



# (Sojourns

THE MUSIC OF PLACE



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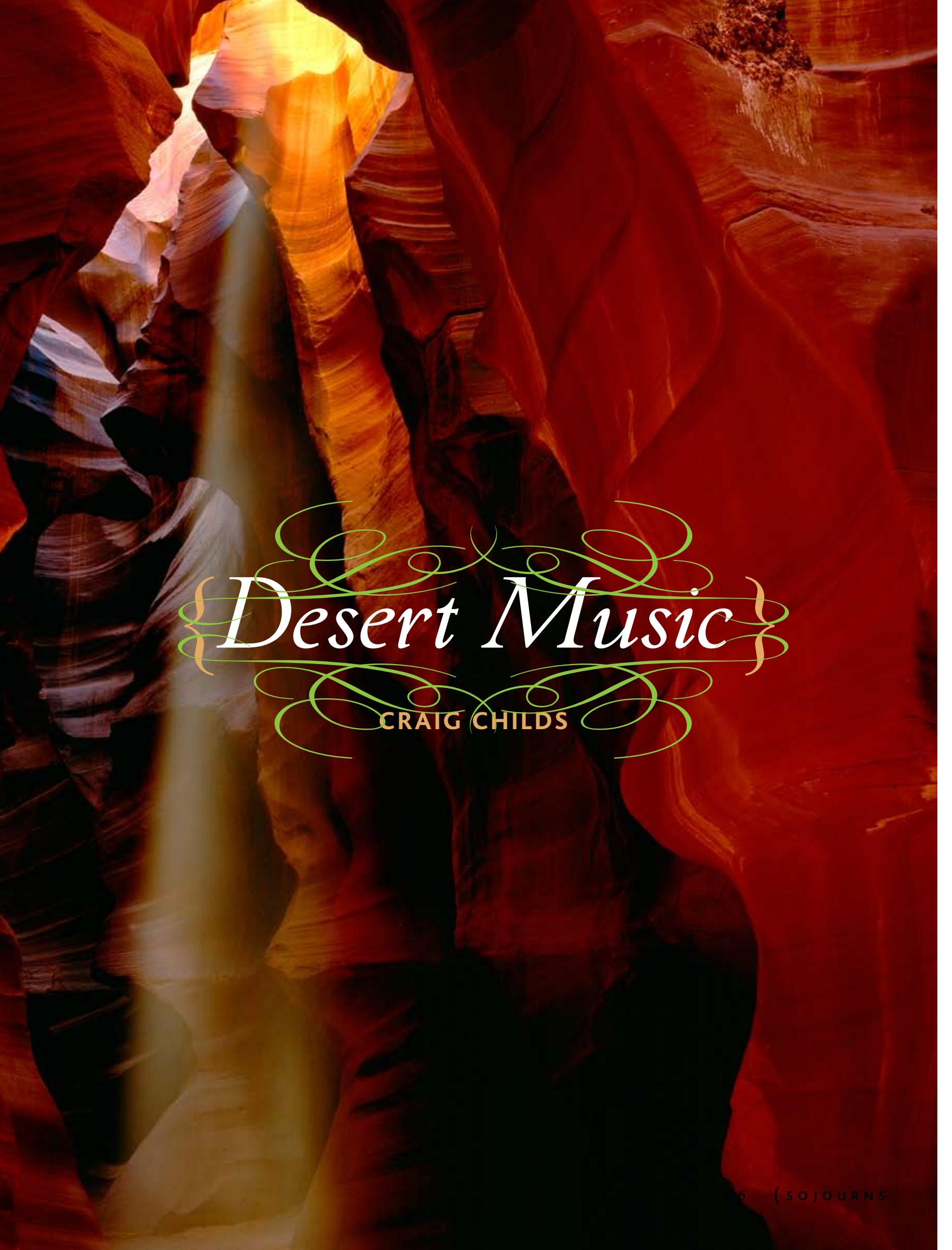
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# (&)ojourneys

6:2 THE MUSIC OF PLACE



**I** WALK BLINDFOLDED through the corkscrews of lower Antelope Canyon snapping fingers to read distances, breathing to hear the closeness of sandstone. I've been doing this for at least an hour, creeping along by small, tentative steps, listening to the shape of the canyon as I drop down through it. Now and then, when I am cocked right, I hear a soft hum. The canyon is a seashell. In it, you can hear the ocean though there is no water. It is every sound in the surrounding world drawn into the curl of this canyon.

