

# Talking Minimalism with Kerry O'Brien and Will Robin

## **SPEAKERS**

D. Edward Davis, Will Robin, Kerry O'Brien

### **Kerry O'Brien 00:00**

Rather than doing a chapter on La Monte Young and a chapter on Philip Glass, I think we were pretty committed to moving away from a persona approach to minimalism. So, the answer to the canon — a four person canon is not making a 100 person canon.

### **Will Robin 00:36**

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host Will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. It's been a while since we've been on the air, and this is in fact, unfortunately, not yet season three, but season three is coming very soon at some point in May. We've got one final preseason bonus episode for you. And I am joined today by two of my closest friends and collaborators, one of whom, you know, my producer D. Edward Davis — say Hi, Eddie.

### **D. Edward Davis 01:08**

Hi, everyone.

### **Will Robin 01:09**

And my co-author / co-editor on a new project we're going to be talking about today, Kerry O'Brien

### **Kerry O'Brien 01:16**

Hello, hello.

### **Will Robin 01:18**

So we're going to be talking about a new book that Kerry and I have coming out in just a couple of weeks on April 25, which is called on minimalism documenting a musical movement. It's coming out with University of California Press. And we've been working on this book for a few years. It's a history of minimalist music through the presentation and anthologization of primary sources. We're printing about 100 different reviews, interviews, manifestos, all kinds of different stuff to cover the canonic composers and ideas and musical minimalism but also really open up what minimalism can be and expand it in new directions. So this episode is going to be one of those flipped episodes, you might remember one from season two, where I talked to Eddie about my first book, but Eddie is going to be interviewing Carrie and I. At the end credits, we'll talk a little bit about where you can get the book and hopefully

you'll preorder a copy as soon as you hear this conversation. And we've also got a couple upcoming really cool book launch events, which I'll talk about later, too. But for now, let's get things started with Kerry O'Brien, D. Edward Davis, and me, Will Robin, talking about the new book on minimalism documenting a musical movement. Take it away, Eddie.

**D. Edward Davis 02:29**

Hey, everyone, I am joined by Will and Kerry. I'm so excited to talk about the new book. First of all, congratulations. It is an outstanding achievement, this collection of materials that you have managed to assemble. I want to talk about the origins of the project. But I think first for our listeners who are unfamiliar with both of you and your skill sets, we should start with some introductions before we get into the book itself. So I know both of you wear a lot of hats, scholars, educators, performers, podcast hosts once in a while. I would love it if each of you could introduce yourself as you want to be represented for the purposes of this conversation. Kerry, let's start with you.

**Kerry O'Brien 03:21**

Sure, yeah. So I'm Kerry O'Brien. I'm based in Seattle. And I'm a musicologist. Primarily, I teach at Cornish College of the Arts, and sometimes at the University of Washington. And I specialize in, I would say, music in the United States, especially in the 1960s and 70s, especially experimental avant garde minimalist music. And I'm narrowing things down bit by bit — within that slice, the weirder the better. I'm interested in countercultural movements both in terms of broader culture and weirdness within musical scenes. I also am a percussionist by training. And so at Cornish college, I also will coach ensembles, teach some lessons. And it's notable here just because the way I got into minimalism was as a performer playing a lot of Steve Reich actually, as an undergrad, six marimbas was my baptism, you could say, into the world. And yeah, I had a teacher Greg Buyer, who really got me deep into that. So yeah, primarily a musicologist and percussionist and writer. I'll leave it there.

**D. Edward Davis 04:40**

Great. Well, we'll see all the ways in which those various identities become wrapped up into your contributions to this volume. Will, give a short introduction of yourself.

**Will Robin 04:49**

I'm Will -- you all know me because I host this podcast Sound Expertise, which hopefully you're longtime listeners or maybe you're first time fans... is that a thing, a first time fan?

**D. Edward Davis 04:59**

Like longtime listener, first time caller?

**Will Robin 05:01**

First time caller -- Yeah, we should do another call on episode. Anyway, I'm a musicologist, have been one for a while. I do a lot of music criticism, journalism type stuff. And I teach at the University of Maryland. And my first book was about institutions in new music through the lens of Bang on a Can looking at the 1980s and 90s. And this project has been really exciting to me because it deals I think more with aesthetic issues and on the ground ideas of musicians about all kinds of musical stuff. And I've been a minimalism junkie for a long time. And, yeah, it's been a really cool project. So.

**D. Edward Davis 05:39**

All right, both of you have dropped in some decades into your introductions. Kerry, you identified yourself with studying music of the 1960s and 70s. Will, you just dropped in the 80s and 90s. One of the things that makes this book an incredible anthology collection of writings and ideas about minimalism is how broad it spans not just in terms of chronology, from the 1950s to the present day, but in terms of its scope more broadly. So I want to get into talking about the scope of this project. Can you talk a little bit about the origins of this project? I heard that it was — I read in your acknowledgments page that it started in a hotel bar somewhere, was this whole book written on a dare? A late night dare in a hotel bar? What's the origin story here?

