

**Virginia GIGLIO, *Southern Cheyenne Women's Songs*, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994, ISBN 0-8061-2605-1)**

**Anne Lederman**

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[See table of contents](#)

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Virginia GIGLIO, *Southern Cheyenne Women's Songs*, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994, ISBN 0-8061-2605-1)

*Southern Cheyenne Women's Songs*, on first glance, has much to recommend it. In the canon of ethnomusicological collections, studies of women's music are rare. In the canon of collections of Native North American songs, attention to detail in melody and text is rare. There are nice photographs, sections on general culture and history of the Cheyenne, discussions of the different genres of "music of everyday life" and clear transcriptions. There are both literal and free translations of Cheyenne texts done by a native speaker, and a Cheyenne glossary at the back. There are comparisons to the work of previous collectors and scholars. There are descriptive and analytical sections following each song, including some anecdotal and biographical material on the singers. There is an accompanying cassette containing all of the transcribed songs as well as spoken comments from the singers after each song, the latter a wonderfully commendable practice.

There is also much to be learned from this book. For example, we learn that there is a difference between spoken and sung text in Cheyenne. We learn about the various genres of song that women sing "everyday", including lullabies, children's game songs, hand game songs, war songs, songs for specific social occasions, hymns, et cetera. We learn about the Japanese "omnichord" that one woman uses to accompany herself, a kind of electric autoharp with built-in drum rhythms, and that her use of this instrument creates some interesting polyrhythmic and polytonal effects. If we can trust the history sections, which, unfortunately, contain virtually no source references, we learn about the historical role of women in Cheyenne culture. (Surely even a non-academic reader, given the legacy of bad scholarship and historical inaccuracy that plagues most written work on Native culture, might like to know where this material is coming from.)

Unfortunately, however, in Giglio's very attempt to exemplify the ideals of modern ethnomusicological thought, the book underscores what is wrong with the current state of much of western ethnomusicology. Let's begin at the beginning. We are told, for example, in the introduction by David McAllester—himself a model of lifelong involvement in Native culture—that Giglio's work "was not conducted with 'subjects' and 'informants' but with 'singer/consultants'" and that this is "their book" (p. xiii). We are told that one of the women adopted Giglio as a sister and that this book is part of current "humanistic", "reflexive" and "feminist" anthropology in which people whose culture is being investigated are respected as teachers and as equals. All this, I concur, ought to make the book an improvement on much past work on Native music, and, in many respects, it is. But the strong promise here that the emphasis in the book will be

on the human side of making music in Cheyenne culture, and that the book is based on the thinking of Cheyenne women themselves, is not fulfilled in the following pages.

The book is organized around songs and song genres. This is a common approach in a work of this sort and gives a nice overview of the range of the overall repertoire of the women in the study. The problem arises when we realize that there are no separate biographies of the women, nor even a list of the “singer/consultants” with whom Giglio worked. In fact, for a book whose avowed purpose is “to bring to light the contribution of women to the musical culture of the Cheyenne people” (p. 6), there is surprising little information about the singers at all. We only learn about them in passing, in the notes following the songs. We never know their ages (even approximate ages would be useful), nor much about their lives, about the communities in which they reside, about the overall place of women’s musical practice in the culture, or even about any particular singer’s repertoire. It would seem that none of the song genres presented here are exclusive to women (except perhaps lullabies?), which immediately raises questions about how songs are learned in general, about what might motivate different women to acquire different repertoires, and about how they see their place in the musical life of their community, all questions which remain unaddressed. Further, although we eventually learn that women do not play the drum, and that they do not lead the singing at most (all?) public events, nowhere does Giglio give a clear picture of the circumstances in which women *do* sing. Instead, we are left to piece together various scenarios as the book progresses, which include singing for children, for men when they forget a song, and, of course, for visiting ethnomusicologists.