I recommend winter for this activity. Cold settles deep into the rock and there are not so many tourists making the narrow, winding path of Antelope Canyon sound like a cathedral with tour groups echoing along its halls. In winter, you hear the stir of wind across woven stone rims as if over an instrument made of clay. Sand slithers down from above. You hear the place sing. Fingers glide across the grain of sandstone making a sound that tells you where you are. You can hear the convolution of water-sculpted stone, walls so close together they are nearly bridged by their own hooks and clasps of eroded rock. I stop, tilt my head, snap once. The snick echoes back, and my ears triangulate.

Hearing is perhaps the most tactile, or even most refined of our senses. Auditory information goes to the brain along chains of the fastest functioning cells in the body. It is direct contact with whatever vibrates in our world, our ears able to discern the smallest of changes. We can, in fact, distinguish between 1,500 different pitches, detecting changes in the air up to one-billionth of an atmospheric pressure (that is, 14.7 pounds per square inch divided by 1,000,000,000), which explains why you have to yawn going over a pass. Calibrations are so small that large adjustments throw them off and threaten to pop your head.

The late George Steck, an old mathematician and route finder in the Grand Canyon, once told me his hearing was the one sense he most feared he would lose in old age. It was the sense, he said, that he most appreciated for its subtlety and the information it carries. He told me this when he was seventy-seven, at the bottom of Soap Creek where we had stopped to camp. I remember that while we spoke, dry reed grass rustled in the wind and he paused to hear it as if proving his point. Do you hear it? Every tick and turn of the wind, you feel even the slightest in your bones.

The shape of the canyon is the rustle of a coat and boot steps muffled in sand, then higher pitched as I step on bedrock. I listen for each angle and refraction. Blindfolded, I do not think visually of the place. I think of it as an auditory landscape. Pitch, frequency, tone and timbre magnify through the convolutions of the outer ear, setting off miniature tuning forks of inner-ear bones, which direct sound waves across "hair" cells in the inner ear. Brain reads these signals as if they were wind across tall grass, cilia and cerebrum tied directly together. This wash of incoming sound translates into a neural code, assembled into an auditory picture of sandstone fins and dips.

Step by step, I trace the big bowl of a room where floods must churn and thunder, a sound I know as unlike any other. This is where people have died in the past hearing this very sound, where you would at first pause in the quiet of narrows, straining to detect a roar far upstream followed by the belly-voiced groan of debris being pushed ahead by a flash flood.

**The canyon is a seashell.**



Above: Travertine Falls in Grand Canyon.

Photo by Mark Lisk

Facing: A sunbeam illuminates eroded Navajo Sandstone walls in Antelope Canyon. Photo by Larry Ulrich

**Hearing... is in direct contact with whatever vibrates in our world.**



M OVIES HAVE RELIED ON MUSIC for particular effects since the very beginning, when audiences were first awed in a Paris basement by the image of an approaching train given to them by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière in December of 1895. Technically speaking, there never was such a thing as "silent cinema." Whether with a solo piano accompaniment or full philharmonic orchestra, actors speaking behind or in front of the screen, perhaps a sound effects man creating bird calls and the clip-clopping of horses—music and/or speech and sound were always present to tantalize and tease and to help direct and intensify the audience's emotions. What we have come to know as a film's "score"—as distinguished from the more comprehensive "soundtrack," which also includes dialogue and sound effects—therefore came along as an essential element of film with the recording technology of the years 1927–1929.

