

The Bulletin

of the Society for American Music

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Welcome to Richmond 2026

Joanna Love, Local Arrangements Committee Chair

The Local Arrangements Committee is eager to welcome SAM members to Richmond, Virginia, for the 52nd annual conference, held March 11–15, 2026, at the Richmond Marriott Downtown. Richmond is one of the nation's oldest cities, becoming Virginia's capital in 1779. Established on the tribal lands of the Powhatan Chiefdom and Monacan Nation and surrounded by ancestral lands of nine other first nations, it has helped to shape the complex history of the U.S. Located on the James River, it was a key trading point for tobacco and acted as a main passageway for hundreds of thousands of enslaved African people. The city further served as a strategic site for the American Revolution and as the capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Influential figures left their marks on the region, including Pocahontas, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry,

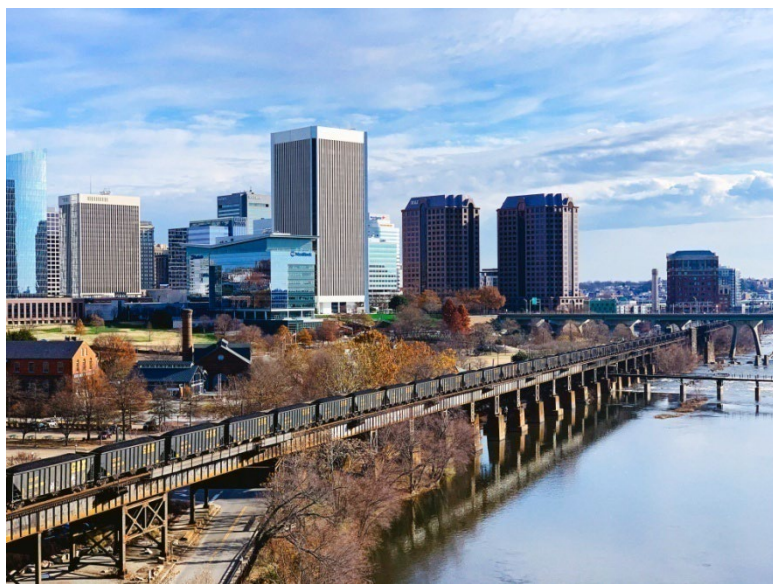


Photo credit: Richmond Region Tourism

Edgar Allan Poe, Maggie Walker, and Arthur Ashe. The city has undergone significant social and political changes over the last century as the metro area has grown to about 1.3 million residents. In addition to its

many local universities and colleges, it boasts robust music, visual arts, and food scenes. The Society for American Music affirms that Richmond's Indigenous histories and traditions, as well as the histories and contributions of enslaved Africans and their descendants, are essential to the story of American music, and we commit to recognizing their continuing importance in the work we share there in March.

We thank the program committee for their work to create a robust schedule of thought-provoking and cutting-edge research. We are also pleased to announce that some of SAM's signature evening events will be rounded out by acclaimed regional ensembles, including the Virginia State University Concert Choir. We further look forward to welcoming award-winning composer Judith Shatin into the Society as an honorary member.

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In addition to engaging with this year's exceptional on-site programming, we hope to entice you into the city to join one of our specially-curated afternoon excursions during the program break on Friday, March 13th. The first option is an expertly-designed tour of historical sites central to the experiences of Black individuals, guided by University of Richmond professor Dr. Julian Hayter. Site visits will include the Bill "Bojangles" Robinson monument in Jackson Ward (referred to as the "Harlem of the South") and the 2019 Kehinde Wiley "Rumors of War" monument, among many others. Cinema aficionados might alternatively elect to see a special screening of Buster Keaton's *One Week* (1920), accompanied live by the Mighty Wurlitzer organ in Richmond's historic "Grand Movie Palace." Keaton's twenty-minute film will be followed by a short talk-back with the organist and a second screening featuring the documentary *Black Fiddlers* (2022) which will be accompanied by a brief Q&A with its Virginia-based filmmaker, Eduardo Montes-Bradley. Finally, scholars interested in material culture and media will enjoy a curated tour of musical items held at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture that represent the birthplace of country music, local hip hop moguls, colonial music-making, and much more! Participants can also enjoy free admission to the impressive galleries at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, just next door.

Additionally, please mark your calendars for the annual Vivian Perlis Concert, which will be held at 7:00 p.m. on Friday, March 13th. We are excited to announce that the Legendary Ingramettes will dazzle us with their gospel vocals for this year's concert. This free concert is co-hosted by the University of Richmond's Department of Music at the Modlin Center for the Arts. Attendees are encouraged to sign up for shuttle transportation between the Marriott and the University of Richmond campus. Refer to the conference website for more information about these and other opportunities to explore the region. With so much to offer, you'll see why Virginia is for music lovers!

From the President

Denise Von Glahn

Dear SAM Community,

As 2025 careens to a close, I'm using this message to reflect on SAM's recent accomplishments, its immediate plans, and the opportunities our community provides to do even more for our collective future.

Although the phrase has become cliché, *it's been a privilege* serving SAM as President these past nine months, and I look forward to continuing the work we've begun through my term. A fleet of tireless and talented volunteer board members, volunteer committee members and chairs, volunteer publication editors, and volunteer editorial board members keeps SAM working. Having a dedicated and knowledgeable Executive Director, Technology Coordinator, and Associate Conference Manager means the administrative side of our enterprise stays afloat. When we are all pulled in more directions than we can safely navigate individually, knowing that others are pulling with us in the direction we've collectively charted is our greatest strength.



More opportunities to engage with each other was the most frequent answer to our 2024 member survey question that asked what SAM could do for you. In response, we've instituted our online President's Forum, a series of conversations that spotlight issues members have identified as especially important to them. The first forum on October 10, 2025, addressed "Difficult Topics in the Music Classroom." Using feedback from that event, we have a second forum planned for January 23, 2026, when the topic will be AI. Panelists Ryan Bañagale, Jennifer DeLapp-Birkett, and Maria Ryan will speak from their experiences in different settings and at different stages in their careers to get at how we can move beyond the priority of chasing and catching inappropriate and potentially dangerous uses of the tool to considering the roots of AI's attractiveness and its productive potentialities. This ninety-minute forum will include additional time and opportunities for members to interact with panelists and each other, something earlier forum attendees wanted. Please get Friday afternoon, January 23, at 3:00 p.m. EST in your schedule. Be on the lookout for registration information in the next SAM RoundUp.

