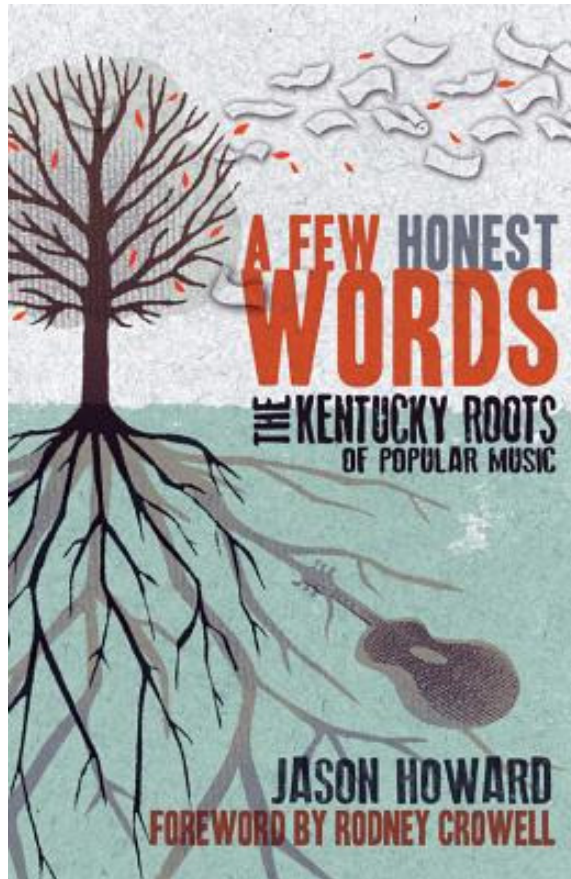


'A Few Honest Words' captivates

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"A Few Honest Words: The Kentucky Roots of Popular Music," by Jason Howard. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015 (paper). 272 pages, \$19.95.



"My education in roots music began in front of an RCA turntable," Jason Howard notes in the just-released paperback version of "A Few Honest Words: The Kentucky Roots of Popular Music," which was first published in 2012. "One of my earliest memories is of my father guiding my hand to the arm of the record player, carefully moving the needle to the appropriate groove in the vinyl. I can still hear the crackle from the speakers, an intoxicating, rapid succession of pops and hisses."

I suspect I am not the only one who instantly relates to the scene that begins "A Few Honest Words." Those of a certain age will always hold dear one of the rituals of our youth – carefully placing the phonograph needle on the album, adjusting the speed and volume for optimal sound reproduction and then slowly melting into a world driven by the exquisite resonance of our favorite artists.

"A Few Honest Words" is comprised of an introduction and 14 additional chapters. The narrative is not extensively researched by academic standards; the prose consists primarily of first-person storytelling. Howard's writing style

is conversational. Being somewhat well-versed in popular music, I recognized many of the singers featured in this concise yet surprisingly comprehensive primer. At the same time, I did not know the background and context for many of the songwriters and instrumentalists Howard profiles.

The vast majority of the book is based on face-to-face interviews Howard conducted with his main characters, which gives the volume an intensely intimate texture. In addition to explaining the inner workings of the entertainment industry, the author delves into the personal lives and relationships of those whose accomplishments he is seeking to highlight. After only a few pages, it was readily apparent the person weaving this delightful tale understands the nuance embedded in Kentucky culture. It has been said hardship and struggle often inspire the most powerful and enduring musical legacy, and this is most definitely the case with the performers immortalized in "A Few Honest Words."

One of my favorite chapters was “Joan Osborne: Brooklyn Meets Appalachia.” I have been a fan of Osborne’s for quite some time; she is perhaps best known for “One of Us,” her megahit from 1995 in which she asks the proverbial (and sacrilegious, according to some) question, “What if God was one of us?” But there is a lot more to Osborne than her one excursion into the chart-topping stratosphere. And, as Howard makes abundantly clear, her Kentucky influence is unmistakable:

“Migrating to Gotham was a daunting prospect for the young girl from Anchorage whose family never locked the doors and knew everyone in the sleepy village of 2,000 residents,” Howard explains. “Only a 20-minute drive from downtown Louisville, Anchorage provided Joan with what she calls an ‘uninhibited childhood’ spent building tree forts in the woods and singing harmonies to John Denver and Elvis Presley records with her five siblings.”

“Coming from small-town Kentucky, Joan says the level of success she achieved was unimaginable,” the author writes. “The willingness to challenge conventional wisdom is what ensures roots music’s authenticity, Joan believes, a quality she continues to find revelatory and comforting. Now an independent artist in an increasingly precarious industry, Joan is content with her status as a career singer-songwriter bursting with musical wanderlust.”

The other chapter I found particularly intriguing was “Nappy Roots: The Pursuit of Nappyness,” principally because it chronicles the rise of a group whose origins can be traced directly back to this part of the country.

“William Rahsaan Hughes, aka Skinny Deville, arrived on the campus of Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green in the fall of 1993, eager to escape the strict gaze of his parents back in Jeffersontown, a suburb of Louisville,” Howard writes. “Although excited to be on his own, he admits that he was also glad to get away from the dangerous culture plaguing his hometown.”

“What Nappy Roots does is roots rap – a gritty blend of dusty guitars, catchy pop hooks, high octane beats and clever rhymes that celebrate where the group is from,” the author observes. “This, Skinny says, was the intention from the beginning. Besides the group’s embrace of rural life, Nappy Roots attracted attention for its refusal to objectify women and glorify violence in its music, consciously choosing to promote a positive message instead – a quality that Skinny continues to speak of with great pride.”

Howard served as senior editor of Equal Justice Magazine, where he investigated miners’ efforts to receive benefits for black lung disease and explored a variety of issues related to adoption and eminent domain – some of which were argued before the U.S. Supreme Court. A recipient of the 2013 Al Smith Individual Artist Fellowship in Creative Nonfiction from the Kentucky Arts Council, he also completed a fellowship at the University of Kentucky and was a finalist for the 2011 Roosevelt-Ashe Society Outstanding Journalist in Conservation Award. His work has appeared or been featured in the New York Times, the Nation, Sojourners, Paste, No Depression, The Louisville Review and on National Public Radio. Previous books include “Something’s Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal” and “We All Live Downstream: Writings About Mountaintop Removal.”

I enjoyed “A Few Honest Words” immensely – partly because music has always been an integral part of my life and partly because it deals with the contributions of folks from Kentucky, a place I have grown partial to over the last 35 years or so. My sense is a lot of readers would find it similarly captivating.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.