

2011

## Review of Worthington's "Motif (vol. 1) Writing By Ear: An Anthology of Writings About Music"

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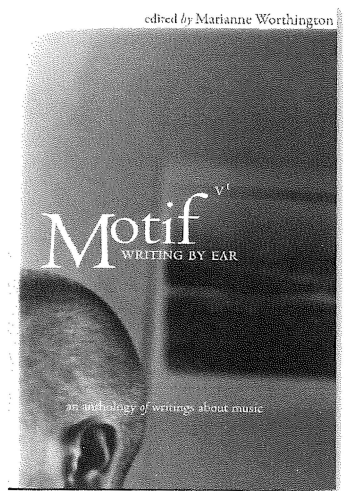
Jolliff, William, "Review of Worthington's "Motif (vol. 1) Writing By Ear: An Anthology of Writings About Music"" (2011). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 31.  
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**Motif (vol. 1) Writing By Ear: An Anthology of Writings About Music**

Edited by Marianne Worthington (Louisville, KY: Motes Books, 2009)  
\$12.00, paper. ISBN 9781934894088, 295 pp.

*Writing By Ear: An Anthology of Writings About Music* is the first in a *Motif* series of thematic collections to be published



annually by Motes Books. This volume, edited by the award-winning editor and poet Marianne Worthington, is a superb beginning.

*Writing By Ear* is a big book (nearly 300 pages) of poetry, short stories, literary nonfiction, and song lyrics, grouped less by subject matter than by what I'll call ten categories of sensibility. The category headings, such as Pastorales, Nocturnes, and Tritones, do give some subtle indication of a perspective from which the pieces might be read, but at times I would have been hard pressed to say exactly *why* a particular work was included in a particular section. What is clear, however, is that the selections were placed with a skilled and sensitive attention to aesthetic continuity. In fact, I found that I could enjoy reading this anthology straight through—a rare experience for me and a testament to Worthington's sense of the appropriate.

As we might expect from such a large and diverse group of pieces, particularly one gathered through an open call for submissions, the quality varies. It's apparent, however, that the pool was strong. I seldom wondered, "Why in the world was *this* included?" or, when I did, I could usually discover an answer with a more attentive reading. In addition to a good many lesser known writers, names familiar to readers of Appalachian literature make welcome appearances. The strength of the volume, as well as its shelf appeal, is enhanced by the work of more broadly known writers with at least one foot in Appalachia: George Ella Lyon, Frank X Walker, Barbara Crooker, Diane Gilliam, and Silas House.

Given the defined parameters of the musical subject matter (it is, after all, the Motif series), this book achieves a pleasing unity. Its dramatic variety is held together by interwoven patterns on many levels, and that's true whether the weaving was engineered by the editor or created by the literary and life experience of the readers. More surprising than its unity is the fact that the anthology adheres to its musical motif and presents a breadth of subject, style, and sensibility.

Readers who expect this volume to center on Appalachian music will certainly find music from the region, both traditional and commercial, secular and religious, amply represented. Most readers would've been surprised not to find abundant references to the Carter Family and Hank Williams, or to more contemporary artists with strong iconic value, such as Patty Loveless and David Allan Coe. But the range of musical contexts is broader than I'd anticipated, and the associational and allusive value gained is as welcome as it is rich. A few examples may suggest the breadth: Harry Gieg calls to mind John Coltrane's improvisational jazz phrasing as he scores his poem "Jam" across the page. Poet Judith H. Montgomery's formally crafted "Transported" is a sensitive response to Bach's *The Passion of Our Lord According to Saint Matthew*. Caridad McCormick's "Canta, Y No Llores" details a young girl's troubling and troubled relationship with the passionate popular music of her parents' native Cuba. Kayla Rae Whitaker's "Friends in Loud Places" centers on the positive influence that hours of MTV had on her literary development: while her title may be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Garth Brooks hit, her story con-

nects her early love of hip-hop with her adult literary passion, noting that she finds herself “listening to Merwin and Wright these days with the same ear” she developed in front of the television (54). And Albert DeGenova’s “A Blues Blessing” serves as the volume’s fitting final word. Worthington has cast her net wide and presented musical referents from a variety of genres.

The role of music is often at the center of the figurative richness (either as tenor or vehicle)—and just as often, it suggests a socio-cultural setting, creates the work’s emotional context, or acts as the defining aspect of a particular milieu. In “Rockin’ With Red,” Michael Scott Cain’s boyhood experience of regional blues star Piano Red (William Perryman) is at least as much about growing up under segregation as it is about music, and it promotes African American music as a positive cultural force in breaking color lines. Some of the darker aspects of a 1960s counter-cultural lifestyle are framed by the music in Bibi Wein’s “A Red-Headed Woman,” calling into question the “freedom” of those times and portraying the price that was sometimes paid. Not going to a Stones concert becomes a rite of passage into adult responsibilities for Graham Thomas Shelby in “My Promise to the Rolling Stones.” And in “Air Devil’s Inn on a Saturday Night,” Beth Newberry presents a snapshot of the life of a GenXer against the backdrop of that enduring American institution, the bar band. Her description of Dallas Alice is right on the mark:

I dig Dallas Alice because they can balance twang with tattoos, guitar solos with bourbon shots, and smart lyrics with foul mouths. The five members are slightly scruffy, occasionally charming, reliably boozy, and guaranteed to be smoke-stained. They serve their music neat, no mixers needed.... [Their music] stole my honky-tonk heart. It has become a welcome soundtrack to my evening. (83)

As Newberry leads us through clouds of bar smoke, she suggests the troubling ennui of life in her swatch of contemporary America.