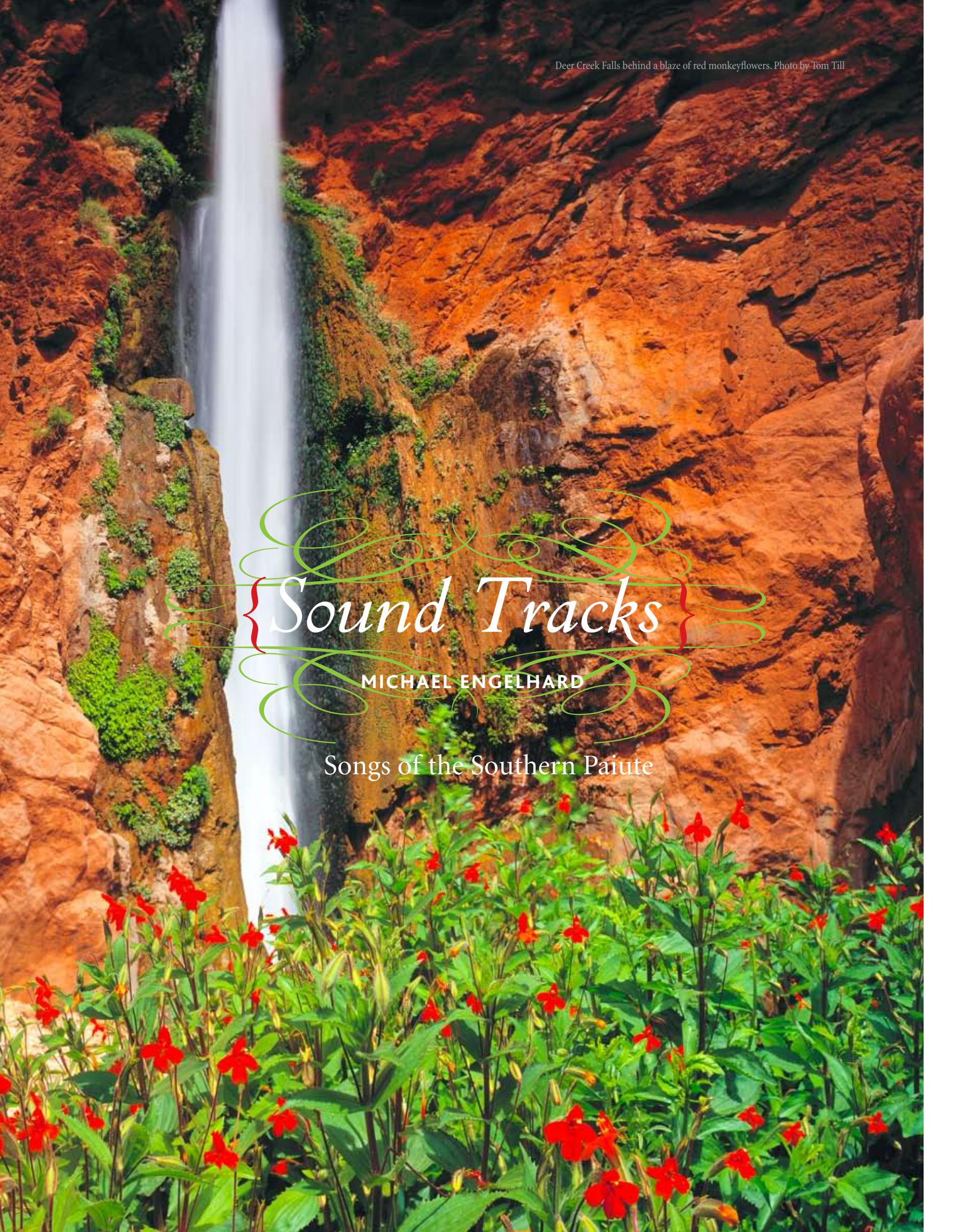
Composers of film scores are specialists. In the classical studio era (ca. 1930–1960) each major movie studio had its own "music department" employing composers, arrangers, orchestrators, lyricists, singers, and musicians to prepare a film's music. This was the period when producers reigned supreme, before the rise of the director in prominence, and producers and studios chose composers. Composers and their teams observed various conventions we still recognize today, for example the descending musical phrase in minor key that we hear when the bad guy comes into the scene of a typical classic western.

Today, with few exceptions, a composer comes on board early in the process of developing a project to discuss the mood of the film with the director, though most of the composer's work will be done in post-production, when the movie is in its editing stages. It is now more common for directors to choose a composer or to establish long, useful relationships with film composers over a number of their films, or even over an entire career. The combination of Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann led to essential movie scores that not only reflected the style and themes of the "master of suspense"—as in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, *The Birds*, and *Marnie*—but also played important roles in the films' reception and critical esteem. The collaboration of Steven Spielberg and John Williams has been an equally powerful force. Movies like *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Indiana Jones*, *E.T.* and *Schindler's List* earned Oscars or nominations for both director and composer. Other notable examples are that of Carter Burwell, who has scored films for the brothers Joel and Ethan Coen from *Blood Simple* to *True Grit*, and the late composer John Barry, who wrote music for many of the James Bond movies from 1962 to 1989. And, naturally, one of the richest of these director-composer collaborations was that of Sergio Leone and Ennio Morricone, who together gave a new face and new sound to the western in *The Good,*

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Research assistance for this article was provided by Larissa Rhodes and Dana Kopenhefer.

