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## Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations (The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies)

*Greil Marcus*

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**Greil Marcus : Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations (The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Three Songs,

## Three Singers, Three Nations (The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies):

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Greil Marcus has been one of the most distinctive voices in American music criticism for over forty years. His books, including *Mystery Train* and *The Shape of Things to Come*, traverse soundscapes of folk and blues, rock and punk, attuning readers to the surprising, often hidden affinities between the music and broader streams of American politics and culture. Drawn from Marcuss 2013 Massey Lectures at Harvard, his new work delves into three episodes in the history of American commonplace song: Bascom Lamar Lunsfords 1928 *I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground*, Geeshie Wileys 1930 *Last Kind Words Blues*, and Bob Dylans 1964 *Ballad of Hollis Brown*. How each of these songs manages to convey the uncanny sense that it was written by no one illuminates different aspects of the commonplace song tradition. Some songs truly did come together over time without an identifiable author. Others draw melodies and motifs from obscure sources but, in the hands of a particular artist, take a final, indelible shape. And, as in the case of Dylans *Hollis Brown*, there are songs that were written by a single author but that communicate as anonymous productions, as if they were folk songs passed down over many generations. In three songs that seem to be written by no one, Marcus shows, we discover not only three different ways of talking about the United States but three different nations within its formal boundaries.

Superb. (Rob Sheffield *Rolling Stone* 2015-10-19) *Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations* is elegant and focused [It] examines the commonplace as a subject and a way of being, as a language anyone might use and a way of listening that's true to ordinary life and all its plainness, order, customs, and moments of the unexpected. The ordinary begins with performance, the singers work, and in *Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations*, Marcus is keenly attuned to the details of that work to words but also to sounds, the way notes drop off, rhythms shift, the way a guitar (Wileys) can be round, heavy, a stone that in an instant sinks to the bottom of a lake. Few risk writing this way about music anymore; its alien, almost obscene to give inflection the weight of meaning it receives here. (Robert Loss *Los Angeles of Books* 2015-11-13) Wildly, lyrically, Marcus writes in *Three Songs* of seemingly authorless compositions songs by no one that belong to everyone, that change as they appear and reappear with new interpreters. In this alluring mystico-musicology, songs bend singers to their disembodied will, not vice versa. (Sara Marcus *New Republic* 2015-08-31) Greil Marcus walks a fine line between grand, romantic, almost dreamy poetic prose and analysis. The enterprise could easily have turned purple, but he does it with consummate skill: distinctive and readable, capturing the sense of a nation haunted by its songs. And the notion that the ultimate accolade might be an artist's work acquiring anonymity is all the more resonant in an age of cheap fame. (Steven Carroll *Sydney Morning Herald* 2015-10-17) *Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations* is a beautiful and hypnotic treatise about how songs journey from origin to ether, from nowhere to everywhere, from a single voice to a common one. As always, Marcus writes with an exhilarating musicality that posits the reader inside the notes, directly upon the sonic road itself, at once both visceral and transcendent. (Carrie Brownstein) Greil Marcus remains pop's most visionary writer, following the thread that flows like the ghostly Mississippi beneath America's musical traditions. He's always essential reading. (Bruce Springsteen) [*Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations* is] wonderful: emblematic of Marcuss interest in how words and melodies find truths that survive the centuries, or appear likely to. He just makes your spine tingle with the feeling he has for music and the things he can perceive in it. (Danny Eccleston *Mojo* 2016-01-01) [This] volume finds [s] Marcus doing what he does best: hearing what you didn't hear or nailing precisely what you did. (David Cantwell *New Yorker* 2015-12-02) Greil Marcus may be the single most influential American music critic of the past half century. A compelling stylist and seemingly omnivorous listener, reader, and viewer of Americana, he teases out echoes of American art and of U.S. history's spiritual dimensions to find a depth in pop forms that few others seek as seriously. Brisk and brilliant. (Josh Garrett-Davis *Los Angeles of Books* 2016-01-05) [Marcuss] book is a prose poem describing American popular culture's embodiment in the media. (Nigel Smith *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-10-21) About the Author Greil Marcus is the author of *The Doors*, *Mystery Train*, and other books.