

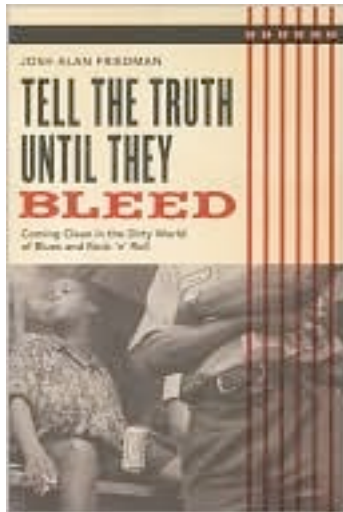
# Best Music Books of 2008

## (by Diann Blakely)





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By [Diann Blakely](#) 

*Note to potential readers: I apologize for the fact that this column, scheduled for December, appears what seems to me very late; on the other hand, after being hospitalized four times, including a stint that encompassed both Christmas and New Year's and a furlough that resulted in two broken ribs, I feel it's a miracle that it's appearing at all. Enjoy!--I hope.*








Backbeat Books delivered a slew of interesting new titles this year. [Tell the Truth Until They Bleed](#) 🌿, Josh Alan Friedman's follow-up to [When Sex Was Dirty](#) 🌿, begins with the unlikely alliance of members of the Jewish and African-American populations who began the business of what we call r & b, a term coined by the late and much-lamented [Jerry Wexler](#) 🌿, who used it to replace what he felt--rightly--was the offensive sobriquet of "race records." Plentiful anecdotes from Wexler color, so to speak, the first part of Friedman's book and make a fitting, if not entirely even, memorial. Chapters on equally mythical figures like Doc Pomus follow. Friedman's style entertains as well as instructs and makes for a collection of compulsively (for me) readable essays on the dirty

business of music. [\*\*I Want to Take You Higher\*\*](#) : The Life and Times of [\*\*Sly and the Family Stone\*\*](#) , by Jeff Kaliss, tells the story--with the first interview from the reclusive bandmeister himself in twenty years--of one of the most brilliant and influential musicians of the last half-century. The cheering, anthemic segue from the band's early work, which got everybody (I mean the last part of that word literally) shaking his or her booty to songs that praised integrity, human potential, and tolerance, were something of a miracle, while *There's a Riot Goin' On* was surely the moodiest and righteously disturbing follow-ups in history. (For more details, buy the fifth and newest edition of Greil Marcus's [\*\*Mystery Train\*\*](#) , with its--of course--informative, erudite, wry, and at times lusciously scathing expanded notes and discographies, even if an earlier copy of the book is already on your bookshelf. There'd be more about Marcus, but, alas, he generously includes both my husband and me in these pages, so to go on at greater length seems tacky.) The only minor disappointment among these Backbeat titles comes as [\*\*The Jazz Singers\*\*](#) , by the esteemed Scott Yanow. Though nonetheless encyclopedic and a useful source, it lists Mel Tormé's son (who? the sometime cab driver?) but

fails to take note of Percy Mayfield, to give an example of a single strange omission.



Hard-core jazz fans should also try spreading their mental and musical wings and reading Ted Gioia's [\*\*Delta Blues: The Life and Time of the Mississippi Masters Who\*\*](#)

[\*\*Revolutionized American Music\*\*](#) , published by Norton. Gioia, long- and well-known as a jazz critic, has seemingly made use--if at times ploddingly--not only of his original musical background, but also of every iota of new material that has come to light in his chapters on the early blues associated with Dockery Plantation and Parchman Prison, as well as those on Son House, Skip James, [\*\*Robert Johnson\*\*](#) , [\*\*Muddy Waters\*\*](#) , John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, [\*\*B. B. King\*\*](#) , and the blues revival. Quirkier, but much more enlivening, is Marybeth


Hamilton's [\*\*In Search of the Blues\*\*](#) , issued by Basic Books, about the collectors, field recorders, and folklorists who gave us the music as we know it today. Hamilton's work belongs to a genre I didn't think I liked--"meta-blues" writing--and yet Hamilton does more than present us with some unforgettable characters, whom Sean Wilentz compares to Schlieman at Troy and Marcus to Columbus at San Salvador. Through these

characters, including, of course, John Lomax, as well as those heretofore lesser-known, she tells us why we have the music as we know it today.