The "Mittens" in Monument Valley, Arizona-Utah border. Photo by James Kerrick



Deer Creek Falls behind a blaze of red monkeyflowers. Photo by Tom Till

## Songs of the Southern Paiute

# Sound Tracks

MICHAEL ENGELHARD

*We sing so that the spirits that dwell in those sites know that we haven't forgotten them.*

—VIVIENNE JAKE, CO-DIRECTOR SALT SONG TRAIL PROJECT

*The songs . . . make us into one tribe.*

—LARRY EDDY, SALT SONG LEAD SINGER

LIKE A NETWORK of invisible capillaries, Southern Paiute songlines crisscross the western desert, linking the Pacific Ocean and the Grand Canyon. Salt Songs, Talk Songs, and various hunting song cycles record “sound-tracks” as far south as Lake Mead and as far north as the Hopi Mesas, Zion, and Escalante. But the eastbound trails do not end at the Colorado River. They cross over into the spirit realm where only the dead, or people with special powers, may venture.

Often sung at memorial gatherings for the deceased and old as the time when Ocean Woman and Coyote set the world in motion, the Salt Songs perpetuate Southern Paiute (or “Nuwuvi”) ritual landscapes. More specifically, they recount the meanderings of two mythical sisters, a wild goose and a small water bird. Assisted by spirit helpers and chanting along the way, the two wandering sisters named caves, mountains, springs, and other locations they encountered. In present-day recitals, their journey is not so much told as reenacted.

The trails codified by these songs align sacred and historical sites, ancient villages, hunting grounds, burial grounds, and places for the gathering of medicinal herbs—and salt, a valued commodity. People used salt from springs or caves to preserve meats and other foods, which in long cold winters could mean the difference between life and death. In hot climates salt also maintains the body’s electrolyte balance. Yosemite’s Miwok Indians knew their Nuwuvi neighbors in the Sierra Nevada as the Salt People, for their fondness of this substance and because they dominated its production and trade.

There are approximately 142 Salt Songs, customarily sung between sunset and sunrise, always in the order of the sisters’ journey. During the re-enactment, the singers’ voices dip and soar, as if in sync with the topography.

Gourd rattles mark time steady as hoofbeats. Women and

men both participate, solo or in chorus, and singers may take turns. But only a few elders who know the entire cycle are left now, and there is concern that the songs will not be passed on to a younger generation. In addition to fearing cultural loss, the Nuwuvi fear for the land, because the harmony restored by singing plays a role in its preservation.

Since 2001, the Cultural Conservancy (a non-profit indigenous rights organization) has worked hard with the Nuwuvi founders of the Salt Song Trail Project to document this threatened tradition. One service they provide is a series of workshops on methods for using audio and video technology to record the songs. The collaborative effort has already resulted in three short ethnographic films and a musical compilation, to be used exclusively by the Nuwuvi to keep the tradition alive. According to the Indigenous Language Institute, of the more than 300 Native American languages once spoken in the United States, only 175 remain. This nonprofit group estimates that without successful efforts at revitalization, only twenty will still be spoken in 2050—a wave of extinctions equaling that of loss of species. As “old growth forests of the mind,” Native languages embody diversity: unique worldviews and irreplaceable knowledge. Those recording the Salt Songs hope that modern technology will help the Nuwuvi to project a strong, clear voice into the future.

