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Cinema Inspires Sounds of the City

By MARTIN JOHNSON

In the late '80s, when studying music at Juilliard stopped appealing to him, Edward Ratliff went to film school. Today, he's best known for making richly cinematic music that captures New York City's momentum and diversity. Elegant and assured, it blends elements of jazz, tango, klezmer and Hong Kong soundtracks into a unique amalgam.

Mr. Ratliff, 52, who plays accordion and a variety of brass instruments, especially cornet and trumpet, has released three recordings, the most recent being last year's "Those Moments Before" (Strudelmedia). He will perform Tuesday night at Local 269 on the Lower East Side.



Edward Ratliff

Anja Hitzenberger

A military brat who grew up near Washington, D.C., and in Texas, he studied piano and enjoyed playing the music of Burt Bacharach and Henry Mancini more than the youth-oriented pop of the day, but jazz saxophonist Eric Dolphy was his first musical love. The first Dolphy song he ever heard moved him enough to buy the reedman's "At the Five Spot" recording, and he was impressed with the structure of the band. "It instilled in me a lot of different ideas that stay with me," he said. "The power and supremacy of melody, emotion and color."

From there he began exploring the music of Ornette Coleman and Béla Bartók, and moved to New York to attend Mannes College and then, after rejecting a scholarship from Juilliard, to tackle film studies at The New School. He played bass trombone at the time and couldn't

see himself in an orchestra full time. And while The New School instilled in him a greater appreciation of movies, he also couldn't imagine himself as a film critic. So he returned to music and took up his current instruments.

When he moved to New York in the early '80s, Mr. Ratliff lived on 149th between Broadway and Riverside Drive. Being one of the few white people in the area heightened his curiosity about other cultures. On Thanksgiving 1994, Mr. Ratliff saw Stephen Chow's "From Beijing With Love" at the old Music Palace Theater in Chinatown and was taken by the informality of the scene. He began going weekly.

"I discovered all these great film directors (Tsui Hark, Wong Kar-wai, Johnnie To, John Woo, Ann Hui, etc.) who were churning out really artful films that were meant for the mainstream Hong Kong audience to enjoy," he said. "It was sort of like in the golden age of the Hollywood studio system where great directors made artful—but not 'art'—films for the mass market. That you could make something moving and possibly profound and artful and yet still accessible to nonspecialists was a breakthrough for me and very liberating. This became the model I strove for, and I've been much happier making music ever since."

Mr. Ratliff began leading bands in the mid '90s and played at venues not bound by genre, like the Knitting Factory, BAM Café and Barbès. He has also written music for dance companies, and he has created two film/dance projects with photographer Anja Hitzenberger, "Barcelona in 48 Hours" (2004) and "The Paris Film" (2010), which is on the festival circuit this year.

His interest in dance was also inspired by Hong Kong cinema. "The thing that I related to most in the Hong Kong films was the movement," he said. "I've always related music to visual motion."

—Mr. Johnson writes about jazz and popular music for the Journal.