Moreover, while the singers speak on the tape about individual songs, there are remarkably few quotes from them in the book. This leaves much of what Giglio says in the realm of unsupported speculation, such as the following: “songs whose texts or melodies were attributed to family members were freely sung for this book, sometimes with a verbal indication of ‘belongingness’ that did not *seem* to restrict their use by others” (p. 208, emphasis mine), and “the personal techniques she has developed to increase her vocal volume without added strain *might* include the practice of modified vowels to accommodate the sound she desires” (p. 47, emphasis mine). If Giglio really enjoys the close relationship she implies with her singer/consultants, could she not have asked them about these matters? Perhaps she had reasons not to pursue certain lines of inquiry as an “outsider”—a completely understandable situation which could have been clarified. Or perhaps the singers were not nearly so involved or concerned with her work as we are encouraged to believe.

The further lack of information about her time in the community in general and the nature of her “fieldwork” would seem to support this latter conclusion. How long was she there? How did she present her work to them, what questions

did she ask, how did they respond? How were these particular women chosen? This is all fairly basic information in a study such as this, and, I maintain, would be of more interest to the general reader (if that was her concern) than much of the technical analysis that accompanies the songs. What little I can glean from the book leads me to believe that her research was probably fairly conventional and fairly short. According to her introduction, she met and befriended one woman who was sympathetic to her work and who helped open other doors in the community. She visited women in their homes and asked them to sing for her. The songs were obviously recorded. Some "interviewing" went on, formally or informally, but in what manner? There are disturbing statements in the introduction such as, "...this book contains as much contextual information as it was possible to ascertain" (p. 5). As much as it was possible to ascertain under what conditions, by whom, in what time period? The length of time she had to finish her Ph. D.?

Unfortunately, this question and many others beg to be asked. Perhaps the most crucial is this: in what way is this "their" book? In other words, did the singers really want a book of their songs published, and, if so, why? This, of course, leads to other questions. Who is this book, and other books like it, really meant for? Who will use it and why? Are we, as outsiders, meant to learn these songs, perform them in our concerts, teach them to our choirs or our school classes? Readers need to know if these are appropriate uses of the book, for these activities are what it invites.

I do not doubt Giglio's warmth, humanity, or good intentions. Further, she is, basically, following the currently accepted model of academic ethnomusicology to which so many of us, myself included, have subscribed in recent years. (My own research into Metis fiddling some years ago is, in some ways, similar to Giglio's.) I ask these questions because I would expect people such as Virginia Giglio and David McAllester to ask them also, and I would be interested to hear their answers. *Southern Cheyenne Women's Songs* does not give them to us.

That *Southern Cheyenne Women's Songs* is written for "us" (non-Natives) and not "them" (the singers) is clear throughout. The introduction begins: "It is easy to forget that Cheyenne women are ordinary, everyday people. The mystique that surrounds "Indianness", a residue of popular images supplied by Hollywood and romantic novels, can keep us from seeing that the Oklahoma Cheyenne people function in the mainstream modern world" (p. 3). Continuing this tone, Giglio goes on to conclude in her last chapter that, "finally, the foremost goal of any non-Cheyenne student of Cheyenne music should be to give back to the people any knowledge acquired during a study" (p. 213). Let's be honest. What good will these transcriptions and musical analyses be to the women in this study, whose tradition is passed on aurally? Yes, they may find the history and comparisons with other collections interesting. Yes, they may be flattered to have their songs and aspects of their lives appear in print. Yes, the mere fact of having

a book of Cheyenne songs published may have positive effects, perhaps giving the singers a renewed pride that their “everyday” songs are worthy of such outside attention (since they do not appear to be interested in material reward for their music). But most of this book is neither “theirs” nor for them.