**Kerry O'Brien 06:23**

Yeah, I mean, so it happened in Knoxville, I would say at Will's instigating, I'll let him tell the hotel story. But the reason we were in Knoxville and Eddie, you were there, too, was for the North Summer Festival, which I think was at that time, maybe in its eighth or ninth year of running. And we hosted what is a biannual conference for the society of minimalist music, which I think that was like its seventh conference. And I co hosted that with Andy Bliss, longtime collaborator and friend, and we were really interested in hosting a minimalism festival that didn't do the typical thing of just doing all Steve Reich and Philip Glass during the festival. So we got really excited about programming things that people might not expect. One of my favorite things was that we programmed Ellen Fullman who installed her long string instrument over three or four days of just like really laborious work. And we got to hear that at the end of the festival. We had Mary Jane Leach, they're talking about her music and Julie Smith's music. Amy Cimini talking about Marianne Amacher's music, so like not the usual suspects that I had come to recognize at past festivals. And but we also did Drumming by Steve Reich, Russell Hartenberger was there to coach an ensemble doing it. So that was the occasion. And then it was really exciting because it was a mix of all these dozens and dozens of performers composers coming in to be at the festival to perform and then dozens and dozens of scholars coming in to present at the conference. And we've never basically had a meeting that large on either end the conference and or the festival. And so it was like a really fun collaboration. But so having us all there. We all met at a hotel bar and Will had this idea. So maybe Will you could explain that part.

**Will Robin 08:33**

Yeah, I have a terrible memory. And so I don't remember if I instigated this group of people, or if I — do you remember if I said we should all get this group of people should get together or if we just got together and then I pitched the idea. Do you have any idea Kerry?

**Kerry O'Brien 08:48**

Yeah, I think it was we were all sitting together and you had this idea. Okay, and said we would be the perfect group to do it.

**Will Robin 08:55**

So we were with it was me and Kerry and three other great scholars, Ryan Ebright, Patrick Nickleson, and Sasha Metcalf, all of whom had been presenting at this conference on minimalist music. We're all have a similar generation of scholars. And I had been seeing a lot of really cool presentations at the

conference that reflected I think, some really interesting new findings, especially archival findings, new kinds of documents that were saying different things about the music of Steve Reich. You know, Kerry's work is a great example where it deals with not just these big musical pieces, like music for 18 musicians, but really looks at investigates the weirder aspects of them, their relationship to the body and technology. And so it just seemed like there were new things happening in the world of musical minimalist scholarship, among scholars in their 30s that were, I think, different from the previous generations of work being done. And I was --we should figure out a way to represent this and given that I was seeing so many cool primary sources being presented by Kerry and Patrick and Sasha and Ryan, -- why don't we do We're primarily like what in the world of musicology called a primary source reader where it's -- here's a big book of all these different primary sources, here's a review, whatever of Liszt, playing a concert in the 1840s. Or here's like an essay about Amy Beach written in the 1910s, or something. And, you know, there are a lot of these types of primary source readers, there are ones that span the history of western music, or American music or this like a country source reader. And so I was thinking, what if the five of us put together some reader, reflecting this new approach to minimalist music drawing together all these primary sources that we were investigating in our own work? And so that was the pitch and then the five of us tried to carry that idea forward, somewhat stumbling over a couple years, because a five person editorial team is fairly unwieldy. And, you know, Kerry, and Patrick, we're going to work on the early 50s and 60s part because that's their area of expertise. I was going to work on the 80s and 90s. No, I was gonna work on the 2000s. And Sasha and Ryan were going to work on the 80s and 90s. And then I don't know, Kerry, then then we started rethinking the project.

**Kerry O'Brien 11:07**

Yeah, I mean, I think all of us had our own other projects going on at the same time. And so and we went through talking to a couple of different publishers. And so at some point, basically, one of those publishers suggested that a large editorial team is unwieldy and asked us basically to narrow it down. So we, yeah, we settled on me, and Will going forward with it and transformed it into something completely different from what I think we originally imagined. But that's over like five years from the initial idea to what it turned into. And a lot of that I should say is in thanks to the peer feedback, peer review that we got really helped us shape it into something something new.

**Will Robin 11:56**

Yeah, I want to just quickly shout out Ben Pickett, who is one of the peer reviewers and an amazing scholar, and he identified himself early in the process, as it's supposed to be anonymous, but he said, It's me, Ben. And he was really supportive of the project. But also, he basically just gave us this list of people we should be thinking about, including John and Alice Coltrane and the Pyramids, and Henry Flynt, and CC Hennix, and all these, some of the names were very famous people, some of these I'd never heard of, and that, and he also just gave us some general feedback about how to really think beyond — at that point, we were trying to, I think, rethink how the canon was being understood, but not necessarily really try to radically expand what that could be. And he really, I think, pushed us to rethink this whole parameter through which we understand minimalism. And that was really, I think, how the book became what it ultimately there was a proposal stage where it's -- here's a new take on Young and Riley and Reich and a few other a bunch of other people and Glass. And then he gave us this peer review and was -- do all these other things. And we basically just totally reimagined the whole thing, and it became what it is now.