Just as the role of music in the selections ranges broadly, so does the subject matter that musical motifs help develop. An abundance, if not a majority, of the pieces center on family life. Not surprisingly, a dominant strain is the life-giving role that music plays in families. In her winsome and insightful Foreword, as artful in its way as any piece in the volume, publisher EK Larken writes of her own early family experience with music:

Daddy sorely needed somebody just to sit and play music with. Music was lifeblood to him, after all, so he looked around and, spying me at an age not yet jaded and certainly eager, decided that I’d be as good a place as any to start. It worked out for us both. (16)

Larken’s words introduce many of the aspects of music in the family that persist throughout the volume. First, music is something more than a pastime or recreation: it’s a need. Second, music is most often, and most joyfully, made with other people; and the family members are often the most accessible. Finally, for music in a family to be at its best, all the parties have to really enjoy it for the magic to happen.

Like Larken, many of the prose writers remember music as a positive force of family life. Laurie Duesing, in rediscovering the joy of playing flute with her

sister in “What She Wants,” reminds us that “when two make music together, they are immune, untouchable” (72). Pamela Duncan writes of her two aging uncles who, awkward and embarrassed, are reborn for a few timeless moments when they sing together again: “And like magic they start playing together, just perfect. They play like they never quit, like that music has kept on inside them all these years, even while they were working and getting married and raising kids and forgetting” (269). The poets farm this topic as well. Jesse Graves’ memory of his elders, especially his mother, is identical with his memory of their music. His moving “A Short Life of Trouble” concludes by echoing Merle Travis, then confessing, “I would dig into the depths of the earth / to hear those voices ringing out one more time” (32). Equally powerful is Sylvia Woods’ “A-4.” In that poem, which suggests comparison with Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz,” she recounts the childhood pleasure of frequenting a café where she ate hot dogs and danced with her father to Hank Williams on the jukebox. Her memory is rich with sensory detail:

Smells pulse like gut strings  
ringing through a doghouse bass,  
chili, onions frying,  
bootleg bourbon and Juicy Fruit,  
Old Spice and Irish Spring. (50)

The volume includes many pieces along these lines, pieces that I suspect those of us who grew up playing music will read time and again. As we might expect, Silas House, in the final stanza of “God’s Key,” sums up beautifully the feelings of closeness that rise around music played and loved together:

I believe God made the world for nights  
like these, when we are safe with our kin,  
with people who have mountain blood  
in their veins, with banjo players who  
speak poetry each and every  
time they put their fingers to the strings. (145)

Yet the role of music, even in a family, is far more complicated than that, and Worthington has made selections with such complication in mind. K. Bruce Florence, in “Minor Chords,” portrays music not only as a force for family unity, but as an emotionally dense complex where a man can take out his frustration, violently, on his musically gifted wife. For Neela Vaswani in “Feet on the Ground, Reaching for the Stars,” Top 40 music is the very Americanizing force this child of immigrants wants, but her family has no interest in such a fulsome integration into the vulgarities of pop culture. Just as poignantly, Sybil Baker writes of her relationship with a mother whose life centers on music, allowing us to understand her feeling about her mother’s passion for music, a feeling very like resentment: “But you were beyond me,” she writes, “I couldn’t touch you, because you had your music. You had the divine” (225). And Kathy Briccetti presents the viewpoint of a nonmusical member of a musical family, engaging us with the pain of her marginalized position—a pain she only begins

to work through after she has her own child: “And then, in a rocking chair that squeaked out the beats with each push backward, in a room lit only by a soft night-light, and with my arms wrapped around a baby in fuzzy soft pajamas, I tested my voice” (208).

My one criticism of the book relates to the prose selections, including Briccetti’s piece. Contemporary literary nonfiction is ultimately impossible to distinguish, formally, from a piece of contemporary fiction written in the first person. Yet the two can make different emotional claims on the reader and demand different psychological engagement. It seems to me, then, to be a significant disadvantage not to have the genres of the pieces actually identified. But that’s a small complaint about a very good book. *Writing By Ear* is worthy of multiple readings, and I suspect it may include several pieces destined for anthologized lives far beyond these covers. For starters, I’ll suggest that Jeff Daniel Marion’s superb “Nocturne: Rogersville, Tennessee, 1947” and Diane Gilliam’s intensely moving “Tender” fall into that special category.

Music, both traditional and commercial, has long played an important role in Appalachian life, with popular music often creating the cultural contexts in which Americans’ values are formed or reflected. Given this centrality of music in our culture—and the quality of selections Worthington has chosen—it’s hard to imagine anyone with an interest in contemporary literature not finding something in the volume to enjoy, maybe even something to sing about.

### **William Jolliff**

Bill Jolliff grew up on a farm in Delaware County, Ohio. He now serves as professor of English at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon.