



Beyond the Book Austin

When Music Speaks, How Do You Write What It Says?

Beyond the Book explores music writing and music scholarship

By Stephen Cooper

AUSTIN – Each world culture has its own musical tradition, all of them expressing in sound the nearly boundless range of human experience. From the lullaby to the funeral dirge, music is universal in everyday life; it can “speak” to a broad ethnic tradition, or to a specific individual. And it often evokes strong emotion.

Similarly, effective approaches to *writing about music* are also diverse, highly personal and even unique. But each music writer faces the same essential problem: how can anyone convey the beauty and power – in effect, the *sounds* of music – on the printed page?

In April 2005, *Beyond the Book* explored that conundrum at the University of Texas in Austin, with a four-person panel representing the diversity of contemporary music scholarship: a musician/journalist raised in a milieu dominated by the sounds of American blues and folk music; a perceptive layman who helped define the fusion of two seemingly incompatible species of popular music; and two distinguished academics who rely on both “traditional scholarly research” and oral histories of people who bear witness to music history.

“Music, by definition, is non-verbal,” noted **Christopher Kenneally**, Copyright Clearance Center’s director of Author and Creator Relations, who moderated the conference. Music writers, Kenneally said, “are required to write about everything but the music itself: the composer, the artist – the famous ones and those forgotten by history – the performance space, the style of the music, the role of race and gender and religion.”

To compound the problem, he noted, many musicians are reluctant to talk about, or find it impossible to articulate the meaning behind, their work.

The key challenge for music journalists and scholars, Kenneally said, is to connect readers – through research, interviews, analysis and the “music” of their own writing – to a high-fidelity universe that goes beyond words.

A Vehicle to Understand Experience

For some writers, building a bridge to the world of music proves almost irresistible. “I decided to write about music because of my father, because he really conveyed, as I was growing up, the power of music,” said **Jerma Jackson**, associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the author of *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age*.

“(My father) would sing,” she recalled. “He would teach us all these songs. We would go visit with family and friends and you couldn’t leave the house without everyone engaging in a song. Music had the potential to carry us to this other place that could not be replicated through conversation. And it seemed to me that the power of music made an important, or a potentially important, vehicle to understand experience.”

Music, Jackson said, is often far more articulate than plain narrative. With musicians, she explained, “you don’t ask them what they mean. You either get it, or you don’t. One of the things that’s fascinating about African-American history is that often people are translating it. And with musicians, they just play. It’s our responsibility as listeners to make meaning out of it. That made music really important to study particularly because, as a historian, I wanted to look at meaning.”

Mining Written and Oral History

A key element of Jackson’s book explores the transition of gospel from a purely religious music into the commercial sphere. “A number of amazing sources came from the black press. I read the *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1900 until 1950 and ended up stumbling on a series of editorials about swinging spirituals, which really was a turning point in the book,” she said. “The other very, very important source was oral histories. There were so many people that I interviewed who really made a difference.”

Robert Cochran’s “favorite” among his several published books is *Singing in Zion*, an exploration of one family’s musical tradition and its connection to a rural Southern community, not only relies on oral history; it was inspired by a face-to-face encounter with a student in his University of Arkansas classroom.

“She told me that her family had in its possession a book, loose-leaf, that had some 240 songs in it that they regarded as their own,” said Cochran, a professor of English, chair of American Studies and the director of the university’s Center for Arkansas and Regional Studies. “They had a proprietary interest in these songs: they sang them, and they liked them, and their parents and relatives had sung them. That was the start of that project. I was interested in why they preserved these songs, what the songs gave back to them.”

Cochran described his approach as journalistic and focused on specific stories or themes. “Scholarship is journalism with loose deadlines,” he joked. In a serious vein, he added: “I really have almost no ambition to generalize. I just want to get this thing as right as I can. In that book, I actually found a theorist who agreed with me. He said ‘the particular does not yield to the general without loss.’ And I quote that in the book.”

