



Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound

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Whale song is an astonishing world of sound whose existence no one suspected before the 1960s. Its discovery has forced us to confront the possibility of alien intelligence-not in outer space but right here on earth. Thoughtful, richly detailed, and deeply entertaining, *Thousand Mile Song* uses the enigma of whale sounds to open up whales' underwater world of sonic mystery. In observing and talking with leading researchers from around the globe as they attempt to decipher undersea music, Rothenberg tells the story of scientists and musicians confronting an unknown as vast as the ocean. His search culminates in a grand attempt to make interspecies music the likes of which no one has ever heard (until, that is, they listen to the accompanying CD), by playing his clarinet with whales in their native habitats, from Russia to Canada to Hawaii.

Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound Details

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From Reader Review *Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound* for online ebook

Hugh says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. Heck, it even comes with a CD of music played to a variety of whale songs. But for every one insight (from WWII through the 1960s, the information that whales "sang" was a closely kept military secret, and that research into their songs was designed to filter their "noise" out from the sound of enemy submarines), there are 10 wild hypotheses and conjectures that ultimately lead the reader to understand we know almost nothing about whale songs in spite of careful plotting of hundreds of thousands of hours of whale song. The author, a musician, tries earnestly to make a case for aesthetic considerations in research into whales, but as he himself admits, it leads to simply competing ideas and concepts

Stefanie Lubkowski says

There is a lot of good info on whale sounds and summaries of research for the lay person. But, in order to better it, you have to wade through Rothenberg's dismissal of hard science, enthusiasm for woo-woo pseudoscience, and ridiculous levels of anthropomorphizing.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

It was a foregone conclusion that I'd give this the highest available rating. & there's so much that I could write about it. But I doubt that I'll barely get started.

For me, as for so many people, my interest in the sounds of whales began w/ my discovering the record entitled "Songs of the Humpback Whale" which, according to Rothenberg, was initially released in 1970 but which I didn't discover until early 1977 in a more mass market edition.

I've always been interested in seeking out unusual sounds. Around the time I got the "Songs.." LP, I was listening to a lot of Yoko Ono, Sun Ra, John Cage, etc.. The whalesong was a particularly exciting discovery b/c it meant getting out of the human realm. I loved it but didn't really get THAT much out of it. Nonetheless, I EARgerly listened to any recordings that came out of compositions that incorporated it somehow. For a while, using whalesong seemed like it was getting to be a cliché. STILL, what a GREAT cliché it was! My interest gradually waned.

Then I heard that David was writing this & I was enthused all over again! I started sending him all the more obscure whale-related recordings I have that I thought he might not've heard: O'Ceana's flute playing w/ whales, Interspecies' simulated whale song, Robert Hall Lewis' "Whale Lament", Charlie Haden's "Song for the Whales", that sort of thing.

I sent him a DVD of my comedic interspecies communication movie from 1988 where I attempted to take musique concrete to seals in the North Sea off Scotland. I told him about the guerrilla performance group that I was in, B.O.M.B., using whalesong in the video documentation from our action at the dysfunctional

Three Mile Island nuclear power plant on April 3, 1979, etc..

SO, I had a strong personal interest in seeing whether any of this wd make it into the bk. Alas, none of it did (except for Charlie Haden who David probably already knew about).. but, what did make it into the bk is far more important ANYWAY.. so I'm not really THAT disappointed!

What can I say?! There're so many things in this to inspire a person like myself. The info about the speed of sound thru water & the possibility that whales can communicate across oceans? It makes me think of the Bulgarian use of tritones to communicate from field to field, the use of yodelling to communicate from mountains.

I learned that there's software called "Leafy Seadragon" to help w/ human-dolphin communication. I learned that there's a Whalesong Project that enables us to hear realtime via the internet the sound of whales around Hawaii during their mating season. In general, there's so much fascinating info in this bk & it's so fluidly written that I can easily imagine it becoming a best-seller - & it comes w/ a CD of David & friends playing w/ whales or playing music inspired by whales.

As for the CD? I'd give it a 5 star rating too! & it's not even close to what I'd like to hear done along these lines! David details the problems he had w/ even making the recordings in the 1st place. Playing music to whales is considered by some to be harrassment of them &, therefore, against Marine Mammal Protection laws. &, yet, David, too, wd like to see whales protected. The music is fairly straightforward from my perspective. Good, but good in a conventionally aesthetic way. I wd've preferred a much more experimental approach but I'm sure what I'd like to do wd be even more offensive & suspect to whale ecologists that what David did!

ANYWAY, READ THIS BK! & READ DAVID'S PREVIOUS BK: "Why Birds Sing". They're both scholarly, entertaining, thought-provoking, the whole 9 yds.. or thousand miles..

Victoria says

WHen I picked this book up, I was hoping it might be a resource for my research project. What I didn't know, is that it would turn out to be a GOLD MINE! It was published long after I had begun the research, so I had no way of knowing that the research I wanted to do, had been done. It was still going on, in fact. So now I'm thinking about altering my project.

