An interview with Mark Jenkins (2012)

By Beppe Colli
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More and more often, while looking at the horizon, I happen to think that what I'm seeing are much probably the last rays of the twilight. Of course, it can be argued if this is really true, and of how many – just a few, or a lot? – different sides of modern society. We could also argue about the possibility that things placed on an inclined plane have already reached such a velocity that there's no chance for us to turn back the process.

What if I'm wrong? Here a good remedy is to engage somebody in a dialogue. But whom, exactly? It goes without saying that the ideal candidate has to possess an understanding of the internal workings of the "engines" that's deep enough to understand what's going on, while at the same time having the right attitude in order not to perceive the current state of affairs as "obviously fabulous".

A perfect candidate? Mark Jenkins, with whom I had the pleasure to chat a few years ago. Our conversation at the time had mostly – not exclusively, of course – dealt with the "internal" aspects of making music, while this time it

was my intention to have a closer look at the "external" side of the framework when it comes to critics, audience, and the "real world".

Mark Jenkins kindly agreed to answer my questions, our interview being conducted via e-mail in the past two weeks.

Yesterday I had a look at Wikipedia, and I found two "Mark Jenkins": one, an American artist; the other, a Welsh musician; you are neither of them, right? Then I followed a link to a page on the NPR website, where I found this about you: "Jenkins spent most of his career in the industry once known as newspapers, working as an editor, writer, art director, graphic artist and circulation director, among other things, for various papers that are now dead or close to it." Since the page is dated April 14, 2009, I'm really curious to know more about those papers that were "close to it".

There are three Mark Jenkinses with whom I am sometimes confused. One is a travel writer — based in Wyoming, the last I heard. He wrote a few pieces for the Washington Post, so I was asked if I had written them. The second is the tape-sculpture street artist. Since we both live in Washington, people sometimes assume we're the same person. We're not; in fact, we've never met. The third is the Welsh musician/author. I once heard from a university librarian, asking if we were different people. (Some of my ancestors came to the colonies from Wales, so perhaps we're distantly related.)

It would help if the Welsh Mark Jenkins would follow Welsh orthography and spell his name "Marc Siencyn." Or perhaps I should. Clearly I should have used "Mark L. Jenkins" or "M. Leoline Jenkins," or perhaps "Toure," when I started to write professionally. It now seems too late to change.

Among the still-breathing papers for which I used to work, Washington City Paper seems the most threatened. It's the weekly alternative paper in Washington, founded in 1981. It thrived from the late 1980s into the early 2000s. It's now in much weakened condition, as a result of various specific problems, but also because of the general shift away from reading print on paper, especially newsprint.

As I told you in our previous conversation, I discovered What Goes On – the column you wrote for the Washington City Paper – totally by chance. I've noticed that my old link to those pieces doesn't work anymore, and though I've copied a few of them I'd really like to access the whole lot – in a way, they're part of "rock history" now. Is there something I can do?

My former editor has all the Washington City Paper website material for which the paper severed the links. I haven't talked to him about it recently, but the potential is there to move it to an active server, if anyone ever finds the time to do so.

I have the unedited versions of the columns, but without HTML coding. So it would be easier to post his versions of them than mine.

Though I obviously liked those pieces for their "content" – and your "point of view" – I have to admit that their generous length made it possible for them to explore their subjects in depth. I'd like to know your opinion about the issue of "length" when it come to writing "in the real world". Some have talked about "censorship by word count", but here I'm thinking more about readers' willingness to go the extra mile, so to speak. Some say that, though the Web frees us from the (physical, also financial) constrains of the paper, nowadays people are only interested in very short pieces – lots of them – which in the end makes that freedom totally redundant. What's your take on this?

Writing short is an art, and is sometimes the best way to go. But there should be room for both. I frequently am forced to leave things out in order to meet a limited word count. And those word counts are often designed to leave more room for same promo photo that every other publication will run. The web allows theoretically unlimited lengths, but most people — and I am one of them — don't like reading long articles on a computer screen.

There aren't many American publications that do "long-form" journalism any more, and it may be just as well. I read the New Yorker regularly, and often find its features too long.

In feature writing, one obstacle is that subjects are more guarded these days. Tom Wolfe, who was one of my inspirations, used to spend long periods with his subjects, and that enabled him to write "literary" features that were nonetheless entirely factual. These days, access is more limited, and the people themselves are less forthcoming. I get the sense that you could follow some musicians or filmmakers (or whomever) around for a week, and not get any more material than you would in an hour.

What I was attempting in "What Goes On" was more free-form, an attempt to continue the tradition of such early-'70s rock writers as R. Meltzer (although without so much of his brand of absurdism) and Lester Bangs. It's an approach that has a very small constituency these days. Even on personal blogs, which allow writer-proprietors to indulge themselves endlessly, the writing is usually bland and brief.

I don't know that I have the patience anymore for several-thousand-word record reviews. But I do consider most 50-to-100-word reviews useless. Not that mine are much longer: the album reviews I write for the Washington Post are about 210 words — live reviews generally run about 350 — and for Blurt usually 250-to-350.

