) answered my letter and sat down for a long talk about the Beatles. It felt very heady to actually meet these people I had admired for so long.

[Milo Miles](#) was the first music specialist to pull my writing apart and kick my prose into shape at the *Boston Phoenix*, and it was part trauma, part delirium, to arrive in those storied pages and cover the Pixies, Roy Orbison's last solo album, and the Who at Sullivan Stadium in 1989, my first cover. I had just missed Mission of Burma, but later became friendly with bassist Clint Conley. I also wrote a ton of book reviews there and conversed with [Mark Moses](#) and [Jimmy Guterman](#), both of whom I miss terribly. I'm still in touch with [Joyce Millman](#), film scribes [Charlie Taylor](#) (*Opening Wednesday at a Theater Or Drive-In Near You: The Shadow Cinema of the American '70s* [Bloomsbury USA]), and [Stephanie Zacharek](#).

The Lennon biography came along in 2003, and it felt overwhelming at first; starting can prove a very difficult phase of the process. A dinner with [Peter Guralnick](#) really got me going, he was a peach and gave me lots of encouragement. Big up to [Chris Salewicz](#), another critic who met with me when I sought him out as a young pug. And the late [Dave Laing](#), author of *Sound of Our Time* and a great Buddy Holly book. If you recognize or worked with any of these teachers or bylines, please drop a line. The fellowship of critics needs to play catch-up with the fellowship of musicians.

Walk me through a typical day-to-day for you right now.

It really depends on my teaching schedule at Emerson College, but I do plenty of remote teaching as well, so I have an office off our kitchen where I have my headphones and laptop, and I also work in the dining room. While writing the Lennon biography I roped off 3-4 hours after breakfast for quiet writing, that early chunk of the day served as my best brain time, and I needed at least six days a week and often seven to keep the flow. It was endless and included many anguished moments, eight years. A very bumpy ride, and each book turns out to be its own epic of bumpy rides. Then I nap, big napper ever since adolescence, and the second part of the day is set aside for housekeeping, maintenance, reading, research, listening, more reading, and evenings mostly with film and crime procedurals.

What does your media diet look like?

Like a lot of people I left Spotify during the dark times for Apple to join my kids on that platform, and was overjoyed to find better fidelity. I think we're in a curiously privileged time for consumers, after having spent large portions of my income on music most of my life we've suddenly landed in a subscription model where everybody wins except the musicians.

But I don't go out much anymore. Boston's a curious place; you can go out for months and months and never recognize anybody, and then meet like ten friends at a single show. One of my favorite gigs took place at the Paradise in the early 1990s, it was Nick Lowe's Cowboy Outfit, and every other person there had sold me a used record. I miss all the used record store browsing.

I pick shows carefully. My older son and I caught Kacey Musgraves last year, King Princess opened, got that familiar thrill of seeing a young star at a crucial developmental moment, on the verge of breaking out. We went down to Hartford to see the River tour in 2016, but I'm quite upset about Springsteen's ticket arrangement, and Jon Landau's tone-deaf quotes, so I'll give this tour a pass probably. Felt the same way about the Broadway stint, too, and never made it all the way through the HBO film. I go to hear the BSO at Symphony Hall several times a year, and just heard the Berlin Philharmonic there; stupid good. I catch Richard Thompson and Rosanne Cash whenever possible.

I listen to NPR in the mornings and read the *NYTimes*, although since Trump I've threatened to cancel my home delivery almost every day. It's like Republican pollsters write those headlines. I stopped watching Eat the Press because they kept booking that hair-brained KellyAnne Fibomaniac. At night I listen to audiobooks, and have worked through a bunch of amazing material; I also listen to *Democracy Now!* the great unsung news source of our era. I think Rachel Maddow just clobbered the Russian story; she's a champ in all kinds of ways. Harry Shearer is another great under-praised weekly broadcaster. One of our great comics and Simpsons' vocal talents, he owned the Katrina story, played that contemptible, Wonder Bread Army Corps Engineer theme song, "Let Us Try," but nobody picked up his stuff.

How has your approach to your work changed over the past few years?

I'm very curious about the the inexplicability of taste and how it changes over the years. I had many classical colleagues in music school who found my rock interests unfathomable, and the same on the other side. I'm glad to have lived during an era when we saw those barriers between high and low bend somewhat, and the Beatles really forced everyone to grapple with those biases.

I had always considered the Grateful Dead a strange act with two drummers (overkill) and weak vocals. I saw them just once in 1986, they were masters of arena shows by then, and it left a big impression. I have slowly come around to their sound, most of it from the early period, and I now adore Garcia's singing and solo stuff and bluegrass. I think they rank as some of the strongest Dylan interpreters, and that's also ironic given that they back him on one of his very worst albums. I never understood why Garcia wouldn't simply stand up to him and say, "Nobody should put this horrid 'Joey' on ANY record..."

I passed through a similar rubicon with the Doors, who made zero sense as a band with NO bassist. Come on, man, get a damn bass player. And then later in my thirties something clicked and something mysterious and playful suddenly leapt out at me, I'd still like to write about it just to figure it out. I buy into this theory that the music we fall in love with as adolescents stays with us, when I got my first transistor radio at 10, it was all "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" and "Leaving on a Jet Plane," and weird curios like "Spill the Wine" and "Ma Belle Ami," alongside late Beatles, Badfinger, "Maybe I'm Amazed," Joni Mitchell, Pearl, Three Dog Night... I have no critical distance on a lot of that stuff. It's still a place to reconnect and center my listening.

At the same time, I was conquering more challenging stuff on the piano and learning the symphonic repertoire. I remember the first time I heard Beethoven's Waldstein piano sonata vividly, at 17, it sent me over the moon. The first Beethoven symphony that hooked me was the Pastoral, in like the 8th grade, and I still love comparing recordings of that one. I heard Mahler for the first time in Aspen at 16, the Second Symphony, with a Mexican-born

conductor there named Jorge Mester, another thunderbolt moment—I had to hear it all. James Hepokoski taught a notorious Mahler course at Oberlin, and writing about the Fourth symphony for him, comparing the double variation slow movement with its model, the slow movement from Beethoven’s Ninth, was another high point.

How do you organize your work?

Well I work in notion.so lately, very convenient, and use an app called Readwise which helps me store and access all my highlighter notes, tremendous time-saver for book reviewing. I like Pages but will have to use MSWord a lot. I’ve been a total Mac guy for most of my life. Enjoy reading mostly on my iPad, but dabble in print still, don’t like that banal argument pitting them against each other. My eyes constantly scope out and harvest more than my stomach can take, or than hours in a day can contain, so I always have stacks of things to read and listen to as if I might run out of things to feed my brain, and always feel a bit sheepish about never getting through it all. I’ve slowly accepted this as a work mode.

Where do you see music journalism headed?

It’s embattled for sure right now but like journalism itself, with demand exploding at every turn. Those bean counters will get the monetizing side done, they always do. We just have to stomp on them repeatedly about the greed and inequity, they basically want to funnel as much money upwards as possible and impoverish their customers. They’ll end up with zero customers. Rapacious late-phase capitalism has turned very dreary since Reagan, who can never get blamed enough, but at least everybody’s talking about it and the problem has a transparency almost as if it’s French Revolution times.

But I’m sure it’s felt like this before, and the young turks coming up have a lot to teach us. I love zooming students like [Hunter Harris](#), and *NYTimes* theater critic [Maya Phillips](#) (another Emerson graduate), into classes.

What would you like to see more of in music journalism right now?

More diversity, obviously. What we need is 600 years of [Margo Jefferson](#) and [Danyel Smith](#) and [Hanif Abdurraqib](#) and [Nelson George](#) and [Jeff Chang](#) to “balance” the scales. Us white guys have screwed things up royal.

What would you like to see less of in music journalism right now?

Well the clubby, trendy, cliquish, “we’re the cool kids” stuff got old a long time ago, but it feels timeless. Like the t-shirt says, “You’ve never heard of my favorite band.” And it’s worse when it’s well-written and copiously edited, as if it had ideas, when it doesn’t really. Beware the contrarian idea positioned as relevant. That’s for Hollywood. In a lot of ways, rock’n’roll reacted against the phony Hollywood idea about reality, I show my students *Singing in the Rain* to talk about how teenagers like Presley not only didn’t see themselves in that world, they couldn’t believe anybody might look to that as either entertainment or any reflection of what life felt like.

What’s one tip that you’d give a music journalist starting out right now?

Write, write, write, maybe especially and mostly when YOU DON’T FEEL LIKE IT.

Read, read, read, everything you're passionate about and at least one book of pure history every six months, our lack of historical knowledge scares me. And creates monsters like Tr*mp.

And then pitch until you think you're a pest and then pitch some more. Many editors use the "twentieth pitch is a charm" tactic to weed out the flakes.

Don't let the first 2,000 rejections get you down, and don't take rejection as a sign of rejection.

How do you typically listen to music, both in a professional and personal sense?

As a teenager, I saved up for a Fisher 400 tube receiver and those deathless, warm, and generous KLH bookshelf speakers. A couple CU students helped me out, and steered me towards a new Philips 212 turntable, which served me for years. I still listen on KLHs, although a different pair, my originals need servicing. But now, I have a Harmon Kardon receiver which I quite like, Apple Music, and a hard drive full of weird samizdat. I've grown very fond of Beats wireless, Ultimate Ear Fits molded ear pieces, a Bowers and Wilkins set with groovy bass, and listen a ton during my train commute and at night. Those UE Megabooms bluetooth speakers sound terrific, and we run a Hyperboom in the kitchen. I enjoy the strange tension between size and sonic punch; Libratones also deliver, as does Como audio, Trulli, Tribit, JBL, and Sangean. I like hearing stuff on different players and making sense of the distinctions. I was a stereo snob who's gone mono.

What artist or trend are you most interested in right now?

It's country pop's world to my ear, Kacey Musgraves reigns sublime, Kelsea Ballerini on deck, Nikki Lane ready for her closeup. And just across the line in folk, Joni Mitchell made a Newport comeback at 78, what a moment.

What's your favorite part of all this?

Discovering new things, new takes on old material, or fresh voices with something new to say. Reading [Warren Zanes](#)'s new book on *Nebraska* took me back to that album, long an obsessive favorite, and then I stumbled on Aiofe O'Donovan's cover album. She's touring that set now, but then I find that she's recorded with free jazz trumpeter Dave Douglas as well as Chris Thile, and I consider myself somewhat plugged in but how have I missed her?

Also, hearing new things in familiar material. The 2009 Beatles remasters still have this continuously revelatory aspect to them, and Peter Jackson's technical developments isolating voices seems to have taken things up another notch. I marvel at how everybody hung in there with the style and kept it going into Geriatric Redemption. It was never supposed to happen that way, and yet it makes an odd and silly kind of sense. "Glory Days" once made those untrustworthy 30s feel comic and misty-eyed; last season Springsteen duetted on it with Paul McCartney, 80. We forget how unlikely that once seemed.

What was the best track / video or film / book you've consumed in the past 12 months?

Oh that Dan Charnas book, [Dilla Time](#), such a bomber. That made me hear rap in a completely new way and I still barely grasp the nuances of Dilla's achievement. But last year had many terrific entries: I wrote about [Chuck Berry: An American Life](#), by RJ Smith, and [Lightning Striking](#), by Lenny Kaye, but there's also [Rap Capital](#), by Joe Coscarelli.

If you had to point folks to one piece of yours, what would it be and why?

Well I wrote the Lennon biography as an American to answer that notorious hack job, and very proud to get praise from UK reviewers. They're very possessive about their John over there.

Anything you want to plug?

If any of this tickles you, sign up for [the riley rock report on Substack](#), because once we go bad and nationwide, nobody's safe.

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