Popular Music (2026), 1–9
doi:10.1017/S0261143026101822

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

MIDDLE EIGHT

Hommage à Francois Ribac

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This is the edited version of a videoed conversation between Simon Frith, Paul Harkins, and Nick Prior shown at *Hommage à François Ribac*, a live event in Paris on 26 November 2025.

SF: François Ribac was part of my life for a long time but I can't actually remember when I first met him. It was in a hotel lobby in London. He was, I think, with his partner and collaborator, Eva Schwabe, and somewhere else in the space there was a dog barking loudly. It was hard for me to hear someone speaking not particularly good English and harder for François to listen to someone speaking even worse French. Nevertheless, we connected immediately; we had such similar interests and such different approaches.

When I first met François he was very much a working musician, well experienced in applying a rock sensibility to theatrical performance, to community operas and participatory events, taking advantage of France's local and state arts funding. He wanted to talk to me about using his working experience – on stage and in the studio – in an academic study. In particular he wanted to make academic sense of his experience of recording; his experience not simply in recording studios as a musician but also, interestingly for me, as a broadcaster and in broadcasting studios. He was fascinated by the politics of studios and how they had evolved differently in Britain and France. His working experience of French studios was that he had to follow their established rules: where to sit, how to use the equipment. He had to accept studios' ways of doing things. In Britain, it seemed to him, everyone involved in a recording studio was in productive communication. People could change ways of doing things as they went along. Feedback was crucial part to the British recording process but absent in French studios. Why would this be?

This was an interesting question but in our early conversations we also discussed the differences between British and French popular music studies. There had been a International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) international conference in Paris and Antoine Hennion was a well know scholar internationally. But on the whole Anglo-American scholars' work did not get translated into French nor did French popular music studies get translated into English. In Britain we knew that the French were much cleverer than us – it was the grand theorists who were the French authors on our reading lists (Bourdieu, Attali, Deleuze ...) – and I have to admit I was rather flattered that a Frenchman would want me to be involved in his supervision!

That's how I got involved with François' doctoral research and came to sit on his PhD panel with Antoine and three other French professors, who seemed rather more interested

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in their own work than in François'. Not much feedback here, which in the light of his thesis arguments was hardly a surprise!

We bonded further over this experience but thereafter François was engaged in research topics that didn't much interest me but in which he involved me anyway, such as a new scholarly society formed to develop the study of progressive rock. He persuaded me to help organise one of its early conferences in Edinburgh. My contribution was to be in conversation with Georgina Born, who had been in Henry Cow, my brother's prog rock band. It quickly became clear that Georgie, as a British prog rocker in the early 1970s, had been much more aware of what was happening then in France than an Anglo-American sociologist like me, and François continued to give me a different perspective on research issues that did interest me. We remained in regular communication, for example, about the *process* of music making. By then Paul Harkins was my PhD student and Nick Prior an academic colleague. I was having to think about actor-network theory (and another French theorist, Bruno Latour), to consider that musicians could be understood in this framework, just as much as sound engineers and, indeed, musical instruments.

In short, François was a wonderfully helpful and experienced person with whom to talk about the complex excitements of music making. And he also helped to establish a more active dialogue between British and French popular music scholars (he had some of my own past work translated into French for the first time, for example.) He changed the way I thought about the sociology of music and I am very grateful.

PH: I started my research for this conversation with a timeline to work out when François and I first met. It was in 2006 in Bannerman's pub in the Cowgate in the old town of Edinburgh, which is ironic considering neither of us drank very much alcohol. It was a Saturday afternoon and a few of us were taking a break from the Art of Record Production Conference which was being held over the road at St Cecilia's Hall. Francois was a PhD student working with Simon, and a mutual friend of another of his students, Mark Percival.

Conference going, that would be how we would meet over the next ten years. A workshop in Paris in 2010. The Art of Record Production (ARP) Conference in Oslo in 2014. A prog rock Conference in Edinburgh in 2016 and an IASPM Conference in Kassel in 2017 (which took place at the same time as the Documenta Festival). We talked about gender and music technology. We walked beside a Parthenon made of books and played pool in the hotel bar where I stayed. We were academic friends in the making. I still remember François' paper about feedback at the Edinburgh ARP Conference. I hadn't yet started my PhD, so I was new to this academic world and its conventions, but he made it seem fun as I watched him perform and made notes and connections, and wondered if this was a path for me to follow. A new career, a new adventure, new tracks.