**D. Edward Davis** 13:03

That's great. So I like that it's inspired by this conference, where in the conference itself is expanding what fits into the category of minimalism scholarship. And that inspires a book that that drastically, rethinks — I think your book talks about what belongs in the canon and what doesn't, but it also questions the whole notion of how the canons are built in the first place, and problematizes the whole idea of why we need to rely on a canon. So maybe we could talk a little bit, we can get a little bit deeper into that and sort of your guiding principles behind the book, how did you decide what goes in and what goes out? And, you know, Kerry you mentioned that you liked the idea — you used the phrase, the usual suspects you liked? A conference where there wasn't just the music by the usual suspects there? Do you want to talk just a little bit about the usual suspects, the Big Four, and what that means and then what it means to write a book that acknowledges the Big Four while expanding what we consider a part of the canon or who's worth talking about in this conversation about minimalism?

**Kerry O'Brien** 14:00

Yeah, I mean, the Big Four in part comes from a number of sources, but the I would say the most extensive book on the history of minimalist music is called *Four Musical Minimalists. La Monte Young, young Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley*. And through that selecting of those four people — a lot has been written since, that's a book that came out in the 2000s. But plenty of magazine pieces in the 80s and 90s already had selected these four people as representative of, of the minimalist style. It's not unique to minimalism that we have like a collection of people to represent an entire style -- you can think of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven as representing the Classical style. And so we're not the first people to criticize the canon in this way. We're building on other kinds of critiques of the canon. And, to be fair, there's a lot of like benefits to being introduced to music this way. For pedagogical purposes, it's really useful to be -- you want to know about minimalism, listen to Philip Glass. It's great for the expediency and familiarity but there's just so much more music out there.

**D. Edward Davis** 15:24

I love in the introduction of the book, you've described the idea of tidy music history and untidy music history and you say something about the loose threads that need to be taken away to tidy up this history. And so just to bounce off what you just said, pedagogically speaking, it makes sense to — you want to teach a tidy history, because that's a good introduction to a subject. But what's the ... can you talk about what are the risks and rewards of building an untidy history?

**Will Robin** 15:48

Well, I think, you know, we wrote that introduction the way that we did, because as Carrie mentioned, there are huge benefits to ..., there are really good reasons why this story was told in the way that it was and we can think of this as a scholarly history. But we can also think of it as a compelling narrative that composers have told about minimalism, and musicians and also journalists and scholars picked it up from there. And so La Monte Young invents this musical tech... or not invents really, La Monte Young begins using this musical technique of droning in the late 1950s and early 60s. And then he befriends Terry Riley, who has his own addition to the lexicon of minimalism with looping, with tapes, which becomes the canonic "in C" -- and then Riley meets Reich, and Reich adds something to Riley's in C, which is this pulse and then begins investigating phasing; and then Glass and Reich have an early

collaboration period and, and Glass begins.... And so there's a chain linking all of them. And they also, you know, Glass and Reich become the most famous minimalists and so there's a really, as Carrie said, tidy narrative. When I used to teach undergrad music history, five or ten years ago, I would do those for composers in the minimalism day, because you could really do it in 50 minutes pretty well. You're getting very short snippets of their music, but it holds together as a coherent story. And so, as we say, in the book, it's a good story. And it's a tidy story -- but when you want to try to tell a different story, you want to try to move away from the tidiness and especially because we had an opportunity with a book like this, that's different from a book that would say, be a narrative history of minimalism, where it's hard to include the names of 40 or 50 people, but because we're printing documents, there's so many different ways to rethink who you're talking about, and you can move towards this untidiness, where we have these themes that group each chapter, but we can explore all kinds of different music and musicians in these themes, too.

**D. Edward Davis 17:51**

So just to bounce off that, you know, it's untidy, but you've managed to tidy in a way by grouping chapters around these themes. The book is generally chronological, part one, part two, and part three, moving through time, by decades. But within each of those, you found some really important connective tissue to link these stories together. So whether that's talking about cultural fusion that's happening or altered states, or phasing and looping these sort of conceptual ideas that are linking those together. So can you talk a little bit about the process of brainstorming those Did you work from, you know, we have to include music as a gradual process by Steve Reich, so what what grouping are we going to put that in? Or did you work top down and come up with the groupings first, and and then figure out what filled each of those, what material told those stories the best?