Looking ahead to future forums, tentatively scheduled for April and July, we are especially interested in focusing on the interests and needs of our Student Forum and Early Career Professionals cohorts, as well as SAM members whose music-related work exists primarily outside traditional classrooms or academic settings. Many current SAM members are involved in outward-facing community-serving occupations and organizations, which continues affiliation patterns of large numbers of SAM's founding members who were museum workers, librarians, performers, and journalists as well as academics. Public involvement was and remains essential to SAM's mission and vision and will be carried forward by our 2026 initiative "Sounding the Nation at 250." SAM Secretary Dana Gorzelany-Mostak and her committee are overseeing a year's worth of presentations by SAM members across the nation that celebrate the range of American musics. Educating ourselves to the musicking work that takes place throughout our communities expands everyone's horizons and gets SAM's name out there. If you have ideas for additional Forum topics and/or the names of potential panelists, please send them to me at DVonGlahn@fsu.edu with the subject heading: FUTURE SAM FORUMS.

In November, over one hundred SAM members enjoyed a SAM reception at the AMS-SMT conference in Minneapolis. Although an unexpected situation took me away from that event just as it was about to begin, I understand from reliable sources that the air buzzed with non-stop conversations, so much so that the brief welcome messages that had been planned were jettisoned to avoid interrupting what was clearly a warm and collegial moment for our community. I appreciate SAM member Pat Warfield, who is also Director of the School of Music at the University of Minnesota, for his work in advance of the reception, his presence at the event, and his continued engagement in the after-hours. SAM members are everywhere!

We have recently reconstituted our Development Committee. Under the leadership of Deane Root, more than a dozen SAM members have volunteered to share their energies and expertise to assess where SAM is in relation to where we want to be, and to strategize how best to get there. We know that for SAM to accomplish its goals, we must build our administrative capacity. A single part-time Executive Director paid to work an average of twelve hours per week cannot carry our ambitious agendas even with expert help from two contract personnel. Keenly aware of our need to prioritize efficiency, transparency, and a commitment to responsibly serving our mission and our members, we are strategizing ways to secure the infrastructure that supports us all. To that end we will soon circulate the final version of the board-approved Strategic Plan among the membership for its vote. This will be our blueprint for SAM's future.

Regarding that future, I'm pleased to announce that beginning in March 2026, Dr. Trudi Wright will assume the role of President-Elect, and Nancy Rao and Will Robin will take their places as members of SAM's Board. We are grateful to Dana Gorzelany-Mostak for agreeing to serve a second two-year term as Secretary. All of us are hopeful that everyone who is interested in serving SAM makes their interest known, either in the formal Service Survey that has been circulated, or by contacting the Executive Director or me. In any year, we have dozens of committee positions that need filling, and we want and need you where you can make the greatest impact. Check out the updates, reports, and stories in this *Bulletin* to learn about some of the possibilities for service.

Those who know me are aware that I'm an insatiable reader, which means that I occasionally come upon a line that resonates far beyond its original setting. This was the case when I read Ann Napolitano's 2023 novel *Hello Beautiful*, a book that had made it to President Obama's Summer Reading List that year. It's unimportant to provide much back story beyond the idea that the lead character had been thwarted from the career they had originally imagined for themselves. In the pivoting process, however, they accomplished something far more resonant and powerful: they "built . . . an infrastructure of kindness" (253). SAM succeeds when we commit to an infrastructure that nurtures and supports curiosity, creativity, opportunity, transparency, accessibility, inclusion, excellence, respect, and, perhaps most importantly, kindness. Here's to doing just that.

Peace to us all in the New Year.

Denise

SAM Spotlight: An Interview with Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.

Jordan Brown, Harvard University

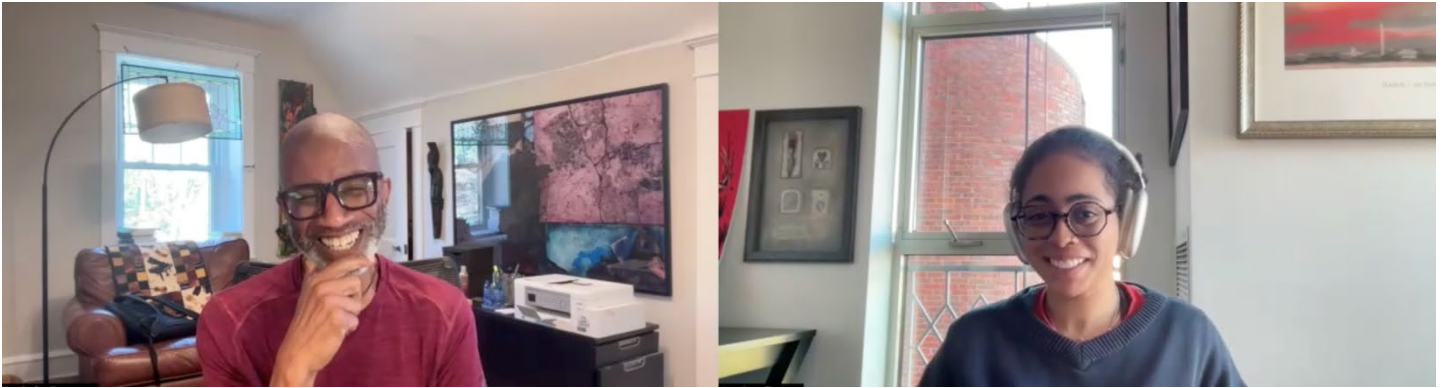


Photo credit: Jordan Brown

Editor's Note: The Bulletin is excited to introduce a new occasional interview series spotlighting the recent work of our members. In this installment, we hear from Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., about his overlapping roles as scholar, teacher, and multimedia artist. He is interviewed by Jordan Brown, a performer-scholar and ethnomusicology doctoral candidate studying the impacts of alternative R&B and alternative hip-hop in African American popular music and culture. If you have recommendations for future interview subjects or collaborations, please be in touch with the editorial team.

This interview was conducted via Zoom on October 21, 2025. The text has been edited for clarity and concision.

Brown: How have you been able to navigate your performer scholarship? And when did you feel the confidence in being able to intertwine these two things together?

Ramsey: The main reason I wanted to bring scholarship and performance together was a desire to feel whole—to feel like those parts of my life were speaking to and informing one another. As you know, especially in musicology—my home field—performance hasn't always been valued on the same level as scholarship. I understood early on that choosing to be a scholar meant prioritizing academic work, so at first I didn't question that imbalance. I was excited by the "life of the mind," as people call it. There was so much I didn't know about musicology, and I was very curious.

