



Mark Pedelty. *A Song to Save the Salish Sea: Musical Performance as Environmental Activism.* Music, Nature, Place Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. Illustrations. 304 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-02268-4.

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A Song to Save the Salish Sea sets its sights on the cross-border stretch of coast connecting British Columbia and Washington State. The Salish Sea region is simultaneously an ecosystem of exceptional marine biodiversity and an area consistently under development for its natural resources. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that it is here—where environmental “activist musicians have been playing their part apace” for decades—on which anthropologist and musician Mark Pedelty has decided to focus his efforts, employing a multisited ethnographic approach and rich analysis (p. 3). Musical engagement with environmental issues is hardly new; Pedelty is well aware of the extensive history of environmental themes in North American popular genres and is particularly attentive to historical models from the twentieth-century folk revival. Yet, in light of encroaching climate crises, he profiles how seven broad-ranging groups and individuals across the region have worked to speak out against environmental and social injustices.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the music of Dana Lyons. Lyons—of the 1996 hit “Cows with Guns” fame—is perhaps one of the Salish Sea region’s best-known and longest-standing environmental artists, and the motivations and inspirations behind his career are Pedelty’s primary focus. Much

attention is given here to the humor that underpins many of Lyons’s performances, a feature Pedelty and many others evidently find compelling in his music. Pedelty’s second case study also concerns a group with international renown: the Raging Grannies, a Victoria-based activist conglomerate whose amateur musical performances and civil disobedience have been emulated by octogenarians the world over. Highlighting the group’s reflexive self-parody and nonhierarchical structure, Pedelty illustrates their intersectional activist ethos: “The Grannies draw attention to the interconnected nature of social and environmental issues, framing both as a matter of justice” (p. 74). Appropriately enough, chapter 3 sees a welcome turn to indigenous rights, as Pedelty considers a 2014 protest organized by Idle No More, a grassroots protest movement headed by First Nations people in Canada. Generally centering indigenous issues and practices, the author outlines the multiplicity of voices that came together at the protest against a proposed oil pipeline, considering the various factors at play in the successful coordination of protesters and paying particular attention to the use of “voice.”

The halfway point of the book also appears to mark a change of scale, with an increased focus on musicians without clear affiliation to larger

movements. Children’s performers Bobs and Lolo take center stage in chapter 4, wherein the author considers the interactive pedagogical tools employed to engage children with the natural world through music; like in the following chapter, place-based musical engagement is foregrounded here. Continuing the theme of school-aged audiences, Pedelty’s next case study is that of Holly Arntzen and Kevin Wright’s Artist Response Team, based in British Columbia, who facilitate mass performances. The author outlines the curriculum-led approach adopted by Arntzen and Wright to increase children’s local environmental knowledge through sustained song learning. Pedelty’s penultimate case study—ostensibly concerning the duo The Irthlingz but placing much heavier emphasis on the work of one-half of that duo, Sharon Abreu—makes a highly convincing case for community arts and mutual knowledge exchange in local contexts. Abreu’s *Climate Monologues* project is positioned by the author as a visceral yet inclusive means of fostering dialogue across multiple sites and demographics. The final chapter is somewhat of a divergence in terms of both approach and subject matter. Pedelty steps back from his previous thick descriptive work to examine young Victoria musician Adrian Chalifour’s version of “This Land Is Your Land” and the accompanying YouTube video, offering a comparative analysis with Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) and bringing our attention to the communicative power of social media.

It should be evident from the diversity of musical backgrounds and target demographics that *A Song to Save the Salish Sea* is a rather gargantuan undertaking, something Pedelty readily admits: “The Salish Sea is a shifting and nearly infinitely variable set of cultural realities that could never be captured in their entirety” (p. 236). Indeed, the book’s eclecticism leaves several potentially fruitful avenues unexplored. The question of indigenous justice and land rights in particular deserves more attention than the single chapter dedicated to the Idle No More protest. A deeper engagement

