



Where Dead Voices Gather

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A forgotten singer from the early days of jazz is at the center of this riveting book--a narrative that is part mystery, part biography, part meditation on the meaning and power of music.

Where Dead Voices Gather Details

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From Reader Review Where Dead Voices Gather for online ebook

Steven Spector says

I've read plenty of minstrel history studies, some of which the author savages in the first few pages. What is this? A discography with narration of a crazy quilt of everything from blues, hokum, hillbilly music, and jazz. Congrats to the author who can listen to a lot of records and review old newspaper files. And the alleged subject Emmett Miller? An obscure legend to some - an opportunistic chameleon to others. As a blues fan who's read every book from Charters to Palmer and more, this book is bunk.

Garrett Cash says

I have never seen a man with such a strong capability to go off topic, or despise Elvis Presley so thoroughly. Nick Tosches is an intelligent man who can discuss some very interesting topics. Unfortunately his ability to remember where his argument is going is about as good as a senile old geezer. I really loved the book at first, but Tosches really slows down when he starts rambling in the middle. It's quite painful from then on. He clearly has his obsessions, Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, James Luther Dickinson, etc. His biting hatred for Elvis left a noisome taste in my mouth, and it is humorous to me that he could so illogically abhor a man whom Bob Dylan almost worships. There is a photo of Dylan on his hands and knees kissing the spot where Elvis recorded "That's All Right Mama", the moment Tosches deems the death of good rock music. None of his arguments against the King are sensible and are clearly fueled by his pretentiousness (as if the rock n' roll surrounding Elvis was anymore real or not real). That whole thing just made me upset. So overall, it's an ok book that made some observations I fully enjoyed, and others I wanted to tear out of the book and burn.

Jonfaith says

I finished Where Dead Voices Gather by Nick Tosches this afternoon. I had more issues with this text than any other by the deft stylist. I was reading deep into last night, when I took out Carter Family disc I bought myself recently and replaced it with an early Gillian Welch (my wife rose from her slumber and deadpanned, there she is again, my rival.) Tosches extends a nod, the gist of which is the cathartic of song has been with us eternally, like some airborne Dutchman, yet the idea of minstrelsy is being vilified by sentimentalists and academics who don't understand anything. I was not impressed. There may not be anything scientific about race as a designation, Tosches proudly points to research in that regard. There still is a concept of human history, and, no, no one alive withstood slavery. These arguments do not mean that this legacy and all its subsequent horror have not had an implacable effect upon people of color.

Tosches needs to cease his incessant blowing of Dylan as well. It isn't becoming. cheers.

Richard says

This book is ostensibly a biography of Emmett Miller, a blackface minstrel show performer whose "clarinet voice" inspired people like Jimmy Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Merle Haggard. Those bits are fine,

especially if you're obsessive about the dates of shows and recording sessions, which are meticulously documented. Much more interesting to me were Tosche's detours into obscure byways of American music and pop culture, the Homeric tradition, and even ancient Jewish mysticism. It's like having a few beers with a crazed genius whose mind keeps jumping from subject to subject, all of which he's an expert in. You sit there in awe, feeling lucky you stumbled into this bar on this particular day, and leave smarter than you were before on a fundamental level. I must have highlighted the titles to fifty songs I'd never heard and then tracked them down on YouTube. His vision of the "pranayama of holy theft," by which Virgil drew in the air that Homer breathed and Dante drew in Virgil's breath and so on all the way down to Emmett Miller and Lightnin' Hopkins and Bob Dylan is a beautiful way to look at the evolution and influence in art and one that will stick with me forever.

Steve Satterwhite says

A great book for anyone interested in Western pop music. The book is loosely centered around Emmett Miller, a minstrel singer and comedian who represented the best of the minstrel shows, just as they were dying out. For many of us, Emmett was the guy who best did American standard songs in the minstrel style, a project that truly blended country, blues, vaudeville, Broadway and "folk" tunes into the style that is just now known as Americana, or whatever. A genius drunk, that we don't know much about, he is owed a great debt by current american songsters of all styles. And he was funny.