Still, I kept performing. In graduate school and later as an assistant professor at Tufts, I always found ways to play, even if it was just a church job directing choirs or small gigs here and there. But scholarship was definitely the priority—I had so much to learn. I constantly felt like I was scrambling to keep up with coursework, exams, languages—there was always something. So, my hands were full, but I never stopped playing. It wasn't until I got tenure that I finally felt free to rethink what I wanted my career to be.

Brown: When you ended up with tenure, was your relationship between scholarship and music how you envisioned it being at that stage? Where did you see yourself prior to tenure, and then as you had tenure, did that relationship sort of fulfill your envisioning?

Ramsey: There were a few of us kept performing, so I did have examples—Michael Veal, David Ake, Horace Maxile, and Tammy Kernodle come to mind. But I think what's different now is that music schools and departments increasingly recognize professors of practice as legitimate intellectual contributors. That shift makes it difficult to maintain a double standard where scholars' musical lives somehow *don't* count as intellectual labor.

Back then, though, I didn't see many models ahead of me. That created some fear, especially while on the tenure clock—or even in grad school when time to finish the degree is limited. That "capitalist clock" is deeply uncreative; it makes it hard to combine all the things you want to do. So, I played it safe. There were also very few Black professors in musicology at the time, and I felt a responsibility to succeed, to open doors. That meant not trying to remake the discipline while also trying to establish myself within it. Once I was established, pushing boundaries became easier.

Brown: You had these two elements [of performance and academics] within your scholarship as you were progressing as a professor. Did this affect your pedagogy at all? Did you have performance elements in your classes? How did you combine this ethos, or did you at all?

Ramsey: Absolutely. I never made a formal declaration about bringing performance into my work—it's simply who I am. I engage sonic worlds by entering them, participating in them, and trying to understand them from the inside.

Even as a young father, I incorporated performance. I was my children's Suzuki accompanist, and I snuck in the little musical ideas I wanted them to learn—some pentatonicism, a few bent notes. Teaching became another venue for performance. I often brought bands into class and was lucky to usually have a piano in the room. I'm a visiting professor this semester where there's no piano in the classroom—it's strange! Looking back, I don't think I've ever taught without incorporating performance.

I also keep visual materials—videos, recordings of my musical groups—so students see me first as a musical person and then as someone guiding them into scholarship. I especially love bringing community musicians into class. Students learn so much when they see that the music they access instantly online comes from real people with real lives and struggles. It humanizes the art.

Brown: For the readers: what is your primary instrument? And how did you get into that? What's your musical story?

Ramsey: I'm a pianist. My first exposure came at age five from Mrs. Jones next door. She had a beautiful upright piano, and I was fascinated. She began giving me lessons—though I don't remember for how long. She used to put a slice of apple pie and cheese on top of the piano and tell me I could have it once I learned what she was teaching. So, I learned—and connected food and music forever!

I got serious around age eleven, when I began lessons at the local music store. From then on, I knew music would always be part of my life. I sang in church choirs, and by seventh grade I was directing the youth choir, learning arranging in real time. There was a lot of encouragement for children in music, which kept me going. In high school, I joined every ensemble I could. I think I played my first professional gigs at eighteen or nineteen.

Brown: How did being a real-time arranger and having that role away from your piano at times affect your musicianship? And also, how did you see that reflected in your scholarship? Because I see that coming through for me sometimes.

Ramsey: Those experiences taught me that the musical objects I loved were living, breathing things—unpredictable and open-ended. I was raised in a tradition where performances were *never* the same twice. Making music with my peers shaped my identity; it helped me understand who I really was. I still love music with an element of indeterminacy. I try to bring that same spirit into my scholarship—pushing boundaries, challenging expectations. I admire scholars who can do that in their writing.

Brown: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I definitely can relate. Recording music is fun, don't get me wrong. But being able to do that experimenting in real-time, and, like you're saying, every performance is different because it is constructed of fleeting moments. And the ephemerality of it all can be quite addicting—there's nothing else like it. Like you said, it solidified my identity as a performer. I'm wondering how this, for you, all manifested in "Musiqology" with a "q." What is that? And how did it get started?

Ramsey: My "Musiqology" work really started in an undergraduate American music class. At the time, I taught it as a history not only of composers but also of performers, collectives, and the music industry. I wanted students to understand that the music they listened to existed within a broad network of connections—and that musicians often create for their *own* well-being. As listeners, we aspire to what performers model: cohesion, mutual aid, leadership—powerful social metaphors.

I began to involve students in projects that became performances—concert series, recordings, forming a "label," dividing roles as if they were in the industry. One student, Pamela Yau, who was interested in arts administration, did an independent study with me because the program didn't exist elsewhere on campus.

People saw my practical experience not as "industry" but simply as a working musician trying to make a gig, and they appreciated that perspective. Eventually, we created the name "Musiqology," which evolved from a blog to a performance group to a community platform—videos, Musiqology RX, and more. Over time it became a production

company that changed as my career changed. When I started, people confused the name with the 2004 *Musicology* album by Prince. I never let on that I knew that's what they were referencing when they said they'd heard of it before.

Brown: [Both Jordan and Guthrie chuckle.] That's the best way to handle it, I think! It's interesting that all of this came together around the same era of time. And it's cool that that cheeky joke came out of it as well.

Ramsey: Right, exactly. No need to tell them I knew they were thinking of Prince. And since he and I were born the same year, I'll claim a little of his shine.

Brown: I guess there's some astrological linkage there!

Ramsey: Yeah.

Brown: While you were with Musiqology and this network that you'd created, what were some of your favorite projects to work on?

Ramsey: My favorite project is always the one I'm working on. I've done so many things—albums, blogs, books, articles, catalog essays, scoring plays and films, curating exhibitions. Whatever's on my plate feels like the favorite. Musiqology originally helped me make sense of my eclectic interests. People like categories, but I didn't want to be boxed in—for example, I didn't publish my dissertation on Bud Powell before *Race Music* because I didn't want to be labeled only a jazz scholar. I wanted one umbrella for all my selves. I tend not to look back; I'm always drawn to the next thing.

Brown: That's an interesting philosophy that I've never thought about. I feel like maybe it's just me, but I think it's easy to focus on looking back, especially when you don't have a gig right in front of you. But also, there's fun in doing something innovative and new. It's cool that you had such a broad range of stuff to work on.

Ramsey: I'm interested in a lot of things, and I learned from past mistakes—like waiting for validation. I'm not a big self-promoter, but I do believe in myself. That's the first step.

Brown: I think that's half the battle. I don't think I could ever be fully industry because of that reason: self-promotion. But some of my good friends are fully industry, whether that be as musicians, producers, engineers, managers, or even writers. Many of my closest friendships are actually with music journalists who are fully embedded in music industry work.