This was a phrase François used a lot when we spoke. We were developing new tracks, new paths. Making discoveries as he helped me find them. I had already been pointed towards science and technology studies (STS) by my supervisor, Nick Prior, but couldn't make the connection between STS and sampling. What did the synthesisers and salesmen that Trevor Pinch was talking about have to do with samplers like the SP-1200? I was still finding my way and beginning a journey that would give me tools, ideas, conceptual frameworks and new ways to think about the design, distribution and use of musical instruments.

François proposed a panel about STS and popular music for the IASPM-ARP Conference in Huddersfield in 2018 and we started to work more closely. As I continued to work on sampling, music technologies and instruments, he introduced me to a new subfield, maintenance and repair studies. He recommended articles about mobile phone repair shops in Switzerland and books like David Edgerton's *The Shock of the Old.* My toolbox was getting bigger and there was synchronicity. I was researching an instrument developed in Australia in the mid to late 1970s called the Fairlight and meeting technologists who repaired them. It was serendipity.

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I'm currently working on a project about the repair and maintenance of the Fairlight and I'm still grateful for François' input to that project. We didn't have the same taste in music. He was a bit older than me. He liked progressive rock, I liked hip-hop, but we both loved the Beatles. A lingua franca of popular music and it was when François came to Edinburgh for the prog rock Conference in 2016 that he started to talk about the Anthropocene. We had lunch in one of the places where JK Rowling had written the first Harry Potter novel. He was applying for funding. Would we like to be involved? Yes. Workshops followed at IRCAM and I gave a paper in September 2019 titled 'Was the Sampler a Revolution?'.

How did this connect with the Anthropocene? It was about continuities and change, a break from modernism and ideas of progress. A more sober way of looking at music and history. And then COVID happened. We both caught it. Did I see François again in person after the pandemic? He had already decided he wasn't going to travel by plane. I continued to fly to conferences when life restarted. He asked me if I wanted to write about Music Declares Emergency for a book he was editing about music and the performing arts in the Anthropocene and we continued to meet online.[1] François had bought a pedal steel guitar and was teaching himself to play it. I was following James Lovelock and he was too, through Latour as his champion. We were both sceptical about the efforts of musicians and the music industries to tackle climate change because they were based on ideas about saving the world. We had read Lovelock and knew that the world didn't need to be saved. We disagreed over nuclear energy. I had a great line in my chapter about it being the best way of keeping the stadium lights and streaming services on. But François wasn't so keen, so I left it out.

I'm waiting on that book to arrive any day now and looking forward to reading his contributions and the connections he made by bringing us together. Thank you, François, for your energy, your enthusiasm and your effervescence. Thank you for showing me new tracks and paths to wander along. I'll forever remember your *joie de vivre* and how you poked fun at me for my poor grasp of French and how I managed to get by and get through the challenges of academia with a little help from an old friend in France. Au revoir bon ami.

NP: I'm moved by these tributes to François and I think one of the central threads in both of the accounts is François's warmth and generosity and the informative way in which he communicated difficult ideas. I didn't know François as well as Paul and Simon, but I would say that each meeting with him, each form of interaction, was incredibly meaningful and left a lasting impression.

Here's a case in point. In 2014 François had come to Edinburgh to work on a research proposal with Simon and myself and it was a moment around, I think, November 2014, when I was working on a collaborative music project with seven students from my sociology of music course. The idea was to compose and then to perform a piece of music from scratch. A piece that somehow embodied the themes of the course.

We had a blank page and six weeks until the performance and by week four we had a blank page and two weeks until the performance! In one of the rehearsals which wasn't going so well, François sat in and at the end of the session and with gentle honesty said, 'what you are doing is interesting but very difficult'. He then offered (again gently but directly) some thoughts about someone (i.e. me) taking a more active lead and conducting the sessions more systematically. That was something that in the spirit of improvisation and quasi-democracy I'd been reluctant to do. But I followed François' advice and by week six we indeed had a 15-minute composition that we were able to perform. The whole case is one I write about in a book, *Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society*, in which François appears as 'a

[1] Ribac, F., Moindrot, I., and Donin, N. eds. 2025. *Music and the Performing Arts in the Anthropocene: Nature, Materialities, and Ecological Transformation* (London, Routledge).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143026101822 Published online by Cambridge University Press

well-known music sociologist'. But he was more than that, he was a true giver – someone you listened to because you knew what came out of his mouth was always perceptive and worth listening to.