Check Miller out on YouTube. There are two songs with bits that got filmed.

Emmett predated Milton Brown, Bob Wills and Hank Williams, and they all used his stuff.

And, Nick Tosches is a very good American critic and writer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otNIC...>

Bryan says

The tale of Georgia-native minstrel singer Emmett Miller done in that distinctly Tosches way. Fascinating story that gives a good history of mistrely, a bit of vaudeville and makes the argument why mistrely is no more to be abhorred than it's later cousins. In fact, it's when the black face came off that things truly became bad.

Miller's distinctive voice influenced Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and many others. The musical style bridged gaps between country, blues, jazz etc. hinting at the coming of Western Swing music.

Still hoping to make it to Miller's grave in Macon.

Steve Leach says

Blackface mistrely would seem to be a delicate topic all these years after its demise, but not for Nick Tosches. He bounces back and forth between the two cultures that built this entertainment form, for decades

the most popular performance diversion in the U.S. Whites took from blacks, blacks took from whites, whites took it back again. And so on. A fascinating story that only occasionally gets uncomfortable.

Kit Fox says

Stayed away from this one for a bit because I was admittedly all, "Eh, minstrelsy...really? Just not really my thing." But, in typical Tosches fashion, this book was informative as all get-out and full of his patented music-history-acrobatic-act where he'll take a popular song and trace its roots back to some bawdy, 17th century ditty. Structurally, it's all over the place—which the author addresses several times—so it's more "history if it were written as a Faulkner novel." Far out stuff any way you cut it which all ultimately underscores how mind numbingly intertwined all forms of art and expression are: from the progression of minstrelsy can be seen all things from country to the blues to rockabilly to rock to Dylan and all that jazz.

David Gorman says

As the conversation around cultural appropriation and race in America continues, this book is becoming even more relevant. As expected, Tosches makes unexpected cultural connections and comes to sometimes shocking conclusions. Personally, I found that I had to put my politics and preconceived notions aside and take it all in before I could process the ideas and history presented (some of which I'm still not on board with, but feel a deeper understanding for having them presented so compellingly). Overall, this is an amazing piece of work and essential to a larger conversation that goes far beyond any pretext of this book being a biography of Emmett Miller. Whether you're inspired or offended (or both) by its tone and assertions, the depth of research and presentation of the arguments are valuable pieces of the very complex puzzle in any debate around race and culture in America.

As for the negatives/disclaimers, the book can be jarring at times, switching abruptly from Tosches' gorgeous piss n' vinegar verbal flights to cold pages of endless facts and academic detail. Tosches also has a habit of casually dropping references only a scholar could catch and even resorting Greek words (written, of course, IN Greek), which is a bit tiresome after a while. The musical references also seemed both limited and forced at times (Dylan, Jerry Lee, Dylan, Stones, Dylan, Dylan, and Jerry Lee, plus a lot of Luther Dickinson, whose album just doesn't live up to the number of call-outs it gets here).

Tom says

Not that I particularly care, but this is a 3.5-star book if there ever was one.

I find Tosches really frustrating. *Hellfire* is just jaw-droppingly good on every level, and seems all the more impressive the more of Tosches' other work I read. *Where Dead Voices Gather* is, I think, mostly excellent, and a really timely read in these days where "cultural appropriation" is so frequently derided by people who simultaneously claim to prize and desire "diversity."

This is, uh, not to suggest that blackface minstrelsy shouldn't maybe be examined and troubled over -- just that this particular issue of black and white is, y'know, pretty complex, which is *all the more reason* to give it some time and attention.