Journalist as Musician; Musician as Journalist

The earliest memories of **Elijah Wald**, a Los Angeles-based author, are of “progressive” folk music artists such as Pete Seeger, Josh White and Paul Robeson. Wald is trained as both a journalist and musician. He’s the former world music writer for *The Boston Globe* and a guitarist since the age of nine.

Appropriately, perhaps, Wald has also received a Grammy for his writing – of album liner notes. But Wald is best known for his books, including *Escaping the Delta*, a re-examination of blues history centered on the legendary Robert Johnson, and his newest, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, Dave Van Ronk’s memoir of the New York folk revival.

Does being a trained musician give someone like Wald a leg up when it comes to writing about music? “There are ways in which it is clearly an advantage, but only if you’re the same kind of musician as the person you’re writing about,” he answered. “I mean, I could play Robert Johnson’s guitar arrangements, and because of that there were things I could notice and say about them, and show links between him and other artists. But equally, that could lead you astray.”

One of Wald’s most important mentors as a writer was Van Ronk himself.

“He dropped out of school when he was 14, but he was the best-educated man I’ve ever known in terms of general education,” Wald said. “He was this huge bear of a man – this growling, shouting blues singer. When I first went to him, it was for guitar lessons, and I learned a lot about music from him. *Escaping the Delta* was based essentially on conversations with Dave. But when I started writing, he started handing me [books by] by A.J. Liebling, in particular, and Calvin Trillin, H.L. Mencken, Joseph Mitchell – the people he felt were the people you need to read if you’re going to write non-fiction in America.”

Trend Spotting

In the 1970s, as a young staffer for *Texas Monthly*, **Jan Reid** found himself in Austin during the explosion of its music scene. When he visited a club one night, he heard a style of music he had never encountered before.

“They were up there playing fiddles and pedal steels [guitars],” Reid recalled. “To my ear, it was country, but they were making these country instruments play rock and roll. I could hear the blues, the rock and roll. And it was fresh. It was obvious that what was going on here was different – it wasn’t being repeated anywhere else in the country.”

The discovery led to a magazine piece, then his first book: *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*. Reid named the genre itself, almost accidentally: “It just came to me, ‘redneck rock.’ I was writing about the audience as much as the music. That was striking – this was when there was this tension and hostility between hippies and cowboys. And suddenly, they were in the same room,” he said.

“Some musicians,” Reid admitted, “were hugely offended by [the label] – ‘everything I stand for is against rednecks.’ But it was intended to be just a book title that people would remember. It was tongue-in-cheek.”

Redneck Rock is now in its third printing, and Reid has penned eight other books, about musicians (Willie Nelson), celebrities (George Foreman), politics (Karl Rove) – and even a novel.

Technology: Integrator, or Polluter?

Controversy arising out of the fusing of distinct musical traditions flared when gospel began to influence jazz, and when technology – the phonograph and radio, at first – propagated this commercialized sound to new audiences. Jackson noted the cultural ferment sparked by Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s introduction of gospel to Harlem’s cosmopolitan Cotton Club in 1938.

“Gospel began as a religious experience and became a commodity that the [religious] community no longer exerted complete control over,” Jackson said. “Yes, it’s more accessible. But who controls it? In the gospel community, [this shift] fosters a debate about the meaning of faith. What does it mean when you sing a song in the Cotton Club versus a church? I want to put that on the table because technology creates possibilities, but also creates some new burdens that people have to deal with.”

Added Bob Cochran, “Jerma mentioned that this music grew up in a segregated society, and that’s absolutely true,” he said. “But once people get radios, you’re picking up XERA, or you’re picking up stations like WLAC. You can’t segregate a radio dial.”

Cochran and Kenneally noted that today’s digital technology has driven down the cost of recording music. But the World Wide Web got mixed reviews from the panelists. While articles on less-than-mainstream musical traditions may be hard to locate on free search engines, the Internet and the i-Pod have become state of the art sources for music itself.

“My daughter can amass in an hour a musical library that took me 20 years to amass,” Cochran said. “It’s an absolute cornucopia out there.”

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