



Sounding the Land

The writer of a journal distills experience on paper.

Musicians inscribe it on air.

Those of us who have European roots can easily forget that we descended from tribes, migratory people, people of the earth who wore the skins of animals killed by their own hands. We can easily forget that we once worshipped the earth and the heavens, that our long-ago ancestors found spiritual mystery in fire, authority in thunder, and a strange otherworldly presence in an echo.

The migration of my hunting and gathering ancestors led them eventually to settle into villages and townships within kingdoms and empires. I am the result of those movements and alliances and now have migrated from my beginnings near Seattle down to California and then over to Arizona.

My home sits within full view of solid stone cliffs defining the southern edge of the 140,000-square-mile land mass known as the Colorado Plateau. My front porch looks onto Sedona red rock rising 1,700 feet above the house foundation, up to a mountain capped by remnants of limestone and massive cliffs of Coconino Sandstone.

Old-timers call the dome-shaped formation Grayback, alluding to the appearance of its secret north-facing cliffs. The United States Geologic Survey calls it Capitol Butte, bowing to a powerful political landmark. And newcomers call it Thunder Mountain, a name I avoided until I heard the loudest force of nature repeatedly echo among its crags. After that storm I couldn't help but call it Thunder Mountain.

There is nearness to mystery atop a mountain's crown, and I have felt it repeatedly at the summit of Thunder Mountain. A little notebook is stored there in a glass jar, inviting climbers to record the inward experience of this private place. I usually take the time to read and then sign the mountain guestbook, enjoying the connections expressed by others:

"The peace of the heights. Bird song. A breeze on my face. God is surely near."

"Sitting on the summit is so empowering and freeing to a cramped spirit."

"What a wonderful place and breathtaking view. I can't wait to bring my brother to this same spot."

"Watched the ravens do their magic dance. Everyone's a poet up here. How could you not be?"

Yes, how could you not be?

ON ONE HIKE UP THUNDER MOUNTAIN I invited along William Eaton. William, a master stringed instrument designer and builder, is also a musician who has explored his spiritual connection to the desert Southwest. Integrating the sounds of his unique guitars with gourd rattles and water drums, silver flute and electronic violin, his world-music ensemble weaves together new music with ancient expressions.

William Eaton improvises a haunting melody by playing a hunting bow in an echoing cave.

As photographer I sought to capture this rich and intriguing connection that has garnered him three Grammy nominations. We chose to shoot his portrait in a large cave I had discovered years earlier in the cliffs of Thunder Mountain.

We left on foot from my home, Eaton's cased lyre harp strapped to my backpack and William carrying another of his skillfully crafted instruments. His harp uses an empty knot in the wood for a sound hole.

We entered the Red Rock–Secret Mountain Wilderness and climbed through scrub oak and cat's claw for nearly an hour until we stood beneath the dark, empty cavern. William scrambled up onto a high ledge inside the mouth of the opening, took one of his instruments, and began playing. I shot a series of photos.

Then, shifting moods, he brought out red clay, a hunter's bow, and a gourd rattle. He stirred the red earth into water and painted his body with mud. Shaking the gourd rattle he began a dry, sharp rhythm. The hunter's bow became a prehistoric instrument as he plucked its string. He began chanting.

His primal call filled the hollow cavern. Sound waves and vibrations carried a connection to the land. He chanted with abandon. My sense of time melted in the awe of the present moment, simultaneous with all that was or will be. And in the sound of "awe" is the resonance of all holy names.

"The surface of the Sun vibrates like the instrument of a finely tuned orchestra," the University of Texas McDonald Observatory revealed. "And a recent study says that Earth may respond like a planetary eardrum, vibrating at some of the same frequencies as the Sun itself. Telescopes on the ground and in space have measured thousands of these vibrations, each of which has its own frequency, like musical notes. The solar wind carries the vibrations to Earth's magnetic field, which funnels them to the atmosphere and ground."

William's rich, full-bodied chanting sent a bold celebration into the inner cavity of Earth's ear. He spoke neither words nor stories, but he talked to the Earth, and the Earth listened, and he sang out with power, with respect, and with joy. Inside that cave the sound vibrated into my tissue and organs and the very marrow of my bones. When the sound ended, silence galvanized the experience.

The camera had clicked, but no picture, no recorded tracks of music, could ever replicate that experience. I longed to be so bold.



