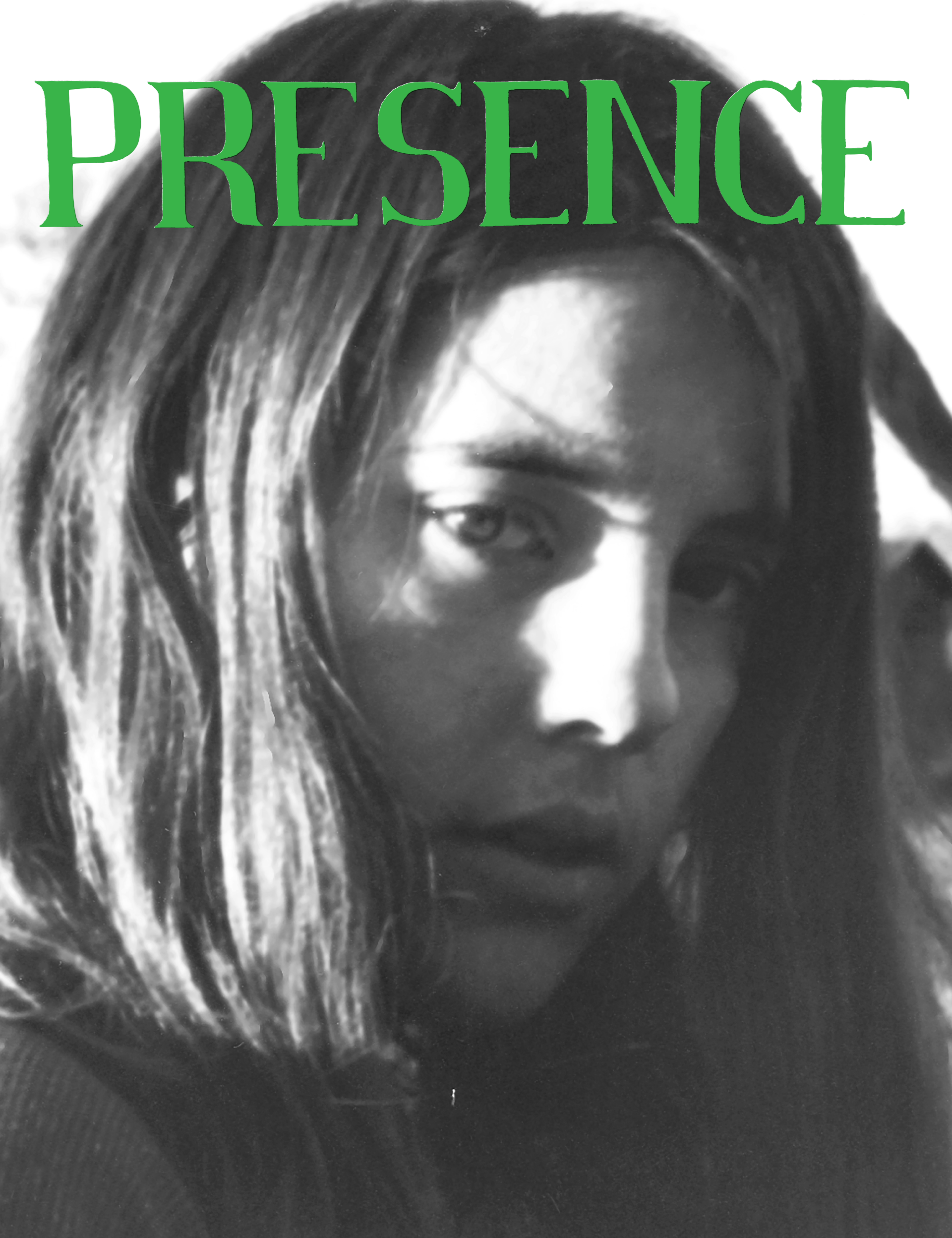
PRESENCE



Marisa
Anderson

Past
Present
Walking

Ben Ratliff *talks to* Marisa Anderson

BEN RATLIFF: What are your days like?

MARISA ANDERSON: I wake up pretty good, you know—the morning routine is pretty much the same as before. It's like, coffee and music and reading. And then in the afternoon, when normally I would start to get ready to go do a thing, that's when I get a little lost. Which is fine, I don't mind.

BR: Because whatever that thing is, you can't do it?

MA: Something like that. 'Cause that thing would be like, go see a person, or go do an errand, or be in the world in some way. Right around three or four, I start being in the world. But that's not happening, so I find myself a little bit lost. But that just is—it's not good or bad. I just...recognize it.

MA: What about you?

BR: I don't want to say that life hasn't changed that much, because it has. But I teach, so I would go down to school at least three times a week, and I don't do that now. Otherwise, I get up in every morning and I go running; that hasn't changed. I live in a part of the Northwest Bronx where it's kinda low-density. I live near a big park and I can get to it via streets that are so under-used that I can actually run in the middle of the road all the way there and back. So that's good. My wife and I and| or our two kids get out and walk in the afternoon, usually. Dinnertime, watch some TV, whatever—I guess it's not that different. But I miss people a lot.