It's one of my regrets that while François and I swapped some of the music files and compositions we were working on, and spoke about collaborating musically, we never got around to it. What we did play around with was the name of the band! François, always the thinker musician, suggested *Ants* (after that well-known theory of agency that we have both found useful, albeit with some reservations). I often wonder what our music would have sounded like. I'm sure it would have been a valuable and educational experience, the value and education mostly coming from François!

What offsets the sense of regret, however, is the fact that I was able to make a tiny vocal contribution to one of the tracks on Eva and François' remarkable opera album, *Qui Est Fou?*. The track, 'Mat', the last on the album is the embodiment of his and Eva's creativity, supported by Eva's, Cathal Coughlan's, and Marie Faye's voices. Steadfast but subtle, politically astute but not doctrinaire, hard hitting but delicately executed, the track ruminates on questions of agency and the socially skewed nature of fate. It finishes with a back and forth on questions of destiny and ends with the line: 'we're all the same'. Maybe we are but it takes a unique and creative voice to explain so beautifully why some are more equal than others. Merci François.

PH: Maybe I can start our discussion by picking up something that you said, Simon, that your initial meeting with François was when he was primarily a musician. That comes across in what you said as well, Nick. For me he was an academic friend but he never stopped being a musician.

SF: His life had been as a musician before he became an academic.

PH: And he continued being a musician despite becoming an academic and a professor, a serious process in France! He remained keen to learn new instruments. As I mentioned, one of the last times I saw him on Zoom he was learning the pedal steel guitar and devoting time to that. So, his musicianship was clearly still central to how he moved in the world.

SF: There's an interesting question here about the relationship between music making and music theorising. There are clearly French musicians like, say, Boulez who are also music theorists, but by and large I don't have the sense that French academics believe musical practice is crucial to their academic reputation. I don't think it was easy for François to get registered to do a theoretical PhD and even harder to combine it with all his musical activities. I can't imagine how he managed to go on making so much music while also becoming an internationally influential academic.

I was struck by what you said, Nick, about working with François as a musician as well as an academic. I've always known myself to be a non-musician. My life has revolved around listening to music, criticising and writing about it, but involved no music-making practice whatsoever. For François, music-making, music-thinking and music-studying seem to be different aspects of the same process. From François' perspective, it was clearly a great help in theorising music institutions to be doing it, to *feel* (and not just observe) the pressures and tensions, the conventions that are hard to shake off and the indulgences in which you shouldn't be indulging. That's one reason why I valued his friendship: he wasn't an academic like me at all.

NP: And it's probably also the reason for his attraction to theories that grounded themselves in materials, in material objects and practices, because it felt intuitive. It feels intuitive to

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talk about the agency of stuff because when you're with that stuff in the studios and it breaks down and you've been relying on it and everything collapses, you realise how agential that stuff was! Seeing through the mutually enriching relationship between sociology and music is, I think, what's in play here. François was really good at showing the ways in which music itself isn't passive, isn't some sort of super-structural recipient of something more important. Music is really important, musical practice is really important, and that enriches the sociological imagination because it reveals the mess and the muddle, including the feedback loops and all the other kinds of weird and informative processes that happen in space and time.

It's like seeing sociology *through* technology and music making, which I think was part of François' project. Being an academic should be a creative act anyway, but when you bring in the object, make the sound, it becomes a lot more real and vivid and vital.

PH: I think François's work was always grounded in music, and thus grounded in social conventions. In a sense he was very theoretical. He was so well read – in terms of his interest in technology studies, for example – and his reading was very wide-ranging; much of it ranged far outside music studies. But it was always with the light touch which attracted him to the work of other academics, the light touch that is a kind of humility, a humility that underpinned a lot of what he did. I'm curious, Simon, about the early stages of his work as a PhD student. He wasn't registered at Stirling, was he?

