Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture • Issue One

Expanding Ethnographic Documentary Film: Roy Holliday and the Effects of Ageing on a Lifelong Musician

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Published on: Oct 06, 2020

DOI: 10.21428/66f840a4.4dd8e608

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ABSTRACT

Expanding Ethnographic Documentary: Roy Holliday and the Effects of Ageing on a Lifelong Musician
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Roy Holliday is a portrait film by Heather Britton that takes a look at the life of Roy, a 93 year old Jazz and Dance Band drummer. Roy has had and continues to lead an expansive life and is one of few remaining nonagenarian drummers of his time. Within the confines of a 15-minute film, the audience is offered a glimpse at Roy's life not as it was, but as it is now and documents how he retains the community aspect of being a musician well after the performance aspect has dissipated. In the accompanying paper, the idea of ethnographic documentary is expanded, and Roy Holliday is used as a springboard for discovery into the effects of ageing on the identity of a lifelong musician. It is clear that being a musician for 80 years will have a huge impact on one's identity, and we follow Roy as he navigates what it means to be a nonagenarian drummer.

Roy Holliday (Documentary Film)

Roy Holliday is a portrait film that takes a look at the life of Roy, a 93 year old Jazz and Dance Band drummer. Roy has had and continues to lead an expansive life and is one of few remaining nonagenarian drummers of his time. Within the confines of a 15-minute film, he offers a unique look at the challenges and effects age has on the identity of a lifelong musician.

Portrait Films, Narrative and Trust

Portrait films offer an opportunity to embrace a cinematic approach to documentary filmmaking, rather than striving for an objective or transparent portrayal of characters. *Roy Holliday*, like most portrait films, follows one central character through different situations in their life, “[allowing] the audience to build up an acquaintanceship.”¹ Baily notes that “choosing the appropriate person who’ll come across well on film is of crucial importance” to the success of a portrait film.² Roy, a family friend and performer of nearly 80 years, certainly makes for a confident and engaging subject, relishing the opportunity to share his stories and philosophy on life. Roy’s eagerness to narrate his own story might be considered problematic in itself, leading to misinformation or exaggerations of the truth. However, I do not consider this to be an issue. There is no singular truth to any life story, but rather many potential representations. This film, as just one such representation, is a collaborative effort which is guided both by Roy’s own portrayal of his life narrative and by my understanding of what will make a compelling documentary film. As Nash writes in her article *Telling Stories: The Narrative Study of Documentary Ethics*, “The telling of a story is never a simple recounting; the storyteller imposes their perspective on events, seeking to convince the listener.”³ Barbash and Taylor argue that that there is no precise distinction between ethnographic documentaries and fiction films; they note that “all films, fiction films too, contain ethnographic information, both about the people they depict and about the culture of the filmmaker.”⁴ Likewise Baily argues that “an ethnography is the creation of the ethnographer, a highly personalised, non-objective, non-scientific account of other people’s lives,” a “creative treatment of actuality” and this is the approach I have adopted in the creation of my film.⁵

I kept in mind that the finished film would be viewed by a variety of different audiences with different perspectives. In particular, I was aware that the audience would likely be younger than Roy and it was important to me to sensitively portray his life in a way that worked to bridge the potential generational gap between subject and audience. I spotlight Roy’s story as a generational exploration of culture through time, and, in a sense, act as an archivist through the medium of film as story-telling or “motional transcription.”⁶ I ensured Roy was comfortable at all times with what and when we were filming, trying to ensure an equal balance of power between us; as Nash suggests, “trust is central to (observational) documentary filmmaking.”⁷ The filmmaker-subject relationship is particularly complex in the instance of Roy and myself because of our pre-existing relationship, and communication was key to ensuring Roy was happy with all the filming and situations I had set up for him to interact with, such as the drumming scene at the studio. After a short amount of playing he says, “That’s it!” and I respected his need to stop playing, turning the focus to a discussion regarding the effects his ageing has had on his playing.⁸ Roy was clear from the beginning of the process that I should make whatever film I wanted to make and handed over any control he could have had in the

