

## THE BALLAD IN AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

While ballads have been a cornerstone of popular music for decades, this is the first book to explore the history and appeal of these treasured songs. David Metzer investigates how and why the styles of ballads have changed over a period of more than seventy years, offering a definition of the genre and discussing the influences of celebrated performers including Frank Sinatra, Aretha Franklin, and Whitney Houston. The emotional power of the ballad is strongly linked to the popular mood of the time, and consequently songs can tell us much about how events and emotions were felt and understood in wider culture at specific moments of recent American history. Tracing both the emotional and stylistic developments of the genre from the 1950s to the present day, this lively and engaging volume is as much a musical history as it is a history of emotional life in America.

DAVID METZER is a professor in the School of Music at the University of British Columbia. He has published widely on a range of modern musical topics, and is the author of *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge 2003) and *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge 2009).

# THE BALLAD IN AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

*From Elvis to Beyoncé*

DAVID METZER

*University of British Columbia, Vancouver*



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*To the memory of Michael Fellman*

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## *Acknowledgments*

As a child, I cried silently to myself in the backseat of a car while listening to Terry Jacks' recording of "Seasons in the Sun." That kid would have been surprised that he would write a book on ballads, not to mention that he would become something called a musicologist. Yet the musicologist is in touch with that kid and still gets emotional over ballads. Musicology has provided me with a way of understanding why ballads have moved me so much. I never, though, wanted my work on ballads to be a musicology secret, a study produced for and best understood by fellow scholars. It was always my goal to write a book that would follow the paths of scholarly research but do so in an accessible and engaging way that would appeal to the general reader, that is, all of us who love ballads.

I would like to thank Cambridge University Press for their support of this project. Editors Vicki Cooper and Kate Brett have agreed with me that a book on widely loved songs should reach out to a wide audience. To have two passionate and shrewd editors behind you is good fortune for a scholar.

Before I wrote a page of this book, I was encouraged by my friend Michael Fellman. A Civil War historian, Michael wrote books that attracted both scholarly and general readers. He thought that I could do the same with one about ballads. The challenge was to find the voice to connect with that large audience. Michael coached me in developing that voice, telling me when it got muffled in academic prose and when it rung out. It grieves me that Michael passed away before I completed this book. I would have loved to hear what he had to say as I worked away, let alone to see his smile when I handed him the published copy. Yet I have heard his voice in my head while writing and him telling me to persevere when setbacks arose. I dedicate this book to his memory.

Also involved in this book from the outset was Michael's wife, Santa Aloi, who has read all of it. I would like to thank her for her dedication and ever-insightful advice. My gratitude also goes to my parents for their undying support, especially for a book in which they will know some of

*Acknowledgments*

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I have created Spotify playlists of the songs mentioned in the book.