"When I recollect chanting at Thunder Mountain I am transported back to that experience, one that each of us has direct access to. In a few breaths I am becoming dirt and rock and bush, and my utterance comes without thought . . . just an initial intent and engagement with my living surroundings. It is that part of me that is ancient as the mountain, that moves lightly upon the breeze, and is inside and outside of the boundary that is skin. The resonance, the echo, the sounds—they alert my attention and restore me to reverence for the miracle of this time, this presence, this now."

—WILLIAM EATON

TOP: Created by a previous visitor, an intricate and ephemeral design of stones awaited discovery in Boynton Canyon.

LEFT: Pictographs above the abandoned Honanki pueblo in north-central Arizona may date back 3,000 to 8,000 years.



Visionary artist Ra Paulette spent over two years carving the rooms, stairways, niches, swirled designs, and then inlaying stones and mirrors in the Sandstone Shrine.

A niche sculpted in a wall of the Sandstone Shrine amplifies a singing voice with rich resonance.

heart, gifts given and received."

Her voice never overwhelmed the space. As it grew, layer upon layer, ever more fully playing off the stone, into a living, breathing presence, the space came alive and responded. Round, pulsating energy surrounded me, and inside the sound was her clear, gentle voice. I longed to be so brave.

SUSAN HAS SUNG in Europe's famous cathedrals, in burial chambers of the Druids, and with the sculptor of the Sandstone Shrine hidden in the Ojo Caliente River Valley in New Mexico. She gave my wife Wendy and me directions on how to find it.

Not far from hot springs the Apaches considered their healing grounds, a dusty trail drops into a private wash and then ascends a barren hillside toward tall, nondescript gray cliffs. There in the cliff shadows hides a simple wood-framed glass door. Unlocking the door we stepped inside the sandstone cliff.

I WAS FORTUNATE TO SHARE a few days with Susan Hale, the respected author of *Sacred Space, Sacred Sound: The Acoustic Mysteries of Holy Places*. I took her to the thirteenth-century pueblo outside Sedona called Honanki. The large Sinagua dwelling, with walls rising over two stories tall, is open to the public for viewing from a platform, but access inside the alcove has been closed for years. Having helped stabilize the ruin under the supervision of Peter Pilles, Coconino National Forest archaeologist, I was granted permission to enter.

I showed Susan the low, narrow doorway our crew helped rebuild. Then the window we restored with stone and mud masonry. We then moved to the center of the alcove, midway between a remnant kiva and the empty-roomed dwelling. Susan looked at pictographs near the high ceiling of the cavity.

When I read Susan's book, she described singing at Lascaux, the cavern of prehistoric paintings in France now open only to researchers: "I breathe in the air of the cave and let it fill me. The cave itself shows me how to sing. . . . When I hear an echo, it seems as if my voice is being reflected back by the bison—no longer my voice, but the bison's voice, the voice of the cave itself."

Within the Honanki alcove she sang out a wordless toning sound, testing the reverberation of the echo. Changing pitch she painted strokes of sound as if they were watercolors she was testing in the margins. Into more and more individualities of the cavern she sent her singing voice, until she found the echoing sweet spot of the cave.

"Some research suggests that petroglyphs and pictographs may have been placed at echo sites," Susan said after her Sedona visit. "I looked at the pictograph images above the ruins, closed my eyes and heard sounds from some third ear, some other way of knowing, and allowed my song to emerge as an offering of the moment."

"I heard the harmonics in my voice," she continued, "resonate off the stones imprinting the pictograph images into me, spirals, unfurling into my ears, handprints touching my





Windows barely visible from the outside allowed sunlight to bounce a soft luminous glow throughout a multitude of creamy white chambers. The sculptor of this place, visionary artist Ra Paulette, had told Susan, “People dig for coal and oil, gold and silver, and precious stones. The holes they leave are scars of wanting. Why not dig for beauty instead?”

Paulette finished the shrine in 1996, after two years of work using only hand tools and a wheelbarrow. He carved the interior rooms with huge vaulted ceilings, rounded columns, curving stairways leading down past private niches, a monumental throne inside a scalloped alcove. He placed mirrors to represent small water pools. The carved surfaces were faintly striped in the natural stone, smooth and sensual.

Wendy shares her first impression, after we removed our shoes: “I recall the feeling of white powdered sand between my toes, cool and pure. I heard only great silence.”