editing process, though I did still check in with him during post-production. I believe that this reflects an inherent trust in me that developed over the course of the project, or which perhaps was always there because of our existing relationship. Our successful power dynamics may also have been in relation to my inexperience as a filmmaker at the time of shooting. According to Nash, whilst “some filmmakers exercise substantial ‘power over’ participants, it is also the case that less experienced filmmakers and those without institutional support are, potentially, quite vulnerable in their relationship with participants.”⁹

Pre-production and Shooting the Film

I knew from the outset that telling the story of 93 years in 15 minutes would be challenging, and I needed to first understand Roy’s timeline before I could decide what the narrative focus for the documentary would be. I met with Roy on a few occasions to hear his life story and explore his personal archive - briefcases of unorganised photographs, CDs and VHS tapes of live performances - in an informal setting with one camera. These sessions were intended to help Roy (and myself) get accustomed to the use of cameras in preparation for a second interview, where I had a camera assistant, and used two cameras for multiple angles and cutaways.¹⁰ Following Barbash and Taylor’s suggestions on how to foster a collaborative approach to ethnographic filmmaking, I created a shot-list and video treatment to communicate style and approach to those assisting me, and to get feedback on my ideas from friends with experience in filmmaking.¹¹ This proved helpful in ensuring a satisfactory amount of shots were captured, leaving me to focus on the interviewing. Roy’s confidence as a performer meant practicing with the cameras was not necessary, but the conversations we had had meant I had a greater understanding of the timeline of his life, thus coming to an idea of what the narrative of the documentary could be, and what questions to ask when it came to the additional interviews.

The making of the film was always a mutually beneficial arrangement. Roy was pleased to be sharing his stories with an audience through the medium of the documentary, and I had a willing and interesting subject for my first foray into documentary filmmaking. Barbash and Taylor note that in ethnographic filmmaking that “a little of the language of the people you are filming goes a long way,” helping to build a rapport between filmmaker and subject.¹² Although Roy’s first language is English (as is mine), being a musician for eight decades means a musical lexicon permeates much of Roy’s dialogue. He even equates the heartbeat - biological time, with musical time.¹³ As a fellow drummer, Roy and I shared a rapport and shared knowledge of musical lexicon that helped me to understand

what Roy was communicating. This musical knowledge also gave me credibility and respect from Roy's contemporaries when it came to filming at the Coda Club.

A few weeks after the filming of the interview, I arranged for Roy to travel to London to play for me at the Goldsmiths Music Studios, as I wanted to capture footage of him drumming and to record another interview in a different setting. Whilst I had assumed that Roy's home would be the most comfortable environment for filming, I found that he really came alive when sat behind the drum kit, or surrounded by his fellow musician friends at the Coda Club. In the home interview footage, he talks us through his life chronologically, with little emotional embellishment. In contrast, he is visually more dynamic and expressive in the footage with him at the drum kit, through both his playing and his words. In this scene I decided to use a hand-held camera in addition to a locked-off camera, to supplement more steady shots with a fly-on-the-wall effect and to capture the haptic intimacy of Roy's playing. Roy reveals a great deal to us without words whilst playing. His facial expressions exude character and nuances that may not have been expressed through conversation alone, and this drumming scene is particularly important in the audiovisual storytelling of the documentary. We also gain a strong sense of Roy's bold character in the footage en route to the Coda Club; for example, at 00:09:43 where Roy exits the taxi and looks at his reflection in shop window to fix his hair, at 00:09:49 where he nearly walks out into traffic and is 'beeped' by a truck, and 00:10:59 where in his reflexive commentary he jokes about getting an 'establishing shot' outside the Coda Club.

As my aim was not to analyse music but to explore the effects age has on musical practice and personal life, I did not feel the need to provide notation, complete footage of performances or expository explanations of Roy's drumming as one may expect from a more traditional ethnographic film.¹⁴ Instead, I have included edited footage of Roy playing for a short time which sensitively portrays the restrictions of age on his musicianship.¹⁵ In these scenes, Roy discusses when his last gig was and how arthritis has inhibited his drumming. It is interesting to note how Roy explains his reason for stopping playing - not because he is physically unable to play the drums, as it is apparent in the footage of him playing that he is still a fantastic drummer, but because he knew he wasn't able to play to the standard that he was accustomed to in his younger years. He has an acute awareness of his age and doesn't want to be perceived as "the poor old guy that used to be good when he was young."¹⁶ He summarises this moment by stating that he wants people to "remember me for what I did, if it was worthwhile... I hope it was."¹⁷ This is one of many moments in the filming process that I found especially moving and revealing of Roy as a lifelong musician, and I respect the intimate honesty that he so willingly shared with myself and the crew.

Roy's familiarity with cameras and attention that stems from his 80-year career as a performer, meant that he was even more open than I'd expected. This was something I was cautious not to exploit, but eager to utilise in order to thoroughly investigate the theme of the effects of ageing on a musician.

This is apparent in further gentle prompting in the taxi ride from the studio to the Coda Club, where I say, in reference to Roy's age, "93 is impressive" and Roy replies "I don't know that it is impressive. It's depressive, sometimes."¹⁸ He interposes reflective comments such as this with frequent smiles and laughter. When the conversation continues in a similarly tragicomic tone, Roy ruminates,

I sort of outlived the norm. As much as it doesn't sound right somehow to say so, I've not exactly outlived my usefulness. (*Laughter*). The average age for men is, what, 84, and here I am just about ten years later. It's too much... sometimes. That's what you miss - your contemporaries. People that I was around with. A lot of them haven't lived as long as me. Perhaps they didn't live such a good life as I did. (*Laughter*).¹⁹

Following this comment, a heartfelt insight into the experience of old age, Roy continues, "one tends to think that you can do everything you could when you were younger and it's not true..." punctuated quickly by "...but here I am sitting in a cab in London with two charming young ladies!" In his testimony, Roy paints an honest picture of the difficulties of old age whilst affirming his sense of humour and bright personality.

During this scene, the shot of Roy's hands lingers and tells its own visual story - the wedding ring, the arthritic swelling, lines, cracks and visual effects of age, a visual tangibility of Roy's ageing with haptic effect, an "embodiment" of the themes of age, musicianship and intense human connection.²⁰ Working alongside this shot, the feedback from Roy's hearing aid is also prominent as an audio narrative device, a manifestation of his age and a moment of audiovisual symbiosis. Documentary and ethnographic filmmaking is indispensable in foregrounding issues surrounding music and age. More mainstream films and documentaries sometimes lack this engagement with ageing in relation to musician's identities, opting instead to focus on a given musician or artist in their youth rather than in the present. Furthermore, the subject in such films is usually a widely known person of public interest.²¹

To conclude this moving taxi scene, I decided to include the footage of Roy exiting the taxi because it was important not just as a narrative device, but to show the realities of his physical ability as a nonagenarian.²² Documenting these stark realities helps paint a picture of Roy's everyday life in the present. In contrast, immediately after a slight struggle to get out of the taxi, he thanks the driver, then checks his hair in the reflection of the shop front outside. This moment is a reminder that Roy continues to take pride in his appearance, something that is also evident in his choice of formal outfit, the Musician's Union pin on his blazer jacket, colourful modern socks and carefully combed hair.

