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### Storyteller of the Shadowland: Marginalized Identity at the Roots of 'Americana'

Department of Music, University of Richmond

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# NEUMANN LECTURE on Music 2022

## UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

### **Storyteller of the Shadowland: Marginalized Identity at the Roots of 'Americana'**

*A discussion on the life and work  
of songwriter-musician  
Robbie Robertson  
of the seminal roots group The Band*

**Dr. Robynn Stilwell, speaker  
Associate Professor,  
Georgetown University**

**Monday, April 4, 2022**

**7:30 p.m.**

**Ukrop Auditorium  
UR School of Business**



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Authenticity” is one of the most fraught terms in musical discourse: vague, imprecise, and of ambiguous practical use, but with outsized cultural power. The feedback loop between listeners and critics creates a churn that is difficult to escape, or even question productively, though the figure of musician Robbie Robertson offers a particularly fertile opportunity to do so. As a songwriter, music producer, composer, and music supervisor for film (especially for long-time friend and collaborator Martin Scorsese), Robertson’s career has spanned over 60 years and an astonishing range of styles. Canadian by nationality, but half-Mohawk and half-Ashkenazy Jewish by ethnicity, Robertson was the primary songwriter of the seminal roots rock band The Band, which is widely considered the foundation for the “Americana” style. Robertson’s subsequent solo work grew increasingly concerned with texture and space, often highly mediated by electronica and deeply rooted in his indigenous heritage. As this talk elucidates, Robertson’s life and work sit at the center of debates about authenticity and identity, and between insider authority and an outsider perspective, providing unique opportunities to question these boundaries.

### **About the speaker**

**Robynn Stilwell** (Georgetown University) is a musicologist whose research interests center on the meaning of music as an expression, or impression, of movement through space and through narrative. Her early work was rooted in readings of musical-choreographic relationships between Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine, and expanded into the work of Gene Kelly, ultimately leading to a fascination with the specific spatial, temporal, dynamic, and aural characteristics of different media: film, television, theatre, and the imagined spaces of sound recording. This thinking first crystallized into an often-cited essay on the “fantastical gap” between diegetic and non-diegetic cinematic sound (2007). Stilwell’s publications also investigate other parameters and media conditioned by technology, industrial history, and cultural positioning (gender, race, sexuality, class), covering diverse topics such as Beethoven and cinematic violence, musical form in Jane Austen, rockabilly and “white trash,” and French film musicals. Another primary strain of her research—the voices of girls as both embodied sound and individual identity—examines the sonic transitions between girlhood and womanhood. On this topic, Stilwell has written essays on early rockabilly prodigy Brenda Lee, girls and vinyl records in cinema, *The Hunger Games* books and films, and the intertwining of boys’ and girls’ coming-of-age narratives in animated films of the 2010s.

Stilwell is currently working on two book projects that study aural media (radio, podcasts, audiobooks) and audiovisual modalities of television.

Her future projects include studies of Baz Luhrmann films, non-fiction film and television, science fiction across various media, and more on girls' voices.

### **About the Neumann Lecture**

What do protest songs, madrigals, Mozart, cognitive neuroscience, and the Civil Rights era have in common? They've all been topics presented at the University of Richmond Neumann Lecture Series. The Department of Music started the series in 2003 to remember former music faculty member Frederick "Fritz" Neumann, who taught violin and started the University Symphony. Neumann held a Ph.D. in music education, as one might expect of a music professor. But his career was hardly a conventional one. Though he had trained as a violinist in childhood, he earned his first Ph.D. (in 1934 at the University of Berlin) in economics and political science, writing a dissertation on the stock market crash of 1929. After spending a few years working as an export-market analyst in Prague, he decided to take up the violin again—this time, more seriously. His studies took him to several major European cities—Berlin, Paris, Basel—and finally to New York, leading him to apply for United States citizenship. During the Second World War, he served in U.S. Army Intelligence for three years before resuming his music studies at Columbia University, where he earned his second Ph.D.

Starting in his late fifties, Neumann pursued yet another career with great dedication and vigor: the study of performance practices in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music. During the next few decades, he published over forty articles and three books that challenged performers and scholars to revisit long-held beliefs about how to execute musical ornaments and rhythms. He became a scholar of international renown, receiving grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Council of Learned Societies. In 1987, the American Musicological Society awarded his book, *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart*, one of its highest honors: the Otto Kinkeldey prize, given annually to a book of "exceptional merit." After living for more than five decades in the United States, he had planned a trip to Prague in the spring of 1994, which would have been his first return visit since 1939. But he died that year in March at age 86, after a life overflowing with accomplishment.

The Neumann Lecture Series kicked off in 2003 with Christoph Wolff, a German-born scholar who teaches at Harvard University and studies

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the music of J.S. Bach. Wolff and Neumann were cut from similar cloth: both were educated in Germany and interested in eighteenth-century music, reflecting a branch of music-historical study that centered on Austro-German repertoire from centuries ago. But the scholarly interests of Neumann lecturers rapidly diversified: Susan McClary (2004) applied feminist methods of scholarship in her talk, while Kay Kaufmann Shelemay (2005) spoke about Syrian Jewish music from an ethnomusicological perspective. To mark Mozart's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2006, Nicholas Till delivered a talk centered on that composer. Guthrie Ramsey (2007) is the only speaker to date who brought his own band with him to illustrate his lecture on music in the Civil Rights movement. Opera scholar and native Londoner Roger Parker (2008) talked about a 1930 production of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* at the famed La Scala opera house. Later that year, Suzanne Cusick introduced research on the use of music as a form of torture in the U.S. "global war on terror," which she discovered through unclassified military documents and interviews with detainees and interrogators. In ensuing years, the series further broadened its scope by presenting the composer Lei Liang in 2011 and the conductor Joseph Flummerfelt in 2012.

The tenth Neumann lecturer, Craig Wright (2013), who started out as a scholar of medieval music, discussed a new project in which he applied current neuroscientific knowledge of the brain to Mozart's compositional processes. Anthony Seeger (2014), nephew of folk singer Pete Seeger, talked about protest music in the 1960s, singing a few songs and accompanying himself on the guitar. In 2015, Jessie Ann Owens discussed how the Italian Renaissance composer Cipriano de Rore turned a well-known literary lament (that of Dido from Virgil's *Aeneid*) into a small-scale musical drama. J. Peter Burkholder (2016) spoke about Charles Ives's practices as a church organist and their impact on works such as his Third Symphony. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong investigated contemporary social policies with her 2017 talk titled "Listening to Pain." The following year, George Lipsitz spoke about ethical acts of co-creation in "Accompaniment as Social Practice." Guthrie Ramsey made a return visit in 2019 to share new research on the history of African-American music and its resonances of enslavement. Our most recent Neumann lecturer, Tammy Kernodle (2020), historicized the role of Black women in framing the sonic contexts of civil rights and protest music.

Now, as we enter our third decade of Neumann Lectures, the Department of Music looks forward to continuing the legacy of the series' namesake by highlighting dynamic and groundbreaking musical research.