**Kerry O'Brien 18:41**

Yeah, I would say it was a back and forth between those two things, which is like there was definitely a collection of pieces that we had to include, like music as a gradual process, and then certain groupings started to coalesce. But then we would have a grouping like I only had two pieces in it. So then we had to go back and forth and back and forth. I swear, there was probably 10 drafts of different groupings. But it's true, like the loops and process chapter we have to include, it's like some of the most expected you could say documents in the history of minimalism. But other ones like altered states are completely I would say unexpected and it can include someone like Pauline Oliveros, who was really never included in discussions of the history of minimalism, in part because she was really interested in the ways that performing long tones impacted her state of mind. In other chapters, like gurus and teachers, were able to draw together figures like La Monte Young, who you'd expect, with others like Alice Coltrane, who all were both studying with gurus, Alice Coltrane and Philip Glass studying with the same guru, but are really never included in the same discussion in part because the framing is never right. They're often drawn apart by, say, classical / jazz genre splitting. But through these Venn diagram types of groupings, we were able to include different people in different types of musics together,

**Will Robin 20:15**

just to give the listener to a sense of the process behind it, which is we had created our own thematic groupings for the first phase of this project, which were, I would say, somewhat traditional, it was -- a chapter on La Monte Young or whatever. And we have a bunch of documents on La Monte Young and I



can't think of some of the others. But after we got these peer reviews, and we started to rethink the project, we basically took all the documents we had, put them in a Google Drive, and then made a gigantic like 100 folder Google Drive. And each folder was the name of a musician who we thought was someone who could who's an obvious choice like La Monte Young or an unobvious choice like Alice Coltrane or someone where we were -- This person has some minimalist thing going on at some point in their work. And then we basically just took all those names and just did this crazy library hunt for documents, we would comb over like secondary scholarship, look in the footnotes for references to old concert reviews, or old interviews. This was during the pandemic, a lot of this work, and we're very grateful for our interlibrary loan system, because they were scanning at both of our universities, they were scanning stuff for us and sending us PDFs of it. So we were just basically dumping all these PDFs into folders, then once we amassed, you know, several hundred documents, we then started to look through them, and we were both sorting them. Okay, like in this interview with John Cale, he said something that's resonant with this interview with someone else. And Okay, we see some themes emerging. And so we really tried to build a lot of the themes, not this top down -- this is a category that we know is important. But here's some resonance between what we're hearing musicians say, or what we're seeing in concert reviews, that allows us to bring different voices into the fold through an organic process. It's not -- oh, here are two totally disconnected musicians that belong in the same chapter. It's -- no, actually, you know, they, they're talking in the same way about spirituality, or they're talking about the role of the drone, or they were both hanging out in Yoko Ono's loft, or something like that.

**Kerry O'Brien 22:14**

I would also just add that rather than doing a chapter on La Monte Young and a chapter on Philip Glass, I think we were pretty committed to moving away from a persona approach to minimalism. So we didn't -- the answer to the canon is not ... a four person canon is not making a 100 person canon, we didn't want to valorize all of these different people, but instead, so that the groupings could be ideas, or musical styles or tendencies, rather than the personalities of the people, even though there's a lot of great personalities in the book. I think that yeah, we got really committed to not framing the book around specific people.

**D. Edward Davis 22:58**

Well, we also live in a time when we have unprecedented access to information. So even if you're not giving a biography of every single person that appears in the text, it's very easy for anyone to say, oh, that idea from Henry Flint was really interesting to me, that is going to inspire me to learn more about Henry Flint, right? You're just providing to the reader, unlocking these ideas. And then the reader can follow up on the biographies and the personalities, and whatever as they want.

**Will Robin 23:21**

And the way the book is structured to it's basically in three chronological sections, the 50s to the mid 70s, the 70s to the 90s, and the 2000s to the present. And each of those chunks has... we have a longer essay that explains the history. So before you read the documents, you can get an understanding of what's going on. And then before each chapter, we have a little one to two page intro, threading the needle so that again, you're not just awash in the sea of information, but you're getting our guidance through it. And so you can read the book front to back, and get the narrative that we're telling, or you can just hop around and find cool stuff. And I think one of my goals for this book was to

make a book that felt like you could read it from cover to cover and really get a lot of the experience, in that traditional sense of reading a book, but also that it could serve as a coffee table-ish book, where it's -- here's a cool book, and whenever I have 10 minutes on the subway, I'm gonna just like pop open something and read some cool stuff. And I think I think it works that way. That's my hope at least.

**D. Edward Davis 24:29**

Yeah, I want to commend you on your setups for each of those parts. you distill an incredible decade's worth of musical innovations into a few pages and just reading it you get the sense, of course, that when you're reading it, that they're leaving out a lot of the details because this is a gloss, but it's such an achievement to gloss decades worth of musical innovations in just a few pages and set the reader up for -- these are the texts that are going to connect to that. I like how all the pieces fit together of your work. To switch topics just a little bit, well, still talking about these groupings. Kerry, you mentioned that you use the word genre skipping or genre conflict or something like that. Generally the story of minimalism is taught as the Big Four and also white male classical composers. And your book very consciously works outside of not just the whiteness and maleness, but also the idea of classical music being the only genre that has minimalist ideas in it. Can you talk a little bit about the book's approach to non-classical artists of all styles?

