



On Celestial Music: And Other Adventures in Listening

Rick Moody

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Rick Moody has been writing about music as long as he has been writing, and this book provides an ample selection from that output. His anatomy of the word *cool* reminds us that, in the postwar 40s, it was infused with the feeling of jazz music but is now merely a synonym for *neat*. "On Celestial Music," which was included in *Best American Essays*, 2008, begins with a lament for the loss in recent music of the vulnerability expressed by Otis Redding's masterpiece, "Try a Little Tenderness;" moves on to Moody's infatuation with the ecstatic music of the Velvet Underground; and ends with an appreciation of Arvo Part and Purcell, close as they are to nature, "the music of the spheres."

Contemporary groups covered include Magnetic Fields (their love songs), Wilco (the band's and Jeff Tweedy's evolution), Danielson Famile (an evangelical rock band), The Pogues (Shane McGowan's problems with addiction), The Lounge Lizards (John Lurie's brilliance), and Meredith Monk, who once recorded a song inspired by Rick Moody's story "Boys." Always both incisive and personable, these pieces inspire us to dive as deeply into the music that enhances our lives as Moody has done--and introduces us to wonderful sounds we may not know.

~from back cover

On Celestial Music: And Other Adventures in Listening Details

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John says

An Intense Exploration of His Passion for Music from the writer Rick Moody

In the literary genre of the essay, I can think of no better practitioner than the late Stephen Jay Gould, who combined effortlessly his encyclopedic knowledge of and exuberant passion for evolutionary biology with those he had in classical music, history, fine art and baseball. Who else but Gould could write a provocative scientific paper with his friend and colleague evolutionary geneticist Richard Lewontin entitled “The Spandrels of San Marco”, evoking these cathedral supports as a metaphor in a most memorable appeal to their fellow biologists to think more critically about the origins and subsequent usage of traits by organisms? Who else but Gould could recollect singing the Berlioz Requiem with the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood as part of an opening prelude for a most erudite discussion on the evolution of the mammalian ear in his essay “An Earful of Jaw” (published originally in *Natural History* magazine and later republished in the essay collection entitled “Eight Little Piggies: Reflections in Natural History”)? Gould wrote his essays as his primary means of educating the public on the scientific truth of biological evolution in brisk, vigorous prose replete with ample instances of wit and graceful style, transferring his knowledge and enthusiasm into exquisite gems of literary art. Like Gould, Rick Moody has an inordinate fondness and passion for music, which he conveys in his first collection of essays, “On Celestial Music And Other Adventures in Listening”, but readers may find Moody’s thoughts not nearly as edifying as Gould’s were, and frankly, at times, even bewildering.

Moody’s debut essay collection is a smorgasbord of literary treats, with some worthy of comparison with Gould’s best. One of these is his brilliant “Against Cool”, which traces the literary evolution of the word from its post World War II association with the “cool jazz movement” to its somewhat contemporary debasement as a generic term of assent, as widely misused as the word “neat” (which Moody also rails against, oddly echoing the same caustic sentiment toward “neat” that I had heard from Frank McCourt while studying creative writing with him at New York City’s nerdy Stuyvesant High School somewhere back in the dim Paleozoic Era of my youth.). Equally commendable are his autobiographical homage to dancer and musician Meredith Monk (“On Meredith Monk”) and his elegy to Christian music (“How to be a Christian Artist”) in which his defense of Christian spirituality and faith-based music reads as his defensive reaction to the harsh, almost fanatical, militant Atheism expressed by the likes of the late Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins (who became Gould’s rival as the foremost science writer of our time specializing in biology). So too are his compelling celebration of the band Magnetic Fields’ album “69 Love Songs” (“Thirty-One Love Songs”) which succeeds as an exceptionally glowing tribute to Magnetic Fields musician and composer Stephin Merritt, his “fan letter” on behalf of the alternative jazz/contemporary music band “The Lounge Lizards” and his history of the rock band “The Who” as seen through the prism of guitarist Pete Townshend’s personal and artistic troubles (“The Pete Townshend Fragments”), and another history, this time of the avant garde rock band “Velvet Underground”, focusing on the artistic and personal relationships between contemporary composer John Cale and rock musician Lou Reed (“The New York Underground, 1965 – 1988”). I also like a lot the title essay (“On Celestial Music and Other Listening Pleasures”) which, in a surprisingly terse manner, explores the spiritual side of his musical passions as part of a persuasive argument – though one that I’m not sure is successful – that links the music of Otis Redding with those of John Cage, other “serious” contemporary music and Afro-American funk. Another of my “guilty pleasures” – to borrow Moody’s title for another of his essays - is the concluding essay, “Europe, Forsake Your Drum Machines!”, his spirited tirade against the usage of drum machines in European electronic and rock music, which also works as his homage to the great German band “Kraftwerk”.