Style and content matter, of course. The ultimate contemporary example of the long recorded-music review is the "33 1/3" series of books on "classic" albums. Of the ones I've read, a few are really good; most of them aren't.

A few years ago I noticed you had started a new website, ReelDC, totally devoted to movies – which at first surprised me, since in my mind you were first and foremost a music critic. Now I see that ReelDC looks dormant. Would you mind talking about this?

I was a film critic for Washington City Paper from 1986 to 2008. When I stopped contributing to the paper — which had been sold to new owners who soon took it into bankruptcy — I didn't expect to write about film professionally any more. That's one reason that I set up ReelDC in early 2008. (Another was to cover Washington's extensive repertory film offerings, which no one else does systematically.) But in mid-2008, I began writing film reviews for NPR.org. And since early 2011, I've been writing film features and reviews fairly regularly for the Washington Post. Those two activities crowded out ReelDC. I'd like to revive ReelDC, at least to cover local repertory film, but that's not likely to happen without someone else's help.

One other reason I began ReelDC: to teach myself HTML and CSS. That didn't work out very well. If you look at the site, you'll see it's pretty primitive. I used to be a graphic designer, so I figured I could master web design. But I didn't take to it, and mastered only the basics. I should learn more, but at this point I don't have time. And since I don't enjoy web design, I probably won't spend much more effort on it.

I've seen you regularly review movies for NPR, but it's not clear to me whether you also contribute to other departments. Tell me more.

In 1996, after I left my art-director job at Washington City Paper, I started contributing local-music reviews to WAMU-FM, a local NPR affiliate. Soon after, I also began doing music reviews for NPR's "All Things Considered." But that stopped in 2000, after my NPR producer — Bob Boilen, who now runs the "All Songs Considered" website — shifted his responsibilities. I continued to do music reviews for WAMU until 2010, when my producer left and the station stopped using non-staff contributors.

Today, my movie reviews for NPR's website are my only pieces for the radio network.

Today I had fun looking at the list of movies you've reviewed for NPR and I read your reviews about 'Magic Trip': High Times With The Merry Pranksters (August 4, 2011) and 'Mr. Foster': A Man And His Buildings (January 26, 2012). The one you wrote about the documentary on Norman Foster reminded me that you've also written about architecture and urbanism, but it's not clear to me what kind of background you possess when it comes to both disciplines. Talk about this.

I'm pretty much self-educated on all the subjects I cover. My formal education was generalist/classicist. Living in Washington is certainly one of principal things that inspires my interest in urbanism and architecture; it's an unusual city by American standards, with a baroque street plan (begun by a Frenchman), relatively high population density, and no skyscrapers. It's also in a constant uproar over development, which is one of the major local industries and enormously influential on city politics. I like cities, don't own a car, and am generally skeptical of contemporary architecture — not because of its look, per se, but because it's so hostile to the fabric of urban life.

I suppose your main gig nowadays is at the Washington Post – one of the most famous American newspapers, and one of the last among the big ones left standing. What's exactly your beat at the Post?

I have a few, actually. I started writing for the Post as a freelancer in the mid-1980s, originally doing "rock" music reviews (usually of less mainstream, more experimental or non-Euro-American acts). That's mostly what I've done since, and I still write such reviews regularly, although less than I once did. The decline in assignments is partially, and perhaps largely, because the Post has shrunk so much in recent years.

Depending on my relationships with various editors, I have also done music features and film features and reviews, as well as occasional other things. Since early 2011, I've been freelancing much more for the Post, which has trimmed its full-time staff significantly over the last few years. I used to fill in for one of the visual-art critics when he was on vacation or indisposed; last spring, I began writing a weekly column covering local art galleries. I occasionally write about art museums, of which Washington has many, but there's another critic who usually handles that.

I accessed two of your pieces for the Post ("Musical History Tour: Joe Boyd and Robyn Hitchcock revisit the '60s," March 8, 2011; Indian music finds its niche in Washington area with intimate house concerts," June 24, 2011), which made me think about the whole issue of "playing live", which is an interesting topic, I think, in a lively place like that (once you talked to me about two clubs, The Black Cat and 9:30, are they still going?).

The 1200-capacity 9:30 (which some reckon to be the country's most successful "rock" club) and the 800-capacity Black Cat are still thriving. There are also a number of smaller clubs, as well as various part-time spots. In the last year, two new largish venues have opened, and a third will debut in April.

The 2000-capacity Fillmore, which opened in September 2011, is part of a chain owned by Live Nation, the country's largest concert promoter. It had another venue here for years, but that closed in 2006 when its neighborhood, a warehouse-turned-club district, was slated for massive redevelopment.

(See urbanism answer above.) Live Nation and 9:30 are bitter rivals, fighting over the former's control of most of the country's outdoor amphitheaters ("sheds," in industry parlance). So far, the Fillmore doesn't seem to be hurting 9:30 and the Black Cat much. All three are stand-up clubs, with only a few seats.