**Will Robin 25:39**

Yeah, part of it was, again, that review from Ben Pickett, where he just listed a bunch of people that we hadn't really been thinking about some of whom were non classical. And we had all these different kinds of scholarly influences for doing so. George Lewis has this wonderful essay in an edited volume about Julius Eastman, where he talks about the fact that although Eastman is still considered one of the few black minimalists, what about John Coltrane, who was this formative figure in the 1960s for the white minimalist composers working in this period, like Riley, Reich, and Young, all of whom have basically a strongly Coltrane influenced period in the early 60s. And so Coltrane is often seen as a primary influence on minimalism. But what if Coltrane himself is a minimalist? And, you know, the way we start to think about this is like all of these composers are basically influenced by bebop, modal jazz and Indian raga around the same time, and Coltrane is one of them. And so that's part of it. And then, you know, the way of thinking beyond the classical frame is, we just started thinking about figures like Brian Eno, Victor Szabo has a really excellent new book about ambient music where he makes a lot of points about the way that ambient and New Age got walled off from minimalism, because of various issues of taste, and high art versus low art and popular versus art music. And, again, it was very important, I think, for the folks who were theorizing the idea of minimalism to wall it off, in the sense that -- in order to advocate for Reich and Glass in the New York Times or Time Magazine, it was often the case where it was, let's show how these composers relate to Bartok and Stravinsky and Bach, which those composers themselves were making those connections. But if we take a gaze backwards, and also we really try to use the documents as our guide of what are these musicians using as a shared language to talk about their work -- What are some other critics, how are some other critics providing different groupings than the traditional grouping? Then we could start to see different kinds of patterns and different figures emerge. And, you know, if we move away from minimalism as a specific set of techniques, or a specific set of people, we started to think about aesthetic affinities, shared thematic engagement, shared communities, because again, these people were often collaborating with one another, although we don't think of it. Don Cherry and Terry Riley is a great example, in the 1970s,



someone considered a Black jazz trumpet player and a white classical-ish experimental composer, in fact, we are seeing them just basically operate on a similar aesthetic terrain. And one of the main challenges of the book was figuring out how to basically tackle the beginning, which was really Kerry's - - we divided the book up chronologically, so I was dealing with a lot of the post 80s stuff, because that was related to my research. And Kerry was doing the 60s, and sorry, the 50s to 70s stuff, which is the hardest needle to thread, because how do you tell a different origin story? Because the Big Four origin story is so strongly ingrained and the cultural and scholarly imagination. So Kerry, I'd love for you to talk about how you did that, so that we could do it.

**Kerry O'Brien 28:53**

Yeah, it's hard to basically replace the origin story. I think what we were trying to do is not do that, not say, it started on a rainy night in 1961. That's not how these things work. Honestly, we could have written the first paragraph of that first chapter 100 different ways, and the way that the chapter ended up going was not -- how did how and where, and who started minimalism. It was -- what made it possible? What were the conditions that made it possible. And the way that this traditional story is often told is that there's these four men who started minimalism, and they were influenced by North Indian classical music, bebop jazz, West African drumming, they were influenced by those things. And again, one thing that George Lewis points out is that -- why is John Coltrane an influence on minimalism rather than just like a minimalist, why is it the framing always that they are influences rather than participants in this tradition. And so the way that we set it up is just by talking about an iconic concert of North Indian classical music, and a recording that resulted from it. And just the idea that Well, La Monte Young was listening to that album, John Coltrane was listening to that album. Everyone was listening to that album. And that wasn't the album that started minimalism. It was just a way in to say that many different people from many different backgrounds were taken by, infatuated with drones, repetition, stasis. And then once we're in, that's the hardest part, we could talk about these kinds of conditions that made minimalism possible. The access to recordings of non western music. I don't know, Will, if you want to add any of those other kind of, what made minimalism possible?

**Will Robin 30:59**

Yeah, that's the framing we have for this introductory chapter. That before we get into the the document section of the first chunk of the book, where as Kerry was saying, rather than say, Okay, in this year, this composer wrote this, here are the things, this patchwork of influences and ideas. So, I think you mentioned most of them electronic music, tape music, jazz, Indian music, the work of Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan as big influences in this period. There are probably a couple others I'm forgetting. And that allows us to set up the first chapter of the book, The first set of documents, which, you know, we consciously did not call origins but we instead very consciously called improvisation and experimentation, which starts with a document that you found Kerry.

**Kerry O'Brien 31:47**

Yeah, it's an essay by Amiri Baraka, on Miles Davis, his music, his penchant for minimalism. And it's another case, again, in which Miles Davis is often considered an influence on minimalism, but we position him as the first the first minimalist of the book.