More than just musical travelogue or mnemonic device, the song cycle roots a people in place. “It explains the whole history of our people and our connection with the elements,” says Chemehuevi band member Matthew Leivas, summing up the sacred canon. A Salt Song recital combines purification, healing of a community, and rite of passage—a sendoff for relatives on the path to the afterlife. When a death occurs among the Nuwuvi, tribal members gather, traveling long distances if necessary, to sing together all night. If the songs are not performed, or not performed properly, the spirits will stick around, feeling restless and



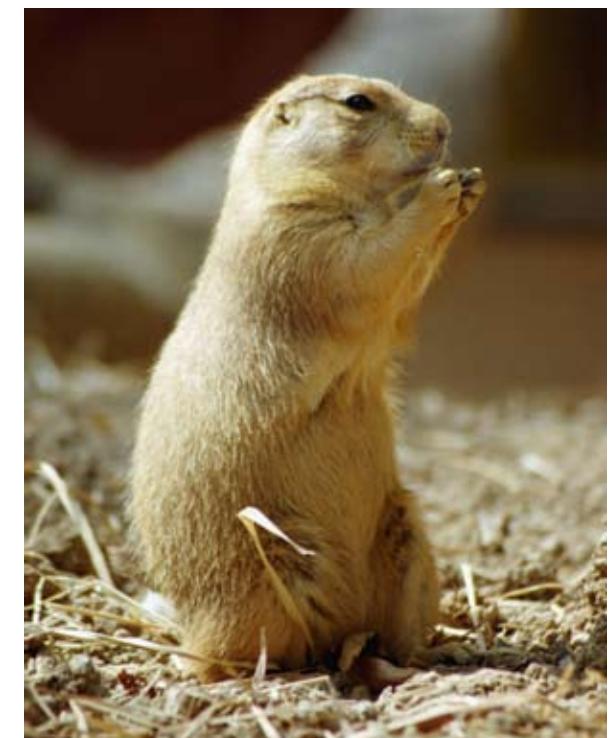
“We can learn these languages of the wild the same way we learn any foreign tongue . . .”

**S**TARS WERE JUST COMING OUT when I heard the elf owl about twenty feet away. He was clacking his beak at a predator, his message clear—“back off now, or else!” As I inched closer, peering into the darkness to spot the predator, I was soundly whacked in the head by the attacking owl. There were many more stars for awhile. Then realization dawned. *I was the predator.* I had badly misjudged the owl’s tolerance zone, unaware that he had his newly fledged young with him.

Animals communicate all the time—between themselves, with other species, and even with humans. Sometimes we even understand them. Researchers are discovering that animals have far more intricate and complex languages than once imagined, especially among the social species such as coyotes and prairie dogs. These animals have larger vocabularies because of the necessities of their communal way of life.

Gunnison’s prairie dogs, for example, which live in community groups, are incredibly articulate rodents. After studying prairie dogs for twenty years, Dr. Con Slobodchikoff at Northern Arizona University has discovered that they have one of the most sophisticated animal languages known. A prairie dog can recognize over 100 words, including adjectives and nouns, and can express and understand abstract concepts.

Being plump and at the bottom of the food chain, prairie dogs must be vigilant, always on the lookout for a wide variety of predators. They have developed specific warning calls signaling hawks, coyotes, snakes, badgers, human hunters, and other predators, so that colonists will be prepared to react appropriately to escape each type of threat. Dr. Slobodchikoff and his students have spent thousands of hours in the field recording prairie dog calls and observing the animals’ behavioral responses. Back in the lab the sounds are analyzed by a computer program that measures the overtones and frequencies of the various calls. Slobodchikoff is now able to discern the subtle variations himself. He has discovered that the calls are packed with specific details. A sentry will bark to warn the others of approaching danger, increasing the intensity of the call as the danger escalates. The barks describe which animal is coming, its size, shape, color, how fast it is moving, and the degree of threat. Even more impressive, the prairie dogs distinguish between individual predators. Their calls may describe a specific badger or coyote (or even human) with which the group is familiar. Knowing that particular animal’s hunting strategies and tactics, the little rodents are better prepared to



Facing: Coyote calling.

Photo by Dudley Edmondson

Above: Prairie dog. Nickhill/Bigstock



<http://soundbible.com/76-Prairie-Dog.html>



shockBigstock

To the songs of the sacred the fire moved, courting the dancers  
while revealing a place ordinarily dark and unknowable.



**I**T WAS MY THIRD DAY UP ON THE HILL. Within a circle of small stones and corn pollen I sat, head bowed and humbled. After two days of fasting, my body, without the food and water to which it had grown accustomed, felt frail and empty, a dry branch from a tree with roots the rains no longer fed. I was there to pray before the Creator and creation. At times they seemed compassionate, other times ambivalent and fierce. An occasional wind passed through like a whisper, caressing my unclothed body in fleeting moments of cool, cathartic bliss. In their absence came a pervasive heat, embers turning to flame that threatened to reduce me to ash. On the morning of this third day I was drawn to the rising Sun, the arbiter of my suffering. As I turned to look I could not look away. Silent and still, I stared, transfixed by a solar eclipse that my eyes alone would behold.

