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# The Rose & The Briar: Death, Love And Liberty In The American Ballad



## **Synopsis**

A devastatingly original work that plunges into the emotional heart of the American psyche. Praised by Robbie Robertson of The Band as "a classic & a ticket to ride," The Rose & the Briar assembles an astonishing group of writers and artists: Paul Muldoon, Stanley Crouch, R. Crumb, Jon Langford of the Mekons, Sharyn McCrumb, Luc Sante, Joyce Carol Oates, Dave Marsh, and more than a dozen other novelists, essayists, performers, and critics; to explore the ineffable power of the American ballad. From "Barbara Allen" through "The Wreck of the Old 97" to contemporary ballads by Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, The Rose & the Briar is, as Geoffrey O'Brien hailed in the Los Angeles Times Book Review, "a book full of internal echoes and provocative coincidences," featuring "historical investigation, shamanistic trance-journey, memoir, novella and cartoon," where "names and costumes change, soldiers become cowboys, demon lovers become backwoods murderer; the voices are unmistakably distinct but they share a common ground." 25 illustrations

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Arguing that the American ballad is "a major form" "musically, perhaps, the major form" "through which Americans told each other about themselves and the country they inhabited," Wilentz, a Princeton history professor, and Marcus (Lipstick Traces) offer this impressive, innovative tribute to it. The contributors "critics (Stanley Crouch), novelists (Joyce Carol Oates), poets (Paul Muldoon), songwriters (Anna Domino) and other writers, performers and artists" "were asked to "help create some new works of art" about a ballad of their choosing. Sarah Vowell traces the evolution of the

ballad "John Brown's Body" into the hit song of 1862, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." John Rockwell meditates on the gentility of Burl Ives's "The Foggy, Foggy Dew" ("this performance helped define vocal beauty, shaping my taste forever"). R. Crumb contributes a hilarious cartoon version of "When You Go A Courtin'" that succinctly exposes the ballad's dark humor. And Eric Weisbard's wide-ranging "Love, Lore, Celebrity and Dead Babies: 'Down from Dover' by Dolly Parton" might be the best essay yet on the work done by this misunderstood country-pop diva. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

\*Starred Review\* Defining ballad loosely as a song with narrative content or reference, coeditors Wilentz and Marcus, a historian and a rock critic, respectively, asked 22 nonacademic writers to each pick an American ballad and expatiate on it. Their responses are wonderfully varied, from John Rockwell on the performance style of Burl Ives' recording of "The Foggy, Foggy Dew" to poet Paul Muldoon's brand-new variant, "Blackwatertown," of "The Unfortunate Rake" and its cognate, "The Streets of Laredo

I could hardly wait to read this book when I learned about it since so little has been written about the long history of loving these songs. While the authors do a good job of talking about how they feel about the songs, they don't delve very deep. Most disappointing, though, is the production quality. Jon Langford's and R. Crumb's visual interpretations of their chosen ballads look as if they are very interesting but the reproductions of their drawings are so blurry that they are nearly indecipherable.

There are some really amazing essays here, notably, Greil Marcus's envoi. Dave Marsh on "Barbara Allen" lifts a lot of ancient stuff out of the shadows and sets it in a clean, well lighted place. Sarah Vowell on "John Brown's Body" tells us a lot more about the ballad than we might have imagined. Cecil Brown on "Frankie and Albert" is a delight. Frankie's life is worthy of several ballads. R. Crumb's graphics make this a classic. His letter to the editor slaps a few of the other essayists out of the fetid air like horse flies. The graphics are fine, so I don't know what a previous reviewer was complaining about. Maybe he got a bad a copy. There are some real clunkers here, however. Wendy Lesser's piece is lost at sea. This is such a disappointment when there is so much to say about Dylan, and she is such a fine writer, and Greil Marcus has written such great stuff on Dylan. Stanley Crouch's essay is fine, but it has nothing to do with ballads. David Thomas is a high-falootin' intellectualizer. "An imperative that derives from a gestalt of geography, sound, and culture fixes and

vitalizes and drives certain musics." Wouldn't you love to see this guy have a conversation with Bob Dylan? Would he know a ballad if he stepped on one barefoot?

Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus have been listening to some great old songs, and some new ones too - songs about doomed lovers, highway shooters, and a nation lost and found. The essays they have put together are stunning -- my favorites are Dave Marsh on "Barbara Allen," which people have been singing for 500 years; Wendy Lesser on dancing to Dylan's "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" with her baby boy in her arms; and Sean Wilentz on the curse behind "One more round, Delia's gone." Greil's last word on the "embarrassment" of "folk music" is also terrific. And the companion CD is a must.

This book, and the accompanying CD, have been needed for a long time. But I was disappointed by the fact that not all of the essays accompanying songs are about the songs as much as the interpretations of the individual writers about what the songs mean to them. Frankly, I wasn't interested in that, just as I'm not interested in how these songs remind people of how much they hate George W. Bush or the political right. The irony is that these songs are, in effect, red state songs, if you want to look it from a completely superficial standpoint. But these songs speak to everybody, and always have. Tying political points to them drags down the appreciation one feels. I especially enjoyed it when the essays went into the particular events behind the songs, or in the case of "El Paso," how the song was written and recorded. Perhaps what I wanted was another version of "Stagolee Shot Billy," a wonderful study of the Stagger Lee mythos. I would recommend this book to anyone, even with those reservations.

This is a wonderful book. The explorations of various folk songs (and what comprises a "folk" song) range from intriguing academic insights to fictional interpretations of the histories and even biographies of various songs: wonderful and inventive and satisfying. It was given to me by a friend and I am buying it for at least three more. Incredible

In Sharyn McCrumb's novel, IF EVER I RETURN PRETTY PEGGIE-O, I first learned of the ballad, 'The Knoxville Girl.' Here in her chapter about American Ballads, she's called 'Dear Little Girl.' She has that ballad mixed up with others making for confusion on all fronts. If I didn't know the song and its consequences, I would not have recognized "Nellie" as the Dear Little Girl in 'Pretty Peggie-O' -- "is with her beau, Jack, who turns into "Willie" who throttles the life out of her along the banks of

some river (the French Broad). As with local "history" of a certain theater which left out the decade which meant the most to me, now her vagueness and omission of her own as she twists this ballad after calling the chapter 'Pretty Peggy-O', what a let down. You can hear this song in Betty Smith's 1977 'For My Friends of Song.' I have heard that the Louvin Brothers had a good version sometime and Elvis Costello sang it in the same aforementioned theater as 'The Knoxville Girl.' Barbara Allen was the poor Scots-Irish theme of the Appalachians as parlayed by Dolly Parton. She is not a ballad singer, but hillbilly music of her own making.'John Brown's Body' was used as a marching song for the 12th regiment in 1861. That John Brown had drowned while crossing the Shenandoah River on the way to battle. On March 1, 1862, it was sung at the spot where John Brown, the abolitionist, was hanged by the Union. Up 'til now, I thought it had been written about him.I have not heard of most of the featured 'ballads' even though I'd always said I preferred ballads to classical music. This book features many folk singers, but my ballads were by Eddie Fisher. A big difference!The chapter by David Thomas combined 'The Wreck of Old 97' about a train wreck in the early 1900s and 'Dead Man's Curve' by Jan and Dean in 1964 about a car crash. Randy Newman who wrote 'Short People' also had ballads recorded by Dusty Springfield and his own 'Sail Away' which Enya croons.This book gives intermittent history of America and the editors included a plethora of works published on various subjects. The best thing was the two-page cartoon by R. Crumb, but the black and white pictures and copies of old sheet music at the beginning of the 22 sections are almost as good.I don't think they missed anything from a put down of Abraham Lincoln's 2nd Inaugural Address six weeks before his murder by John Wilkes Booth to Stephen Foster's 'possible' suicide at the age of forty, to Richard Speck's rampage in Chicago. A smorgasbord of strange incidents, not all musical. I grew up hearing my dad play his guitar and harmonica and sing the old folk songs, like 'Beautiful Beautiful Brown Eyes' and I'd always say, "but I love blue eyes." Still do.

I bought this for the Handsome Family's Rennie Sparks chapter, and was not disappointed. I can read and re-read this tome and be entertained each and every time. Check it out.

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