The footage of the Coda Club is largely a montage of the evening's events, which happened to be a premature celebration for Roy's 93rd birthday. Using a montage sequence with minimal dialogue was a conscious editing decision to allow the audience time to reflect on the deeply interesting statements

from Roy in the preceding scenes. The montage breaks twice, the first time for us to hear a brief story explaining the slightly comical and morbid name for the club for senior musicians - 'Coda' in music terminology, means 'the end.'²³ Despite this, the Coda Club footage celebrates not only the lives these musicians had, but the life they are still very much living, coming together monthly to celebrate their community. Moments later in another comical reflexive moment, Roy's friend Alan exclaims that he is still receiving royalties for a very famous song that he doesn't remember performing on. Roy nods to the camera and says "they've just recorded this!" and Alan says quickly in a jovial tone "don't put that out, I'll never get another penny!"²⁴ This scene reflects the potential for lapses of memory as part of the ageing process in lifelong musicians, which might mean that they are unable to remember all the session recording they did in their youth, even if the work they did lives on in recorded form.

Roy lives in Milton Keynes, 50 miles from London, but travels to Soho monthly to attend the Coda Club. When we're having drinks in the bar, Roy opens up about what the Coda Club means to him, "I need to be here to prove I'm still alive. That there's others still alive. I can't let everything go from the past. I mean, I've let the playing go... I suppose I've let quite a lot of things go, but this has been my life. There's guys here I've known for 60, 70 years, and you just can't break it off, you know?"²⁵ This reinforces his previous comments about the loneliness of old age, specifically, loneliness as a nonagenarian musician - he feels the need to be around his contemporaries whenever he can, to reminisce about their shared musical past simply because it is so woven into the tapestry of their identity. He mentioned off-camera how freeing it is to drop cultural references from bygone eras without further questioning or explanations required. It is not only a musical understanding, but a temporal and cultural understanding that he has with his contemporaries at the Coda Club, and to use his words, "nonagenarian musicians are a dying breed."

Post-production and Editing the Film

Director Travis Swartz (as quoted by Gregory Bayne) suggests that "editing a documentary is akin to someone handing you a bag of sentences and asking you to write a book."²⁶ This was an observation that rang true as I began the editing process. I had tens of hours of footage and without prior film editing experience, and also having become closer to Roy during the filming process - I found it hard to identify what my narrative structure should be.

As mentioned previously, I have been aware of Roy throughout my life as a close friend of my stepfather's, both of them operating in the music industry and having played together in jazz trios for the past three decades. Roy was consulted in the purchase of my first drum kit, aged ten and I have a

fond memory of attending his 86th birthday party, where he performed with his band *Swing's the Thing*. This performance happened to be recorded to a good standard, which I discovered early on in the filmmaking process when going through Roy's archive. It seemed like a fitting choice to take pieces from this live recording and use them as the soundtrack to the film, so that even the soundtrack itself was a celebration of Roy's drumming career.

It was on hearing Roy's wild stories at family events and witnessing the zeal with which he told them that I decided I had to document his life, not expecting the shift of focus from outrageous music industry stories to a more intimate focus on the effects of age on Roy's musicianship and identity. Because I'd collected so much footage, the film could have easily been a didactic, chronological retelling of Roy's life, which I'm sure he would have been happy with, but my interest in the intimate nature of how age has prohibited his playing took over. When looking through the rushes I saw the potential this narrative focus had in helping me create a documentary that was more unique and interesting, and perhaps more telling of Roy as a musician and person than any chronological account of his life could be. It would still cover Roy's history, as the first third does, but the focus would be instead on his life in the present, as opposed to his past. I feel that I respected Roy's background by giving it space to be told in the first third, and allowing myself to draw in on themes of age in the second two thirds, in a way, telling his story twice, or from two different points of interest.