Further evidence that this work comes out of an explorer’s first heady excitement of discovery, and not from a well-grounded knowledge of Native music, is revealed by Giglio’s musical comments and transcriptions. She was, by her own admission, surprised when her consultants revealed “sophisticated musical expertise” (p. 125), and an “uncanny ability to conserve both pitch and metre” (p. 200) and “an example of true polymeter and polytonality, discovered in the unlikely environment of a Native American folk spiritual idiom” (p. 200). She offers such further ethnocentric comments as “this melodic device [the use of a D#] gives the melody an interest that the *expected* (emphasis mine) D natural would not provide” (p. 65). Although her orthography includes symbols for non-standard pitches, vocal slides, et cetera, she uses them in only a fraction of the cases in which they might be appropriate. Nowhere is there even cursory discussion of all of the pitch ambiguities the songs reveal, leaving readers to assume that European pitches and scale systems apply without question. Neither is the issue of rhythm addressed. Although the singers are frequently accenting every beat evenly, to my ear (a fairly common practice in much Native music), Giglio consistently goes to the trouble of adding accents to certain beats and not others, thereby confusing the issue unnecessarily. She points out asymmetrical phrasing in her analyses as if it is an anomaly, rather than the norm that it is in much Native music. Moreover, even within the ill-fitting mantle of European notation she has adopted, there are a surprising number of both rhythmic and pitch inaccuracies in the few transcriptions I checked, i.e., intervals clearly closer to minor thirds are notated as major 2nds, and tritones as perfect fourths in Song #2, Song #6, which has a fairly steady tempo throughout, is notated as jumping to a faster speed and then back again; Song #4, which fits much better into a triple subdivision, is notated as duple; and there are extra syllables in Song #1, to name only the most immediately obvious problems. Do we ascribe these problems to haste, to lack of knowledge of Native music in general, to an inability to get beyond her own European-system musical attitudes and training, or to all three?

There are further issues at stake here. The question of what should and should not happen to traditional Native music is a serious concern in many Native communities. In my experience, some Native singers feel very strongly that “outsiders” (including Native people of other cultural backgrounds) should not sing their traditional songs, even non-ceremonial ones. As a result of this, many feel that their songs should not be published or recorded, or that such dissemination is only acceptable under conditions of the strictest community protocol. Giglio states that “Oklahoma Cheyenne women *seem* to share a philosophy that everyday songs are, in general, free to be used by anyone” (p. 208). Once again,

however, the absence of supporting testimony from her consultants on this very important issue renders this less than convincing.

I maintain that, ultimately, research such as this is more for the researcher than anyone else. Further, the idea of returning knowledge to the people has become just another anthropological cliché, along with “respect” and the use of the term “consultant” rather than “informant”—all buzzwords that scholars use to help justify a relatively superficial type of study. It seems to me that the difference between “informant” and “consultant” is somewhat moot without co-authorship. Should not the translator, at least, on whose work much of the book depends, be given title-page credit? Burying her contribution in a one-sentence “thank you” near the end of the Preface, as is the case here, is a completely unacceptable practice, in my view.

In conclusion, the tape on which the singers speak and sing is wonderful, the text transcriptions and translations invaluable and much of the information about the songs and the culture interesting. Further, it is all presented with warmth, sympathy, and, yes, with respect. However, Giglio’s book, in many ways, has failed to provide the counter-example to former work in the field that we would wish. This brings us back to the larger issue plaguing ethnomusicology as a whole. I believe we should all consider, before publishing a book on the music of a culture other than our own, devoting a much longer time period to involvement in that culture than the average Ph. D. program (research grant, fellowship, whatever) allows. If we wish to continue to be answerable only to the demands of the academic system itself, then let us, at least, stop the current fashionable pretence that we are conducting our research “for them” or that any sort of “complete musical understanding” (another phrase from Giglio’s introduction) is possible using the presently encouraged methods.

I look forward to the day when we, as cultural researchers, truly deserve the respect of the people with whom we seek to work. I believe this will happen not merely because we have managed not to offend them or make any glaring errors in describing their cultures, but rather when their names appear as co-authors, translators and contributors on the title pages of our books (even if their contributions are purely aural), when our books reflect *their* idea of what is worth putting into words and making publicly available and not ours. Let us, at the very least, accept the fact that “respect” in most cultures’ terms involves at least one basic pre-requisite—time. Knowledge may or may not follow. In short, as ethnomusicologists, as cultural and musical educators, let us all learn to practice what we preach.

Anne LEDERMAN  
York University,  
Toronto, Ontario

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