MA: I live by myself, so it's more profound—I don't have another person to bounce off of. There's people around—I live in the back house, and there are people in the front house, and there are some neighbors who we've decided are in the same affinity group.

BR: Are you able to see them?

MA: Yeah. We just decided early on—they're across the street. I go to their house, they come to my house, I hang out with their kids. We just decided.

BR: That's trust. That's good.

MA: Yeah, well, you know, we're friends. It's funny, because one of them grew up Mormon, she's ex-Mormon, and she said "you're our sister-wife now!" (laughs)

BR: You had gigs you can't do. Do you imagine life starting again in September? How do you imagine it?

MA: Well, life hasn't ended. So that's something for me to think every day: this is life as well.

BR: But I'm looking forward to whenever shows start again—it'll be really nice to play one. I've missed it, a little. You know, the thing is, in my life, I have definite seasons, you know? It's not that I'm performing all the time. I definitely have periods of time when I'm just in a mode of either recording, or creating, or neither of those things, and other times that are devoted to performing, and those cycles are pretty well established. Right now is the start of what would be a cycle of performance. I'm coming off of a pretty long stretch of not performing—long for me. So it's just, you know, the wheel's turning, and then the wheel stops. But having no performances on the calendar isn't a completely unheard-of thing. It's just a different cycle.

BR: How is music for you now? Are you hearing it pretty well?

MA: I'm listening to a lot of music but I'm not making it. I sat down at the piano the other day, and that felt good, but the guitar's just not...it's just not there. And that's O.K.

BR: So how's the listening?

MA: The listening's pretty great, because one of the really nice things about right now is timelessness. You know? I'm not necessarily, like, "oh, I'll put this on while I go do another thing." I'll just be like, "I'll put this on and, and I'm gonna sit here and listen to it." I don't think I've done that as much over the last few years—I always felt that there was something you need to be doing while you're doing something else. All of a sudden, you can do one thing at a time, and it's great, because that's how you get through a day.

BR: Have you done any of that today yet?

MA: Listening?

BR: That kind of listening.

MA: Yeah. There's a radio station here, KMHD, that I like a lot—they were playing some stuff this morning that I drank coffee to and sat and listened.

BR: What was it?

MA: I don't remember who-all the artists were, but there was about a half-hour chunk of some Afro-Cuban and Peruvian and other South American jazz—and that's a thing I've been learning about a lot and listening to a lot. I've been deep in that for a couple years.

BR: Tell me about your route into that music—what are your guideposts?

MA: I had this record from a long time ago that's a compilation of New York music from the '70s. This is a record I'd had for 20 years.

BR: I wonder what that record is?

MA: I can find it—I think it's in this pile right here. [Moves over to another part of the room] Also, this record is so good. [Holds up to the screen *A Orillas del Magdalena: Coastal Cumbias from Colombia's Discos Fuentes*] Colombian cumbia, old Colombian cumbia. Oh! This record. It looks like that [holds up front: it is *Son Cubano NYC:*

Cuban Roots New York Spices 1972-82].

BR: Oh right—that's an Honest Jon's record.

MA: Yeah! It is. From the beginning since I got it, I've been totally infatuated with the sounds of it.

BR: Who are some of the people on it?

MA: Let's find out. Charlie Rodriguez; Henry Fiol; Lita Branda; Roberto Torres; Los Jimaguas; Fernando Lavoy; Angelo y su Conjunto....I think that some of it's just pickup bands.

MA: And I've been reading this book, too. [Holds up Ed Morales' *The Latin Beat: The Rhythms and Roots of Latin Music from Bossa Nova to Salsa and Beyond*] Do you know this book?

BR: Yes, I do.

MA: Yeah! So I've been reading the first two chapters over and over again. I thought I should do a little study project and for every artist he mentions I should go into Youtube and see. That's been nice, having time during the Coronavirus...have you seen that movie called *We Like It Like That*? About boogaloo?

BR: No, I haven't. Is it great?

MA: It's not a great movie, but it's good enough, and it has beautiful archival footage of New York streets and kids in the street and stuff. The movie's good enough, because it's a topic that I don't know about—you know, tell me everything. Sixties, and earlier. It's talking about the transition from Afro-Cuban jazz. The movie is focused on boogaloo, but if you draw it out it moves from jazz to boogaloo to salsa.

BR: I bet you're into Arsenio Rodríguez.

MA: Ah—I'm more genre-specific than player-specific. But I like Willie Colon a lot—I saw him a couple years ago in México City, which was super-great. I'm just really thirsty for Cuban music right now. So that's something I'm doing, spending time reading and listening. I just got back from México City, right in time for this—I was there for a couple months, buying a lot of records on the street, so I've been going through those.

BR: Liz tells me that you walked across the country twice.

MA: I would say that I was on two cross-country walks. Because I didn't walk every step. They were organized things, with groups of people, and there's times that you walk and times that you don't. But I was on two cross-country walks, yes.

