

PHILIP GERARD, AMERICAN ANTHEM

a review by Bland Simpson

Philip Gerard. *Words & Music: An Album of a Life in Story and Song*. Beach Glass Books, 2023.

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PHILIP GERARD (1955–2022) was the 2019 North Carolina Award for Literature recipient (read about that award in *NCLR Online 2020*). From 1989 until his death, Gerard taught at UNC Wilmington in the Department of Creative Writing, where he founded the MFA program. Read more about him in the remembrance published in *NCLR Online Winter 2023*.

Words & Music is Philip Gerard's musician's-musician memoir about the writing, recording, and launching of his fifteen-song album *American Anthem* – a true, paired *tour de force*.

First came the album, wherein the renowned multi-genre author and multi-instrumentalist Gerard delivers with his clear warm baritone (a fine band backing him) such a rich set of narratives, his passionate, self-described "crazy quilt" of songs about rambling, tramping, sailing, railroading, about loving home and away from home, a remarkable achievement, a childhood dream come true. He so movingly sings of moments and characters from throughout our history: the Revolutionary War's beginning, the Civil War's ending (taking off from Stonewall Jackson's last words), bluesman Robert Johnson's deal with the Devil, aviator Amelia Earhart's mythic flight around the world. Then, with *Words & Music*, comes Gerard's inspired life story, woven throughout this phenomenally revelatory book about the album, its songs, and so very much more.

Nothing about *American Anthem* or its accompanying memoir suggests that Philip Gerard wrote either of these with swansong in mind. Indeed, he seemed at the very top of his amazing multiform expressiveness when he died in November 2022, and his pen went still, his guitar silent. We can only wonder at what all else Gerard would have given us had he been spared for another twenty

years, and we must be grateful for the large dramatic output this truly genuine and singular spirit has left us with.

Nothing shocked me more than hearing from Jill McCorkle that Philip was gone. He and I had just a few weeks earlier collaborated (I played piano on his voter-turnout song "Book the Vote!") shortly before his death, and I had every reason to expect we would do more. And nothing would have pleased this great, Whitmanesque larger-than-life man more than knowing he helped to find the votes that will keep American democracy safe. In an over-arching way, his love of country was his lifelong song, as *American Anthem* and *Words & Music* together show so well.

Philip Gerard was a sailor, rambler, musician, teacher, and he was deservedly celebrated for his many books: for his 1994 novel *Cape Fear Rising* (1994), a daring text that helped open the door on public examination of Wilmington's long-suppressed story of the 1898 white supremacy riot and coup, and for so much more: for filmscripts, such as the one for the PBS program he did with James Leutze on the Cape Fear River, presaging Gerard's terrific, adventurous natural history *Down the Wild Cape Fear* (2013); for a creative nonfiction textbook; for sixteen books in all, one of my favorites being his early novel *Hatteras Light* (1986). While the North Carolina coast during World War II has gotten significant attention, far less notice has been given to our coast's World War

I experiences; one need only look to this Gerard novel for a compelling portrait of loneliness, lust, and maritime combat on the Outer Banks during the late 1910s.

Not only did Philip Gerard understand the high value of the word, he understood its value in so many different ways, including, simply, the *spoken* word. How well I recall his meeting Brent McKee's and my UNC "Changing Coasts of Carolina" class on the Wilmington side of Memorial Bridge in October 2022 to speak with them (calling out powerfully over the loud clanking bridge-plates above) at the Dram Street Boat Ramp about how heavily engineered this river was and had long been, and how often it was out of its banks these days and onto downtown streets ("Sunny-day flooding," he laughed ironically at the glib downplaying phrase for sea-level rise and increased basin-wide run-off). And then he joined the class in a kayak float up Lee's Cut and into the central marsh of Harbor Island over at Wrightsville Beach, speaking about the very high high tide that was allowing us to see for miles out over the marsh grasses. He stayed on for lunch with our class and Tracy Skrabl (North Carolina Coastal Federation then-Senior Scientist) to discuss coastal policies and activism (the *Stop Titan Action Network*, which had successfully opposed Titan Cements's environmentally disastrous mega-plant proposal for the Northeast



COURTESY OF JILL GERARD

Cape Fear). Our students were dazzled – here was an *orator*, here was a *force*.

This was the very marrow of Philip Gerard's being: he was in for *everything*, the writing, the reading of his students' and his friends' works, the thoroughgoing study and acquired knowledge of his adopted state, the singing, the sailing, the *all* of it. He had the high-level passion for life ascribed to artists like Michaelangelo and Thomas Wolfe, the great globe strider taking note of everything and more. Though there is nothing intentionally valedictory about *Words & Music*, still there it stands, at the close of this remarkable man's grand career and life, showing us such dedication and commitment and striving. I spent enough time with him and in communication

with him to know from his energies and his wit and his ways that he truly thought anything was possible in life, the arts, friendship, and love.

Ultimately that is what Philip's *Words & Music* is all about, his letting us in on all the *life* that went into the songs, the rambles, the music that he never stopped hearing, writing, playing, and singing with family, friends, and students. If we listen to all the heart on the album *and* get close to all the heart that comes through in *Words & Music*, we will not only get to know a terrific artist far better, we will know without any doubt that, with all his passions and works, all his words and music, that the authentic American anthem we are regarding is this fine, amazing man in full: Philip Gerard himself. ■