After deciding on a three-act structure, I wanted the film's sections to have their own subtle stylistic treatment. I treated the home interview with a warm, vintage aesthetic, the studio footage with a present-day feel and used effects such as warp stabiliser and slow-motion to create the dream-like, nostalgic atmosphere at the Coda Club. It was at times challenging to balance the sections showing the historical trajectory of Roy's life with those exploring his life in the present. To differentiate the old from the new, I treated the archive media with a vintage overlay effect, keeping the history of Roy's life in the first third of the film, with the second two thirds reflecting on the effects of age. To keep the interview shot interesting, I used cutaways and a second close-up angle of Roy's face to convey emotion and these shots of discontinuity were edited together, for, as Walter Murch puts it, "greater impact."²⁷ Murch makes an interesting argument for the use of discontinuity in editing. He claims that "discontinuity is king"; that even though we view life in one continuous stream of visuals, we take readily to the discontinuity of film and in fact reject editing that has minor discontinuity over major discontinuity, such as in the displeasing jump-cut.²⁸ Looking to nature, Murch continues, "a beehive can apparently be moved two inches in the night without disorienting the bees the next morning. Surprisingly if it is moved two miles the bees also have no problem. But if the hive is moved two yards, the bees will become fatally confused."²⁹

Film writer Gabrielle Oldham, when talking about "percussive editing," claims that "music and filmic rhythm combine to create intellectual, emotional, visual and auditory climaxes."³⁰ I was

influenced by films such as *Birdman* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2014) and the preview for Christian Marclay's exhibition *The Clock* that use the rhythmic element of jazz drumming to instruct their editing, with haptic effect.³¹ My opening and closing credits also use screen-splitting inspired by drumming documentary *Beware of Mr. Baker* (Jay Bulger, 2012), and a custom font selected to mimic Roy's handwriting. Similarly, I took direction from the music to inform the editing of film, cutting on music sync points or beats in Roy's drumming, and in the inclusion of a coda symbol at the end of the film. The theme of music naturally plays a large part in the film, and it was essential that the audio and visual elements have a synergy, informing each other and working together.

Initially my rough edit featured less background music and audio clips of Roy drumming, but as I added more of this I found that it brought the film to life, acting as a musical glue between transitions and masking some of the lesser quality dialogue audio. Although I was disappointed with my initial audio from the home-interview scene, I had to also accept that variations in audio quality was on some level natural, due to the different acoustic spaces, and that this was potentially even helpful to the audience's experience of the film.

Murch outlines a hierarchy of editing criteria, whereby emotion is of highest importance over story, rhythm or space.³² With this in mind, at points where I could have cut dialogue sooner, I felt that the overriding emotional aspect of lingering on these shots made for a more poignant moment in the film.³³ It is these moments that nurture the film's soul and create an intimacy essential to the film's success and I'm very pleased to say that Roy adored the film and for me, that was a success in itself. I felt a deep relief once we'd chatted about how much he loved the film, and how he considered me to be a sensitive and talented filmmaker.

Conclusion

Using the film as a vessel to explore the effects of ageing on musicians, the audience is confronted with the reality that ageing is a universal process. This makes the conversations and issues raised by this film even more hard-hitting and relatable to an audience of all ages and backgrounds, whether musicians or not. The film leads us to consider the effects that ageing may have on our identity and potential loneliness, particularly should we outlive our peers; this is perhaps intensified for ageing musicians specifically, because music is generally a social activity. In the case of Roy, whilst he is limited in his ability to play due to his arthritis, it is the social aspect of being a musician that he has felt the absence of the most; attending the Coda Club is Roy's way of holding on to this social scene into his nineties.

Carrying out this project has been a steep learning curve where I have developed advanced filmmaking skills in both shooting and editing, as well as an understanding of the ethical awareness required to work with a subject and manage a small team of assistants in the creation of a film. The moral complexities of filmmaking took me by surprise. I felt an overwhelming sense of duty to make a good film for Roy, not just because he is a family friend, but because this was my first documentary as a filmmaker. The film has since had screenings at various galleries and cinemas, with one such future screening in Roy's hometown Milton Keynes set to include a filmmaker and subject Q+A, with a performance of Roy on the drums to commend his 80 years in the music industry. This will also be an opportunity for many of his friends, family and old students to share in his success and I feel honoured that my film can play a small part in celebrating his life.