As a resource, this book was awesome! I found more resources to use, articles, names, journals, etc. As a reading book, it was alright. There were sections that read too technical, and there were sections that read too personal (it's clear to see where the author stands on certain issues when it comes to politics and laws, which bugged me because I would want to read an un-biased, fact-based book).

I'm not sure I would recommend this to anyone, only because it's aimed at a specific audience. But if anyone is interested in understanding whales and their songs, then this book is for you.

Chelsea says

I read parts of this as "research" for a short story I'm writing which involves whales and their song as an influence on the protagonist. It was very informative, and didn't get so bogged down in technical musical or scientific details for me to stop reading. It's best read in the way that Rothenberg came to consider his own project: as an emotional, philosophical survey which asks non-scientific questions after presenting many scientific facts.

Kristen says

I heard about this book on a discussion on public radio's Diane Rehm show sometime this past year. And considering myself both a music lover and a whale lover, I thought this book would be the perfect combination. And it was very interesting. But it covered much much more than I expected. From the history of humans recognizing and listening to "whale songs" to current research being done on whale sounds and, of course, the author's forays into playing the clarinet into the ocean with a hydrophone and recording how the singing whales responded. Some parts were a little drier than I would have liked, but for a lot of the book, I just read with a silly little half-grin on my face and I was just so happy that there are people in the world doing research about whales and dolphins and that I can read about them. The impact might be far more important than we'd like to think.

Spoke says

In the grip of his enthusiasm on the subject of whale song and the possibility of their intelligence, Rothenberg has tried to cover all viewpoints on the subject. The result is an interesting (if sometimes exasperating) look at various whale species, the science and technologies involved in studying them, and a nice sampling of various conflicting human attitudes.

The overall effect is of reading the science report of a highly literate child who is determined to convince you how cool whales are, and that we should totally listen to them more.

Entertaining, and enjoyable if you can handle his tendency to go back and forth between different standpoints? But not for those who prefer a more linear and structured approach to the subject. (Or any subject.)

Deborah Pickstone says

Read as a personal story and music this is very interesting; as science it is vague and basically comes down to science has no real idea what whale music is about despite a lot of recording and research but it does have a lot of theories ranging from the crackpot to the downright barking with a few more rational approaches thrown in. Personally I have no problem with whale song being a mystery - it's a beautiful mystery and uplifting to the spirit.

I prefer my world to have unexplained beauty in it.

Wendy says

My mood swung around wildly while reading this -- some parts I loathed (see this review, which sums it up pretty effectively), others I really appreciated (e.g., summaries of scientific research). I both love whales and play music, but was much less jazzed about this dude's attempted clarinet duets with the whales (just, no) than getting some whale song knowledge directly. Not a bad starting point, though.

Shane says

It's a surprisingly well-written book by a non-marine mammal expert. I have to say that David Rothenberg did a stellar job interviewing many of the well known cetacean researchers and presented facts and arguments in a non-distorted way. After reading too many media coverage on marine mammal studies by main-stream media that are usually so way off the facts, I consider this one of the best books if you want to have a grasp about cetacean bioacoustics from the lay person's point of view. However, I do not consider the way he did the playback to whales just to see how animals would response to the noise (or music) brings much merit to the discussion of the importance of underwater sound to these animals.

Abby says

If you read science writing, as I do, for the "WOW!" factor and for the mysteries, whales are an excellent choice. This is amazing, interesting, and moving by turns. I've got all the old wonderings about what qualifies as intelligent life, what giant boat noises are doing to the ocean, whether animals have something that counts as culture, and now I'm also wondering what rain sounds like from under the water. I love what Rothenberg has done here.

Perhaps he is right that science could do with more aesthetics and art could stand some science (my liberal arts background is like, duh). However, when it comes to his quest to make inter-species music with the cetaceans, I find myself siding with Mark Johnson: "...for God's sake leave them alone unless you have a really good reason to bother them." Rothenberg also takes shots at scientific literature and its lackluster descriptions of beautiful things, and he seems to be missing the point. Scientific journal articles, which cost the authors \$100/page just to publish, are not the place to wax poetic about whale music. I'd say the real shame is that more scientists don't take a little time to write for the general public. The general public might generally appreciate it.

Kogiopsis says

I have wanted to be a marine biologist since I was three; to study communication among whales since the fourth grade. In elementary school I could teach a college student a thing or two about orcas - and no, I'm not exaggerating. I've heard Kathleen Dudzinski speak, as well as Sylvia Earle. I devour books about the ocean with a voracity I rarely turn on nonfiction.

It should be impossible for a book about whale music to bore me, let alone piss me off.

Well, congratulations are due to David Rothenberg, because he's managed it.

The first few chapters of this book were about how human musicians have incorporated whale music or the idea of whales into their creations. It was dull, because I'm more into science than music, but I dealt with it because this book promised to be about "Whale Music in a Sea of Sound", and surely this was just a really long hook.

I was wrong.

