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Interview with Ben Carson

I interviewed Ben Carson Assistant Professor of Music UCSC on Friday March 5th. We talked about a variety of topics relating to music composition, his influences, music perception and some theories regarding the structure of music departments in an academic setting. I found his insights to be helpful in placing certain ideas in contexts that I had not thought about before. The interview followed a very relaxed format in which I didn't have to ask continuous questions and some of Ben's responses led into questions that I was preparing to ask. We didn't get through all the topics that I had wanted to talk about which was okay because they were just about particular projects of his and instead I think we covered more interesting insights into music perception as a whole and the structure of academic institutions. Neither of which I really had too many questions about walking in but both of which I am happy we talked about.

First of all I will talk about music perception. I essentially was relating my interest in this field to Ben, of which he is the only music faculty who does research in this area, and talking to him about the basics of music perception and what my particular question in music perception was. First off he said there are essentially no real basics. This field of research really brings together music, cognitive science and psychology. I was relating my reservations about framing my thesis around something including music perception but feeling concerned about my initial knowledge of the field. Ben said that most people publishing in the field come from one of the disciplines and kind learn what they need to in the other ones to make up for it. He also talked about some of the problems in this field just being parallel to cognitive science in that everyone wants to turn all the information into data which can be analyzed. This poses a contrast to older models of doing psychology where more introspective ideas were related and taken as knowledge. This was then put into the context of being a result of capitalism or late-capitalism. Essentially by turning the information into data a product can then be the end result of the research, evaluation which promotes capitalism in and of itself.

We then went on to talk about some of Ben's music. I asked about his relationship to Jazz. This led us on a number of different topics. Ben related a story about his time as a graduate student during which a faculty member asked the same question, what is his relationship to Jazz. He said he initially said that he didn't have a relationship to it however he later changed his stance as time went on. Basically he stated that Jazz is such an integral part of American Musical Culture of the last 100 hundred years that it would be impossible to think of making music where Jazz would not be an influence. We went on to talk about the problem of jazz as a discipline and how it is treated within the structure of a music department in an academic institution.

Overall this was an interesting interview and I am glad that he made the time to talk to me.