While not volumes about the blues, or even music, strictly speaking, two collections of photographs appeared this year that emanate the keening, gut-bucket, sometimes menacing, and often humorous sounds we associate with them from every page. Democratic Camera, the catalog for the Whitney's retrospective exhibit of [William](#)

[Eggleston](#) 's work is stunning, and includes essays by [Stanley Booth](#) , Donna DaSalvo, and Tina Kulkielski. I became acquainted with Jane Rule Burdine's

photographs in another museum catalog, this one from the Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis and called Visualizing the Blues. Represented by a masterful, mysterious work that depicts a hanging dress caught in mid-waft by a rural breeze, this photograph unfortunately doesn't appear in Burdine's first published collection,


[Delta Deep Down](#) , published by the University Press of Mississippi. Instead, children hugging each other (in one picture, with a furious, about-to-attack cat between them), long shots of the humid flat landscape...buy the book, put on some Son House or Robert Johnson, and I'll

bet you a dollar to a Delta Donut (located at Clarksdale's intersection of 49 and 61, one of the many places the latter was said to have made his pact with the devil) that you'll hear echoes and chords that previously escaped your notice. As well as see things in the photographs you missed upon first viewing.

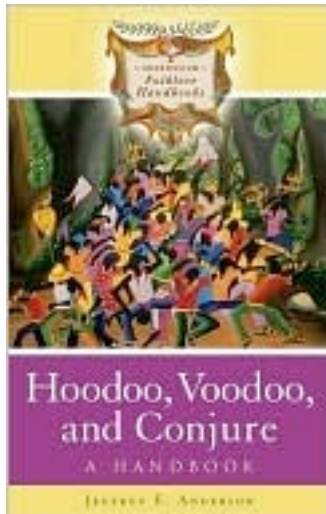


Da Capo, of course, each year publishes a volume of the year's best music criticism, and even though the press made the mistake a few years ago giving the editorship to J T Leroy, who turned out not to be a post-teenage truckstop hustler who appeared at readings wearing sunglasses and a blond wig, but a forty-something woman living in San Francisco, the collection is always worthwhile, though the variety and density of the pieces make the book a necessarily pick-it-up-and-put-it-down

read. This year's editor, the inestimably more solid and reputable Nelson George, states in the introduction, "God in the Vinyl," that through the aforementioned *Mystery Train*, along with Leroi Jones's Blues People, he "found two very different, very brilliant kindred spirits, [not to mention his] calling." His anthology's selection of essays contains several of particular interest to SwampLand.com readers, but it omits, except by name as honorable mentions, two of the most interesting such pieces I read this year. Bill Friskics-Warren's "Adding Notes to a Folklorist's Tunes," reviews "Recording Black Culture," a recently released CD that presents the acetates originally made by John Work III, the most prominent of the three African-American folklorists who, though heretofore invisible, were relied upon by the previously cited Lomax when he made "some of his landmark field recordings in the 1940s." Work was no mere "acolyte," as Friskics-Warren puts it, of Lomax, who "tended to treat black vernacular music as an artifact in need of preservation"; his fellow folklorist "sought to document it as it was unfolding." Thus "instead of spirituals hearkening back to the 19th century, we hear febrile gospel shouting set to the cadences of what would soon become rhythm and blues and rock'n'roll." (Look up the article in the New York


Times, its original site of publication, and you'll be rewarded with three wonderful MP3s, one by the Fairfield Four.) "Deliciously febrile," when coupled with "really damn smart," are good adjectives to describe the writing of Kandia Crazy Horse. In 2004 Crazy Horse published with Palgrave Macmillan the way too-little-known [\*\*Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock'N'Roll\*\*](#) , a study that begins with the Stones' gig with Ike and Tina Turner at the Royal Albert Hall in 1966 and veers, over the course of its learned but clever pages, from Jimi Hendrix to Prince to punkers Bad Brains, not to mention including interviews with Little Richard and Lenny Kravitz. Crazy Horse's honorable mention Da Capo essay, "Digital Venuses," is a fascinating, provocative criticism of the "mummery" of singers such as Amy Winehouse and Joss Stone. What a relief to read a critic who is far more interested in what she sees as cultural rip-offs rather than the former's eyeliner, hairdo, or addiction problems.















To continue with Da Capo's offerings for 2008, you have to be pretty damn cool to toss your collected lyrics, otherwise known as [Pass Thru Fire](#),  into the fray with a December pub date. At a time when traditional newspapers and even alt-weeklies, which assign titles weeks if not months in advance, assuming they cover them at all, they tend, after all, make do with end-of-the-year lists much briefer than this one, which strives for inclusiveness, and who's to say what the reviewer's taste will be? It helps if you're Lou Reed, whose early combination of shock treatments, study with poet Delmore Schwartz, and Brill Building expertise resulted in some of pop/proto-punk's greatest works stretching over three decades. Think back, just for a moment, to the deftly terrifying lyrics of "Walk on the Wild Side" and the laidback melody, punctuated with horns. Or "Femme


Fatale,” or “Sweet Jane,” or any other of Reed’s signature work with the Velvet Underground. Perhaps Reed says it best himself: on a Turner Network interview back in the day when such encounters were more than promo for a forthcoming movie or album, he was asked, if he couldn’t be Lou Reed, who he’d rather be. “Well, if I couldn’t be Lou Reed,” he answered with his trademark world-weariness, “which, let’s face it, is pretty cool, I guess I’d rather be Dirty Harry.” I felt lucky when Pass Thru Fire arrived at my door. It made my day.