SF: No, it was at the University of Dijon. I don't know what my status was officially, but he had a French supervisor and he wanted me to be a supervisor too. So, from his perspective I was a co-supervisor though I can't remember whether I was actually ever formally acknowledged as such by his department. Probably not. I never got paid for it, put it that way. I've already described the peculiarities of the French system. The examiners talked much more than the candidate and François had to respond, as it were, to what they had said about the importance of their own work. I didn't know that's what I was supposed to be doing. So, I asked questions in English and François had agreed he would speak in very, very slow French so I would understand him. That was quite a daunting conversation but what I remember now is the context not the substance.

I remember better my supervision sessions, which is to return to what Nick was saying. My sociology of music was inflected by British cultural and media studies. I was interested in the commerce of music, in making sense of songs and records and shows as commodities. François, by contrast, was interested in the music-making not the commodity-making process. In retrospect I'm sure these sessions were more valuable for me than him. They made me realise the limits of what I understood as popular music studies.

To put this another way, François helped me adjust to now being in a music rather than a sociology or media studies department. When I started out as a popular music academic I didn't consider my students as musicians. When IASPM was launched (in continental Europe rather than in Britain or America), it was an organisation as much for musicians as for academics. But quite quickly, once the Anglo-American academy took it over, it became just another academic society. I know he was a member and went to the conferences but he represented a different kind of popular music scholarship, which is why, I think, The Art of Record Production was a more important scholarly community for him. ARP gatherings and publications didn't make sense without involving actual record producers, and the mix of scholars and practitioners – and the recognition that they could be the same people – was the key to ARP's success.

PH: I don't think François was very interested in the industry as such, in major labels and the production of hits. In my conversations with him the focus was very much on the French

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context of state support for popular music and venues and, I guess, the music that he released was on non-profit labels, certainly the work that I knew over the last ten years. He was more focused on amateurs than many popular music scholars. That was quite a strong strand in his work. I don't know if that was the case in his thesis, I know it's about recording studios, but am I right in thinking its focus was on home studios?

SF: Yes, and what was interesting to me was that I'd never really thought of broadcasting studios or the DIY studio in which we're recording this conversation as part of what was meant by 'the recording studio'. François understood that in the history of music recording, radio broadcasts were as significant as record companies' commercial studios. The possibilities and the intentions of what could be recorded and how, *by anyone*, greatly interested him. This was beyond my grasp because I didn't have the technological knowledge, but François was precisely interested in how the technological set up and the ideology of sound were different in a British and French recording settings. What effect did this have on the role of the recording engineers, on their judgement of good (or correct) sounds? Later on, after I met Nick, I realised that one of the things I liked about his work too was that it paid the same sort of attention to those material details which, on the face of, don't seem to be the music, but without which music wouldn't happen.

NP: I think it's that straddling effect, isn't it, between two operations or modes of production or modes of thinking that can often produce both tensions and a degree of *frisson*, but also enlightenment. The toing and froing between both is also, I think, beneficial in terms of understanding, getting a different perspective. That's also clear from what you were both talking about in relationship to France and Britain. And I suspect that the *modus operandi* of French academic life didn't always sit that well with him. He saw the British system as slightly more open to ideas and exploration of ideas, more suited to his way of thinking.

He was, I know, a big fan of a small strand of British post-rock, of XTC and Andy Partridge's role in a version of indie: an indie reflective music but with a fiercely experimental angle. I think that sensibility, that way of music-making, crept into his work as well. I'd argue that straddling two fields, straddling two national cultures was actually quite a productive tension for François. I suspect he had a French version of himself and a British version of himself and maybe we saw just one side of that.

SF: That certainly makes sense to me. To prepare for this meeting I watched the conversation I had with François about progressive rock,[2] before the prog rock conference in Edinburgh. One thing it makes clear is that we both (if in different ways) romanticised each other's culture. François wanted to relate the music that he liked to a particularly British sensibility. I replied that Britain's experimental (i.e. uncommercial) progressive rock bands only survived because they had an audience on the continent. From my perspective French progressive rock was more imaginative (and more political) as were French progressive rock fans. For Henry Cow, for example, France became the key to successful touring, a key market for their records and offshoots. My brother [Fred] went on working in France for a long, long time.

