

Sing It Pretty: A Memoir by Bess Lomax Hawes. Music in American Life. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 216pp. ISBN-13 978-0-252-07509-4. Paper.

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In *Sing It Pretty: A Memoir*, Bess Lomax Hawes (b.1921) recounts her life in sixteen largely chronological chapters that also sway to and fro in time, charmingly, to connect events, feelings, perspectives in an intuitive and authentic life-rhythm. In addition, the author provides a one-page chronology of her life up to 2007, for the benefit of her more linear-thinking readers. Throughout the memoir, Hawes's recollections appear unapologetically unchecked against historical record, existing as "important elements of beauty and substance" that she equates with those "items of intellectual power" that each of us has authority to introduce from our life into the public discourse (p. 174). Her premise challenges the reader to offer the power of our life to others publicly, and asserts that such an offering will accomplish something. Indeed, in her instance, the offering accomplishes a great deal.

Several aspects of Hawes's memoir are particularly significant and endearing.

First, the Lomax family of Hawes's origin was an ordinary family. Living in Dallas and Austin and other familiar places, they sang tunes, told stories, played games on car trips for fun. The two daughters learned to sew; the two sons helped Papa John with his projects. Oldest child Shirley grew to become "the flapper"; John Jr., the worker; Alan, the helper; Bess Jr., the literate musician. Just as many Texas families emphasized sports in rearing their children, John Sr. and Bess Sr. emphasized music. Mother's home-schooling melded the joys of music and play with the discipline of academics, Latin studies above all. She gave each child a personal Latin motto: for Bess Jr., *Faciendo ediscere facere* (By doing, you learn to do). In every task, Mother expected her children to do things right. This applied to youngest child Bess Jr. as she became the family pianist. How so? Bess Lomax Hawes explains: "In some mysterious family enclave, of which I was not a part, it had been decided that I should become a pianist. . . . From Mother's point of view I was not just taking piano lessons, I was becoming a pianist." When Papa, aged 63, lost his 50-year-old wife and became a single parent to 10-year-old Bess, he struggled, as any father would. He sent her to "the very finest school for the development of young ladies he could find," not a good match for his daughter (p. 12). So he moved Bess to a school where a cousin taught. This became the place where Bess first learned to negotiate the confusing world beyond her family, guided by "a small group of fifth-grade Mexican American girls . . . [with] a special assignment: to see to it that I never got lost." In the *Memoir*, Hawes sizes up the group as "experienced, sympathetic, and almost professional" in caring for overwhelmed Bess. From this singular experience, respect for individuals absent ethnic stereotyping became a hallmark of Bess Lomax Hawes.

A second significant aspect is that the ordinary lives of the Lomax family were inhabited by extraordinary human beings. For instance, Bess Jr.'s academic prowess entitled her to start college at age fifteen. When Papa took her along to prison as a song transcriber, not because she was trained but because she was the only family member who could read music, she notated an accurate, detailed transcription. When Ralph Rinzler asked Bess, now a professor at Cal State at

Northridge, to “prepare a living presentation of the arts traditional to the ‘California heartland’” for the “Regional America” section of the Smithsonian’s annual Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C, she and her students took the project on, completed it successfully, and created what is now the Bess Lomax Hawes Student Folklore Archives on campus (p. 103).

Faciendo ediscere facere!

Centering on Hawes’s story, *Sing It Pretty* also points to other extraordinary people: before her day to her parents’ generation; beyond her prime to her children’s and their children’s generations, to whom the book is dedicated; outside the Lomax and Hawes perimeter to Sandburgs and Seegers and Cowells and Georgia Sea Island Singers and the rest. The reader is left wondering, Am I, too, extraordinary?

The third, poignant aspect of *A Memoir* is the author’s warm regard for music as an expression of who we are. Having digested life’s downs as well as ups, she has found ways to be true to their actuality and also find deeper significance in them. Hawes recounts one particularly endearing memory, the Bicentennial Fourth of July Mall folklife festival in Washington. She kept to her usual routine of festival program-visiting, that day the South. Nobody was on the stage or in the audience, due to a competing “major opening-time hoo-ha down at the Lincoln Memorial.” Then “three black gentlemen” in work clothes walked onto the big stage, playing “a battered bass drum,” a snare drum, and a self-carved cane fife from back home in Mississippi. On this morning they played “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

They stood all by themselves on the big stage, and I sat all by myself in the empty audience seats with tears running down my face while they played—in good African American style—that grand old song over and over and over again until they decided it had been well and truly played. Then they marched back to the place where they had come from. I had been the only person to hear them, but I don’t think they especially cared. And I sat there thinking: you know, the folks really always know what to do. (p. 117)

Had Hawes’s memoir been twice as long, I would have eagerly read it and no doubt learned more. On the other hand, the author’s decision to write just enough, no more, is probably a good one. A more detailed index could have been used more efficiently for reference. Then again, Hawes recounts her life in an informal, appealing style that begs us to accept it for what it is, and is not.

Just as American football is a game of inches and American basketball of seconds, American music seems measured by distinctive individual musical paths. Bess Lomax Hawes’s memoir tells two stories: In the foreground, her life as the younger daughter and youngest child of John and Bess Brown Lomax; as pianist, guitarist, banjoist, singer, transcriber, folklorist and scholar, Almanac Singer, teacher, composer, student, professor, festival director, founder of heritage fellowships, source name for folklore archives and a National Endowment for the Arts achievement award, National Medal of Arts recipient. In the background, the weave of Hawes’s life—her distinctive individual musical path—inflects the American musical experience. Early on, the author fashions a meaningful metaphor for American music: materials woven, crafted together into fabric. She describes her mother’s preference for ragbag or “blendy” quilts: “So all

the quilts on our beds turned out to be blendy. They were made out of the clothes we wore and the colors we had chosen and the aesthetic principles we had learned. . . .” The “blendy” colors and their stories were organized along aesthetic principles her mother lived out in their family: “neat corners, straight lines, balanced curves, precise workmanship, unemphasized dividing lines, subtle color gradations. It’s actually a wonderful system; around the world it has produced some beautiful effects, from Italian paintings to British flower gardens to Chinese porcelains to East Texas quilts” (p. 3).

Did Bess Lomax Hawes intend to weave her story to be an essential color blended within the fabric of the American musical experience? Perhaps not. Yet, this is what her memoir reveals, with both “beauty and substance.”