In lots of cases, music journalists are the ones that have their nose on the ground more than I do. So, it's important to hear their experiences with interlocutors and their ways of navigating those spaces because we can help inform one another's research. For example, I was just on a panel with three music journalists back in October for New York Comic Con to help promote my colleague's upcoming book on Black femme fandom culture. All in all, it's been a fun relationship to build and a real pillar for me professionally going forward.

Ramsey: As for me, I'm writing a book and making music. D'Angelo just passed, and I've been a fan since I first heard him. Journalism requires quick responses, and that's not how I work. When I write, I want to fully understand the subject—its sonic complexity, its elements. His sound demands care. A rapid-response cycle isn't enough.

Brown: Yeah, definitely. And I think your background in having a performer's ear and composition experience makes such a big difference in how you probably are thinking about music in comparison to other music research occupations. Because you have the performer's edge, you know what it's like. So, I'm sure that that's informing your own approach, and also your background in composition in terms of being able to really look at the minutia behind the way that, in this case, D'Angelo's putting things together, which is so important and I find it fascinating myself.

Ramsey: Exactly—you want to know how a sound was edited, whether it's a low-pass or high-pass filter. There are so many questions. Week one: I finished one song.

Brown: Yes—and especially during that time-period, production equipment was tailor-made to the producer. So, now you have all these people you're studying, and you must try to track down what, out of a thousand options, they were working with anyway. Was it monophonic? Was it polyphonic? Was it quantizable? Was it not quantizable? Were you using 45s, or were you using regular vinyl? Then all of a sudden comes the rabbit hole. I remember going to Paisley Park on a group tour by myself. I talked that poor tour guide's ear off, and I felt really bad because, you know, Prince's equipment was

physically present, so my face was pressed up against the glass while the rest of the tour group wanted to move on to other rooms. I don't know, maybe it's just me who feels this way.

Ramsey: No, it's not just you. Maybe we'll both figure it out eventually. Or maybe we need to think differently. I think the key—musically and in writing—is putting ourselves in the position of the average reader. What would they find fulfilling? That's how you write music for a play: a certain hookiness, something memorable by the second listen. It's not necessarily the *only* music I aspire to write, but I *can* do it. For some reason, applying that mindset to prose is harder. What about you—can you compare those modes?

Brown: I mean, kind of...I'm not sure. That's a tough question!

Ramsey: I know this is your interview—sorry. I've wanted to ask you questions, but I keep holding back. This is *your* interview.

Brown: No, no, no. I mean, it's a good question! I completely understand the curiosity. I want to also answer all your questions – let's just say that this is the beginning of a longer conversation we can have!

Ramsey: There you go—I like that!

Brown: To circle back around in terms of your compositions, I saw your name on the credits for *Making Sweet Tea*, E. Patrick Johnson's film. I watched that film for the first time last year and I think it was one of the most impactful "one foot academic, one foot very much ethnographic and performance" pieces I've seen. How did you get that gig? And how did you approach it in terms of figuring out what would be best scored? Did you come with compositions already ready and sort of embed them within film? What was your process?

Ramsey: Great question. Here's the scoop. I got the film-scoring gig from the director, John Jackson, now provost at Penn—he's a colleague. E. Patrick Johnson was the writer and subject of the project. I'd seen the live performance of *Sweet Tea* in Durham, North Carolina one year. The film is a documentary about making that performance.

I collaborated with Wavy Wilson from my team. We watched the film without a score and discussed where music was needed—moments that needed humor, instruction, or coherence. If a character was from New Orleans, maybe a second-line stomp. It was very collaborative. I hadn't scored anything before; I just relied on my love of film music. I'd love to do more of that work.

Brown: Reading their body language makes a lot of sense in capturing the material's ethos, especially when you're making more like a documentary-esque film that's more intimate and personal.

As I mentioned earlier, music studies and performance studies are split fields, and technically speaking, E. Patrick Johnson is on the performance side of things. How do you see these two fields? Personally, I find it all a bit confusing since music and performance studies heavily overlap. When creating this project, what did the embodiment of these two fields look like in your work?

Ramsey: From the beginning, I sought communities of thinkers outside musicology—English departments, performance studies, other fields. My goal has always been to understand the musical object using whatever tools make sense—ethnomusicology, performance studies, new historicism, and so on. I see overlap between performance studies and music studies, but music scholars tend to read more widely across disciplines. Strangely, outsiders rarely cite music scholars—maybe because they lack the training to engage directly with musical material. I've always puzzled over that imbalance.

Brown: What you're saying makes sense, especially in terms of audience. Each discipline comes with its own inherent positionality. Speaking of positionalities, I wanted to ask a rather large question about your work entitled "Who Hears Here?" This work had an extremely significant impact on our field, and at this point in time I'd say it very much has a life of its own. My curiosity is, how did you consolidate all those thoughts, including the spoken and the unspoken words that are embedded within what you're writing? How do you think it has impacted the field? And how did you gain the confidence to put it out there in the first place?

Ramsey: Are you referring to the article or the book?

Brown: In this case, I'm talking about the book, because the article came before the book, right?

Ramsey: Right. Yes. At that time, I was trying to understand my identity as a scholar. When you enter a field, there are expectations about what you should be. Mentors help, but they don't always grasp who you are or what you want.

I felt a lack of purpose and placement. I couldn't take my position for granted. It was difficult simply to *be myself* in the discipline. I realized writing would be my main tool, and I needed to make a statement about my experience. I looked to scholars in other fields doing self-reflexive work. Was I going to follow the standard path or shape my own?

My writing wasn't flowing, and then I realized I had been writing as an unidentified, idealized persona—this anonymous, “neutral” scholar. That article helped me find my voice. I didn't stay in that mode forever—I shifted more toward historiography—but I couldn't control how the article was received. I got tired of explaining it privately.

Brown: Yeah, I feel like your work is such a prolific model into how we should be thinking about action, because you're right. In this field of academia, what are our weapons? Our weapons are a pencil and paper. There have been a couple of people at this point who have released articles speaking on the same issues, and I think all of them have accomplished a significant amount of change for the field. Nowadays I think this generation's scholars of color are dealing with the effects of what you and others have rightfully highlighted and how we can continue to move forward with our current set of circumstances. I think that's where we're at.

Ramsey: It would break my heart if people thought they were in the same position I believed myself to be in. This isn't about enemies—it's about honesty. We understand our situation only when others tell us. I wanted my work to reflect real issues, not just contribute to panel talks about diversity. That's why I participated in the written symposium in *American Music*—to preserve my thoughts in the record. The book includes more than that article, but people focus on it anyway, which wasn't my goal.