BR: Because you've spent a lot of time outside, and a lot of time walking, I wonder whether you think a lot about what music has to do with sounds of the natural world, and the motion of the body.

MA: A lot about the motion of the body. Most of the music I make has a walking cadence to it, a mid-tempo. It starts there for me. But I was thinking about it... It's less about the actual sounds in the world, and a little bit more about silence, and the layers of where the sounds are, and distance—the arrangement of things rather than the things themselves.

BR: How do you replicate that in your own music?

MA: I don't think I do it consciously. I think it's something that I can listen back and think, oh, that's about that. I'm not very idea-oriented when I create. I just make things, and I can identify at some point that they work or don't work. When they work, I'll work on them some more, and maybe it could be years later, I'll think "oh, that's about that."

BR: O.K. sure. But when you're outside, and you're listening, are you aware that you're listening?

MA: I think so. I never wear headphones out the world. Never. I don't like it at all. I'm aware of that. I feel the same way about taking in light. Yeah: light, and color, and the aural placement...it's very difficult to explain.

BR: You're doing great.

MA: It's just about random intersections. If you're outside, a plane will go by, and a bird will be happening, and a car, and a person's voice, and it's never the same. Where those things place in your field of...and the time....I don't know.

BR: Right. It's natural heterophony.

MA: Yeah, that's a good word. But not busy. You know? I like silence a lot. I listen for silence, and the way that sound is suspended in silence.

BR: How do you mean that?

MA: I don't know, that's a visual for me.

BR: What's the visual image?

MA: Well, a bird-song, that's a pretty obvious one—to me, that's held. It's suspended in silence.

BR: Suspended, as in floating? Or hung?

MA: More hung. Because if something's floating, it's moving a little bit. But something like a birdsong, it has a definitive start and a definitive end. Birds don't fade in and out of their call: they hit, and they stop. So to me that's not floating. [Laughs]That's definitive.

BR: Can you identify birdcalls?

MA: No, I wish.

BR: Maybe this happens to you all the time, but I wonder whether you've had memorable experiences hearing things outside that make you think "music could never accomplish anything like this."

MA: The way sound travels over water.

BR: Oh!

MA: That.

BR: Like hearing a sound across a lake.

MA: Yeah.

BR: That's a pretty good one.

MA: It's so loud, but it's so far, and the time that it's happening is not the time that you're hearing it.

BR: That's a really good one. You don't think that could be done in music?

MA: Well, we do things like delay and echo. We can do things like EQing, carefully. But I don't think it can be done in the same way, no.

BR: What if it's a musician making a sound on the other side of the lake, and you're in the audience on your side of the lake?

MA: [laughs] Yeah, that could be! That could be.

BR: Some years ago we rented a little house near the base of the El Yunque rainforest, in Puerto Rico, in the spring, and on several mornings at daybreak I heard a sound that was just gigantic, almost disturbing at first—it sounded like the world was exploding. It was masses of birds, beginning their day, in giant communion. I've never heard anything like that since. Very symphonic, but more like musicians tuning up before the music begins.

MA: Sometimes that's the best part of the show. [laughs] That gets into the question of what is music and what is not music, which depends on the listener more than the creator.

BR: In that vein but opposite—like I said, I've been in México City for the last couple of months—I've been spending January and February there for the last three years or so. The place where I stay is right downtown, an apartment in Chinatown. During the day, it's the heart of the largest city in the Americas, and it's just packed—all day you hear trucks and vendors and people and everything, everything going. But at night, because it's a business district, around midnight it shuts down, and it's so silent—it's completely silent from about two, three, four in the morning. It's a profound silence, because it's a silence of 20 million people. Right?

MA: Right.

MA: Every time I wake up and hear that, it's been three years of spending those winters there, and every time, it's just like—whoa. This is the thickest silence that could possibly exist.

BR: Is it a silence that contains things that have not yet happened, or things that stopped a few hours ago?

MA: It's the silence of all this activity and all this action and all these people being quiet. It's very present-tense.

BR: You can't really hear anything?

MA: For real—it's silence. I've tried.

BR: But you're aware of the presence of people in it.

MA: Yeah, because when you're in that city, there's no way to not be aware of 20 million people. The difference between the night and day is...it's something that was really unexpected for me the first time I was there. I would expect that city to never shut down. Maybe it wouldn't be that way in a more residential area.

BR: Do you play with musicians down there a lot?

MA: A little bit. This time it was nice, I got to play with a few people. But usually I don't go down there to play. My girlfriend's from México, and she has an apartment, and she spends the winters there, her family's there. So I go down just to be there, and often take it as time away—-finish up all my touring and promises for the year and then go down there and not be a professional musician, not be anything, just be there. This year it was different—work followed me—but it was fun. I ended up playing a couple shows, doing a couple recording Méxicos, being on the radio. It was nice.

*BR: Your record [*The Quickening*] with Jim [White] was in my ears this morning.*

MA: Oh, nice. We recorded that in México last year—we found a studio and recorded it in México City.

