

This is a repository copy of *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage*. By Kenneth Silverman : Book review.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/74984/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Brooks, William orcid.org/0000-0002-8257-5566 (2012) *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage*. By Kenneth Silverman : Book review. *American Music*. pp. 113-115. ISSN 1945-2349

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

*Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage.* By Kenneth Silverman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. ISBN 978-1-4000-4437-5. Hardcover. Pp. 483. \$40.00.

No doubt my expectations were unrealistic. Pulitzer Prize winner takes on the most radical composer of the past century; I expected something remarkable, even magisterial—something like Leon Edel's biography of Henry James, dauntingly comprehensive and exhaustively documented.<sup>1</sup> *Begin Again* is neither of these; it's skillfully written and eminently readable but factually vague, emphasizing people rather than ideas, Cage's social life rather than his music. For my father—not a musician but interested in Cage—*Begin Again* would be an excellent present; it's unencumbered by scholarship, an easy and pleasant read in bed or on a train.

But it's of little use to me. It's a convenience, because Silverman brings together in a single, uncontroversial narrative events and personalities that are distributed widely and erratically throughout the existing literature on Cage. *Begin Again* is a quick way to refresh my knowledge, fill a gap, or supply a colorful quote; it saves trawling through a mountain of publications and photocopies; but it offers few insights. I enjoyed reading *Begin Again*, and I'll surely revisit it, but it has changed nothing.

Silverman relies primarily on classical biographical sources: letters, narratives by and about contemporaries, archival holdings, and the extensive secondary literature. In form and method his approach mirrors his biographies of Poe and Mather, providing a certainly scholarly remove by generally eschewing Cage's extensive self-representations—interviews, performances, recordings, public appearances—except to amplify or lend a touch of color. And it distinguishes Silverman's book from other book-length studies, notably David Revell's *The Roaring Silence*, which relied so heavily on interviews that it is nearly a ghost-written autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

The result presents what might be called the “unguarded” Cage—Cage in his daily interactions, his friendships and passions. And Silverman's Cage is passionate; the most evident difference between this account and earlier ones is the consistency (even glee) with which the author dwells on Cage's moods, temperament, and appetites—sexual in the beginning, culinary later. Sexual undercurrents surface in odd details, giving the text an occasionally salacious quality: Xenia has a “mole near her pubic area” (21); the woman in Duchamp's *Étant Donnés* reveals “gaping labia” (393), an image that “continues to shock viewers,” though it evidently didn't shock Cage.

In part this is just good journalism. Silverman's book reads much like an extended newspaper account; chapters have headline-like titles (“The Art of Noise”) and efficient subtitles (“Percussion Music; Lou Harrison”) (26). Cage's friends and associates are sketched with lively details, sometimes apt and revealing, but often irrelevant or even demeaning: “Long blond hair falling over her chest in two ribboned hanks, [Mary Bauermeister] hosted performances . . .” (197). And implied relationships are often out of kilter. Introducing Earle Brown, Silverman writes that he “came to New York with his wife in mid-1952” (111); only much later do we learn that the unnamed wife (Carolyn) was equally motivated to move to New York, and still later that she became a mainstay of the Cunningham company and one of the great dancers of the century. The casual

reader might find such writing entertaining; the thoughtful reader may wonder how Silverman decides what matters—or, worse, whether his judgment is to be trusted.

Scholars—terminally afflicted with doubt—will find precious little justification for trust. There is an extensive, though not exhaustive, list of secondary and archival sources, but finding out what Silverman got from where is well-nigh impossible. The reference system is a nightmare: to find a source I have to remember a key word from the quote and the first word of the paragraph; then I turn to the back, where everything is strung together in massive blocks of text, hunt for the boldface entry keyed to the paragraph, then peruse what follows for the keyword—hoping I chose the right one. I also bought the ebook in hopes that references would be linked to the text—surely an elemental operation—but no. (The ebook has other problems: it doesn't reproduce Cage's mesostics correctly, and it introduces odd misspellings and glitches. But you can search the text, which is a boon, since the index to the print version has the usual flaws.) In addition, almost nothing is referenced except direct quotations, so I haven't a clue about many discrepancies. Why does Silverman say that Cage's short-lived infant brother is John Milton Cage (4), when Revill, Nicholls, and Hines all say there were two, both named Gustavus, and Hines checked birth records?<sup>3</sup> Why does Silverman say Cunningham "made a dance for" Cage's *Credo in Us* (61), when Revill and Pritchett suggest that Cage made the music for Cunningham and Erdman?<sup>4</sup> And on and on; no answers are evident.