Brown: Well, I think it's—you know, my basketball coach used to tell me, “KYP: know your players.” If your audience may be unaware of the subject, sometimes that article alone can be an overwhelming realization. But to your point, there is absolutely more to address than just that.

Ramsey: Exactly.

Brown: And the ripple effects of it all will continue, which I hope at least makes you feel good about your work and impact.

Ramsey: We all want to contribute something meaningful, especially as we get older. Being heard matters. Absolutely.

Brown: Well, I must say, we're winding down. Denise Von Glahn, SAM's current President, wanted to ask: “In 2024, you received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society for American Music in recognition of your outstanding scholarly contributions to American music culture and the Society. How can SAM continue to support and recognize your work now that you have turned your attention more towards performing? How can SAM be a resource for you?”

Ramsey: Recently, I've been thinking about how to connect my musical work—especially sonic responses to historical nonfiction—to support organizations like SAM. My recent projects involve multimedia performances requiring performers, technical crews, and nonprofit support—not typical club gigs. Institutions like colleges and museums could help share this work. After retiring and shifting toward performance, I wasn't sure how AMS, SEM, or SAM fit into that picture. Publications have clear metrics—citations, reviews. But for music outside the commercial industry, there's no standardized measure of success. You have to create your own pathways.

Brown: Yeah, which I feel like sometimes can be hard to explain. I appreciate that take and also thinking about the ways in which the academy can supplement that. Folks might not be aware, but a lot of artist grants—rightfully so—exclude artists who are in grad school due to proximity of institutional assistance. What might not be realized is that not every academic institution looks to financially support projects that aren't *technically* required in the scope of a degree program's academic path. And there are *a lot* of creatives in the academy that could absolutely use that financial helping hand. I totally understand why grant organizations exclude academics, and I don't want them to change that. It's less about that, and more about the academic institution adjusting to reflect the current growing interest in including our research field's performance practices into the scope of our research.

Ramsey: Because SAM members mostly work at colleges and universities, when I talk about performing at those institutions, I'm referring to that community. And I've noticed that schools often fund outside artists more readily than they support scholars who perform. There's no clear venue in academia for academics performing in this different mode.

Brown: I've noticed this as well. Of course, I have not been in your shoes exactly, but from a graduate student's perspective I feel like accolades from high-profile music organizations is what gives outside artists a certain level of visibility and appeal to academia. When, in reality and to your point, there are professors already employed at these academic institutions who are doing the *exact same thing*. They might be teaching a music class during the day and may sacrifice their only time off to perform at venues outside the institution, such as nightclubs or coffee shops, doing the things that they love. In rarer occasions, some of our very own may be running in the same performance circles and performing on the *same stages* as the artists that the institution would rather seek out.

Ramsey: You completely understand what I mean.

Brown: Absolutely! Even in my short time in academia I've witnessed it firsthand one too many times and, in many ways, have accepted it as the reality of the system.

Ramsey: One of the toughest parts of this ecology is that scholarly visibility doesn't automatically translate into recognition as a performer. People tell me I'm known for combining scholarship and performance, but I don't have metrics—no calls from someone like Herbie Hancock. Without that, it's hard to measure impact.

Brown: Right! It is the phenomenon of "the tree that fell in the forest, and nobody heard it." I can relate wholeheartedly, which is a whole other conversation that I, too, will continue to invest in.

But in lieu of just wrapping this up, the last question I have is just simply, what other things do you have going on? What events do you have going on that you want to let the people know about? And how can we get to know you past this interview?

Ramsey: You can follow me on Instagram at @ramseymusic and @musicologymedia. I'm finishing up a book titled *Soundproof: Black Music's American Journey from the Civil War to Civil Rights*. It's my view of Black music history—from the enslavement period to the civil rights era and beyond. I blend historical analysis with contemporary examples—the same way I teach, connecting past, present, and future.

I recently premiered a piece for string quartet, digital beats, and jazz vocalist called *Beat Chick: Tunes for Hetty Jones*. I hope for another performance in New York. I'm also finishing an album, *Subject Matter*, collecting songs like those I've written for Lisa B. Thompson's powerful play, *The Black Feminist Guide to the Human Body*, and those in *Making Sweet Tea*, and other pieces in which I've explored intellectual themes musically. That's coming soon. I'm working on a visualizer film for my album *Race Music 21: etudes/grooves/interludes*, which released in February 2025. I'm also continuing to work on my creative production team, Musiqology Media Group.

Sounding the Nation at 250 (Update)

Dana Gorzelany-Mostak

The SAM **Sounding the Nation at 250** Committee was thrilled to receive many proposals for what is sure to be an exciting slate of events in 2026! It is our goal to sponsor at least one presentation in each state during the 2026 anniversary year. Since the committee did not receive proposals from all states during our initial submission period, we will welcome additional proposal submissions up until March 15, 2026. The SAM250 initiative is a wonderful opportunity to connect our communities with the important work of the Society. If you would like to learn more about the Sounding the Nation at 250 initiative and/or submit a proposal for consideration, please click [here](#). For inquiries, please contact Dana Gorzelany-Mostak at societyamericanmusic250@gmail.com.

Sponsored by the Society for American Music, **Sounding the Nation at 250** is an outreach initiative marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026. This project will celebrate the nation's diverse musical and artistic legacies with public lectures, recitals, and exhibits across the United States with the goal of engaging local audiences with research on American music.

SAM at AMS/SMT 2025

SAM hosted a Friday evening reception on November 7 at the 2025 joint meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory in Minneapolis. Thanks to all our members for attending and sharing their enthusiasm for SAM! Photos provided by Jeffrey Magee.



Journal of the Society for American Music

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Colloquy “Minimalism and the Politics of Inclusion”

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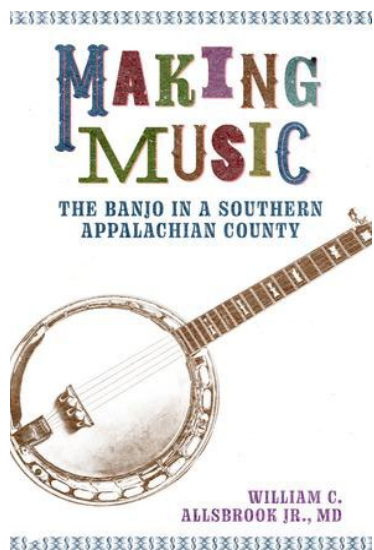
Travis D. Stimeling

Book Reviews

[*Making Music: The Banjo in a Southern Appalachian County*](#). William C. Allsbrook, Jr. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2023. 268 pp. ISBN: 9781496845818. Paperback.