The university presses of Georgia, Louisiana, the already mentioned Mississippi, and, more recently, Tennessee remain some of this country’s best for books about music, and I’m going to give myself a bit of temporal leeway in discussing them. (Interjection: as a native of Alabama, when I was growing up, we always used to say “thank God for Mississippi” when it came to national statistics regarding education, general literacy, the economy, and so on; but when is the University of Alabama Press going to decide to keep pace with those of its next door neighbors, not to mention Louisiana, my state’s last real knockout being [Get a Shot of Rhythm and Blues: The Arthur Alexander Story](#)  by Richard Younger, published

way back in 2000?) Issued two years ago in paperback, both [\*\*Dixie Lullaby: A Story of Music, Race, and New Beginnings in a New South\*\*](#)  by [\*\*Mark Kemp\*\*](#) , and [\*\*Real Punks Don't Wear Black: Music Writing\*\*](#)  by Frank Kogan, and also the 2005 [\*\*Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues\*\*](#)  edited by Fred J. Hay, demand a place on the shelves of any Swampland.com reader. And for something truly rich and strange, try this year's [\*\*Winners Have Yet To Be Announced: A Song for Donny Hathaway\*\*](#) , a series of prose poems by Ed Pavlic. [\*\*The Great Olympia Band\*\*](#)  is among the highlights of LSU's list this year. Late author Mick Burns, a jazz musician himself, dates the origins of the African-American brass bands to the 1870s and asserts that they "still provide a crucible for the seemingly inexhaustible supply of creative fire that is New Orleans music." One of the great strengths of Burns's book lies in its interwoven personal interviews in the section called "Band Call," which focuses on the last thirty years of the brass band tradition in NOLA and culminates in the astronomical popularity of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band in the '80s, which sparked an interest that continues today. How poignant that the book focuses on this particular New Orleans tradition as it was given birth in garages

(most of them no longer existing) and led forward by charismatic local heroes in the years before Katrina, leaving the reader to wonder if the brass band is one more New Orleans institution that will ever be reborn. Burns died, however, in Spilsby, England, the same year this work was published, making me hope that someone else will pick up the project and add an afterword that will bring this 2007 title--which, like the others mentioned, seems to demand a place on this list even if not published during the last calendar year--fully up to date. Turning again to the University Press of Mississippi, one of its 2008 shining prides is [\*\*78 Blues: Folksongs and Phonographs in the American South\*\*](#) , by John Minton. The author tells the story of how “hillbilly” and “race” records released between the 1920s and World War II brought about the dissemination of work by artists such as Jimmie Rodgers, Robert Johnson, Charlie Poole, and Blind Lemon Jefferson and the resultant revolution that began within the American recording industry and its public. (For the second chapter in this story, read *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that Shaped a Generation*, by Marc Fisher, which was serialized in *The New Yorker* and published by Random House.) Shining most brightly is a work by the



inestimable, invaluable blues pioneer Samuel Charters, who joins Minton on the Mississippi list with [\*\*A Trumpet Around the Corner: The Story of New Orleans Jazz\*\*](#)  . Charters has been studying his subject for almost fifty years; perhaps more important, his name is the most frequently mentioned when today's most important music writers--Peter Guralnick, to name just one--are asked about the first blues writer they ever encountered. Author of [\*\*The Roots of the Blues\*\*](#)  and many other titles on the subject, Charters is truly an éminence grise, having been inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1994. In *A Trumpet Around the Corner*, he takes on a century of music and its African-American, white, and Creole influences, as well as those of the Italian immigrants--a maffaletta, anyone?--who gave their own flavor to the emerging genre. Another LSU title and one of 2005's (and 2007's, in paper) most fascinating music studies, [\*\*Conjure in African-American Society\*\*](#)  , by Jeffrey E. Anderson, which examines the multi-million dollar business of voodoo and the way music, while perhaps not taking center stage, exercises its influence through inarguable and mysterious means; the book regrettably received absurdly little attention and thus has rights to discussion with the other titles here. This year's follow-up by

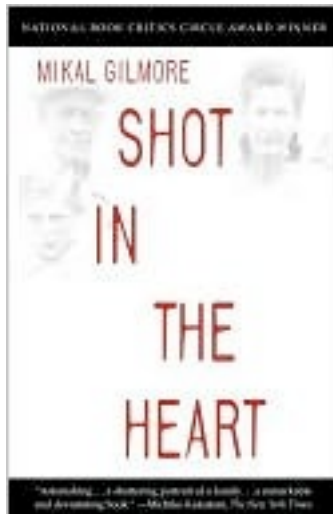
Anderson, [\*\*Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure\*\*](#) , from Greenwood Press, is indispensable reading for those interested in the topic, especially since the trio plays a central part in recent works by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Ishmael Reed. It feels similarly fitting to mention a University of Tennessee back title,

