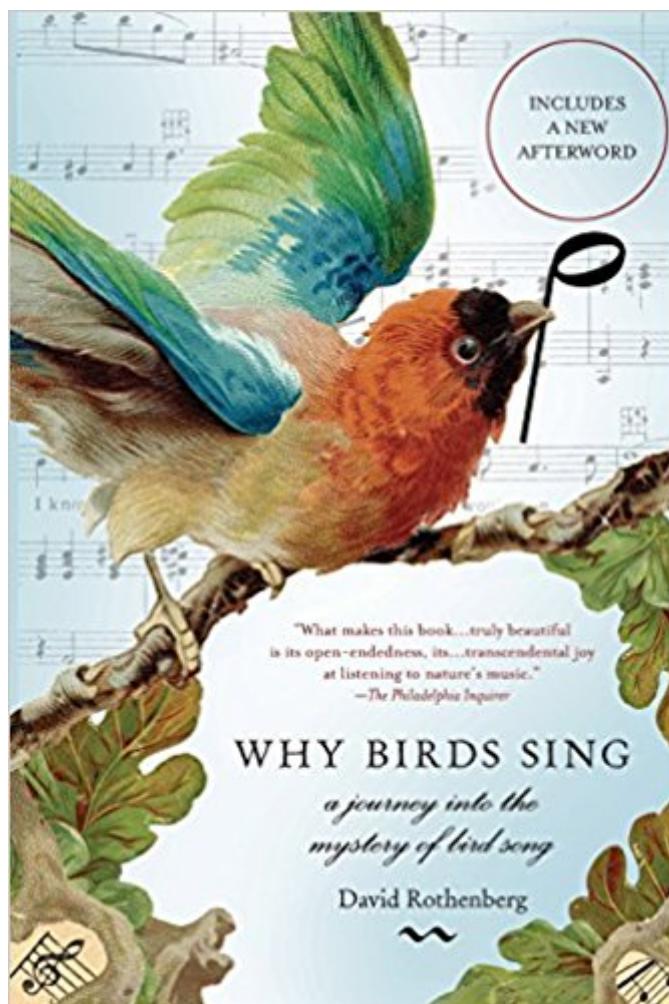


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# Why Birds Sing: A Journey Into The Mystery Of Bird Song



## Synopsis

The astonishing richness of birdsong is both an aesthetic and a scientific mystery. Evolutionists have never been able to completely explain why birdsong is so inventive and why many species devote so many hours to singing. The standard explanations of defending territories and attracting mates don't begin to account for the variety and energy that the commonest birds exhibit. Is it possible that birds sing because they like to? This seemingly naive explanation is starting to look more and more like the truth. *Why Birds Sing* is a lyric exploration of birdsong that blends the latest scientific research with a deep understanding of musical beauty and form. Drawing on conversations with neuroscientists, ecologists, and composers, it is the first book to investigate the elusive question of why birds sing and what their song means to both avian and human ears. Whether playing his clarinet with the whitecrested laughing thrush in Pittsburgh, or jamming in the Australian winter breeding grounds of the Albert's lyrebird, Rothenberg immerses himself in the heart and soul of birdsong. He approaches the subject as a naturalist, philosopher, musician, and investigator. An intimate look at the mostlovely of natural phenomena, *Why Birds Sing* is a beautifully written exploration of a phenomenon that's at once familiar and profoundly alien.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As science explores the frontiers of the measurable, it begins to intrude into the realm of art, and this book occupies that uneasy zone. Rothenberg, a musician and philosopher, became fascinated with the similarities between human music and birds' songs. His investigations into these matters

led him to zoos and forests, where he played his clarinet along with virtuoso lyrebirds and thrushes. His goal: to find out why birds sing by using "the whole toolbox of human talents," rather than just the theories and experiments of reductionist Darwinism. "Just because science demonstrates that a song has a specific territorial or sexual purpose doesn't mean that birds aren't singing because they love to," he writes. Assuming we can know what a bird loves to do is quite a bit of anthropomorphic conjecture, of course. "It may be impossible to escape the human perspective," Rothenberg writes, and then he joyfully acknowledges what he feels to be the truth: birds make music as surely as Charlie "Bird" Parker ever did. Rothenberg delves heartily into the lovely and strange structures of bird songs and finds enough syllables, rhythms and syncopations to fill a jazz encyclopedia. Illus. 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.