The rest of Moody's essays, while demonstrative of his prodigious talent as a writer, and possessed with merit in their own right, do not quite rise to the high literary standard I've expected from essay writers after spending my youth and early adulthood devouring everything Stephen Jay Gould ever wrote. In one notable instance, Moody alludes to still current controversial thinking in evolutionary biology with regards to the tempo and mode of evolution in his history of the alternative country rock band Wilco "Five Songs (By Wilco)" with an opening paragraph riffing on the word "evolution" and its significance in biology that is so superficial in its content and meaning that it will not only leave readers bewildered, but may also encourage other literary critics to take offensive aim at Moody's literary pretensions, in much the same way that some criticized Moody's excellent blend of literary analysis and memoir, "The Black Veil", which I believe should be remembered and celebrated for its own literary virtues, and are ones worthy of favorable comparison with those in Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes". And yet, the relative banality of some of the other essays should not distract the reader from the literary wealth present in Moody's debut essay collection; if nothing else, they demonstrate why he is passionate about the music he believes in and why he should still be regarded as the finest American writer of my generation.

Margaret says

I thought I would be more interested in his words, but it turned out that I don't particularly care about his opinion, so reading a series of essays by him about music wasn't very fascinating, though I did, eventually, finish.

That being said, I do think he has a good turn of phrase and wording choices. I plan on giving this to a friend who I expect will like it far more than I did. It's not terribly written, I just ended up not caring to read it. I received this book through the First Reads program.

Frank says

"There is a link ... between literary writers and music...." suggests Rick Moody in his book On Celestial Music and other adventures in listening." This book "is my attempt to compile my music affiliations and to say to other passionate listeners -- Did you hear this? And did you hear it the way I heard it?" And this is pretty much what he did; but putting passions down on paper is not all that easy and sometimes hard for others to understand that passion. This book might be just a little hard to understand at times depending on your musical affiliations.

This is certainly a different type of read; over a dozen essays of the author's passion in music and how he sees music. It is a meandering of thoughts and insights not always collected together in a way that may be easy to understand such thoughts. For instance in the essay on Celestial Music he says "I don't think God is a jukebox in heaven, and you cannot take your iPod with you....nor digital sampler and no mixing board." "...there are persuasive indications that the word soul does indeed manifest itself in music."

In the essay Five Songs" Moody talks about Hell and Satan as he looks at A Ghost is Born and "the infernal latitudes, common to two of the really beautiful ballads on this recording; Hell is Chrome and Wishful Thinking." "Decibels per minute even internally rhymed with hell."

This is a book that will get your thought processes working both for what Moody is trying to convey and also

how it all moves you. Do you hear it the way Moody is saying it? Check it out and see.

Billy Arnold says

I have NOT read this ! About 50% of the time that I hover over the ADD THIS BOOK button it selects READ without giving me a chance to choose TO READ. Bet I'm not the only one having the same problem. How about some smart folks fixinf this, hmmm ?

Patrice Miller says

I find Moody's writing to be at the least like organic popcorn for my brain, and at best like a absolutely delightful jaunt through themes I am intrigued by, or as is the case here, through music I love. His enthusiasm for music is contagious. I don't think I'm hearing or seeing things any differently, but it's lovely to share the sheer joy of music with an author you admire.

Doug says

This was a goodreads.com give-away. Prior to reading this I have not read any of Moody's work. This book is a collection of essays. It reads like someone's blog. Moody explores his love of music. His taste in music is obscure and avant-garde. Even when Moody talks about well known artist, like The Who, Jethro Tull or Simon and Garfunkel he talks about "deep cuts" from such groups. Moody is a musician. Impressively he began taking violin lessons in his forties. Prior to that, he played guitar and other instruments. So his analysis of his favorite music is detailed without being overly technical. Readers learn a great deal about Moody's personal life as well in this book. He explores his religious beliefs, histories with substance abuse and other issues. He also plays "armchair psychologist" with artist such as Pete Townshend. This book made me think about the music I enjoy and why I appreciate my favorite compositions and artists.

Phil Overeem says

As with most books like it, ON CELESTIAL MUSIC is a mixed bag. I will probably return to Moody's thoughtful and sometimes daring pieces on Pete Townshend, Shane MacGowan, and the Lounge Lizards; most of the rest sheds little new light, nor is written in a particularly enjoyable way.

