

# PAPERBACK WRITER

## Ben Fong-Torres' Remarkable Journey with Rolling Stone Magazine

By Helen Marketti

*Rolling Stone Magazine* has been in publication since 1967. For over forty years, the magazine has addressed music, politics, celebrity and everything in between. Willing to take on issues and topics that may have been too risky for other publications, *Rolling Stone* has established itself as the “go to” magazine when a voice needed to be heard or an individual wanted to be seen.

Being part of the *Rolling Stone* staff since late 1967, Ben Fong-Torres shares an incredible journey of writing for the magazine and conducting exclusive interviews. What he has accomplished will leave many in awe

but to Ben it was all about being professional and doing his job well.

“I always loved music, pop culture and the creative arts but I never thought I’d wind up at a place like *Rolling Stone* because there were no such places when I was growing up,” explains Ben. “If I’ve made any impact from my writing, it would be the different kinds of influences that were around depending on the story I have written.”

When asked how he secured a writing gig at *Rolling Stone*, Ben pauses for a moment then says, “I was reading *Rolling Stone Magazine* and becoming familiar with it. My friends and I considered ourselves part of the pseudo hip scene at the time. A roommate of mine told me about a free concert that was going to be called, *Psych Out*. It was going to be filmed in the Haight-Ashbury district. Dick Clark was producing the film. Mr. Clean Cut was going to trash the hippies. So I called the offices of *Rolling Stone* (located in San Francisco at the time) and asked if they knew about this, they didn’t. I was able to write a piece on it for the magazine and then the door was open. After that, I did a half dozen articles for them on a freelance basis. I had been a student at San Francisco State College and the editor for the college newspaper so I already had some experience. Jann Wenner (editor for *Rolling Stone*) took me to lunch one day and offered

me a full time job with the magazine and I did not hesitate to take it.”

Ben continues, “Magazines and newspapers that had covered music which appealed to young people were by and large fanzines that were fluffy and lightweight. *Rolling Stone* was something different. We were writing stories about people who were successful, achieving success and then dealing with the changes brought about by their success and coping with the popularity. We were covering more than new artists, we covered “where are they now?” artists from when they were at their peak of power. We did a variety of angles on stories, which is probably what I found the most interesting. It was exciting to be part of

to Ray Charles, there were other artists who treated *Rolling Stone* in a different way. Paul McCartney and Marvin Gaye had once told me bluntly that if I had been with *Life Magazine* or *Time* that the interview would have been different. They had dealt with those magazines before. Each medium requires something different from them or what they perceived to be the case.”

Ben was the last journalist that Jim

Morrison spoke to before and after leaving for Paris. Not long after he left for Paris, Jim Morrison was dead. “Diane Gardiner was a publicist friend of mine who lived in an apartment below Pam Courson. Pam was Jim Morrison’s girlfriend. Diane would hold informal gatherings at her apartment where people would stop by to smoke, drink and chat,” Ben said. “Jim stopped by and was looking for Pam then he decided to stay and be part of the group. I had never met him before so I asked him for an interview for *Rolling Stone*. He was in a good mood and agreed.”

Ben continues, “We went to another part of the apartment and Jim said, “Let’s make this like the Dick Cavett Show.” So we set up two chairs and spoke like we were on TV. I asked him about

the state of rock and roll, the Miami trials and his poetry. He, in turn, would ask me questions about *Rolling Stone*, Jann Wenner and my thoughts on rock and roll. Pam eventually showed up and we went right on with our chat. Pam joined the conversation, too. I wouldn’t say it was really an interview, more like a visit.”

Another interview that Ben conducted by chance was with Janis Joplin. She had felt *Rolling Stone* had not been very kind to her. One night she tracked Ben down by way of the telephone. “A couple nights a week I would go to Chinatown and work on a Chinese-American weekly called, *East West*. Apparently, Janis had called the *Rolling Stone* switchboard and wanted to know who wrote the “Random Notes”

column. The next thing I know, the phone rang and it was her. I was lucky that she was in a good mood so she talked to me about different things including her new tattoo. For Janis, you had to catch her on the right arc of the swing. She had moments of tremendous joy and pride. She had moments of triumph such as being at Monterey. She had it rough throughout her life, partly because she was a pioneer, partly because she was a woman, partly

for being a singular voice and being alone.



