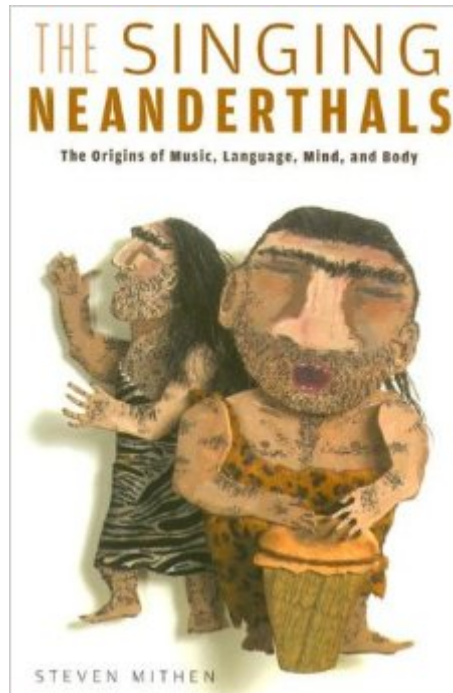


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The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins Of Music, Language, Mind, And Body



Synopsis

The propensity to make music is the most mysterious, wonderful, and neglected feature of humankind: this is where Steven Mithen began, drawing together strands from archaeology, anthropology, psychology, neuroscience--and, of course, musicology--to explain why we are so compelled to make and hear music. But music could not be explained without addressing language, and could not be accounted for without understanding the evolution of the human body and mind. Thus Mithen arrived at the wildly ambitious project that unfolds in this book: an exploration of music as a fundamental aspect of the human condition, encoded into the human genome during the evolutionary history of our species. Music is the language of emotion, common wisdom tells us. In *The Singing Neanderthals*, Mithen introduces us to the science that might support such popular notions. With equal parts scientific rigor and charm, he marshals current evidence about social organization, tool and weapon technologies, hunting and scavenging strategies, habits and brain capacity of all our hominid ancestors, from australopithecines to *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis* and Neanderthals to *Homo sapiens*--and comes up with a scenario for a shared musical and linguistic heritage. Along the way he weaves a tapestry of cognitive and expressive worlds--alive with vocalized sound, communal mimicry, sexual display, and rhythmic movement--of various species. The result is a fascinating work--and a succinct riposte to those, like Steven Pinker, who have dismissed music as a functionless evolutionary byproduct.

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Customer Reviews

Fear not, dear reader. I'm not making the sounds of indecision. Nor have I forgotten the words to my local national anthem. Instead, those sets of letters are acronyms. Steven Mithen uses them to typify the foundations of our ability to communicate in our distant past. The letters stand for "Holistic, "multi-modal", "manipulative", and "musical". With the addition of "mimetic", he uses the collective phrase to explain why "music" in this broadly defined sense, preceded the development of language and grammar in our species. He also explains the "how" of this phenomenon, which is what gives this book its real value. Mithen's previous works are a foundation for this one, although he openly admits that the phenomenon of music eluded him in them. He makes up for that oversight with a detailed examination of fossil and genetic information to support his thesis. As humans fluent in the use of speech, with its lexicons and syntax, we've become blinded to our true roots. We rush children through infancy, overlooking the process we use in communicating with those who lack words and their meanings. Mithen says this period is critical - both because its universality among cultures should tell us something about our past, and because a better understanding of the communication process can lead to smarter and healthier children. Who, among the mothers we know, fails to "sing" to their newborn? In Mithen's view, that childhood communication method repeats what our African ancestors did with each other prior to the development of language. Words, in our time, are representative. They "mean" something - an object, an event, a lesson. In those early days, emotions, especially the basic ones of fear, flight, fight or feed, were the only significant topics.

You can tell the ambitious scope of this book by its subtitle: "the origins of music, language, mind, and body." Wow! Is that all? Actually, the task the author sets out to do isn't as vast as one might at first suppose because they are seen as related in the way early hominids arose and then evolved further. Steven Mithen is less concerned with the origin of music than the way in which the homo sapiens mind differed from its ancestors and the then contemporary hominids. But before I get to my attempt at summarizing what Mithen says about these matters, I want to address something else. The speculative stories that professional anthropologists and archaeologists tell have a very different meaning to them than they end up meaning for the general public and there is some small danger in that difference. Science professionals are all aware of the raw evidence and the context and conjecture surrounding each piece. There are always ambiguities and tentative "conclusions" arrived at by one authority or another and they often conflict. However, to make sense of a broad collection of data a story is created as a kind of summary of what is known at that time. These stories are always fragile as art glass. But they can be a useful way of organizing what is known and

if new evidence found fits within the model it is strengthened. However, it is known that any new evidence found might undo a part of the story or overthrow it altogether. The problem is that the general reader doesn't know the evidence and has no idea of its context. Such a reader is unlikely to read broadly enough to gain some sense of the strength of such a story and whether its speculation is more mainstream or something radical.

Mithen's "The Prehistory of the Mind" was one of the most intellectually exciting books that I can remember reading. His thesis is that the sudden flowering of symbolic representation - like the beautiful cave art of Lascaux - only 40-50,000 years ago could only be explained by a radical change in the mind of homo sapiens. The apparent paradox he addresses, is why the undoubted technical abilities of early man and his ancestors - as evidenced in the abundant and often exquisitely fashioned stone and flint tools - had remained essentially at the same level for many hundreds of thousands of years. Throughout this time - including the period from about 190,000 to 50,000 yag during which anatomically modern humans existed - there is virtually no evidence of any use of these abilities to make anything that could be described as art or decoration. Mithen's solution to this paradox is that early homo sapiens had a "modular" mind - consisting of a "social" module, that allowed them to conduct their relationships with others, a "technical" module that helped them learn to manipulate materials and make tools, and a "natural history" module that understood the animals and plants in the world about them. What they lacked was an integration of these modules - "cognitive fluidity" - which would for example have allowed crossover between social and technical modules, and enabled man to use their technical abilities to fashion art or ornamentation which could be used to modulate or manipulate their relationships with others. It was the evolution of this integrative ability which caused the cultural/artistic florescence that we find so remarkable.

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