Bob says

Very interesting essays on varied musical genres that touches on the relationship between the creation of literature and music. Most of the music discussed is off the beaten path. Includes excellent essay on the underground music scene of NYC from the 60s through to the genesis of hip-hop. Various examples discussed led me to Spotify to check out the referenced tunes.

Jodi says

I open and read passages. Some are profound while others anecdotal and still others deeply personal. Not the best book, but one that touches on the best experiences that life has to offer.

Shane Eide says

www.emergenthermit.com

Novelist and musician Rick Moody's *On Celestial Music* is admirable for at least trying to engage with the world of contemporary music of the past fifty years in a way that doesn't betray the writer's need to approach subjects with a fresh, cultural scrutiny while keeping the old-man youth-hate grumblings to a minimum. 'Trying' is the key word here, however.

Some of the musical biases that pop up are unsurprising, given his generation and artistic temperament, and I read this book sort of expecting these. Aside from the mention of a few artists who come off like his exceptions, Moody doesn't seem to think much of Hip-Hop on whole. Same goes for Heavy Metal.

Thin-skinned readers are bound to find no interest in books like this if they wish only to read something that espouses and reviles different musicians in keeping with their own tastes. However, those of us who appreciate the relativity of varied musical opinion are quite okay with Moody saying he doesn't much like Eric Clapton. He reserves the right to dislike whomever he wants. If it happens that we can agree with Moody on something—as I did, sharing his hatred of the overstated sentimentality and cloying vibrato of show-tunes—it is all the better that he can supplement his opinion with some well articulated reason.

At his worst, however, Moody sometimes uses words that give an innateness to his opinions which puts them immediately in the realm of fact. The Cure simply is 'outdated.' Tool simply is 'mediocre.' After a while, the assertions go beyond mere claims to a particular artist's talent or lack thereof, as happens when he insinuates that Velvet Underground was more influential than Bob Dylan—albeit, in a throw-away statement as if this was something we all know already. As words like 'mediocre' and 'outdated' replace what would be more appropriate to list under 'not my cup of tea,' Moody's struggle to say something fresh and informed about contemporary music falls ever nearer that pit of previous-generation-grumblings that the whole ambition of his project seems intent on surpassing. On those occasions he does try to supplement an opinion in favor of an artist, it is usually a coupling of personal experience with some quote in a common rock magazine.

The prose itself is earnest, passionate and musical with a feeling of freedom like much of the jazz he favors.

There is, however, the other side of that earnestness and freedom. One wonders if Moody perhaps feels uncomfortable employing sarcasm without gunshot-like exclamation points to make sure his reader knows that he is being sarcastic. 'Only problem is: Pete Townsend didn't even write them!' 'Wow! Bob Dylan was dead meat! We should all be so badly decomposed!' 'Kiss ... created a multinational merchandising juggernaut!'

The whimsy transcends mere punctuation. The title piece, 'On Celestial Music,' is a short reckless stew of aesthetics and theology together, giving Moody the opportunity to go abstract on the divine and its relationship with music.

But something peculiar happens when we get to 'The Pete Townsend Fragments.' Pete Townsend of The Who earned himself uncovered attention in 2003 when the police found his credit card information on a child pornography website. It was dismissed when Pete was able to prove that he was researching child porn in order to fight it. As I read this, it became clear that the whole lengthy essay acted, not only as an in-depth study of The Who's career and music but, adjacently, it acted as a peek-a-boo psychoanalytic search through Townshend's art and life for signs of Pete as pederast or Pete as childhood abusee.

Moody's curiosity reaches the height of its vulgarity when he says:

'I sort of want to know more about Pete's grandmother, about the period of his real or imagined child abuse. This is a fascinating autobiographical subplot for those who are interested in such things.'

This insensitivity actually incited me to write 'Yuck!' in my notes. Of course it's a fascinating autobiographical subplot. But you're not supposed to say it. Moody says it. Moody asks the crass questions and goes on wondering until I find myself reading only to satiate my own vulgar curiosity along with him, which becomes the primary hook of the essay.

'The Problem of Impairment' has a similar format. It takes the dipsomania of The Pogues frontman, Shane McGowan, as its aesthetic entry point into the band's music. The piece is redeemed, however, by its muscularity and maturity over the Townshend piece as it says something much bigger about artists and substance-abuse on whole. Moody handles this piece with greater sensitivity as he relates to the subject directly as a recovering alcoholic.