All this would be bearable if Silverman offered insights into Cage's thought and art. But he doesn't; in comparison, Revill's treatment, though often ponderous, is thorough and occasionally illuminating. Or one might bless Silverman for putting Cage's complicated life in order; he is more resolutely inclusive than Revill, and he is, after all, a professional biographer. This doesn't happen either, however; Silverman is unwilling to put in real dates, and since his treatment is often thematic rather than strictly chronological, things are often muddled. A quoted letter from "spring of 1955" about Cage's move to Stony Point (121) is actually dated May 20 (why must I brave the citations to find that out?). Then we learn that "a few months after," Cage went to Germany; later it emerges that this trip was in October 1954. I only sorted the chronology out by going back to Revill, who, in an unimaginative but clear fashion, treated the events in succession.

Especially in the later years, Silverman ranges back and forth, grouping together works that are spread over several years. This helps to explain techniques but gives an ultimately misleading sense that Cage's spheres of activity were separate. They weren't; you can't really understand the time-bracket pieces if you don't know that Cage was creating engravings at the time; you can't understand *any* of Cage's literary procedures without viewing them through the lens of contemporaneous compositions. Again, Revill's treatment is plodding and finicky, but the cross-fertilization can at least be inferred and is sometimes explicit.

Silverman's essential theme is that Cage was always "beginning again," inventing anew. It's a plausible but superficial claim; every "beginning" was a response to what had been done before, and increasingly over Cage's career,

each “beginning” reinstated previously rejected ideas or materials. It’s just as plausible to argue that Cage never began again, that his entire career fulfilled a single agenda: bring into art things that have been excluded—first noise, then that which goes counter to taste, and then (having rejected choice) one’s preferences. But this is outside Silverman’s universe; it’s significant that “Lecture on Nothing” and “Composition in Retrospect,” the two texts that most clearly explained the continuities in Cage’s work, get only a single passing mention each, long after their legitimate place in the narrative.

But I suppose I grow churlish. I’m disappointed that Silverman is not Edel, that his biography is just a comfortable read, rather than a monument for eternity. And I suppose I’m disappointed that it’s probably not possible to publish a biography like *Henry James* in the twenty-first century: neither the industry nor the reading public would tolerate it. Silverman does the best he can, given the world we’re in—or so my charitable self wants to believe.

But does he? Is not the job of a biographer *also* to “begin again,” to reinvent biography to suit the time and the person? Why must Cage be made to fit the mold; why cannot a mold be designed for him? What kind of biography might we invent for a person so prolific, so varied, so nonlinear—and yet so connected, so undeniably an identity?

Cage lived a post-Gutenberg life, and he deserves a post-Gutenberg biography. Despite my admiration, Leon Edel is probably as poor a model as Silverman is; what’s needed is a biography “in the cloud” (technologically and metaphorically)—a biography for the birds: a map, not a route, permitting each reader to find a different way through it. Clearly I ask too much from a professional biographer; but is there someone who thinks differently . . . who is neither a biographer nor a professional . . . and who is, above all, disciplined? If so . . .

Begin again.

William Brooks  
University of York  
Orpheus Research Centre in Music

## NOTES

---

1. Edel’s abridged biography, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) is sufficient for the comparison; but the full version was originally issued in five volumes over nineteen years (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1953–72).

2. David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage: A Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992).

3. *Ibid.*, 19; David Nicholls, *John Cage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 6; Thomas S. Hines, “‘Then Not Yet ‘Cage’’: The Los Angeles Years, 1912–1938,” in *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95.

4. Revill, *Roaring Silence*, 80–81; James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22.