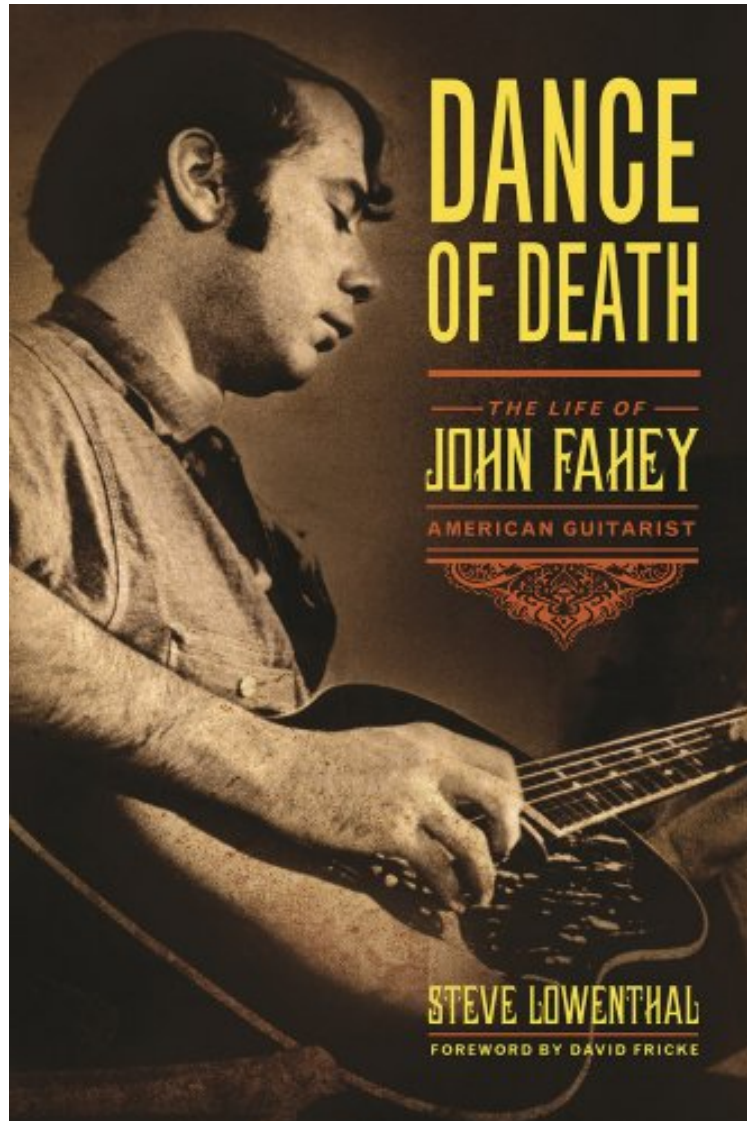


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Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist

Steve Lowenthal

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Steve Lowenthal : Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Painfully goodBy AudiophileAnyone who enjoys John Fahey's music enough to have more than one of his albums will enjoy this book. It is capably written, beautifully printed and well documented, and the author knows enough about music to write credibly about Fahey's works. More photographs would've been enjoyable, but the ones used are apt and help tell the story.I have to say for me, though, the experience