This year, 9:30 began booking shows at U Street Music Hall, a club that specializes in electronic dance music. It's also in negotiations to book a venue that's planned for another section of town that's being redeveloped.

Yet another new place is the 500-capacity Hamilton, which caters to an older crowd that likes to sit down, be served full meals, and listen to music from the '50, '60s, and '70s. It's in direct competition with a suburban club, the Birchmere, which offers the same formula (although it's a little less swanky). The Birchmere is where Joe Boyd and Robyn Hitchcock did their act last year.

In April, the Howard will open with flexible setup that allows either standing or seated shows; it also has a full kitchen. A long-closed bare-bones theater that once served an African-American clientele, it's being dramatically upscaled.

I think it's remarkable that the existing clubs survive, and are doing enough business to draw new competitors. The baby boomers still go to shows, although they like to be comfortable these days, and can afford ticket prices that sometimes strike me as astonishing. (The Hamilton's top price so far has been $100.) And younger fans, who often seem to be intravenously attached to their phones and TVs, do like to see their favorites in the flesh. (I observe that, even in the presence of their idols, many young listeners still seem most engaged by their phones; they text their friends and take pictures of each other as much as they look at the stage.)

As someone who sees live music regularly, I don't especially want to hear musicians simply reproduce their recordings. And I'm bored by a lot of music that's essentially pre-programmed. Rather than take musical risks, however, a lot of contemporary performers use showmanship to distract from their music's predictability. The results range from dull to laughable, but maybe I wouldn't feel that way if I hadn't been going to concerts for decades.

When it comes to the topic of their financial survival, playing live was considered to be the only possible hope for musicians, in an age when sales of music are rapidly disappearing. Selling T-shirts, and self-produced CDs, at their gigs would make them solvent. From where you stand, how do you assess the current situation?

I don't have anything novel to say about this. There are many ways to make a living as a musician these days, but performances, selling merchandise, and licensing songs to movies and TV shows and commercials seem to be the big ones. Obviously, Adele made a lot of money from her last CD. But

most recording artists don’t.

It’s not a huge change for low-on-the-food-chain alt- and art-rock acts. Yet even they can no longer realistically hope for a fluke bestseller, or to accumulate a catalog that sells slowly but steadily.

And yet the volume of music keeps increasing, as does the number of bands on the road. The shifts in the technologies that support the music industry have widened the gap between the haves and have-nots. Fundamentally, though, it seems the business has changed more for record companies than for musicians.

The way I see it, when it comes to "popular arts" such as music and movies, newspapers and magazines increasingly employ "inspired amateurs" instead of skilled professionals – J. Hoberman being the most recent case of a respected critic that was let go. Do you see this trend as one that has long passed the point of no return?

Yes. I don’t know that the new writers are "amateurs," but they tend to be younger, less experienced, and less knowledgeable. Hoberman may be a special case; he’s one of my favorite critics, but also a "difficult" one who probably turned off younger readers.

Generally, most readers want a simple up-or-down review. They often grouse about more nuanced, more informed writing. Yet there is a generational divide. The Post recently published a letter from a 62-year-old music fan who complained that he doesn’t understand the paper’s album reviews or the choices for live reviews. (He wanted coverage of a recent Ray Manzarek/Robbie Krieger gig at the Birchmere; I probably wouldn’t have assigned that one either, if the choice had been mine.)

There’s not much of a market for the critics who began in the 1960s and ’70s, mixing an enthusiasm for pop culture with a deeper understanding of its precedents. I often fantasize about a national niche publication that would provide an outlet for such writers. The alternative papers, by and large, no longer do. But it’s hard to coordinate reviews of art and indie films, which dribble across the country after opening, usually, just in New York and/or L.A.

One irony is that, in dumping experienced critics, newspapers probably aren’t winning younger readers. The Post runs much coverage of pop, electro and hip-hop acts that appeal to people under 25. But most of their fans don’t read the Post, and are unlikely ever to do so. And while local Katy Perry followers might find a Post piece about her on the web, they’re more likely to find some other publication’s. When it comes to pop culture, the web destroys any particular connection with local papers.

You own a turntable. What do you play on it?

Sadly, almost nothing. I like vinyl, but it’s complicated to use so many formats. Most of the music I review these days arrives via download, and I listen to it on a computer or an MP3 player. I also have an MD player-recorder (these days used mostly to record interviews, although I sometimes listen to mix MDs). I still have a lot of records, but much of the music on them has been reissued on CD, and it’s usually easier to reach for the CD. I would pull out older records more often if I listened to more older music, but because of my workload I play mostly new stuff.

The fragmentation of formats bothers me. (There’s even a mini-revival of cassette tapes!) I grew up with records, magazines, and paperback books, and liked the fact that great "content" was cheaply and widely available. I don’t approve of DRM, limited-edition releases, or exclusive availability of certain music through single e-retailers or websites. Theoretically, "everything" is available on the web, but in practice I don’t find that’s true. Part of the problem, of course, is the sheer abundance. There’s just so much silt to sift through.

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