Esther M. Morgan-Ellis

I am deeply grateful to enthusiasts who contribute scholarship on U.S. vernacular music. Much of the work they do—tedious construction of local historical narratives, deep dives into fringe topics—would not win tenure or fame for an academic, but is essential for the grander theorizing that academics often undertake. William C. Allsbrook, author of a recent investigation into banjo players in Haywood County, North Carolina, is a retired physician who pursued his work purely out of fascination with the topic. He has provided the field with invaluable documentation of musicians and their practices. All the same, I am left wondering how academic institutions, with their ready access to expertise and resources, can better support scholars like Allsbrook. This study seems to have stalled halfway between the raw material of Allsbrook’s interviews and a polished monograph. I cannot fault Allsbrook, who has no training in ethnography or scholarly writing. He undertook this project out of his own interest and was generous enough to share his findings. I also appreciate that the University Press of Mississippi is willing to work with non-academic authors in service to the scholarly mission of disseminating knowledge. How, then, might we build a collaborative framework to make books like *Making Music* more informative and readable for both musicians and academics?



Making Music is built upon thirty-two in-depth interviews with banjo players in Haywood County, North Carolina. The players (mostly men) ranged in age from sixteen to eighty-two, and many of the interviews extended beyond two hours in length, covering all aspects of learning and living the banjo. The diversity in ages helps Allsbrook provide significant insight into the dramatic changes that characterized local musicking over the second half of the twentieth century. His study will be of interest to anyone seeking to better understand how vernacular music transmission and practice has transformed alongside the economy, communications technology, and audiovisual media. The central conceit of the book, reflected in its title, is the practice of “makin’ music,” which Allsbrook describes as informal, everyday musicking and traces to a longstanding “in-home folkway” that has flourished in the county for many generations. (It is not clear why the book was titled *Making Music* when the practice is styled as “makin’ music” throughout.)

Allsbrook presents his findings in a straightforward and factual manner, beginning with a methodological statement and demographic overview in chapter 3. A brief biography of each banjo player, accompanied by a photograph, gives the reader a sense of who these musicians are (or were) as human beings. Allsbrook demonstrates a preoccupation with the heritability of musical ability, noting all “above-average” musicians in each subject’s family tree. The remainder of the book reports interview material verbatim, the author providing only brief introductory, interpretive, and contextualizing passages. Chapters 4 through 12 present interview excerpts according to categories identified as significant by the author. These include “makin’ music,” earliest memories of music, earliest memories of the banjo, the appeal of the banjo, learning to play the banjo, practicing, reflections on what it feels like to play the banjo, reflections on what the banjo has meant in the lives of interview subjects, and a final catch-all chapter titled “The Bands, the People, the Places, the Events.”

Every reader will be sure to find chapters that engage their specific interests. The chapter on learning is one of several for which Allsbrook divides his interview subjects into three categories based on age. This effectively illuminates changes in transmission processes from one generation to another. Allsbrook’s oldest informants describe homemade fingerpicks, salvaged instruments, and the desperate quest to decode performances captured on old 78s, while his youngest report learning through the Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) program, in school orchestra, and with the use of DVD tutorials and published tablature books. As a scholar of learning and media practices in vernacular music-making, I found this and related chapters to be full of fascinating accounts that I expect to revisit frequently. Other chapters were less illuminating. Chapter 12 in particular is a peculiar mashup of first-person accounts and brief historical overviews penned by Allsbrook. When he turned his attention to subject matters on which I have expertise—shape-notesinging, for example, or the JAM program—I found his summaries to contain unfortunate errors.

Chapter 13, which I found to be particularly engaging due to the depth and detail on offer, presents lengthy first-person narratives from three prominent banjo players, each of whom details their life with the instrument. Each of these subjects—Doug Trantham, Steve Sutton, and Marc Pruett—is or was a professional musician of some standing. Trantham plays in the clawhammer style (a minority population in Allsbrook’s study) while the other two describe bluegrass careers that took them to the Grand Ole Opry stage and on tour with a roster of famous musicians. All three narratives are fascinating, drawing the reader into the musician’s life and providing a sense of their personality that is missing from the excerpts provided in earlier chapters. I was disappointed not to find Travis Stuart included in this chapter, whom I happen to particularly admire as a player and teacher, but no doubt Allsbrook chose to include the strongest material.

The strength of chapter 13—its compelling sense of linear narrative—is exactly what is missing from the rest of the book. The first two chapters ostensibly provide overviews of banjo history and music in Haywood County, but I found them so disjunct as to be indigestible. (The inclusion of a phrase along the lines of “as previously mentioned” in nearly every paragraph was also exhausting.) These chapters might provide some key facts to a reader who has no familiarity with the subject matter, but I would point both scholars and students to more comprehensive resources. The final chapter enumerates factors that might shape the future trajectory of banjo playing in Haywood County, but Allsbrook provides no interpretation—simply paragraph-long statements of fact under discrete headers. While he charts many paths for researchers to follow, he provides no immediate insights or synthesis of the available information.

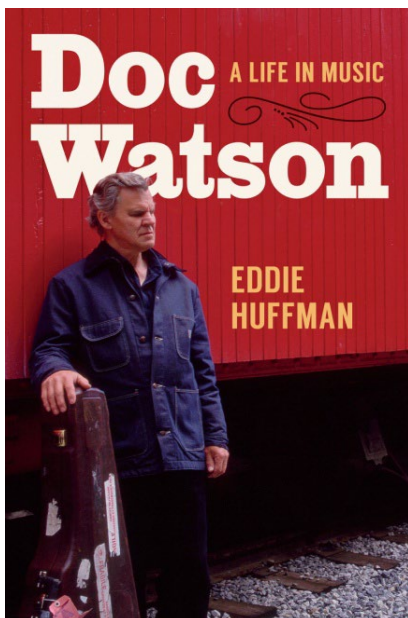
Scholars will find Allsbrook's raw material highly valuable, and banjo enthusiasts are sure to enjoy many of the interview passages. However, this book could be greatly improved at all levels, from writing to organization to interpretation. I hypothesize that Allsbrook's straightforward writing style derives from his profession. A doctor, I should imagine, is trained to clearly state the facts and avoid conjecture. (I expect that Allsbrook's scientific background also inspired him to gauge his subjects' musical aptitude using Edwin Gordon's *Advanced Measures of Musical Audiation*, the results of which are reported—but not meaningfully interpreted—in an Appendix.) An academic editor with subject-matter expertise, given rein to make substantial changes to the presentation of Allsbrook's material, could have made this book much more readable with about the same amount of work that it takes to compile an index by hand. A long-term collaborator—a scholar of vernacular music with experience reporting and analyzing ethnographic findings—would have been even more beneficial.