with voice and indigenous studies on the author’s part in this chapter—I am thinking particularly here of Kyle Powys Whyte’s (2014) work—could have better highlighted the indigenous epistemologies that underscored the anti-pipeline sentiments, moving Pedelty’s analysis beyond surface recognition toward a decolonial framework.[1] Similarly, the author’s brief discussion of how Lyons disrupts and undermines conventionally held notions of what environmentalists look like and who they represent opens up a particularly interesting set of questions about who this music is for; environmentalists, ranchers, and farmers have all variously gotten behind his political messages. While Pedelty touches on the unusually broad reach of Lyons’s music, further consideration of the potential for music to engage those often excluded by environmentalist discourse would be very welcome here. Most of Pedelty’s ethnography centers on issues of poesis, yet I was occasionally left wondering how much of his reception analysis is based on ethnography with audience members and how much is speculative. His short discussion, for instance, of how children might view performers as models for their future selves is interesting and would have further clout were ethnographic data presented to support his thesis.

Yet, aside from these larger issues, Pedelty’s book fulfills its stated aims very well indeed: “I come to this task as neither anthropologist nor ethnomusicologist but rather with a very practical interest in figuring out how to perform more effectively” (p. 140). He gives rare consideration to the success of groups in conveying their environmental messages; while this is impossible to quantify and results in some conjecture on his part, addressing the lived consequences of musical protest sets Pedelty’s book apart. Pedelty’s attentiveness to the practicalities and material limitations of a musical career, particularly one concerned with environmental issues, is also important and refreshing. We see Bobs and Lolo struggle to make financial ends meet solely through performing, while Lyons pines for bandmates he can-

not afford to share the stage with. Very early on, Pedelty tells us that “this book is not so much about people dipping their toes into environmental musicianship as it is written *for* such musicians” (p. 6); I for one got more out of it as a musician than as an ethnomusicologist. With either “cap” on, however, I was less impressed by Pedelty’s occasionally disparaging tone toward certain musicians, or even entire genres, such as pop music (p. 26). He outlines his reasoning for excluding less high-profile musicians, citing them as “very earnest” but “too amateurish,” qualities that can readily be attributed to (and are welcomed by) such groups as the Raging Grannies (p. 201). Overall, the standard of editing is high, save for a few minor errors, such as messy quote-weaving, missed or erroneous apostrophes, and incomplete sentences (particularly noticeable in chapter 7).

Environmental activism has gained increasing global traction in the four years since Pedelty’s book was published and the relevant field of ecomusicology has also seen significant developments, particularly with reference to indigenous environmental knowledge. Pedelty makes the unusual choice to bring in his disciplinary framing of ecomusicology only at the very end of the book. While the resulting discussion of ecomusicology’s remit is thus brief, this structure affords—for me, at least—a chance to ask what musical activism can offer ecomusicology. The next logical step would be to ask what ecomusicology can do for musical activism, a prerogative that has in recent years been addressed by applied ethnomusicologists, including Jeff Todd Titon (2015) and Pedelty himself (2020).[2] In the context of music studies’ historic unwillingness to make political commitments, Pedelty’s case for active engagement and change before disciplinary pigeonholing is welcome indeed. Nowhere is this active engagement more obvious than in the companion website to the author’s research, Ecosong.net. Although—at the time of writing—Ecosong.net appears to showcase Pedelty’s latest collaborations rather than the supplementary material promised in his book, it

offers a valuable example of how applied ecomusicology might operate. Perhaps the most pleasing element of Pedelty’s project is that it is iterative: readers not only can explore material on the website but are also exhorted to contribute their own musical excursions in environmentalism. This open-ended nature chimes well with the author’s assertion that his book is “a segue rather than an end point” (p. 237). And a segue it is indeed: *A Song to Save the Salish Sea* is not a typical ethnographic or ecomusicological text, but Pedelty’s engaging writing style and evident admiration for his informants offers some fortitude in an area that demands so much of us as musicians and as humans.

Notes

[1]. Kyle Powys Whyte, “Indigenous Women, Climate Change Impacts, and Collective Action,” *Hypatia* 29 (2014): 599-616.

[2]. Jeff Todd Titon, “Sustainability, Resilience, and Adaptive Management for Applied Ethnomusicology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*, ed. Svanibor Pettan and Jeff Todd Titon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 157-96; and Mark Pedelty, Rebecca Dirksen, Tara Hatfield, Yan Pang, and Elja Roy, “Field to Media: Applied Ecomusicology in the Anthropocene,” *Popular Music* 39 (2020): 22-42.

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