

A Book of Verbs is Something to Hear

Michael Hicks. *Spencer Kimball's Record Collection: Essays on Mormon Music*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020. 232 pp. Paperback: \$17.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-286-5.

Reviewed by Jake Johnson

A book of essays has an upward inflection; it sounds like a question. To *essai*, in French, is to *attempt*. To *try*. But this is not the essay's reputation. Ideals of ironclad arguments, footnoted discoveries, academese, and the red-inked, professorial *careful!*s have spoiled for numberless students the otherwise dignified practice of tinkering in the mind's garage. An essay is less a noun than a verb, and a book of verbs may as well be a thing to hear.

Which is my where my experience with Michael Hicks's latest book both begins and ends. *Spencer Kimball's Record Collection* is new, but Hicks himself probably needs no introduction here. He has written more, and more candidly, about Mormon musical life than just about anyone else. In my mind he is a likeminded ragamuffin—a convert, like me, to a peculiar religion and a convert, like me, to a peculiar field of study. Musicology and Mormonism are more alike than you might presume, and Michael Hicks can't help but force the comparison. He admits in this book that he is a stranger in strange lands, among strange folks, committed to even stranger values of listening, hearing, voicing, and sounding belief. In the rich baritone of this funkier-than-average Saint, Mormondom sounds different.

This is a collection of ten essays that range in topic from hymnals to blackface minstrelsy to *Book of Mormon* the musical to Joseph Smith's playlist. Throughout, Hicks makes a case for listening to Mormonism. Listening to your faith can be blood sport for the unaccustomed. We learn, for instance, how Emma Smith's divinely-appointed hymnal grew

deaf in the ears of Church leadership—her selections of pietistic hymns that bespoke early Mormonism’s preference for an intimate and indwelling Christ gradually losing favor to the militant and jostling tones of revenge, restoration, and re-placement of the post-Nauvoo years. Hicks asks us to consider this sonic example of how shifting values toward hymnody “overrode the woman’s intimate divine impulse.” “That’s how the church left Emma Smith,” he pleás, “and why you should care” (50).

There are other honest, difficult moments to read. Hicks tracks the perennial favorite hymn “Love at Home” to the blackface group Christy’s Minstrels’ romanticizing of plantation life. He recounts in delicious detail the whims of Church authorities granting or withholding permission to publish accounts of Mormon musical life (“When you are telling the old stories in ways that differ from the people holding the keys to the files,” he notes, “you are in trouble” [207]). There is terrific possibility in even his subtle acknowledgement that, unlike the situations where we find ourselves, Joseph Smith could hardly be expected to have encountered anything in his displaced and frontier life that would have challenged him aesthetically. “Would one expect Smith to favor music as radical or as daring as his theology or social manipulations were?” Hicks prods, adding, “If he did, would he be drawn to it or snub it?” (23). Given that holding the often radical theology of Mormonism against its often unassuming and quieted worship voice can sometimes feel like a strangely labored task, Hicks’s is a stunning question to raise, leaving readers to imagine *what, exactly, is* the function of the modern Mormon aesthetic if it fails to reflect the complex and entangled ideas it holds together. The question also invites concerns for how perhaps the more potent aspects of Mormon theology lose their sting when the triumphant shouts of restorative possibilities are muffled by the reverence of a four-part choral harmony that always seems to resolve neatly, ever so nicely, in Mormon throats every Sabbath the world over.

Hicks maintains opposition in all things, however, and his humor and good nature buoy the weight of his critical listening. The essay

on Elder Price in *Book of Mormon* is a playful satire of a satire. I guffawed when learning that the font used to advertise the LP *The Mormon Pioneers* was the same one we now associate with psychedelia in the 1960s. But the title essay delivers the most for me. After unexpectedly inheriting his pick of Spencer Kimball's record collection, Hicks uses the material leftovers of a prophet's listening habits to raise whimsical, witty, but nevertheless serious questions about the world-making of our ears. To tell of your musical tastes is to admit something deeply personal, to perhaps risk a great deal—an anxiety that anyone ever granted control of the stereo in a car full of new friends knows well. Hicks asks us to listen to Kimball's listening. By doing so, he asks, don't we know the man differently? What can we truly know of a prophet if we have never thought to know him by his choicest jam sessions? What does Mormonism become when we listen to it?

This way of thinking may be a grind in a faith uniquely held in place by historians, the lay and the professional. In my experience, sound rarely factors into the mix. Hicks's work is not the only nor the first to interrogate the sonic and performative dimensions of Mormonism—John Durham Peters, William L. Davis, Megan Sanborn Jones, Peter McMurray, and others have been doing the Lord's work, too—but largely an *acoustemology* of Mormonism sputters behind the loud engine of its history. “Without that history we have nothing” is how Gordon B. Hinckley neatly put it—a startling admission coming from the living mouthpiece of a loquacious God.

No, we are not nothing in our listening. Listening is fundamentally a *something* for Mormons. Like *Spencer Kimball's Record Collection*, Mormonism too is a book of verbs. This is a religion founded upon a book that *whispers* from the dust. A book first *spoken* into existence. By a farm-boy prophet who *heard* before he *saw*. The tilted ear is what Mormonism first inspired, Joseph's thick tongue its first casualty. Whatever Joseph saw in the grove—and he himself could never quite be sure of those details—the fact of sound has always seemed to me the

longstanding miracle. It is the sonic fabric of Mormon past and present that drapes across those gold plates. *This is my Beloved Son. Hear him.*

Which is how this book matters. “Everything we know is something vibrating,” as Thomas Watson once said. Telephones, gravity, prophecy, Tchaikovsky: vibrations beget knowledge. Mormonism vibrates too. It is *something*. Hicks shows here that its relationship with America is like an extended game of Telephone, Mormonism’s currency in this country trading in reverb—bodies and voices attuned to one another in harmony so tight that “America’s choir” became its brand manager. The Mormon journey across the distance and decades of America is as much an echo as an archive. But we won’t know that unless we look up and listen.

If you haven’t met Michael Hicks’s work, let this book of essays be your introduction. You may be disappointed with some of his findings, but you won’t be the same for knowing them. Hicks moves through Mormonism like a shape-note melody. He is Mormonism’s Eve, whose voice, in Robert Frost’s imagination, modulates Eden’s cacophonous canopy. “Never again would birds’ song be the same / And to do that to birds was why she came.”

It is something to listen, after all. It is something to try.

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