Can the field of vernacular music studies imagine a future in which academics are paired with enthusiasts to undertake and present research projects that are meaningful to scholars and community members alike? What mechanisms might help writers on both sides of the tower walls to connect and work together? Could collaborations of this sort amplify the voices of amateur researchers and benefit all of us? The joy of making music in community is at the heart of Allsbrook's study. How can we make scholarship in community? An ethos of freely giving and receiving characterizes the learning and musicking experiences of Allsbrook's subjects. How can we give and receive scholarly expertise with equal generosity?

I do not like to point out problems without offering solutions. I was inspired by my experience reading and reviewing this book not only to imagine a way forward but to start charting a possible path. In my capacity as Assistant Director of the Georgia Appalachian Studies Center (GASC), I have launched an Appalachian Research Bureau, the purpose of which is to offer support to students, faculty, and community members who are interested in undertaking research projects of any type. I have recruited faculty across disciplines to serve as mentors, and I pair them with researchers based on their expertise in methodology and subject matter. Anyone interested in utilizing our services can complete an online form that has been circulated among campus organizations and made available to community groups. This initiative is brand new, but we have already received inquiries and look forward to facilitating many internal and external research collaborations. I hope this can become a model for building stronger bridges between academic institutions and scholars in our communities. More information is available on the GASC website: <https://ung.edu/appalachian-studies-center/research.php>

[Doc Watson: A Life in Music](#). Eddie Huffman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025. 288 pp. ISBN: 9781469680354. Hardback.

Isaac Price, West Virginia University



"Doc Watson was a superhero," writes Eddie Huffman in his new biography *Doc Watson: A Life in Music* (1). This strong, succinct description of the late giant of American traditional music holds true as Huffman delivers an account of Watson's life through his compelling narrative of dedication, loss, perseverance, and influence. Arthel Lane "Doc" Watson, born in 1923, remembered seeing vague shapes and colors before losing almost all his vision as a toddler, distinguishing only bright lights. As a result, Watson's highly adaptive behavior becomes an important throughline rather than a shallow ableist narrative of overcoming, connecting his personal and professional lives through examples of lived experience. Whether in interfacing with electronics, recognizing people without them saying a word, or driving a car, Huffman's account of Watson's everyday life with visual impairment correlates with the aural and tactile requirements of his musical aptitude. Huffman prioritizes Watson's importance as a man who lived, loved, and received love, rather than as a man to be pitied for disability, misfortune, and heartache.

The book is structured chronologically, beginning with Watson's early life in Watauga County, North Carolina. In the first chapter, Huffman details the songs and sounds of mountain music that Watson claimed influenced his musicianship and character.

Watson mentioned the sounds of a cappella singing in his Free Will Baptist church, one of his earliest musical influences. Old Southern worship music traditions, such as shape-note singing, are a part of the American musical narrative in which Watson grew up and that influenced his musicianship. Huffman captures Watson's connection to this music, which he referred to as a spiritual experience. Watson's spirituality is a common theme, and it provides insights not only into the character of Watson but also into the meaning behind the music he played: Watson states, "With 'Stand by Me,' I'm not just singing the song—I'm living it. I feel the Almighty right there with me. He becomes real when you fully understand his passion when he went to the cross. There used to be a fear in me, but I'm not afraid to die now" (222).

As a folk musician (not a *bluegrass* musician, as Watson himself often made clear), Watson loved traditional mountain music, which proved to be fortuitous amid folk music's midcentury commercial boom. In the 1950s and early 1960s, following the growing popularity of traditional music known as the "folk revival," musicologist Ralph Rinzler sought out songs, singers, and the lifeblood of folk music in the South (46). In 1960, Rinzler met Watson's friend and musical collaborator Clarence Ashley, who introduced new songs to him and recruited him to record them. From there, Ashley connected Rinzler with Watson, who offered a uniquely Appalachian style of flatpicking otherwise missing from Rinzler's work. In turn, thanks to Rinzler, Watson received exposure as a folk musician beyond his small corner of North Carolina and was given the chance to perform on "The Friends of Old Time Music" show in New York. Huffman includes a touching tribute by John Cohen to Watson, citing him as the reason that "Amazing Grace" became a folk standard: "Suddenly, there you have this wonderful, tall, big, powerful, blind Doc at the microphone singing, 'I once was blind, but now I see'...We all knew it, sort of, but that was such a moving experience that I think almost every folk singer then started including it." (56). Cohen's take on the impact of this performance provides valuable insight into the power Watson had to move audiences and provide the genre with significant contributions.

Huffman acknowledges Watson's contributions to several musical and historical spheres in the book. He focuses especially on Watson's guitar-playing abilities, with which he "transformed the way acoustic guitar was played for generations of musicians, bringing the six string out of the shadows as a rhythm instrument and onto center stage" (2). Watson's notoriety, particularly in the northern and western parts of the country, grew as young Americans yearned for the rich, earthy sounds that folk music provided as an alternative to Cold War international politics and midcentury urban expansion. Huffman argues that the world is better off because of Watson's contributions and that the world would be "much poorer" if not for the events and influences of Watson's early life that led him to bring the old-time music to the people (249).

In Huffman's attempt to "celebrate the life and work of an American Master," he also gestures about what Watson's fate might have been had he never left Deep Gap, North Carolina (3). Considering the challenges outlined in the opening chapter, Huffman describes Watson's life as one of overcoming the odds: "He seemed destined to become a permanent charity case. If not for music and a supportive family, that may well have been his fate" (249). Huffman's authorial voice is subtle throughout the body of his book, reserving these personal thoughts for the introduction and conclusion. He frequently employs direct quotes from numerous sources both personally and indirectly familiar with Watson, compiling the perspectives of multiple individuals. Watson's close relationships appear as a primary theme of the biography. Rarely is there a page in this book that lacks a new person or group of people who recount some kind of relationship with Watson. While his popularity and personability are noteworthy, it is his strongest relationships that help piece together Watson's personal and professional odyssey. Merle Watson, his son and partner in his career as a folk musician, provided him with his greatest joys and sorrows. Huffman describes Merle's untimely death in the introduction of the book before proceeding to give the reader a personal connection to him with story after story of his and Watson's relationship. When Merle's life came to an end, Watson's desire to play followed. However, Watson's need to play, both for personal, spiritual, and financial benefits, led him to continue being the folk music tycoon the world needed. Huffman's telling of this tale tugs at the reader's heartstrings and fosters a strong emotional connection throughout the biography.

