ForeWord Reviews

The Oxford American Book of Great Music Writing
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University of Arkansas Press
978-1-55728-887-5
(October 2008)

Music makes the world go ’round. Readers of the “Oxford American,” a magazine of all things Southern, have felt for years that they have been the center of that world. It is the steamy South, after all, which has been the source of much of America’s greatest musical talent. Texas can lay claim to flamboyant blues rocker Janis Joplin and gritty blues legend Leadbelly. The Mississippi Delta was the incubator for Ike Turner, wild man Jerry Lee Lewis and, of course, “the king,” Elvis Presley. The Deep South produced rock group R.E.M. in Georgia, Lynyrd Skynyrd “from the bad side of Jacksonville (Florida)” and Randy Newman of Louisiana. And the Appalachians are home to people like blind guitar wiz Doc Watson. Even comedian and actor Steve Martin, who grew up in southern California, minutes from Disneyland, embraced the banjo, an instrument first brought to the American South by slaves.

Those are just a few of the artists addressed in this anthology of fifty-five essays, with the occasional poem, oral history, and short story included, culled from the magazine’s past ten years by the publication’s editor. A foreword by musician and composer Van Dyke Parks sets the tone for the book and, with unerring Southern hospitality, opens the door for readers who may have never ventured below the Mason-Dixon line.

Without stereotyping, the editor allocates these musical talents into genres such as “Rockabilly,” “R & B: Dept. of Al Green,” “Folk/Bluegrass” and “Jazz.” The writers are no less impressive than their grasp of subject matter, and they present personal arguments for their infatuation. Humorist Roy Blount, Jr., in his interview with singer Ray Charles, shares with the reader why Charles, who started out with a small combo, graduated to a ten-piece band. ”When you got a big plate, you can put as much as you want on it,” Charles tells him. “If you want just a little bit to eat, just put a little bit on. But if you want a lot, you can have that, too.” In a musical world that is succumbing to “big business,” Southern musical talents old and new fight onward, determined to tell their stories. Readers will crank up their stereos while studying the pages and making exciting discoveries.