The book's comic-book exclamation points and vulgar curiosities are, in the end, redeemed by the care and sheer ambition of pieces like 'The New York Underground' and 'Europe, Forsake Your Drum Machines!'

In a book edited by Moody on The New Testament called A Joyful Noise, he refers to himself in his introductory essay as an 'armchair hermeneuticist.' This is where he shines and this is precisely how he approaches the drum machine essay. Using the history of the drum machine, Moody says some very interesting things about the nature of art, dehumanization, secularism and how different genres bifurcate.

Is what he says in this piece true? Do the pieces to the historical puzzle he presents fit so neatly? Who cares? One could, perhaps, compare what Moody is attempting in this book to what Roberto Calasso does in 49 Steps or Foucault in The Order of Things. He's developing a historical narrative. He's developing an interpretation.

His addressing the musicians of Europe reaches the height of his earnestness and militancy, and you have to at least admire his attempt to turn it into an invested appeal rather than an alienated gripe.

I welcome the challenge this book presents to other writers to invest this much thought to different kinds of music that space, time and personal taste didn't permit Moody to address. Perhaps this will become its own mini-genre: the nonjealous investigation of music by other kinds of artists.

D.A.Calf says

I bought this in lieu of Da Capo's Best Music Writing 2011 which I couldn't find on the day. The topics traversed and the artists considered by Moody (Otis Redding, Magnetic Field, Wilco, The Pogues, Arvo Part) seemed intriguing and I have not read any of his fiction. After three essays I put this down and will not return to it. Essentially Moody spends a lot of time trying to convince us that (1) Booze is bad; (2) Although he no longer drinks he was wild and crazy, and by implication cool and reputable as a writer and listener, once upon a time; and (3) His sobriety doesn't restrict in anyway his appreciation of all that life has to offer.

P.S. He's christian too.

Rick says

Written by a contemporary about the joys of listening to music. Opens with an excellent analysis of "cool". Rick Moody introduced me to several bands that are new to me...the Pogues, Husker Du, Can and the Lounge Lizards.

sj says

June, 2012: I kind of rambled a little about this book here, but it's really more what I thought of two of the essays. Most I didn't care much for, Mr Moody and I have exceedingly different tastes in music. Just the fact that he listed Zappa as a "guilty pleasure" makes me very sad.

VERY. SAD.

I did enjoy the essay on the Magnetic Fields (even though we'd pick different songs from the album as must listens, see the above link for my opinion on the matter), but most of what I read did not encourage me to read other things by this author. It's really more of a 2.5 star read, but I'm rounding up to be nice.

February, 2012: If only to see what he has to say about Magnetic Fields. <3

Lisa says

I sampled this book, but did not have the patience or interest to peruse it all. I appreciate the clear passion the author has for listening to and ruminating on music, but at the same time it reminds me too much of why I'm put off by the legion of self styled music aficionados who simultaneously elevate themselves and harshly judge others based on their music preferences. I grew up knowing so many of these musical taste bullies.

Ethan says

It is not easy to write about music. I think everyone has experienced that moment when a song sets off some

kind of emotion that you just can't find the words to describe. As a composer, I have always struggled with finding the words to describe my pieces. In my mind, I know what the piece is doing, but I am of the belief that it is much easier to music about music than write about it.

Author and musician Rick Moody has tackled the unenviable task of writing about music for many years. In this book, he compiles a varied collection of essays and thoughts that shed some light on his views of our world of music. Of particular note is his opening essay "Against Cool" in which he chronicles the word's journey from truly meaning cool to becoming another way to say "neat". He begins with the origin of the "cool" bluesy jazz of Miles Davis. He argues that the commercialization and over exposure of the cool (think Kool-Aid or Kool Cigarettes) diminished the value of the word.

In another well written section, Moody attempts to grasp what the music of heaven will sound like. To me, this was the most effective section. Moody somehow manages to relay his emotional connection/response to certain pieces and artists (Simon and Garfunkel, Arvo Part, etc.). Through these descriptions and personal recollections, Moody makes an interesting point about the sounds of the afterlife, and admits his fears of nonbeing.

Other sections of this book fail live up to the level of the better written ones. Like an album of music, certain essays really worked while others just fell flat. Despite Moody's fantastic writing, some of his pieces simply failed to come to any important point. With that in mind, this book is well worth reading for the many gems it contains. Anyone who has had a connection to music will find meaning in Moody's writing and gain a larger knowledge of the music that inhabits our world.