Pre-production is in progress to create more short portrait films about some of Roy's contemporaries at the Coda Club, spotlighting senior musicians and their experiences of the effects of age on their musical performance and identity. I am very interested in carrying out further research to find out if those effects discovered in the making of *Roy Holliday* are universal amongst Roy's peers, and to document the stories of other octogenarian and nonagenarian musicians, offering a further insight into the effects of ageing on identity.

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Biography

Heather Britton is a multi-instrumentalist, filmmaker and audiovisual composer, working across multiple mediums and genres. She has recently completed her MA in Creative Practice at Goldsmiths, where she produced EROS, an audiovisual album. Current projects include her band Calluna, a psychedelic shoe-gaze collaboration, and Vulgaris, her experimental audiovisual work. Her extended research interests and practice covers a broad range of topics from sound design to video editing, with

a special interest in synchresis and incongruousness in audiovisual composition, as well as being a cinephile with a passion for experimental filmmaking. She is on the editorial board for the journal *Sonic Scope* and lives in Brighton with her pet rabbit, Zissou.

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1. John Baily, "Filmmaking as Musical Ethnography," *The World of Music* 31, no. 3 (1989): 8. [↵](#)
2. John Baily, *Film Guide for Amir: An Afghan Refugee Musician's Life in Peshawar, Pakistan* (Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 1990), 4. [↵](#)
3. Kate Nash, "Telling stories: the narrative study of documentary ethics," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 3 (2012): 319. [↵](#)
4. Illisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 44. [↵](#)
5.
Baily, "Filmmaking as Musical Ethnography," 6.

The term "creative treatment of actuality" is from John Grierson, as cited by Baily. [↵](#)

6. Baily, "Filmmaking as Musical Ethnography," 4. [↵](#)
7. Nash, "Telling Stories," 325. [↵](#)
8. See 00:06:35 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
9. Nash, "Telling Stories," 329. [↵](#)
10. I used a small, 2-person crew at all times for minimal intrusion, and two Canon EOS C100 cameras on tripods for the interview, otherwise largely hand-held. [↵](#)
11. Barbash and Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking*, 328. [↵](#)
12. *Ibid.*, 46. [↵](#)
13. See 00:07:02 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
14. Jeff Titon, "Representation and Authority in Ethnographic Film/Video: Production," *Ethnomusicology*, 36, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 89. [↵](#)

15. This was all he could comfortably manage with his arthritis. [↵](#)
16. See 00:05:36 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
17. See 00:05:18 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
18. See 00:07:45 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
19. See 00:08:50 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
20. Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xii. [↵](#)
21. One exception to this trend is the documentary *Twenty Feet From Stardom*, directed by Morgan Neville, Gil Frieson Production, 2013. This film celebrates the unsung heroes behind the greatest music of our time (though it does still tend to focus on the connection to celebrities and famous musicians). [↵](#)
22. See 00:09:30 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
23. See 00:11:50 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
24. See 00:12:30 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
25. See 00:09:54 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)
26. Gregory Bayne, “If You Want to Learn How To Tell a Story, Edit a Documentary,” *No Film School*, October 22, 2014, <https://nofilmschool.com/2014/10/if-you-want-learn-how-tell-story-edit-documentary>. [↵](#)
27. Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A perspective on Film Editing* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1995), 8. [↵](#)
28. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
29. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
30. Gabrielle Oldham, *First Cut: Conversations with Film Editors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 188. [↵](#)
- 31.

“The Clock,” 2018, *Tate*, promotional Video, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/christian-marclay-clock>;

Marks, *Touch*, Xii. [↵](#)

32. Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, 18. [↵](#)

33. See, for example, 00:08:43 in *Roy Holliday*. [↵](#)