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Review

Samuel Charters. 2009. *A Language of Song: Journeys in the Musical World of the African Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4380-6. £15.99.

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Samuel (sometimes Sam, or Samuel B.) Charters is a remarkable figure who has contributed considerably to the study of jazz, folk, blues and rock over seven decades. Born in 1929, he has written some 20 books including fiction and poetry, made field recordings on three continents and produced albums for commercial release by Country Joe and the Fish, John Fahey and numerous blues artists.

All this was achieved without a tenured post or consistent institutional funding, which makes Charters perhaps the last of the independent scholars of popular music, a category typified above all by Alan Lomax, whose biography by John Szwed was reviewed in *Popular Music History* 5.1.

I introduce this review with a précis of Charters' career because *A Language of Song* gives little clue to its author's illustrious scholarly contribution apart from the occasional aside or passing reference that might be picked up by those familiar with the detail of his achievements. The book is a sort of autobiographical travelogue stretching from the 1950s to the first decade of the present century, with each chapter devoted to a musical journey to a different country or different region of the United States. The thread that links these is indicated by the book's subtitle. The first section describes an encounter with a *griot* in Gambia. This is followed by an account of music in the Canary Islands, before the 'diasporic' regions are reached. The remaining dozen chapters cover the Caribbean (Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad, the Bahamas), Brazil and five areas and genres from within the US. These include brass band music in New Orleans, the sounds of the Georgia Sea Islands, zydeco in Louisiana and gospel singing in Harlem churches. A meandering section on the South (Alabama to Texas) includes an account of a fruitless 1950s search for the pre-WWII singer Blind Willie Johnson, but otherwise the blues is absent. This is an inexplicable omission, considering that Charters's book *The Country Blues* (1959) was a path-breaking study (indeed he is credited with inventing that

genre title) and the tracks he produced by Lightnin' Hopkins, Otis Rush and many others have an important place in the history of blues recording in the second half of the twentieth century.

The typical chapter structure is for the first-person account to be complemented by a relatively brief summary of the history or character of the genre or musical region of which Charters was in search. Though there are occasional footnotes or acknowledgements in the text (notably the self-published interviews with calypsonians by Trinidad author Rudolph Ottley and Michael Tisserand's work on zydeco), the sources used by Charters for these potted histories can only be found by searching the book's general bibliography.

Some chapters in this format work better than others. When Charters has witnessed much of the history he describes, such as that of New Orleans brass bands or zydeco, the narrative has greater force than when the historical précis is no more than could be found in a competent encyclopedia or genre history. A glaring example of the latter occurs in the Jamaica chapter whose account of the island's music and of Bob Marley (drawn from journalistic biographies) would not add much to the stock of knowledge of an undergraduate music student.

In other ways, though, the Jamaica section is one of the most interesting. Elsewhere—notably in the chapters on the Bahamas and Georgia Sea Islands—Charters presents himself as an intrepid ethnomusicologist, treading in the footsteps of Lomax, who finally gets his field recordings. But the trip to Jamaica, undertaken in the 1970s at the behest of his British record company boss, is fraught with failure. Charters stays in a pension in Kingston where his white English fellow guests tease him about his attempts to track down black producers and musicians. Racial tensions plague his fruitless journeys until he achieves some satisfaction by finding Augustus Pablo's record store.

Another untypical chapter is that on zydeco, which includes an account of the various recordings produced by Charters in the 1970s with Rockin' Dopsie, providing the reader with an insight into this important dimension of the author's own history. However, it is frustrating not to be given some discographical information on these tracks.

In sum, *A Language of Song* seems little more than a footnote to Samuel Charters's career. It is to be hoped it won't be his final work. An autobiography or even biography would help to cement his considerable contribution to our understanding and enjoyment of many forms of popular music.