**D. Edward Davis 32:05**

That's great, I love the idea of just to bounce off something Will said, that you can define minimalism in terms of communities, who was playing on each other's records, and who was going to each other's concerts. But you can also define minimalism in purely aesthetic terms, in which case, you can take people who are not part of adjacent communities, and find similarities between them because they have aesthetic similarities, or they're listening to each other on record, even if they're not hanging out at each other's loft spaces and things like that. So it must have been a fun challenge to try to find the ways in which these aesthetic overlaps could generate productive conversation around these artists.

**Will Robin 32:41**

Yeah, there's ... I won't say what the specific work of scholarship is. And it's sometimes comes up in other minimalist scholarship, and also popular conversations about minimalism, where -- here are the six ways in which minimalism connects to popular music. Oh, David Bowie listened to it, or did you know that John Cale who was in the Theatre of Eternal Music, which is this foundational group, was also a founding member of the Velvet Underground. And that's part of one of the things -- minimalism is a popular avant garde movement in the sense that it's more popular than spectralism per se. Like a lot of people listen to this music. Philip Glass is an extremely popular composer. And the ideas of minimalism have suffused a popular imagination. But it's also a credentialed one in the sense that it's gained credentials over the last ... it's now welcomed in Carnegie Hall and taught in the academy even though it wasn't for a long time, arguably, but so these pop culture connections help establish its hip bonafides. But if you if you just say, Okay, those aren't necessarily singular data points, but just move away from this idea of it being a classical phenomenon with little pop connections that we can say, okay, John Cale as a central figure in this thing, we can very easily fold the Velvet Underground into this conversation, we can very easily fold Brian Eno into this conversation. We don't have documents about David Bowie, but he's part of this conversation. So let's again not establish minimalism as this big thing that then has connections to the popular world. But let's just look at all of this stuff as ways of making minimalist music or as musicians who are engaging with minimalist ideas,

**D. Edward Davis 34:19**

And your your book even namedrops, people like Tyler the Creator, talks about Lo Fi beats, ambient hip hop that those sorts of things are also part of the conversation, you know that that's happening.

**Kerry O'Brien 34:32**

Yeah, I mean, that's later in the book, but like I would also say that there's essays earlier in the book, the trance music article by Robert Palmer that also has a framing around minimalism that is, you could say crosses genres. It includes works by Steve Reich and Philip Glass, but it also includes the master musicians of Jujuka includes the jazz pianist McCoy Tyner. Yeah. And so it's weird, in terms of genre, there has been this process of pulling things apart and putting them in their proper place. But often when we went back to historical documents, even from the 1970s, they weren't pulled apart yet. The sorting hadn't really yet happened yet. And another great example of that is the WKCR, radio playlist that's included in the book, which I don't know, Will, if you want to explain what that is.

**Will Robin 35:40**

Yeah, so this was a gigantic marathon put on by a Columbia radio station. Sorry, radio station at Columbia University in 1980, by primarily by the critic, Tim Page, but also a musician named Mark

Abbott. And we did some deep research into this because we turned it into an AMS paper last fall, where they played something like 52 or 56 hours of minimalist music on the radio over a weekend and so we got in Tim Page's archival documents, we found the playlist which is this fascinating document, it has his handwritten annotations and just the amount of stuff in there, okay, yes, there's you know, probably four or five hours of Reich Glass and Riley each, there's a little bit of Young. But there were people like Catherine Christer Hennix. a name I mentioned earlier, who just really fascinating stuff in the 70s, the Velvet Underground was on there -- weird people I haven't heard of before, like Remco Scha, the guy behind the punk band Suicide. So all kinds of stuff ended up on there, in part because the relationship between Paige and Abbott and so we just print that playlist and say, in 1980, this was all part of minimalism. And there are more artists on that playlist than probably show up in our book. And that playlist in some ways is a symbol of what we're trying to do in the book itself in a way,

**D. Edward Davis 37:05**

I like that. That's a sort of meta narrative of the book that you are in the process of announcing this revisionist history of minimalism. But you're also finding that you're not the first people to do this. I think you describe it as, hey, these examples are hiding in plain sight that in the 80s people like Robert Palmer, or this KCRW playlist, they're doing some of that similar work, but those aren't the tidy stories that get have lasting impact in the way that minimalism is taught in the academy and things like that.

**Kerry O'Brien 37:34**

Yeah, I would also add just that I love that playlist. And it's one of my favorite things in the book, in part because it's such a weird type of document. And there's a really close relationship between the canon of minimalism as it's been presented and the types of documents that historians have typically used. So if you read the early books on minimalism, primarily it's newspaper criticism is the number one I would say, type of historical document that is consulted. Next to composer interviews, those are like the two main historical sources. And only some people like Steve Reich got profiled by the New York Times in his early 30s. Those types of documents, a profile in the New York Times, are only available for some people. And so if you only do a historical newspaper search for the New York Times, you're only going to find certain people in there. And so part of the thing that we were doing with historical documents was -- we have plenty of newspaper articles in the book. But we also have like weirder things like this radio playlist, we have transcribed speeches that people have given, stories that people have told, because just looking at the New York Times leads you to a certain place but we also wanted to look in like local papers, we have a piece about Meredith Monk from the Chicago Reader. An interview with Alice Coltrane, from Essence magazine. So the types of documents that you consult, informs the types of stories that you're able to tell. And that I think is like one of the most exciting things about the book, which is that you're gonna keep telling the same stories if you keep consulting the same types of sources, which only only cover certain people.