BR: Oh, you did? Huh. It's funny, knowing that makes me think about it slightly differently. It was great for running—the first track is like the beginning of a motorcycle race.

MA: Totally!

BR: Yeah, wheels are spinning, mud is flying, you're sliding around and knocking into each other a little bit. Then the record goes through various other phases, and after 38 minutes it's back to track one—which was exactly when I needed that, an infusion of energy, but I heard it differently the second time. I didn't hear it as messiness, lack of control, but as being in control, being capable, being strong.

MA: That's nice. I do feel like that that record, more than most of the records I've made, benefits from a repetitious listening. I don't think it's absorbable in one chunk.

BR: It is a kind of cycle.

MA: Yeah. And the very last song is intentionally a turnaround, rather than an ending.

BR: Oh, really?

MA: Yeah. It's placed there for that reason [nodding].

BR: What makes it a turnaround?

MA: [Smiles] I don't know! But the song before that one, the second to last song, has that ending vibe, you know? And the last one is like a coda, like go back—it's supposed to send you to the beginning again.

BR: The final track is the one where you and he are trading off.

MA: Yeah.

BR: It's like a very soft version of Interstellar Space, the Coltrane record.

MA: Very soft and very short.

BR: Very short, yeah. How about Jim? What's that all about? What's his secret? As a musician, I mean.

MA: Gosh, I can't speak to Jim White's secrets. But in playing with him,

something I learned was to never try to follow him, or even try to meet him. He will always meet me at a certain point. But if I try to go where he's going, it doesn't work.

BR: He'll get away from you?

MA: It just goes nowhere. He's gotta do his whole journey, whatever that is. But he's tracking, he's knowing, and he always will come back. It's interesting. I've just learned to trust him very deeply in the process of making the record and playing with him. It's a pretty deep trust. Even if I don't know what's going on, there's something going on.

MA: When making that record, I was thinking a lot about stillness. Because stillness and silence aren't the same thing, right? And I was thinking a lot about static, and things being very busy but going nowhere—I wanted to do that in a couple of the pieces, capture an instant, a second, but how do you make a second last for three minutes?

BR: You began that by saying that silence and stillness aren't the same.

MA: Nah. Silence is a lack of sound, and stillness is lack of motion.

BR: Right. So you can be in motion, but not making a sound.

MA: I think so, yeah.

BR: Maybe that's like the México City quiet.

MA: Yeah, maybe so! Nice. Yeah. Because that's not stillness. It's the heart of a very great beast there. It's not still, but it's silent.

BR: Are there times of the day that are better than others, to play or to listen?

MA: Playing is better in the morning—which is dumb, because performing happens at night. But to me there's a real difference between playing and performing. The performance of music is not usually the creation of it—although sometimes it is...So, creating music is better in the morning for me. And I've adapted to night-time performance, but it's not my best time, really.

BR: But when you're performing, you're improvising a lot of the time, aren't you? Isn't that creating?

MA: Yeah, but it's different. Maybe it's just in the solo playing. My practice time and work time is in the morning. I'm not social early, I'm social later. I don't know which came first—if I adapted to the demands of having this job, or ...is it naturally like that for me, I don't know.

BR: So maybe there should be performances in the morning.

MA: Yeah, but audiences...people get up and go to work. But wouldn't that be great, for people who work all night, and then they could go out and see a show?

BR: It would be great. Was there ever a time in your life when you were playing three gigs a night and you'd end up at an after-hours place?

MA: I've never been that busy. There was a moment in Portland, like ten, twelve years ago, when I was in a group called the Evolutionary Jass Band, and we were pretty busy. Then I'd have other shows on the side. That's the busiest I've ever been. But I don't pack my schedule that way. I don't enjoy it.

BR: I was just talking to a trombonist friend here in New York, Papo Vázquez, and he was talking about a typical day for him in the late 70s: three or four gigs or jam sessions, and the last one would start at three or four in the morning. I've been wondering lately about those final gigs in the morning hours. It's been rare that I've stayed up that late, especially now. I've forgotten what live music sounds like in a small room at four in the morning.

MA: Yeah. I've done it when I'm jet-lagged, if I go to Europe, from the west coast, I can stay up all night for a little while. And I've played some all-night shows, back in the Jass Band times. But mostly I'm not out and about much after two in the morning. Portland is not a nightlife city, by any stretch. And it's the only city I've ever lived in.

BR: I'm from the country—I moved here when I was thirty, because I knew that living in a city was a better way to do what I wanted to do, but not because I wanted to live in a city.

BR: You're from California, right?

MA: Northern California. I grew up about sixty miles north of San Francisco, in the town of Sonoma. There's Sonoma county, but then there's the town, and most people don't make it to the town, because it's not on the highway. It's small—about 5,000 people when I was growing up.

BR: Was it rural?

MA: It was agricultural—chickens and grapes. My parents had five and half acres, there was a creek, and there were hills behind us. Rural's a weird word—I think that's a cultural as well as a geographic designation.

BR: Ah. For me, rural means farmland.