The theme of relationships transcends the physical ones manifested in Watson's life. Particularly in the last three chapters, as the narrative surrounding Merle's death unfolds, Huffman often describes Watson's connection to God. Huffman references Watson's words, as he reflects on his teenage years: "I knew God was the creator of all things, but I thought of God as a tyrant who could kill you if you batted your eye wrong. Part of the time I would try to live the Christian life. I would do something wrong and it would bother me, but it didn't convince me to get on my knees and find what I needed to really change" (219). Watson's music, like that of many traditional musicians, often featured a blend of sacred and secular themes (197). He acknowledged the spiritual beliefs he had for much of his life, a revelation that

occurred to him at the age of eighty-three. Throughout this biography, Huffman effectively captures Watson's character development and internal belief system, which became his strength and ultimately brought him closure at the end of his life.

Beyond the story of "The Blind Boy with the Million Dollar Voice," Huffman uses this book to express the contribution that Watson, Ashley, Rinzler, and others made to the folk music genre at a time when jazz and rock and roll reigned supreme (33). This book promotes equal enjoyment and interest to both the Americanist musicologist and the casual history buff. In addition to describing Watson's musical contributions, Huffman spends considerable time simply focusing on Watson's humanity. Huffman's use of newspaper articles, first- and second-hand accounts, videos, websites, broadcasts, and other sources helps paint a complete picture of not only what Watson provided to what we know about American music, but also what American music meant to him. Huffman's portrayal of Watson's character can be simply summed up as "Just One of the People," as inscribed on a plaque near a statue dedicated to him after his death (234). This humble title is not to suggest Watson's insignificance in American musical life and culture, but rather it is a reflective identity of Watson himself. In a world of musicians working for the weekend, Huffman grants us insight into a man and his compatriots who just wanted to "get the old-time music heard" (186). *Doc Watson: A Life in Music* by Eddie Huffman presents a refreshing perspective on a national influencer of American music, making a substantial contribution to a facet of American musical culture that celebrates the life and legacy of a proponent of old-time music.

Student Forum Announcements

Amanda Paruta and Ana Uribe Law, Student Forum Co-Chairs

The Student Forum is seeking students interested in volunteering at the registration table during the upcoming annual conference in Richmond, VA. Volunteers assist with attendee check-in and general conference support.

In appreciation for their time, student volunteers receive free conference registration. This is a great opportunity to support SAM, meet fellow attendees, and engage with the conference community. If you are interested in volunteering, we would love to hear from you! Please reach out to us at samstudentforum@gmail.com with any questions.

Silent Auction Call

The Student Forum warmly invites donations for the upcoming silent auction during the annual conference. We are seeking items such as books, one-month subscriptions to digital research platforms, LPs, and other music-related objects that might spark curiosity and excitement among conference attendees.

Proceeds from the silent auction directly support the Michael Pisani Student Travel Fund, which helps make conference attendance possible for students by offsetting travel costs. Your generosity plays a vital role in expanding access and participation within SAM!

If you are interested in contributing, please contact Amanda Paruta and Ana Uribe Law at samstudentforum@gmail.com. Thank you for supporting our student community!

Student Forum Co-Chair Elections

A new Student Forum co-chair is elected at each annual meeting. Responsibilities associated with the position include engaging with SAM student members, coordinating the annual Silent Auction, and interfacing with members of the Board, Program Committee, and Local Arrangements Committee. Co-chairs are able to host student-focused activities throughout the year, and are invited to curate a panel or professional development activity during the annual meeting. This year, we are rolling out a new election procedure that will allow students time to prepare for the election in advance of the conference. Eligible candidates must have been a member of the SAM Student Forum for at least one year prior to the election, and must be enrolled in a graduate program.

Nominations are now open! We welcome self and nominations of another person (who must formally accept the nomination) via email. Please send your nomination, or any questions, to samstudentforum@gmail.com.

***Bulletin* Board and Member News**

From **Kristen M. Turner**: On October 10, 2025, the Society hosted the inaugural President's Forum on "Difficult Topics in the Music Classroom." Configured as an online panel discussion moderated by Kristen M. Turner followed by a question-and-answer session, the panelists were Jonathan A. Gómez (University of Michigan), Horace Maxile (Baylor University), and Kendall Hatch Winter (University of Kentucky). In their opening statements, the panelists touched on what makes topics difficult, such as teaching American history to students with little previous background or (mis)perceptions by students that can make class discussions hard to navigate. They all suggested that carefully preparing students for potentially challenging discussions can facilitate healthy and productive dialogue. The Q&A focused on how to build trust in classrooms and the efficacy of various methods for preparing students for potentially traumatizing or challenging class material (such as trigger warnings or class contracts). The forum was scheduled in response to feedback from SAM members that they would like more events between the yearly conferences, and President Denise Von Glahn is planning more forums in the future.

From **Mark Slobin**: I was saddened to hear of Karen Ahlquist's passing. Your memorial omitted the time she taught at Wesleyan University, where she was a much-valued colleague. Much later, I was grateful to her for generously steering an article of mine through *JSAM*.

Upcoming SAM Events and Deadlines

January 23: Join us at 3:00–4:30 p.m. (EST) via Zoom for the next President's Forum, which will focus on AI. Moderator **Paula Bishop** will be joined by panelists **Ryan Bañagale**, **Jennifer DeLapp-Brikett**, and **Maria Ryan**. An email invitation was recently sent to all SAM members with a registration link.

Call for *Bulletin* Contributions

The *Bulletin* editorial board invites members to contribute feature articles, reviews, and news, as well as ideas for future *Bulletin* segments or series. We welcome essays and opinion pieces on current issues in American music (broadly conceived) and music scholarship; pedagogical essays, lesson plans, and other materials; reports on concerts and conferences of interest to our membership; transcriptions of interviews with prominent persons in American musical life; reviews of recent books and media pertaining to American music; and updates on our members' scholarly, creative, and professional activities.

You can contact members of the editorial board via the SAM website (<https://www.american-music.org/page/SAMBulletin>) or via the email addresses listed at the bottom of the *Bulletin* issue.

The *Bulletin* of the Society for American Music

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Editorial Board

Editor: [Samuel Parler](#)

Book Reviews Editor: [Chase Castle](#)

Design, Layout, and Media Editor: [Katie Callam](#)

Items for submission should be submitted via the [Bulletin's information page](#). Photographs or other graphic materials should be accompanied by captions and desired location in the text. Deadlines for submission of materials are 15 December, 15 April, and 15 August.