The question of why birds sing has kept humans entranced for millennia. Most scientists would answer that birds sing to claim territories and to attract mates. But why is so much of birdsong beautiful? In a unique approach to the study of birdsong, jazz musician and philosopher Rothenberg attacks this question through the medium of music. When a musician friend invited him to come and play music with the birds at the National Aviary in Pittsburgh, Rothenberg's music attracted a white-crested laughing thrush. The bird began to sing along with the author's clarinet and to actually improvise as he improvised. This interaction led to a journey, both intellectual and physical, as Rothenberg investigated birdsong. Mixed throughout the narrative is the author's sheer joy at the musicality of birds' songs, illustrated with musical notations made by both the author and previous researchers. This lovely amalgam of science and music will appeal to both left- and right-brained readers. Nancy BentCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Rothenberg writes with an easy intimacy, but if one takes him at his word, the intimacy that means most to him comes not by means of words but of music, and less by means of music as such than by an improvisatory exchange between, usually, himself on his clarinet, and someone else on whatever instrument the other person is using. Given this driving urge, it seems inevitable that Rothenberg should want to cross the barrier between those most musical of creatures, the birds, and those with the most productive curiosity, the humans. His own curiosity leads him first to the birds and then to the human experts in birdsong. He gives vivid descriptions of these researchers' extraordinary devotion to their work. I especially enjoyed his description of the ability of the

composer Olivier Messiaen to hear, transcribe, and whistle the complex songs of a bird he had never heard before. Although, like a few of the researchers - Donald Kroodsma, for example - Rothenberg believes in the innate pleasure birds take in their song, he checks his intuitive sense of their musicality by carefully summarizing what is scientifically known about their abilities and ways of life. Yet even though he takes to heart the criticism that the romantics "listened to birds and heard only themselves," he recalls that science, too, is fallible, and he plays on the ornithologists' conclusion that not only is each species of birds unique, but so is every individual bird. "Why Birds Sing" ends in the climactic scene in which Rothenberg and a friend go to Australia to hear, see the dance of, and try to enter into a musical dialogue with the lyrebird named George, the only member, he says, of his elusive, musically gifted species who can stomach the sight and sound of human beings. The bird lights to sing just a few meters from Rothenberg's tape recorder. He hears that the lyrebird's song is composed but alien, in a human sens crazy, music. After he hears a full cycle of the lyrebird's music, he joins in, dancing, not to copy the bird's song, but to play music, in and around the song, that is worthy of the bird's acceptance. The bird seems to respond to the clarinet, dances, and disappears. Rothenberg develops this last, climactic chapter, which he calls "Becoming a Bird," with thoughtful eloquence. He feels he has given his gift and made his human offering to an animal of another singing species. But his gift is also to all of us who read him.

Great book, references scientific research as well as aesthetic qualities of many song birds and non-song birds bringing the two realms of reasoning to somewhat of a compromise. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who wants to know why birds sing.

Great book. It was a pleasure to read. The breadth of sources the author consults and clearly understands and appreciates is amazing. He mentions, "Over the last five years I have read far too much." Thank you. :)

I purchased this as a gift after hearing a companion on insects on NPR. The receiver said that he liked it - it was unusual.

I bought what I assumed was a new book as a gift. There was supposed to be a cd enclosed in the back cover envelope and to my dismay, when the gift was opened, there was none. This, of course is no reflection on the other contents of the book.

Worst and weirdest book ever.

Not exactly what I thought it would be, but interesting to read another person's perspective nonetheless.

In this slightly meandering but sincere book, musician and philosopher Rothenberg shows us that there are qualities to birdsong that transcend what science can tell us. Part of that transcendence is their emotional involvement with their songs, and Rothenberg can be counted among earlier authorities--including Len Howard, Charles Hartshorne, and Alexander Skutch--who believe that birds enjoy singing. His enthusiasm is most apparent when the discussion turns to music, and as an amateur musician I also enjoyed perusing the musical scores and sonograms of various feathered songsters.Rothenberg hits the mark with his observation that "bird songs are a genuine challenge to the conceit that humanity is needed to find beauty in the natural world." Another conceit is the disturbing laboratory experiments he describes, in which singing birds have their brains pierced by wire electrodes and are later killed for dissection.Readers get a bonus CD of the author's music with birdsong and other nature sounds.

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