Ben in his office at Rolling Stone

that.”

Walls were tumbling down as Ray Charles willingly shared his drug and heroin addictions with Ben. “Ray Charles was not at the peak of his career at the time as Aretha Franklin or B.B. King were. He commanded respect and something must have told him that now was the time to talk about his addiction. It was luck for me but there was also different levels working. Ray had shared his problems with addiction cryptically and shortly but not happily with a couple of other publications so it wasn’t new territory. It was nothing pioneering. I thought I would probe too.”

Ben continues, “*Rolling Stone* reached a level of respect and authority. Artists knew *Rolling Stone* as a place to showcase their thoughts in the form of interviews. In addition



Ben with members of the Jackson Five





She had a soft side which left her vulnerable to criticism.”

Having traveled with bands, having interviewed musicians, comedians, film, radio and television personalities, Ben has always maintained professionalism. Photos that turn up of him with various artists were usually taken by photographers who wanted a photo opportunity. Ben explains, “About a month ago, Cameron Crowe sent me a couple of photographs of myself with Marvin Gaye that were probably taken around

set us apart from the other magazines. That is what I am the proudest of.”

Speaking of Cameron Crowe, Ben’s character in Crowe’s 2000 film *Almost Famous* is totally fictional. “The story line of the bands on the road



**Ben hanging out with Paul McCartney**

1971 or ‘72. I don’t recall such photos nor posing for them. I never crossed that line willingly. I would never say, “Ok, Mick now that we’ve done the interview let’s have a picture taken for my scrapbook.” It isn’t something a reporter would do. We were professionals at *Rolling Stone*. That is what

with groupies and such-that part is true, of course, but my character in the film is nothing like me at all,” said Ben. “I did give Cameron his first assignment for *Rolling Stone* when he was around 14. I asked him to write a short piece on the band, Poco. I knew how old he was. I wasn’t snookered into

thinking he was a grown man as the movie portrays me.”

These days Ben is busy doing many projects. He is currently a consulting editor for *Tone Audio*, an on line publication for audio files, digital downloads and so forth.

He also does an on line radio show that is a tribute to station KYA in San Francisco. The program is broadcast 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm weeknights. (Pacific Time) Ben’s other projects include writing blogs and articles for *Wolfgang’s Vault* and for *Asianconnections.com*.

He is currently writing some articles for British magazines, *Uncut* and *Classic Rock*. *Classic Rock* is planning to run one of Ben’s previous pieces on Santana during the month of November. He also MC’s for events and even sings. If that isn’t enough, Ben has recently finished a book, *Grateful Dead Scrapbook* (Chronicle Books). It was released in late September of this year. “I wrote the narrative of the band’s history and also the take on some of their significant songs. It’s an interactive book with removable pieces of artifacts and memorabilia,” said Ben.

Ben left *Rolling Stone* in the early 80s to pursue other interests and projects. He has written several books and has contributed articles to many magazines. Another project he is working on now involves encouraging senior citizens to tell their own story. He recently gave a talk at a retirement home as

to how to share memories with others. In addition, a documentary is in the works about his life and career.

While many people change careers during their lifetime, Ben stayed the course. When asked why he maintained this avenue he said, “I’m fortunate to be multifaceted. On *Asianconnections.com*, they call me the “Renaissance Man”. What that means is I dabble in a bunch of stuff. I do radio, MC, write, conduct interviews and so forth. I dig all kinds of music. I was never stuck in one genre. There was always something to write about. That’s the thing about *Rolling Stone*, it wasn’t just music. It was never stuck in music. The first cover of *Rolling Stone* was a photo of John Lennon in a movie, *How I Won the War*. Writing about so many things has kept me alert and awake to what is going on.”

To keep up with Ben Fong-Torres, please check out the following:  
[www.benfongtorres.com](http://www.benfongtorres.com)  
[www.asianconnections.com](http://www.asianconnections.com)  
[www.tonepublications.com](http://www.tonepublications.com)  
[www.wolfgangsvault.com](http://www.wolfgangsvault.com)

Ben’s recent book, *Grateful Dead Scrapbook* is available at: Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble and Borders Books. Please also check your local area bookstores.

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