[\*\*Journeyman's Road: Modern Blues Lives from\*\*](#)

[\*\*Faulkner's Mississippi to Post-9/11 New York\*\*](#)  by



Adam Gussow, published in 2007 and a delightful compendium of personal memoir, travelogue, advice columns, and heartfelt scholarship. Gussow is also the author of [\*\*Mister Satan's Apprentice: A Blues Memoir\*\*](#)

. Like *Conjure* in African-American Society, [\*\*Highway 61: Heart of the Delta\*\*](#)  by Randall Norris and French photographer Jean-Phillipe Cyprés may look at the subject of the blues in sidelong fashion, but not only is the foreword by Morgan Freeman, which explains his return to Mississippi and foundation of the Ground Zero Blues Club worth the price of the entire book, the occasional essays collected in this volume, by locals from school superintendants to painters, shed light on the land from which the blues continues--anybody heard T-Model Ford lately?--to come.




Often, “the year’s best books” in any category are meant to make for easy Christmas shopping, but while it’s too late for that, Richard Carlin’s [Worlds of Sound: The Story of Smithsonian Folkways](#) 🌿, the motherwell of American blues, folk, and jazz recordings, founded by Moses Asch, makes for the perfect (post)Valentine’s Day gift--for yourself. A CD including various Folkways Records tracks accompanies the dazzling photos--some color, some black-and-white--and tells the story of how Asch and his assemblage of producers travelled the world in search of music from African and Asian islands, animal sounds, the noises of cities and rural areas (yes, the latter make them too). Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie were the triumvirate upon which Folkways rested, but even though Asch’s coffers were thinly lined, he provided the opportunity for new talent to record. The Smithsonian

Museum purchased Asch's catalog in 1987, hence the volume's title.




If I had a "ten-best" list of memoirs, near the top would surely be Mikal Gilmore's [Shot in the Heart](#) , his searing account of growing up as Gary Gilmore's brother. The two siblings lived parallel existences in the "blood-atonement" culture of the Mormon west, raised by two violent and abusive parents who seemed to hate not only each other, but at times, their own children. Gary Gilmore went on to gain notoriety as the first man to be executed after the reinstatement of the death penalty in this country; his brother led a life that saw him chasing darkness through music and then writing about it, most prominently for Rolling Stone. His first collection, the 1998 [Night Beat](#) , though still less well known than the earlier memoir, which won the National Book Award, was a more-than-memorable group of essays about the noir side of rock'n'roll, and his new work, *Stories Done: Writings on the 1960s and its Discontents* (much of which appeared in the magazine) dances in the shadows that lined the rainbow-hued 1960s. No, we don't necessarily need another book about that much-storied decade, but Gilmore's take is new, finding "hard limits and bad faith" in



the soi-disant Summer of Love, especially at its epicenter, a Haight-Ashbury which he saw full of tourists and stoned-out runaways, a danger zone where confrontations with police were merely a foreboding of worse things to come, from Tet to Altamont to the 1970 death of Jimi Hendrix, which is my way of interpolating the publication of an updated edition of David Henderson's biography, ['Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky](#) , which Marcus, then of Rolling Stone, called "[t]he strongest and most ambitious biography yet written about any rock and roll performer."



Hendrix's, of course, was one of many deaths of the era and the years following. "He blew his mind out in a car" and the single chord underscoring it are the end of the

decade's real motto, Gilmore writes in a chapter about the Beatles; another discusses, in depth, George Harrison's depression. Leonard Cohen and Phil Ochs, who committed suicide in 1976, were likewise afflicted. If melancholy is one theme that threads its ways through Gilmore's book, what Michiko Kakutani in her New York Times Review calls "the confluence between an artist's private emotions and larger, public events; the ways in which certain musicians or writers, making art out of their own fears or longings, can come to articulate a generation's experiences — this is a leitmotif that runs through Gilmore's profiles in this volume." Further ones include Bob Marley, Allen Ginsberg, [the Grateful Dead](#) , [Hunter Thompson](#) , [Bob Dylan](#)  and even Led Zeppelin. But the gloom emanating from some of the company Gilmore keeps in this collection of essays, plus the fact that most were written during the reign of George III, makes me wonder if Stories Done would be a different book had it been written in a different time. After this year, would he agree with Sam Cooke that "a change is gonna come," or feel that he had been right all along as robber barons continue to be bailed out by the federal government?