François was a bit surprised to think that France had a crucial role in the history of British progressive rock because he wanted to see Britain as somehow different from France, more freely creative in certain ways. Nick would have recognised the sense of 'the other' being

[2] Editor's note: This was a filmed conversation between Francois Ribac and Simon Frith that was shown as a keynote presentation at the First International Conference of the ACADPROG [now Progect] Network at the University of Bourgogne, December 2014.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143026101822 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conjured up according to what each of us would like it to be. In retrospect I think we enjoyed that conversation so much because we kept talking across each other.

When we were asked to have this conversation I realised I didn't know much about the impact of François's work in France. Clearly there is a body now of young academics in France for whom he is an important figure. But I have very little sense of their background. I've been to one or two formal sociology of music conferences in Paris and I don't recall any reference to François's work. Yes, some people were now being invited from the Anglo-American world (Howard Becker, for example), but the events were primarily about celebrating a French account of French sociology in which François's work certainly didn't feature. These events were for sociologists studying music in certain ways; they didn't involve musicians thinking sociologically about music. If fact I don't remember there being any music there at all. On the other hand, I was later invited to Paris by the students involved in the excellent magazine, *Volume!.* Their interests were much more aligned to the sorts of questions that François asked (and much less France-centric).

NP: I have this image, going back to something that you conjured up earlier Paul, of François learning a new instrument. A steel guitar, picking up new literacies and new skills which again takes a degree of courage and creativity and enthusiasm, time and all the rest of it. But then the idea that he probably went straight from that to writing something. So, he's probably got his digital audio workstation (DAW) in one window of his desktop, and then a document he's working on, you know, on ecology and so on. And there's a sort of slippage between these screens, these images, which I think goes back to what we were talking about earlier. I wonder also whether there was an inside/outside tension for François. Maybe, to echo something that you both said, maybe he always felt a little bit on the margins of things. But then the margins are interesting places on which to cast judgements and evaluations. In a Bourdieusian register we would call this *habitus clivé.* A sort of cleft habitus, maybe straddling two places at once. And from that position you get an interesting comparative dimension. It's maybe this comparative element that's really rich in François' work.

SF: It is also interesting to think about this in the broader context of the history of the sociology of music. There are certainly various sociologists who for a period of their lives thought of themselves primarily as musicians but then, for various reasons, started to reflect on the musical life to the extent that they came to think of themselves as academics. I don't think either Howard Becker or Georgina Born played much music in public once their university careers were established. But François never stopped being a musician, even once he had his PhD and an academic post. He didn't think, 'right, I've done that, I'll move on to the scholarly life'. Being a musician remained central to how he thought of himself.

PH: I guess, as you say Nick, this is about how you situate yourself in two spaces. You occupy a kind of liminal space. You become somebody who's a boundary shifter, who moves between or lives simultaneously in different worlds.

NP: But perhaps, it wouldn't have felt like an epistemological break to him, presumably there would be a kind of seamlessness to it. One world lubricates the other, one world illuminates the other, and it's the constant concatenation of them that's exhilarating. They're in the same room, literally in the same room, on the two screens. And I think that's the important point about materialities and the work they do. For me, it's always the working through. Music helps you work through the issues, work through the ideas. Not to get all grounded theory, but the music is the prism through which the theory makes sense. And if the theory isn't making sense it's because it's not explaining sufficiently well what's going on with the music. It's really that iterative or that dynamic process between the two which, I think, has left a mark on François's work.

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SF: One thing you said earlier, Nick, was that when François observed your work with your students on a collective music project he remarked that you should be more authoritative. This revealed something else about his music making. He wasn't just a player. He ran musical projects. He organised people, expected them to do what he told them. But at the same time they did what they wanted to do and he had to balance that. And, I think, for him this was a model for teaching. You can't stand back and pretend you're not the teacher just as you can't run a project and not run it. And that's why he was so interested in feedback. A project has to be managed and the sociological question is how!

I remember thinking even in our first conversations, that this is somebody who's used to working in big bands, in a musical world in which projects are conceived and musicians gathered, not to read scores but to collaborate, to try things out, to fail, to see what comes of it. Such projects involve a particular kind of collective engagement. And I think this was the sociological phenomenon that most interested François. How did this social process, involving people, instruments, sounds and spaces, actually work? I don't know much about François's university teaching career or practice but as a musician he was certainly also a teacher.