**D. Edward Davis 39:24**

Maybe each of you can talk a little bit about one or two of the entries that you think are especially exciting to scholars, things that haven't been published before. Things that you're especially proud that you are able to share with us through this book.

**Kerry O'Brien 39:38**

Yeah. One of my favorite entries is an interview with an Annea Lockwood, experimental composer never associated with minimalism, really. But I was interviewing her for a different reason. And she told the story about a group that gathered in the 1970s it was her partner Ruth Anderson, the medium Julie Winter and this vocalist Emily Dare. And they gathered together to sing a single pitch, drone on a single pitch for hours and hours and hours approaching as closely as they could to a sine tone, to really try to eliminate all overtones -- as pure of a drone that they could produce. And then to discuss or observe the types of effects that had on their minds and bodies, they even would welcome visitors to sit in the middle of the circle and see what effects it would have on a listener. And this is in the midst of me working on this book with Will. And I was like what -- you had a group in the 70s, that was just droning on a single pitch -- I've never heard of this group before. They didn't have a name, there were no concert reviews. So it's the perfect type of thing where, of course, this wasn't included in the history of minimalism. The typical types of historical documents that would have been captured to reflect it don't exist. And so we just printed their interviews, both the Annea Lockwood and the Julie Winter interview about it. So I'd love that because there's no way we would have the history would have touched upon that if we had hadn't used a different type of document. I would also say and this is an item Will can expand upon because he chose it. But the Beth Anderson documents are some of my favorite in the book, in part because she's funny, and she's pretty irreverent. Again, it's a -- Will can talk about, how he found the documents and collected the documents. But she has this great I mean, she for one thing she calls I forget if it's Reich or Glass -- I think it's Reich. And she's talking about drumming. She just calls it too fucking loud. And I just love that she -- it's true. I mean, that's a huge part of early minimalism is that it's sometimes painfully loud, but no one puts it quite that way. She also, I think she's reviewing a Glass concert. And she has this line, which is like maybe my favorite line in the book where she says, "you know, if this is church, Why has God sent me sent this music to me? And if it's pop music, why can't I have a drink?" It's so good, because it's funny, and it hits at something so true. Which is why do we have this reverence -- you must be quiet, this is a classical music concert. Why do we have this reverence? But why are people lying on the ground, like it's a pop concert? And if that's true, yeah, why aren't why aren't we drinking? I mean, some people were -- but so I just love that her style of writing, Yeah, her personality comes through, but it's a unique document. And I know Will you collected a lot of her writing. So maybe you can explain how you found that?

**Will Robin 42:45**

Oh, yeah, I did this actually for a few years ago for a seminar I taught -- Beth Anderson is a really fascinating composer. And in the late 70s, she went to this big music festival at the Kitchen - New Music, New York - that was a showcase for what the New York scene had become in the late 70s. It became this big festival in the 80s called New Music America. So it was this cultural touchstone moment. And she self-published basically this zine called *Reports from the Front* where she would go to the concerts, scribble down these reviews, sometimes they're reviews but sometimes they also have other people's contributions, and just musings on the scene, so it's really much in the sense, it's the avant garde version of a punk scene in the 80s -- and she would just photocopy them and then hand them out the next day at this nine day festival and people got mad about it because you know, as you said, this one with Reich, I'm just gonna read now - "Mr. Reich is too fucking loud, men hitting things," which is such a great canny synopsis of what Drumming is from a very catty perspective. Anyway, I worked with Beth and we published them on a website, I think it's [reportsfromthefront.wordpress.com](http://reportsfromthefront.wordpress.com) or something like that, I can link to it in our show notes. And they're worth reading in total. So we print a