This book isn't really about the whales. It's about Rothenberg strutting his stuff. It's here to make sure we know what a VISIONARY he is and how CREATIVE he is and how he THINKS OUTSIDE THE BOX and how MUSIC IS AN INTERSPECIES LANGUAGE and all sorts of stuff. Basically, it's like reading a pissing contest, except the guy has no opponent.

No, wait. I take that back. He does have an opponent: science.

I'm going to pause for a moment while you process the idea of a nonfiction book, shelved in the science section, written by someone who seems to see science as an adversary.

Feeling muddled yet?

Good, because so am I.

Rothenberg's casually dismissive attitude towards science and its methods drove me up the fucking wall. I've hated characters before, but this time my dislike of the book was one hundred percent because of the author. If he hadn't been such an asshole, I might have just given it three stars and moved on. As it was, almost once every chapter he was taking jabs at either the careful methods of science, the skeptical attitudes of the researchers he talked to about his project, or of all fucking things, THE MARINE MAMMAL PROTECTION ACT.

I wish I was kidding. But here, have a quote from page 102: "At least we'd be far enough from anyone who might accuse us of breaking any laws if we tried to use music to communicate with the white whales. In America and Canada, the animals are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and anything one wants to do with them is carefully reviewed by a panel of scientists before it is approved. The Inuit are allowed to hunt them in their territories of Nunavut and Nunavik in Canada, but even they are not allowed to play tunes to them. Music-making is no longer considered research; with whales, science trumps art."

This man doesn't try to understand the regulations that are supposed to govern him. In fact, he flaunts breaking the law - the last chapter contains descriptions of two illegal 'rogue' whale-watching expeditions in Hawaii. If there had been at any point a real rationale behind his frustration with the regulations - if he'd ever sat down and explained to the reader the reasons the law was put in place and why it's bullshit, or if he'd ever tried to work within its confines and been stymied, I might be more sympathetic. As it was, he just whined about it and then did whatever the hell he wanted anyway.

And then there's the fact that there was little talk of his results. Most of each chapter, really, was about talking to people who'd done research on whale song - there was very little description, relatively speaking, of Rothenberg's attempts to play music with whales. It's like writing a lab report with a five page introduction and 250 word conclusion - you just don't.

I'm not going to hold the fact that I learned almost nothing new against him. What I am going to blame him

for is **getting things wrong**. And of course, this happened in the chapter about my favorite species of whale: *Orcinus orca*.

Maybe it seems like a little thing, but when a whale's common name is 'killer' someone writing a book should actually try not to misrepresent them that way. They get their fair share of bad press, believe you me. So saying that they're called killer whales because "they will attack and eat almost anything that lives in the sea" is OUT OF LINE. I don't give a flying fuck that he backtracked later and explained a tiny bit about the difference between residents, transients, and offshores. That sentence does not belong in a book about whales and there is no compromise.

Now, I'll admit that I'm far from being this book's target audience. This is probably much more for musicians, or for those whose interest in whales started in the sixties and seventies when the science of marine biology was in its cradle. As someone who grew up not with an idea about a mystical, magical connection but with dreams of being a scientist, it grated. Also, Rothenberg insisted on peppering the book with printed diagrams of whale song and his own clarinet music, which I'm sure would be all well and good if I could understand them. However, despite their prevalence, he never bothered to explain how they are to be read. Most charts are missing a Y-axis. That's just pure bad form, right there.

If you're really interested in whale communication, I highly recommend Alexandra Morton's *Listening to Whales: What the Orcas Have Taught Us*. Rachel Smolker's *To Touch a Wild Dolphin: A Journey of Discovery with the Sea's Most Intelligent Creatures* is also well worth your time. For an examination of some interesting whale/human interactions over time, *Eye of the Whale: Epic Passage from Baja to Siberia* by Dick Russell is well worth your time. This one is definitely not.

Nick says

I did not find this book about whale songs and sounds as gripping as Rothenberg's but the CD of his jams with whales is just as amazing as the CD of his jams with birds. The book includes a lot more personal story and a lot less science, probably because we know much more about birds than we do about whales. What facts Rothenberg relates are fascinating, however, and the music is worth the price of the book.

Tanvi says

Before I say anything, let me confess to being absolutely crazy about whales. Correction: head over heels in love, crazy, crazy enough that I deserve to be put in a lunatic asylum. So, let me continue this review with that bias in mind. Well, this book opened up a whole new dimension of whales for me. Especially good is the CD at the back which really adds depth to the story and lets you actually hear what the heck he's talking about. A trifle scientific and confusing in some parts- OK, a lot- especially at the diagrams of sound. I usually just skipped over these bits. But, overall, this book offers a deep look into the world of whale sound: I especially liked the way he focused on a whale each chapter, but while staying on that whale, going on to explain the history and science and people behind this strange and complex and beautiful phenomena. It is good for someone who doesn't know anything on the subject, going into enough depth while still leaving it interesting. I only wish I was there with him, watching the whales. Did I mention: I love whales?

Katie says

Spent a lot of time looking music of whales for me always enjoyable.
