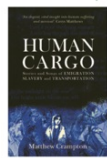


Matthew Crampton
Human Cargo: Stories and Songs of Emigration, Slavery and Transportation

Muddler Books (164 pages)

★★★★★

A history of migration, via the medium of folk song



At a time when flimsy boats overloaded with frightened refugees are washing up on Mediterranean beaches on a daily basis, Matthew Crampton's book is a timely history of the tide of 'human cargo' on the high seas. From slavery and convict transportation to victims of the Highland Clearances and the press gang, as well as those simply seeking a new life across the ocean free from religious or political persecution, he traces the tragedy-strewn saga of migration over the centuries through first-hand personal accounts, sharp analysis and, crucially, the lyrics of two dozen traditional folk songs on the subject.

It's a book about suffering but also about survival, and the use of folk song gives the narrative a unique vibrancy, constituting 'anonymous but authentic records of those who don't get to write history' and bringing alive their voices and experiences, passed down the generations as a collective memory until they were eventually written down by 20th-century song collectors. The songs range from the well-known to the relatively obscure but, from the slave's call-to-freedom in 'No More Auction Block for Me',

to the lament for a transported felon that is 'All Around My Hat', each tells us something that perhaps formal history cannot. As Crampton admits, such songs 'aren't facts or quantifiable'; but they contain a deeper truth in their ability to dramatise the human experience, which is why they have continued to be sung long after the events being described.

Crampton adds a few contemporary testimonies as examples of 21st-century human cargo, but does not labour the historical parallels, which speak for themselves. Crampton is also an accomplished folk singer and live performer; if you get a chance to see his story-and-song 'Human Cargo' show, which raises money for the Refugee Council, do not miss it.

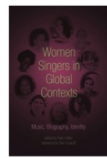
NIGEL WILLIAMSON

Ruth Hellier (ed)
Women Singers in Global Contexts: Music, Biography, Identity

University of Illinois Press (264 pages)

★★★★★

Ten women of the world, united through song



Comprising ten profiles of women for whom singing is the central element in life, this scholarly tome opens with the sort of ponderous introduction beloved of academia – do we really need to be told that singing 'is the action of producing musical sound through the expelling of air causing vibrations in the body?' – albeit one

laced with enough interesting facts and ideas to keep pages turning. Until, like a Lucozade stand at the end of a marathon, we get to the first of the biographical profiles: Akiko Fujii, a hereditary *jiuta* singer of Japan who overcame a harsh upbringing and loveless marriage to cultivate independence through her ancient, male-dominated vocal tradition.

Whether it's Turkish rapper Ayben, with her outspoken views and woman-centric rhymes, or Iranian singer Sima Shokrani, juggling multiple identities in private and public singing contexts, all of the women detailed here feel an overwhelming need to sing. Singing is what grounds them, gives them life and light, from Toronto-based Marysia Mağa, a Polish mother of 12 who sings to connect to landscape, ancestors and home, to Mexican chanteuse Ixya Herrera, an activist bent on overcoming stereotypes. Singing variously connects place, class, ethnicity and self, and enriches a sense of community.

Neither is the spiritual realm neglected. One of the book's most gripping profiles is that of the late Amelia Pedrosa, a respected yet controversial Cuban *santera* (priestess) and the first Cuban woman, states writer Amanda Villepastour, 'to cross a traditional gender line and perform publicly with her own all-women group on the *bata drums*.' A celebrated figure among Cubaphiles in the UK and US, and a proud lesbian, Pedrosa had a tough time at home, where her playing of the *fundamento*, the consecrated *bata*, was deemed taboo. Pedrosa's questioning and defiance of such male hegemony is nothing short of inspirational. Musical drive and passion is genderless, Villepastour reminds us – even if Pedrosa's playing inevitably became a political statement.

The personal accounts of the authors, all ethnomusicologists, are key to the telling. Katelyn Barney tells us of Lexine Solomon, an indigenous Torres Strait Islander, in a chapter gleaned from a strong seven-year-friendship. Nicoletta Demetriou, herself a Cypriot folk and classical singer, tells the story of Cyprus villager Kyriakou Pelagia, whose celebrated career began in her 50s. Cape Town-born Carol Muller shines a welcome light on jazz musician Sathima Bea Benjamin, who grew up in South Africa in the 1940s, spent time as a migrant in Europe and remains a pivotal figure in South African jazz.

All ten stories are worth poring over. Insights and inspiration abound. Better, perhaps, to tackle the intro once you've

read the main book. Then, with themes and links confirmed, start all over again.

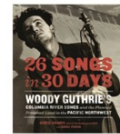
JANE CORNWELL

Greg Vandy with Daniel Person
26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie's Columbia River Songs and the Planned Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest

Sasquatch Books (192 pages)

★★★★★

That odd time Woody Guthrie became a civil servant...



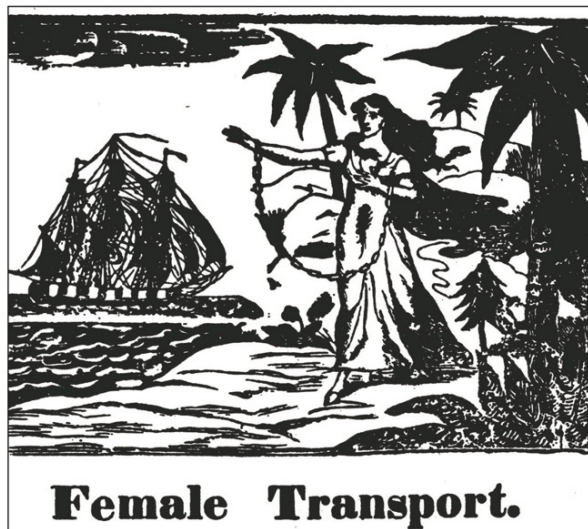
For a nation that prides itself on being the cradle of free-market capitalism, the US has a surprisingly impressive record in state-sponsored experiments in social democracy. In particular, Roosevelt's New Deal programme of public works, designed to drag the US out of the Great Depression, was ambitious, idealistic and even utopian. There was an enlightened attitude in its patronage of the arts, too, as this book illustrates in chronicling the unusual partnership between the federal government and the most radical American folk artist of his generation, Woody Guthrie: when in 1941 he was hired to write a set of songs about the public-financed Grand Coulee Dam and the benefits of cheap hydro-electric power.

Greg Vandy and Daniel Person's scholarly but highly readable book details how Guthrie warmed to the task, writing 26 songs in 30 days, including such classics as 'Pastures of Plenty', 'Hard Travelin'' and 'Roll On Columbia', using a radical popular medium to promote the idea of public utility to the American public.

Was he selling out by writing songs for the government? Vandy argues not, and claims that Guthrie saw the project as 'socialism realised,' for it was the 'common man' who was the beneficiary of the New Deal and public works such as the Grand Coulee Dam construction. That Guthrie had a passion for the project is evident; he couldn't have written lines such as 'in the misty crystal glitter of that wild and windward spray' if he was simply churning out propaganda in return for a pay cheque.

The sub-story of how many of the songs and recordings were 'lost' and rediscovered in the 1980s is also told engagingly in a book that serves as both musical biography and political history.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON



An illustration from Matthew Crampton's book *Human Cargo*