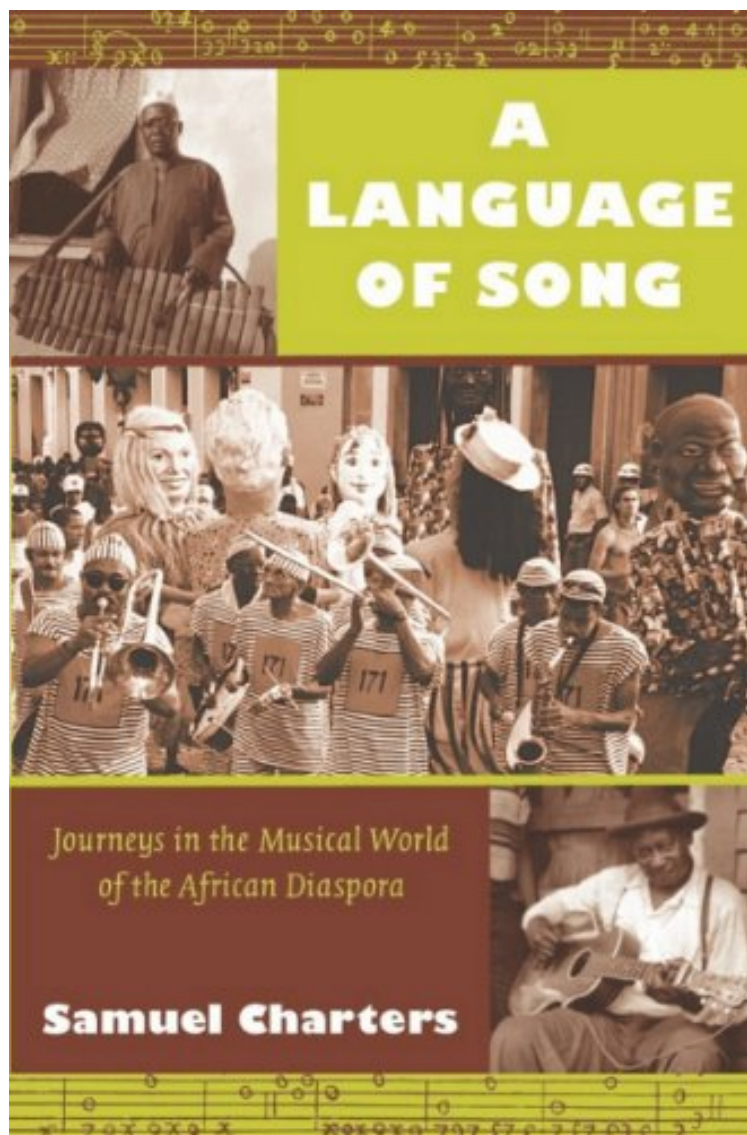


A Language of Song: Journeys in the Musical World of the African Diaspora

Samuel Charters

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Samuel Charters : A Language of Song: Journeys in the Musical World of the African Diaspora before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Language of Song: Journeys in the Musical World of the African Diaspora:

In A Language of Song, Samuel Charters—one of the pioneering collectors of African American

music—writes of a trip to West Africa where he found “a gathering of cultures and a continuing history that lay behind the flood of musical expression [he] encountered everywhere . . . from Brazil to Cuba, to Trinidad, to New Orleans, to the Bahamas, to dance halls of west Louisiana and the great churches of Harlem.” In this book, Charters takes readers along to those and other places, including Jamaica and the Georgia Sea Islands, as he recounts experiences from a half-century spent following, documenting, recording, and writing about the Africa-influenced music of the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Each of the book’s fourteen chapters is a vivid rendering of a particular location that Charters visited. While music is always his focus, the book is filled with details about individuals, history, landscape, and culture. In first-person narratives, Charters relates voyages including a trip to the St. Louis home of the legendary ragtime composer Scott Joplin and the journey to West Africa, where he met a man who performed an hours-long song about the Europeans’ first colonial conquests in Gambia. Throughout the book, Charters traces the persistence of African musical culture despite slavery, as well as the influence of slaves’ songs on subsequent musical forms. In evocative prose, he relates a lifetime of travel and research, listening to brass bands in New Orleans; investigating the emergence of reggae, ska, and rock-steady music in Jamaica’s dancehalls; and exploring the history of Afro-Cuban music through the life of the jazz musician Bebo Valdez. *A Language of Song* is a unique expedition led by one of music’s most observant and well-traveled explorers.

From Booklist Drawing on research in the U.S., Brazil, and the Caribbean, musicologist Charters reports on particular locales, their histories, and their musical traditions with a concern for how modern African diasporic music still relates to Africa. In Jamaica, he notes the dichotomy between where reggae started—the slums of Kingston—and where the country’s high-profile reggae festival takes place—the resort-infested opposite coast; he finds that while reggae “didn’t sound like traditional Jamaican music,” reggae percussion exhibited close links to Africa through its incorporation of “the drumming of the island’s religious sects.” He concludes “that the merchandising of popular music plays a . . . complicated role in every society.” For Jamaica, finding “a way out of its dilemmas” was one of popular music’s roles, hence the difference between where reggae started and where it is most profitably performed. Other highlights include a visit to Scott Joplin’s St. Louis home and a musical visit to the Georgia Sea Islands. Not an easy read, but a rich, valuable one that will leave readers much better informed. --Mike Tribby “*A Language of Song* is an important work. Samuel Charters is a lovely writer, his observations and anecdotes are invaluable, and his background for writing this book perhaps unsurpassed among living writers. He has visited so many important places in the history of the music of the African diaspora during the last half century, and has always done so with great attentiveness and sensitivity.” —Ted Gioia, author of *Work Songs* and *Healing Songs*