MA: Yeah, there were farms—vineyards, and some chicken farms, but mostly vineyards.

BR: Near Sebastopol?

MA: Sebastopol's in Sonoma county, but if you were to drive from Sonoma to Sebastopol you'd have to drive for 45 minutes or an hour. They're on opposite sides of the county. But the size of the town I grew up in in similar to the size of Sebastopol.

BR: I have a friend in Sebastopol, and my visual image of the area is that it's very hilly.

MA: Yeah. It's a valley. It's more like river-bottom there, and flood plain. Where I grew up is called the Valley of the Moon, and it's

much narrower there than where Sebastopol is.

BR: Do you have family there still?

MA: My sister is in Santa Rosa, which is the biggest town down there. My dad was in Sonoma until he died, seven years ago.

BR: How did your sister do with the fires?

MA: Ay. She's O.K.; her family's O.K. I have friends that lost a lot. My best friends from high school lost three houses. One she was living in, one she was renting, one she was fixing up.

BR: That's really starting over from scratch.

MA: I mean, you don't really start over from that—you have to kind of start in the middle. It's stuff gone, but it's time gone, too.

BR: This friend of mine in Sebastopol is 82, and I just checked in with him the other day, because that's what we're doing now.

MA: I like that part of these times.

BR: I do too. I don't know why we didn't do it before.

MA: Busy, just busy. Thinking too many thoughts at the same time, not having time or space, assuming someone else doesn't have time or space, putting things off that aren't necessary to get through the day, and now we have these days that stretch out...

BR: When you play each note, do you know exactly what note you want to play?

MA: When things are going well, yes. I can hear sort of a phrase ahead, and get there. It's like language fluency. When you've just arrived somewhere, you have to stop and think about how to say a thing and then you say it—but after a while you can plan for where it's gonna go. It's like that. So when I'm feeling fluent, then yeah, I can hear the next phrase. It's visual for me—so I see/hear.

BR: What do you see?

MA: I see a relationship. [pause]

BR: A relationship from one note to the next to the next?

MA: No...I don't know if I can explain it. I've had dreams like this and then made songs out of the dreams. It's like a grid, and points on a grid, but three-dimensional. And it exists kind of in the back of my head.

MA: It's like the idea of my fingers on the fretboard—because the fretboard is a grid, you have the strings and you have the frets, and then your fingers are the points, and on a fretboard there's a symmetry to it, so...if my fingers are like this [holds fingers to make the shape of particular chord] it implies a certain relationship between notes. And that relationship is unchanged, regardless of where I am on the fretboard. That's the simplest way I can describe whatever the visual image is. Then it's connected, of course, to the sound, because I can see that interval and know what the sound is, based on practice, on years of doing it.

BR: So the ideal for you is knowing just a little bit about what's coming next.

MA: I don't know if that's ideal, but that's what happens when it's going well.

BR: Do you use a digital tuner?

MA: Yeah.

BR: Do you like it?

MA: Mmmm—it's a habit. I mean, I record myself, and at certain points I'm always recording, if it's that part of the cycle, and everything needs to be very [in tune].... and also I play in open tunings, and the overtones can really clash. If something's a little bit off it becomes very off, because the harmonics of it in open tuning make it much more noticeable. So I have to be a little bit careful about tuning, and even so I play out of tune, I know I do. [laughs]

BR: Well, I was gonna say, actually, when there are clashes in your music, those are some of the best parts.

MA: Thank you.

BR: I'm not sure I was aware that you play with open tunings. Is a lot of your music done with open tunings?

MA: Almost all of it is in open D or open D-minor. But I'm trying to play the piece, not the tuning, so it's good that you didn't know that. I don't use open tuning because it's open tuning, it's just that the relationships work for me, and I can accompany myself better. And I got really bored with standard—I played in standard for, I don't know, thirty years before switching. For the last ten, when I create for myself, I've been pretty exclusively in open D, open D-minor, or sometimes I'll have guitars tuned a whole step up or down from that, or capo'd. It's not like everything's always in D, but those ideas transposed wherever it needs to be works for me.

MA: But I make chords. It's tricky to say "open tunings," because immediately people think it sounds like that. I've got a couple of pieces that are tells, but I try not to. If it sounds too open-tuning-ish, it probably won't make it out the door.

BR: I wonder if playing in open tuning got you thinking more about who you were, specifically, and what kind of music you wanted to make, as opposed to being part of a particular tradition of guitar playing. Did it free you from anything?

MA Well, there's some baggage that comes with learning an instrument—there's the right way or the not-right way, and these are the chords—and that baggage can be habits. So definitely it breaks habits—creates different ones, but it breaks habits. Yeah, I think I can be a little more creative with that palette, for sure.

BR: Those chords that you play in open

tuning, I'm sure they don't sound like anybody else's chords.

MA: Yeah, and that's fun, you know? That's something I really like. A piano player gets to do that. Piano players can play any inversion of a chord—they can play the seven as the root....guitar players are much more limited in general. So it's fun to play guitar and have different inversions available.