little bit of them in two chapters, but one of the chapters which is I think my favorite chapter in the book that's in is called backlash, which has one of my favorite documents in the book, which is this fascinating interview done by Alan Licht, a really great important writer about minimalist music. We also print his one of his minimal top 10 lists where he lists all this very out there minimalist stuff in our Canons chapter. And he interviews the composer Charlemagne Palestine who is this incredibly Gonzo musician who was active around the same time as Reich and Riley and Glass and in New York in the 70s, late 60s and doing just like these really long form intense organ improvisations. He actually performed one of the some of the strangest music I've heard and most compelling music at one of the first minimalist conferences I went to in Kansas City, I don't know like a decade ago, more than a decade ago, and then he decamps to Paris at some point in the I think 80s. And so this interview is in 1989. And Licht calls him up and basically just says, what are you doing now, and he just delivers this really wild rant that may have been under the influence of something and Licht just transcribes it and publishes that -- actually in Sonic death, which was I think Sonic Youth's zine. And he's just ranting about the fact that he invented this music, and now he's in exile in Paris, and why are you calling me why are you talking to me? And there are these lines in it where he says, were we just making aspirin was all of this just about making sonic aspirin so people could just feel better, or is anybody out there just listening or caring. And it reflects this fact that by the 80s, minimalism had become the cultural juggernaut in some sense, and some of the original folks are -- what is this? What did we do? And why are all these yuppies listening to it? And it's just a really, I think, special and bizarre document. One of the other things I love in the book is what towards the.. we have a chapter in the third section, the post 2000 section on history. And we print an essay by David Toop that's incredible called Black minimalism, where he that's where the Tyler the Creator reference comes in just reimagines the history of minimalism through Black music. And we also print a really lovely essay by Jace Clayton, a fantastic musician, and producer and writer about Julius Eastman. It's about Eastman, but it's also about what a canon is, and what it means to be a part of a canon that that I think, informed a lot of our approach as well.

**D. Edward Davis** 46:34

Yeah, that's great. There's a quote, you use a quote from that Jace Clayton essay as part of the epigram at the front of your book, the idea that spotlights create shadows, I think that's a really beautiful three-word phrase, the idea that when you shine the light on someone, you're also hiding someone else behind that. And that part of the goal for the book can be uncovering these names and these ideas that have been hidden in the shadows for too long. So we are about out of time. Thank you so much for being guests on the podcast. It's been fascinating to hear about your work in putting this together. I'm sure lots of our listeners are going to be interested in picking up this book. Maybe as a way of taking us out here, I'm curious to ask each of you -- this book covers minimalism from the 1950s through ostensibly the present day with a lot of emphasis on 60s 70s 80s 90s Are there artists today minimalism or otherwise that are inspiring to you? Tell me about something I should listen to that's going on in the world of music in 2023. Kerry, why don't you start?

**Kerry O'Brien** 47:30

Sure, yeah, I recently just heard about in Los Angeles, the Monday evening concerts are hosting a performance at the end of April of Julius Eastman's Femenine, which is a piece that's been played a lot and recorded a lot recently, but paired with three commissions of Masculine, which is like the, the pair

piece by three different composers, including Sarah Hennies, a composer included in the book, to imagine if the score is lost, all that remains are like recollections of it. So to speculatively imagine what that piece would have sounded like, and I love that, again, just as a historical gesture that -- Okay, some pieces are lost to history, let's not just, I don't know, shrug our shoulders and let it be. Let's imagine what it could have been like. So that's at the Getty in in late April. So yeah, for anyone in LA, I think that'll be a great concert to catch.

**Will Robin** 48:32

Ah, this is a good opportunity to plug our book launch events. So the Dream House quartet, which is this really fantastic group that's been touring in Europe is making its North American debut on April 23, in New York City at town hall. That's a cross genre quartet, Bryce Dessner is one of the musicians in it, they're playing works by him, and by Glass and Reich and I think Meredith Monk and some other folks, the concert's at 6pm at Town Hall, and right before that, at 4:30pm, Kerry and I are hosting our New York City book launch panel. So we are going to be talking to a couple of musicians, including the Great Lee Ronaldo of Sonic Youth who has a really fantastic essay in the book and wrote us a really beautiful blurb for the book. So that's April 23. Tickets -- it's a fundraiser for the Kitchen. So you should definitely buy a ticket for the concert because it helps out an important organization for the history of minimalist music. But the hope our plan is that the panel itself will be free and open to the public. And we'll have some information about that online. And on April 26, we are doing a launch event in DC as well at the bookstore -- amazing local bookstore, Politics and Prose, the Union Market location, we'll be speaking with Chris Richards, the great pop critic for The Washington Post, and there'll be a performance by the group Insect Factory. It's a really great local act that does minimalisty stuff. So that takes us to the end of our episode. So thank you Eddie for serving as interviewer today.

**D. Edward Davis** 49:57

It's been a pleasure.

**Kerry O'Brien** 49:58

Yeah, thanks, Eddie.

**Will Robin** 50:01

And thank you so much, Kerry, for being my co author and dealing with all of the stuff we've dealt with over the last few years. Carrie became a parent recently, too. Can I say that on mike?

**Kerry O'Brien** 50:13

Yes, yes,

**Will Robin** 50:14

Yes. So we are both parental musicologist, which is a term I'm never going to use again. So you can check out Kerry's work and more information about our book over at our website [soundexpertise.org](http://soundexpertise.org) including more info about our book launch events on the 23rd and 26th of April. Thank you, Eddie as always for producing, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). I'm fairly inactive on Twitter @seatedovation. If you have any thoughts you want to share. I really hope you buy a copy of the book. If you go on UC press website, it's only 35 bucks paperback it's probably even going to be



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