For me it seemed that my human cells and the quartz granules of sand recognized each other, both wanting to share and feel acknowledged in their sacredness. I was inside a temple of pure beauty. Here was a place where light floated and echoed and caressed rooms of naked stone.

“An ancient Sufi chant came forth,” Wendy remembers. “I heard music, tones—‘Ishq Allah Mahabud Lillah’—the Spirit is at once the Lover, the Beloved, and Love Itself. I felt this. I only knew I had to sing it. I sang and felt my own sound return to me richer and fuller than I’d ever heard my own voice. I bathed in my own sound and felt renewed as never before.”

The Sandstone Shrine holds a labyrinth of twenty-foot tall chambers hard-carved inside a bluff in northern New Mexico.

LARRY LINDAHL is a landscape photographer whose work appears in national exhibits, award-winning books, magazine covers, photo essays, and feature stories. He has written and photographed for publishers such as *Arizona Highways* and *Outdoor Photographer* covering landscape photography, regional history, and several Grand Canyon adventures. Lindahl is the author of *Secret Sedona: Sacred Moments in the Landscape*, a natural history coffee table book about the region where he lives.

“I recall a late afternoon concert in Blacktail Canyon playing the luminous Fourth Quartet of Shostakovich. The work ends quietly, drifting and intermingling with the sounds of the frogs and birds amid the fading light. They were there all along, but now our attention shifted from music to nature’s realm. As the music faded, the audience held its applause, listening intently to these connecting worlds.”

—STEVE BRYANT

Blacktail Canyon becomes a natural amphitheater for violinist Steve Bryant and his string quartet when they play music deep in Grand Canyon.

From the other end of the shrine came Wendy’s singing. Words I did not recognize traveled in clusters of tone, moving and sustaining, hesitating and overlaying. I felt her clear intent and gratitude in a chamber of Earth’s ear. I longed to make sounds so beautiful.

At the far end of the chambers, down steps gracefully descending past the throne, was a sculpted niche. Holding space about three feet around, with scalloped edges, it led into a cupped pocket slightly larger than my head.

A sustained baritone sound began from within me, building upon itself. The deep rich sound penetrated my chest cavity and my skull with a pleasant vibration that I had never felt before. I sang more boldly into the concave opening and played with the resonance, fine tuning my pitch, until sound became an entity of its own, growing and pulsating and filling the chamber and then traveling into larger and larger spaces.

Afterwards Wendy told me, “I heard your voice, first quiet, and then strong and clear, as if you were next to me or even in me. I then realized that you were sounding from the farthest back room of the shrine.”

MY PATH OF CONNECTING to self, and to others, has been through photography. Slowing down the movement of attention, the photo stills the experience. Inside the art of photography lies the beauty of contemplation. In stillness we can see into a fleeting moment with unhurried eyes.

The art of making photographs of the landscape taught me gratitude. The experience of sounding in the landscape brought a gift as well, a glimpse of the invisible beauty hidden within the reciprocal connections between music and place.

WE LEAVE OUR STORY deep within Grand Canyon where Steve Bryant rafts down the river with a commercial trip. As a guest on the Canyon Explorations/Expeditions trips, he often enjoys time on the oars. He also plays violin in the Seattle Symphony Orchestra.

Every year he organizes a special river trip, bringing a string quartet to play music in the Grand Canyon. This summer he invited his wife Sue Jane, on viola, and John Weller, on second violin, all from the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, as well as Peter Parthun, on cello, from the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

In one stone cathedral after another, the string quartet unloads, sets up, and plays a concert of classical music. Their finely tuned instruments bring heavenly sounds into the natural amphitheaters of North Canyon, Seventy-five-mile Canyon, Trinity, Tuckup, and The Ledges, each place with its own ethereal acoustics. In these moments glow the resonating beauty of human music, and a deep reverence for the power and elegance of Nature. River guide Wayne Ball serves as the musician’s roadie. Reflecting on years of experience, he tells me he’s seen more genuine tears on these concert trips than on any others.

A Sufi poet and musician once said that “Sound is the source of all manifestation. The knower of the mystery of sound knows the mystery of the whole universe.”

Albert Einstein philosophized that “we can dimly perceive and try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in Nature. Human beings . . . or cosmic dust—we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper.”

I can no longer stand aside, searching for beauty only outside myself. An unseen beauty lives beyond the purely visible captured in sunlight and shadow. And I carry it within me.