BR: Have you listened to lots of Indian music?

MA: Not much, not really, beyond what has filtered through to me.

BR: As I've listened to your music, I've enjoyed thinking "hm, I wonder what's really important to her? I wonder what she's listened to the most?"

MA: Things go in phases, of course, but probably the earliest music I listened to and loved and still listen to and love would be, like, white gospel music, like protestant hymns, rousing anthems. I grew up in the church, and that was the first music, age four, age five, that was like waaaaaaoow.

BR: Sacred Harp music?

MA: More rousing than that, like Ralph Stanley, that style. The Blue Sky Boys, this kind of thing. I could still sing you ten songs from my five-year-old Sunday school. And most forms of gospel I love—the Georgia Sea Island singers, for example. Almost every kind of gospel is probably the first love. And then kind of derivative of that is country music, because my dad listened to country music. So I listened to that a lot and still do. Particularly what I love within country music is the sound of the guitars. My template for good guitar sounds comes from country music.

MA: I played classical as a kid, and my mom only listens to Baroque music—that's the only music there is for her. I like modern classical a lot, but that's in my hands and in my technique from a really young age—I started playing classical guitar when I was ten, and you learn things to do with your hands that don't leave.

MA: When you do those things not on a classical guitar it's called finger-style, and when you do them on a nylon-string guitar, somehow, it's this other kind of music. I use the word finger-style because that's what people understand, but I don't necessarily think of myself as a finger-style guitar player. Maybe it's splitting hairs—yeah, you play with your fingers, and in open tunings, and you rely on American song forms...I can see why someone would be like, no, you're this. But to me, it's something older.

BR: But there's nothing quite like Travis picking in classical music, right? There's some rhythmic stuff that makes "finger-style" music stand apart.

MA: Well, Giuliani exercises aren't Travis picking, per se, the syncopations are totally different, but the bass is held in the thumb on the bottom three strings and the melody's held in the fingers on the top three strings—and there's a technique, and exercises that you do to create these voicings and weight your fingers so that one thing is heard more than another. So it's a different musical tradition, but I think the techniques have some things in common.

BR: Did punk rock mean anything to you?

MA: Later. I wanted it to! When I was in high school I was really drawn to the punks but not the music. [laughs] It wasn't a huge part of where I lived, but what I could find I wanted. I didn't like the music until much later, until I moved to Portland and could go to shows and be in the room with it. To me it's a live music. When I was finally in a place where that was happening and could go to, I really enjoyed it.

BR: What was the Evolutionary Jass Band all about?

MA: It was an eight-piece, but sometimes more: standup bass, violin, drums, guitar, and usually three horns—two saxes and a cornet player. The repertoire was all over. We had pieces that were charted out, notated, you do it exactly this way, all the way to complete improv, spontaneous everything. There were two people, a drummer and a sax player, who came out of Jackie-O Motherfucker, you know that band? They were ex-Jackie-O guys. Actually, do you know the band in New York called Gospel of Mars?

BR: No.

MA: It's a trio, and two of them were in the Jass Band. They're kind of doing similar stuff, but in a much smaller way. So the band was really free and really technical at the same time. It was really the best musical education. I'd never played free music before that—I'd learned about improvising, but improvising in the course of a song, in the folk or country tradition, where there's the part in the middle of the song where you improvise. So it was my first exposure to jazz, deeply, to listen to it and play it. I learned a lot in that band, both as a player and a listener.

BR: Were you able to play the same places over and over again?

MA: Yeah. All in Portland. We went on tour maybe twice. It was too big, and it just wasn't an outfit that was gonna travel easily or well. So we'd play every weekend, two or three times, in Portland, and we'd meet every Tuesday and Thursday and play at one or the other person's house, for hours, into the night, and play every weekend. It

was pretty full-on.

BR: Do you think part of the reason the band got good is that you kept playing in the same small number of places?

MA: There's a safety there. Those places become laboratories. They encourage some risk-taking. The people there were there last week and they're there this week and they want to see you specifically. You don't have to do anything to get them there.

BR: It's really encouraging.

MA: Yeah. And everyone's on the same page—let's see what happens tonight with this set of material that we have to work with: the night, the people, the instruments, whatever. So yeah, I think those kinds of small places are really important, and do encourage musical growth.

BR: There's nothing like an audience that knows what they're there for, and knows who you are.

MA: And in some ways they cease to be audiences and become participants.

BR: Or collaborators.

MA: Yeah, that's the word. Yeah. Because you're in a process with them.

BR: I'm thinking of the best editors I ever had—often they have been the ones who could say to me, essentially, "only you could write this piece." [laughs] The most magic words. It implies that they know precisely what my capabilities are, and they support them, and they are sharing in the vision.

MA: Yeah—and that this is truly your piece. I miss that—Portland doesn't have places like that, because of gentrification. There's house shows, and the punk scene is really good, but up from that there's highly any one to two-hundred cap rooms. Everything's three and up.