PH: He taught at the University of Burgundy and you're right about his projects. He performed a similar role as an editor, in terms of bringing people together. He was one of three editors of the book that's coming out (*Music and the Performing Arts in the Anthropocene*), but very much the driving force in terms of bringing together people from quite diverse backgrounds--he wasn't an academic elitist in any sense, although I think he did give people too much time to work on their chapters, which is one of the reasons why the book took so long to appear!

I'm also thinking what you said, Nick, about the spaces in which François worked. I got an insight into that through those Zoom conversations about the book but also from spending time with him and Eva in Dijon. So the space in which he wrote and worked on academic projects was the same space in which he performed and in which there were instruments lying about. And that takes me to other themes in his work. I've already mentioned the amateur but the domestic was also important for him in terms of how music-making is learned.

I was reading a chapter of his yesterday. He didn't publish much in English (he was probably more focused on the French academic world from that point of view). He didn't seem interested in developing a name for himself by publishing in top English-language academic journals; I don't think he published in *Popular Music*, for example.[3] But I can think of three publications in English: one in the *Journal of the Art of Record Production*; one about the Beatles and the cinema in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound & Imagination* and the one I was re-reading in *Rethinking Music through STS* called 'Is DIY a Punk Invention?'. And it's a great article because he spends half of it talking about Bing Crosby and microphones!

He's interested in crooners and the way in which people learn through listening to records. And I picked out one sentence, where he says that the DIY learning of popular music has long remained unseen, that it happens in the domestic sphere, often away from the gaze of others. François was always interested in how people learn and make music and in the spaces where that happens. His obsession with The Beatles involved, in part, his fascination with how Lennon and McCartney learned to make music, how to use a microphone, by listening to recordings. That way of learning was a strong theme in his work.

[3] Editor's note: François Ribac and Paul Harkins co-edited a special issue of *Popular Music*, for which they co-wrote the introduction. So he did, in fact, publish work in these pages. See Ribac, F., and Harkins, P. February 2020. 'Popular music and the Anthropocene', *Popular Music* 39/1, pp. 1–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143026101822 Published online by Cambridge University Press

SF: The other side of what you're saying was what I admired him for: his unselfconscious freedom to study whatever took his fancy. He didn't worry whether he was qualified to study it or whether other people had studied it better. He would just think hmm, that's interesting, I will pursue that. And I guess that's how his composition worked too: that's an interesting idea, I wonder what will become of it? Not a traditional academic way of thinking!

PH: And, from that point of view, he was an artist as much as an academic. I don't know if he found that a difficult tension to navigate.

SF: It didn't seem to but I didn't know him well enough to know for sure. Without a doubt he always inspired me!

PH: For me it was inspiring that he had that creative side of his character but could also steer you in different directions because of his knowledge too of the academic field. From my point of view the tensions of his life were very constructive.

SF: He also had a quality of earnestness, made you feel all this mattered. He was very intense about things.

NP: Yes, my conversations with him were sometimes intense and serious but that just made them even more joyful in a way. We had a couple of conversations about Bourdieu. I had for a long time considered myself a Bourdieuian (or neo-Bourdieuian) and I don't know whether François was hedging his bets but he felt a bit elusive on the question of Bourdieu's importance and legacy. Maybe that was a good thing, indicative of the freshness and openness François had for ideas.

There's so much at stake in the French academic field in terms of where you sit in your tradition and maybe in your supervisor's tradition too and prestige gets passed on through patronage and influence. I felt that François, like myself, didn't want to jump into one camp – pro- or anti-Bourdieu – but felt that there were good things in both. But it's difficult to be detached, I guess, in a field which has so much at stake, to bet on a single horse as it were. In the end, I think, his detachment from academic factions worked in François's favour and it's something I did really appreciate.

PH: Did he ever explain why he wanted to make that move into academia?

SF: It wasn't so much he wanted to move into the academy as that there were things he wanted to understand and he thought academics might be able to guide him as to what he should be thinking about and how he should be arguing. That was the sense I got when I first met him in that hotel lobby.

NP: What I love about that anecdote, Simon, is that what you remember most clearly is the sound of the dog barking.

SF: Yes, seems very Ribacian: the narrative impact of accidental sounds.

Cite this article: Frith, S., Prior, N., and Harkins, P. 2026. 'Hommage à Francois Ribac'. *Popular Music* 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143026101822

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143026101822 Published online by Cambridge University Press