I didn't know it at the time, but my experience was tied to an eclipse that occurred a century before. It was New Year's Day, 1889. While the Sun was shrouded in shadow Wovoka, the Numu (Northern Paiute) prophet, lay dead. He drifted into the afterlife, coming upon friends and relatives who had long since passed. He then stood before God, who bestowed on him a prophecy and spiritual power for the benefit of the People. Soon after, Wovoka reentered this world carrying five songs infused with power that would spark the Ghost Dance Movement of 1890. During a period of widespread displacement and despair for Native North Americans, Wovoka's prophecy of healing and renewal quickly spread beyond his homelands in western Nevada. It cut like a riptide through the ongoing wave of westward expansion, trailing east to the Colorado Plateau where it took root among the Ute and Shoshone.

Not long after I came down from the hill, I found myself dancing in a Ghost Dance on the San Pasqual Reservation. Together we danced within a circular arbor, the center of which held a fire that burned continuously during four nights of dancing. To the songs of the sacred the fire moved, courting the dancers while revealing a place ordinarily dark and unknowable. As we danced, the songs and spirits gave life to limbs that should have grown tired. Somehow we kept moving. We were drawing from what seemed a limitless wellspring of energy as songs crested like waves and washed over the arbor. At the end of the fourth night, when a single, radiant orb of light appeared in an otherwise still-dark sky, we offered the Morning Star song. With this final melody and the flames' last flicker the ceremony came to a close.

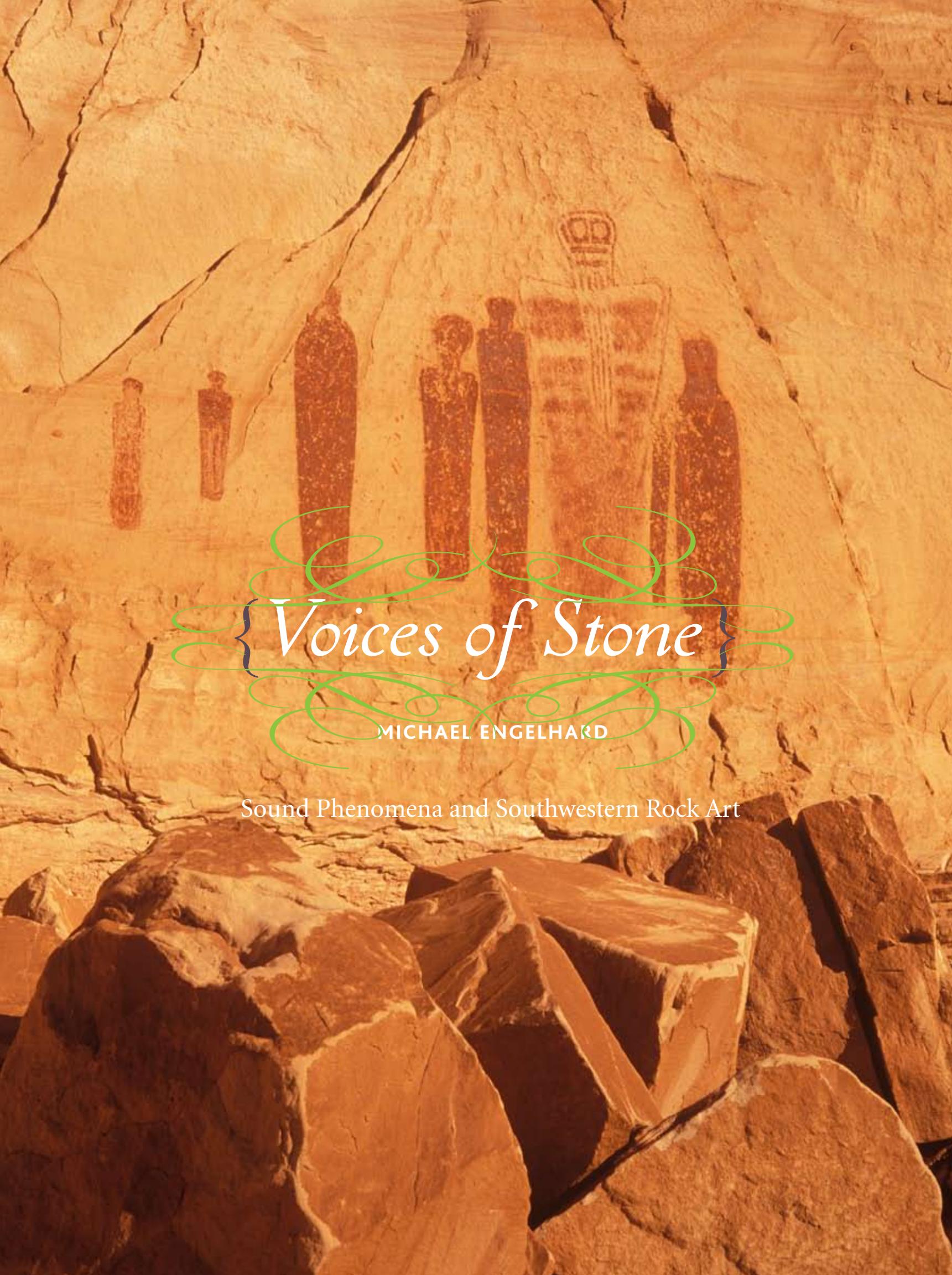
We would sing the songs again the following year, and, like those of a century before, they would keep us moving toward a promise bound to a prophecy upon which the Sun had yet to set.