BR: That's terrible. That's not my vision of Portland. I don't know it well—I just would have assumed it would have smaller places.

MA: It doesn't right now. It did, but all those places couldn't make it with that model—they all turned into fancy bars, date-night bars, because that's who moved here.

BR: If you could, would you stay closer to home in your performing—if there were a way to do that?

MA: No. I've been migratory since the minute I could be. I need to make pretty wide loops. It's an equal part of me with being a musician, is being a bit nomadic. Touring really satisfies that.

BR: It gives you comfort to be on the move?

MA: Yep. Yeah, when I'm in motion... yeah. Definitely. It's easier for me than being home, actually.

BR: Do you know a lot of people who are the same way?

MA: No. But Jim might be one. I'm not sure.

BR: You must be very, very good at packing.

MA: [laughs] Yeah, or just leaving it behind. There's stuff everywhere. It doesn't matter. You know? If I have my guitar, and the shirt I'm gonna wear at the show, and my toothbrush—everything else doesn't matter. I don't have comfort objects that I bring with me. That doesn't exist for me. I just pack a little bag.

BR: There must be things you really trust and believe in that help you manage it all—like certain kinds of shoes.

MA: It's true. I just want to bring one pair of shoes—they have to work for the street and the stage and for long walks.

BR: What are those?

MA: For years I was wearing Frye engineer boots. Then lately I've switched to some Clarks ankle-high boots, but not the safari-sole things that kill your feet after all day. There are some Clarks with padding to the bottom on them. I can walk, like, ten miles in them.

BR: Alright—I should let you go.

MA: [laughs] Now that we're onto footwear?

BR: This was fun.

MA: It was nice to meet you.

BR: Nice to meet you too.

MA: Maybe we'll see each other in the real world when things like that happen again.

BR: I hope so. I think it will. Take care of yourself.

I've been restless for as long as I can remember. When I was a kid, in Northern California in the 1970's, my aspiration for my grown-up self was to ride around in a bus with hippies. I left home as soon as I could and started traveling. I was basically nomadic for about fifteen years, living and traveling within a larger art/activist scene. My travel was purposeful and intentional, and I was part of a community of people who were living in a similar way.

In 1990 I joined a cross-country walk going from Los Angeles to New York City, and then another in 1992 going from New York to Nevada. The first Walk was organized around environmental issues, and the second Walk was in support of indigenous resistance to 500 years of colonization. Both Walks had strong ties to the anti-nuclear movement, in particular to the global organizing around stopping nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site and worldwide.

Walking across the US takes about nine months if you walk 15-20 miles per day, six days a week. The Walks had a kitchen, a bus to carry tents and sleeping bags and gear, and a bus filled with makeshift toilets and a tank that could be dumped at an RV dump. We organized into affinity groups and each group took turns doing the various necessary tasks to keep the community of 100-300 going. Walking fifteen miles might take up six hours of the day, so there was a lot of downtime. We didn't have much electricity and of course there were no cell phones or digital media, so we entertained ourselves telling stories, singing and doing crafting projects.

Editor's note: In my friendship with Marisa, there have been repeat mentions of the long walks that Ben asked about in his interview. After reading their interview and again getting a glimpse, I asked Marisa to share a bit more about those experiences, and about that time in her life. She agreed to share some photos from those times, and a few memories, in her own hand.

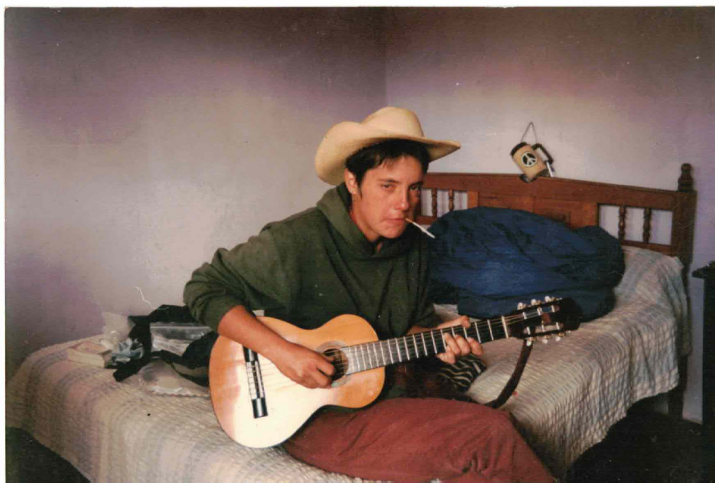
I jumped on and off the first Walk a lot, joining for some days or weeks or months, and then jumping off when an adventure or side trip called me, or if I needed to make some money by working on a farm or in a factory. I had a piece of paper that had a general outline of where the Walk would be on a particular date, so I could find it when I needed to.

This picture is taken on the way to Big Mountain, in front of Macy's coffeehouse in Flagstaff, Arizona. After walking from LA to Arizona, a few friends and I went up to Big Mountain, on the Navajo reservation to do support work for the families and elders living there. We spent about a month at Big Mountain, mostly herding sheep. The guitar isn't mine. I remember that year, I intentionally decided to leave my guitar behind. It was a time of transition for me musically, from playing mostly classical guitar to starting to learn other ways of playing and I wanted to make a clean break from classical guitar, which in my mind at the time, involved a fasting period.