Tosches digs into this complexity throughout the book using his usual methods -- detective work, linguistic flights, and lists, oh so many lists -- and although it's harder than it ought to be to tease some structure out of the book, I do think he develops a solid sense of momentum for most of it, weaving the book's purported biographical subject matter (the life and career of Emmett Miller) together with as much relevant and often enjoyably tangential matter (the times of Emmett Miller, I suppose) until what we seem to have is a panorama of the social, cultural, commercial, and (yes) racial forces that came together to create and destroy blackface minstrelsy and Emmett Miller himself.

Unfortunately, somewhere around page 200, the book started to feel increasingly shapeless to me, a bit too free-associative, a little repetitive... and yet, somehow, not exactly a slog. It wasn't bad at all, but it meandered and petered out at just the point when I felt like it should've been coming together and cresting.

I remain convinced that Nick Tosches is a splendid prose writer; anyone who's capable of writing a book like *Hellfire* has *something* going for them. But I'm also kind of glad that *Country* is the only other book of his that I feel like I need to read.

Bill O'driscoll says

Tosches is a singular writer -- feisty, cerebral, surprising, curmudgeonly -- and this is a singular book, about his attempts to unearth the lost history of Emmett Miller, one of the last of the blackface minstrels, and a pioneer of yodeling in American popular song to boot. The roots of that music during this time period -- roughly the second and third decade of the 20th century -- are especially tangled, with the spread of recording technology meaning everyone can influence everyone else. But Tosches' obsessive detective story (which spans, for him, decades of searching) is compelling, and I love that this is a contemporary book of nonfiction that never once attempts to recreate a scene (let alone dialogue) from a past the author never witnessed (or heard). Rather, Tosches is rather like a personal essayist, swaying by the depth of his research, the intrigue of his rhetoric, and his sheer passion for music.

Ryan says

Nick runs down names and places, labels and producers, songs and dances, etc. to the point that sections of the book bring to mind the Iliad's catalog of the ships. These sections are valuable as reference though, and worth the slog for the insights (e.g. his criticism of the white demand for "authentic" blues/suffering; his digressions about modern forms of minstrelsy; the unfathomable depths of origins; his surfeit of creative and poetic juxtapositions; etc.) and the occasional maniacal bursts of ostentatious prose:

"...1927: the year that Furry Lewis, Jimmie Rodgers, and so many other luminous voices came to be heard; the year of Emmett Miller's glory; the year that the great flood of the Mississippi, the great flood of the Delta, the great flood, ignivorous and exundant, which seemed to sunder the chthonic sacrarium, Κτ?πησε Ζευς χθ?υιος, and bring forth the *tombaroli*, the holy grave-robbers and thieves; to loose the cestus of *Mystis*, sweet tectonic mama, and raise, in skirl and sigh and yodel and moan, in epiclesis, in *aestus*, in *quietus - stile vecchio, stile duro, stile nuovo* - the tessitura of it all, the dark and myriad-voiced antediluvian song and resurrection in the light of new mornin, *matutina lux*, Viva-tonal and electric, wild-souled and endlessly rocking."

This book is all at once deeply felt, obsessive, single-minded, boring, and brilliant.

Trey says

added because of this quote, found on a blog:

"And, of course, that is what all of this is - all of this: the one song, ever changing, ever reincarnated, that speaks somehow from and to and for that which is ineffable within us and without us, that is both prayer and deliverance, folly and wisdom, that inspires us to dance or smile or simply to go on, senselessly, incomprehensibly, beatifically, in the face of mortality and the truth that our lives are more ill-writ, ill-rhymed and fleeting than any song, except perhaps those songs - that song, endlessly reincarnated - born of that truth, be it the moon and June of that truth, or the wordless blue moan, or the rotgut or the elegant poetry of it. That nameless black-hulled ship of Ulysses, that long black train, that Terraplane, that mystery train, that Rocket '88', that Buick 6 - same journey, same miracle, same end and endlessness."

Nate says

Incredible, disturbing dive into the dark history of American music.

Mario Eduardo says

If you are looking for a pool of historical materials on jazz and blues, this book has a lot!

This also introduces me to Emmet Miller, an unsung hero. A rockstar of his time.
