

For the past six years, once or twice a year I visit the National Aviary around dawn with my clarinet out, jamming with the birds along with Pittsburgh flutist Michael Pestel. I've found that playing along with the incredible avian musicians is one more way to enter their world of sound. Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man* that "birds have a natural aesthetic sense," and I have found this to be true. Each species, from starlings to shamas, has certain sounds which it prefers, put together in particular ways, like little pieces of music with their own shape and form.

Although in most species it's generally the males that sing, to attract mates and defend territories, some of the best birds to interact with are those that use sound in a more complex manner, where both sexes sing elaborate duets to establish a social relationship. I experienced



this firsthand on my first visit to the Aviary six years ago. That's when I got the idea to write my book *Why Birds Sing*, which also includes a CD of all kinds of music I've made out of the sounds of birds. Here's how I remember it:

In front of one thicket, I play a few notes, and all of a sudden a strong, rhythmic outburst comes out. *Brr du du du*. I play something like it back:

Br du du du. And then as I weave a melody the bird joins in above me: *Be pu be pu be pu beep!* Who calls in there? Hmm... he's gray, black and white, robin-sized, hopping, dancing around like mad. "That's a white-crested laughing thrush," Terry Lunsford tells me.

I keep playing; he's responding. At first he comes back at me with rising arpeggios, strong and tough. I play back. He cocks his head, leaps to join in. My notes change. His notes change. There seems to be some connection here. I laugh, and the bird laughs some more. His laugh is a melody, a saxophone laugh, a Charlie Parker laugh.

On the hillsides of their native Southeast Asia, these laughing thrushes go around in noisy, cackling groups of one or two dozen. Their sound is generally considered a call, with

specific social functions, rather than a purely melodic mate-attracting or rival-repelling song. Both males and females do it. Does this mean my bird was trying to tell me something specific, to get me either into his group or out of his world? He seemed to live on his own, apart from any other members of his tribe. Perhaps he was lonely. Maybe the distinction

bird books

The Bird in the Band

creative inspiration at the Aviary

By David Rothenberg, Author and National Aviary member

between song and call is not so clear when a bird is confronted with alien music. This guy's sounds were definitely changing in relation to mine. Something was going on.

Pestel saunters up and takes stock of what he hears. "Wow, I've never heard that bird so excited before. You seem to have gotten through to him."

Hear bird sound as music and there is always some mystique to enjoy. Hear the whole world as music and you'll find we live inside a plethora of beautiful sounds. How many other creatures out there are waiting for the chance to jam? Evolution is not supposed to produce beauty for the sake of loveliness alone. Science needs data to back up every claim. A responsible scientist won't pretend to know why birds sing so well. Will he disagree with the idea that birds burst into song out of pure joy?

Bird songs are a genuine challenge to the conceit that humanity is needed to find beauty in the natural world. Whatever processes of evolution have led to their flourishing, no rigorous natural logic explains why they are so multifarious and complex. Their music is essential, not arbitrary; playful but purposeful; repetitive, not boring. It possesses the necessity to which human art aspires.

The laughing thrush keeps laughing with the clarinet. It's a jazz of the underbrush, an improvisation with the avian world. One animal's song reaches out to another. When music starts to happen *between* humans and birds, you don't have to peel apart the categories of *man-made* and *natural*—the interaction appears and grows before we comprehend it. As in the hottest jam session, it doesn't matter who's from where or who's played with whom, it's the sound that counts, the rapport. Who better to coax in than a songbird with an unstoppable will to sing?

Why Birds Sing by David Rothenberg, Ph.D.
(Basic Books, 2005) is available from
<http://www.hybirdssing.com>