Before joining the faculty at Northern Arizona University, Chad Hamill, Spokane, taught indigenous and world musics at Cal Arts, Naropa University, and the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he earned a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology in 2008. His doctoral dissertation explores traditional song as a catalyst for spiritual power among tribes of the interior Northwest.

Suggested Reading:

Hittman, Michael, and Don Lynch. *Wovoka and the Ghost Dance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

Vander, Judith. *Shoshone Ghost Dance Religion: Poetry Songs and Great Basin Context*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.



*When we lived or herded sheep near the rocks, we could hear the wind talk through the rocks.*

—JOHN HOLIDAY, BLESSINGWAY SINGER

# D

URING THE FIRST DESCENT of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, young Frederick Dellenbaugh fired his Remington revolver into turbid waters near the Paria's mouth. Silence followed the violent discharge—then the sound returned, multiplied, blossoming, “with a rattle like that of musketry.” Powell’s crew christened that resonant stretch opposite the Vermilion Cliffs “Echo Peaks.” Less unsettled by the unknown, present-day river guides delight their clients with Indian flute playing or *a cappella* singing in Blacktail Canyon or Redwall Cavern, as they once did in Glen Canyon’s Music Temple of fame. A string quartet is shipped down the river each year during the Moab Music Festival, also for purely aesthetic reasons. The quartet plays in an alcove, for classical music fans who leave gowns and tuxedos at home.

Who has not toyed with the bodiless voice in the wilderness, listened to it bouncing off sandstone walls, clipping syllables from words, to eventually fade back into silence?

#### MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

The desire to be heard in these titanic gorges, to assure ourselves that we have substance against the desert’s vacuum of mute indifference, weighs heavily on many a visitor. Native peoples, at home where we merely pass through, tried to fit acoustic phenomena into their belief systems. A Paiute legend tells of witches in snakeskins who hide among rocks and delight in repeating the words of passersby. According to Diné (Navajo) tradition, two opposing rock monoliths in Canyon de Chelly—Spider Rock and Face Rock—are petrified holy beings. They communicate with each other, as echoes ricocheting back and forth between canyon walls would. A sandstone block on Lime Ridge, near southern Utah’s Valley of the Gods, is thought to be a hogan that a deity turned to stone, trapping wayward Diné children inside. When people approach it, they can hear the children wail. Other rocks emit sounds that, depending on their pitch, forecast rain or “something bad, like flu.”

Ancient peoples would have had no scientific paradigm to explain auditory illusions, such as the invisible pressure waves that stack up into echoes. To them, voices seemed to emerge from within the rocks. Stone surfaces appeared permeable.

Facing: Pictographs in Great Gallery, Barrier Canyon style, Canyonlands National Park, Utah. Photo by Chuck Place