Here I'm in Berea, Kentucky, it's just before I turned twenty, and just after my first time hitchhiking across the US. My friend's mom lived there in a big old haunted house outside of town. We had been robbed of all our money on the street in Eugene, Oregon so we decided to hitch back east to help out with a summer camp her mom had started. What I remember most about that summer in Kentucky is afternoon thunderstorms, rolled hay bales, and seeing lightening bugs for the first time.

My longest stretch of non-stop walking that year was about three months, from Virginia to New York City. It was my first time on the East Coast and the first time I had ever been in any large urban environments, walking through Washington DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and into New York City. We lived outside, sleeping in parks and churches and vacant lots, eating by the side of the road or in the park. Until I got to the East Coast, I had never been around so many people before, and I had never seen towns that just kept going forever until they turned into other towns. We would walk all day and there seemed to be no end to the traffic and the buildings. Here's a picture of me in a park in Washington DC, I guess this August or September of 1990. The first Walk ended in NYC in October. I hadn't made a plan for what to do when the Walk was over, so I hung around New York for a bit. A group of us stayed in New Jersey and would come into the city to hang out at the squats in the Lower East Side. I remember spending Halloween night in Washington Square Park.

After the second Walk ended in late 1992, my affinity group volunteered to drive the support vehicles back to Texas. The vehicles had been donated for use on the Walk by a radical feminist philanthropist named Genevieve Vaughn. When we arrived in Texas she decided that we were the answer to a promise she had made to the goddess Sekhmet to build a temple in her honor in North America, so she bought us a school bus and a mobile kitchen and trained us in straw bale construction techniques and set us up in Cactus Springs, Nevada, across the highway from the Nevada Test Site, where we spent three months building a temple. Here's the crew that built the temple, posing midway through the project. I'm still in close contact with most of these people, as well as the larger group that this crew came out of. We get together every few years, usually in Colorado where three of the people in this photo live off the grid on forty acres in the mountains. That's me in the lower right corner with my dog, Macrina. She was my main traveling companion throughout the 90's.



This is in Mexico, in late 1997 or early 1998. We had the bus and the kitchen and we had been going around cooking and coordinating logistics for large scale public actions for about five years. We connected with a street theater group while cooking at the DNC protests in 1996 and decided to coordinate together to make a trip to Chiapas, in Southern Mexico. We built a show that could travel on the bus and worked with the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in San Cristóbal to set up a tour in Zapatista communities and encampments. The tour was interrupted by the massacre at Acteal in December 1997 and a few of us stayed behind to witness and do support work in the aftermath of that event.

When we returned from Mexico in 1998, my friend SJ (who had been part of both Walks and all the ensoing years of travel) and I decided to focus on playing music together. We didn't know the first thing about how to make it work but I had spent enough time in Portland at that point to see that my friends in punk bands just called places up on the phone and asked for shows. I figured we could do that, even if we weren't punk. We were staying on a trailer on the land in Colorado when we booked our first tour. It was before anyone I knew had a cell phone, and anyway there would not have been any service that far up in the mountains, so we took turns each day, walking a dirt road mile to pick up the car, driving 30 minutes to town to use the pay phone at the laundramat. Eventually we strung together enough shows to get back out to Portland and then down to New Mexico.

At first it was just a duo of SJ and I, which we called Aunt Flo. Later, as the project grew, the band took on more members and the name changed to the Dolly Ranchers. We played a mix of original songs and classic country covers. The band was based out of Santa Fe, New Mexico, where for awhile we played every Wednesday night at a bar/restaraunt called The Cowgirl Hall of Fame. We would play four hour sets and try to keep the townies and the tourists coming back to the bar. I don't remember when or where this photo was taken, but from the cut of my hair and the shirt I'm wearing I'm going to guess it was about 2001? By that time I was living in Portland, but still playing in the Dolly Ranchers so I spent a lot of time on the road between the two places and on tour with the band.

We had started a circus out in a little town near Santa Fe and I came back every summer for a bit to play in the circus band. The Dolly Ranchers split up in ~~2004~~ 2004 so I went back to Portland and started working at the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls and playing with the Evolutionary Jass Band. That was the start of a new way of living because the job kept me in Portland, and the Jass band didn't tour. For the first time I was not always arriving in one place or leaving another.

That period of no traveling lasted about seven years, until my first solo guitar record came out in 2011 and the job ended. I started touring again, and felt a return to my natural balance. I am most comfortable when I'm in motion, en route to a destination. Once I get where I'm going, I'm quickly ready to keep moving. I return to the same places again and again, forming a pattern of migration and continuity that makes sense to me.

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p13	Chiapas by Sarah-Jane Moody
p14	Dolly Ranchers by Jennifer Esperanza
p15	Evolutionary Jass Band by unknown