of reading it was somewhat painful. Like any Fahey fan I knew the sad way his life ended, and experiencing this uniquely American artist's decline was challenging. 11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Get This Book By Takoma All Fahey fans should get this book and read it. It is really the only serious Fahey biography or documentary currently available on any media. I would venture that this is the only real biography or documentary on Fahey, period. Either way it is unlikely to be exceeded. What about the "Blind Joe Death Saga of John Fahey DVD"? Well, get that too. The creative people did a great job setting beautiful imagery to Fahey's music. You can pretty much skip the interviews on that DVD as they are 50% content free for all but diehard Pete Townshend fans. What makes this book so great? It focuses on Fahey himself. Lowenthal obviously made a huge effort to interview ALL of the key people throughout Fahey's life, not just the readily accessible handful who came to know him over his last decade. Fortunately, they are included as well. Next, it stays away from the music itself. Yes, Lowenthal dutifully cites the well worn "Ives/Bartok/classical music over traditional fingerpicking" quote which has never really applied to more than a handful of Fahey's compositions. Fahey was a creative genius composer who listened widely to all types of music. The closest that we're ever going to come to understanding his creativity is found in the rambling text in "The Best of John Fahey 1959-1977" tablature book. This book actually does reference some of that as well, so it really is as good as it gets on his music and Lowenthal wisely knows when to stop. Finally, it focuses on the people and experiences in Fahey's life and through them we come to understand Fahey about as well as we can. If you've spent time reading his liner notes, his books, etc then you will enjoy getting a better understanding of the faces, emotions and histories behind the liner notes. For the first time, diehard fans understand the meaning of "Koonaklaster" (although a few of them seem to still be referring to Fahey himself as the "Koonaklaster" here while reviewing (and I assume, first reading?) this wonderful book.... oh well, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. I was interested to learn that alone among peers, only Village Voice critic Nat Hentoff liked "Of Rivers and Religion", writing "I was not prepared for what I heard in this album. I've been absorbed in all kinds of music for a long time, and only rarely have the first few notes of a musician I'm listening to for the first time announced a wholly singular presence-- an event". I agree with him that "Rivers and Religion" was a masterpiece, and I would include "Old Fashioned Love" and "After the Ball" as well. That makes two critics, as I worked as a published music critic and later an editor seemingly a lifetime ago. While the general consensus will always be that these releases were campy and plastic copies of the originals, they opened a window to 20's Jazz for me. In my humble opinion, these reworked versions exceed the originals in every respect and there are also many hauntingly beautiful Fahey compositions such as "Dixie Pig Bar-B-Q Blues" so perhaps these critics ought to give those 3 records another spin or two. Fahey's last good record was "Let Go", a collaboration with Terry Robb which was soon followed by their weaker 1985 "Rain Forests" release. After this we hit the 1990's and here we run into the only truly weak and inaccurate point in the book. Not some trivial misstep such as the botched assertion that David Grisman was the Dead's lyricist... No, here Lowenthal goes completely off the tracks in a bizarre attempt to portray the 90's as some sort of paradigm shift where tortured soul artists somehow emerge to snatch control of the recording industry from the NYC suits! Here he is talking about the Seattle scene, an era which epitomized complete and total lock down by the "star maker machinery behind the popular song" which Joni Mitchell had so famously criticized. Ironically, Mitchell herself who is the very definition of a non-mainstream tortured soul first found herself unable to get recording contracts at all in this very era. Some "rebellion" against the "powers that be"!!! It's fortunate that Lowenthal generally stays away from the music in the book, because the truth was that 90's Seattle was about as derivative as rock gets with 3 or 4 bands which idolized Neil Young and blew all of our minds solely because they were the first American generation to like, prefer and slavishly imitate their parents' music. Far from talent or creativity, it sounded "real" only because it aped the real music that the kids had heard throughout their childhoods in the back seats of their parents cars. They bought it and the industry rushed in to endlessly reissue that music and to sign every imitative band in sight to enormous contracts, regardless of talent. The whole scene peaked with "Mirror Ball", a Neil Young/Pearl Jam collaboration which marked somewhat of a low point for Young and a career peak for Pearl Jam. Crazy Horse were the big winners as their reputation increased astronomically once we had all heard the "new hard rocking alternative". Today these "kids" have music collections which contain 90% 60's/70's and little of Seattle... check out your own kids' collections. How could Lowenthal get this so very wrong? To his credit, Lowenthal does not go so far as to praise Fahey's work in this period. In fact, he reveals that "Juana", Fahey's only really good composition in that era, was actually played and recorded by Jim O'Rourke as Fahey struggled to play it. All in all this is required reading for a Fahey fan and this is very likely to stand as the definitive Fahey biography. 19 of 21 people found the following review helpful. Poor Boy, Long Ways From Home By Tat - AceI went with 5 stars because it is a well written book and I didn't feel disappointed that I spent twenty bucks for the privilege of reading it. I sat down with it in the morning and, aside from a few breaks went through it from cover to cover by bedtime at 11PM. Say that to say that the text flowed and held my interest. Of course only a Fahey devotee would be interested in reading a 188 page biography of this man. A great and innovative guitarist but flawed human being, like as we all are. I was introduced to his Takoma releases beginning with Blind Joe Death in the early 1970s. I would be classified as one of those aging hippies he disliked because they wanted him to continue to play the same stuff he had composed in the 1950s. I remember being put off by his liner notes with the 'put ons' that he wrote. I recall

his editorials in *Guitar Player* magazine way back then, with phrases including, "the ontological fixity," drew a lot of ridicule from readers who commented in letters to the editor. They thought him pretentious if I remember correctly. Of course Fahey would have classified such critics as the "midgets" he said he was surrounded by, and maybe that is right. So it is a sad story of a man whom I suppose you could accurately say was a tortured genius, whose personal demons derailed his life. I am curious as to why the author didn't include more on Fahey's relationship with Stefan Grossman. He recorded a live concert for Grossman, and a guitar lesson series, with an interview. Bottom line is for those who are curious as to the life of John Fahey I recommend the book.

John Fahey is to the solo acoustic guitar what Jimi Hendrix was to the electric: the man whom all subsequent musicians had to listen to. Fahey made more than 40 albums between 1959 and his death in 2011, most of them featuring only his solo steel-string guitar. He fused elements of folk, blues, and experimental composition, taking familiar American sounds and recontextualizing them as something entirely new. Yet despite his stature as a groundbreaking visionary, Fahey's intentions—as a man and as an artist—remain largely unexamined. Journalist Steve Lowenthal has spent years researching Fahey's life and music, talking with his producers, his friends, his peers, his wives, his business partners, and many others. He describes Fahey's battles with stage fright, alcohol, and prescription pills; how he ended up homeless and mentally unbalanced; and how, despite his troubles, he managed to found a record label that won Grammys and remains critically revered. This portrait of a troubled and troubling man in a constant state of creative flux is not only a biography but also the compelling story of a great American outcast.

From *Booklist* John Fahey is hardly a household name, yet it is surprising that this is the first biography of the idiosyncratic acoustic guitarist. Fahey, who died in 2011, was a singular if peculiar figure in the music world, a cult figure, really. Even as a high-school student, Lowenthal notes, Fahey felt like an outsider, "more miserable and alienated" than the average teenager, and he sought refuge in music. Fahey recorded more than 40 albums, mostly folk and blues in the so-called American Primitive style—he was a virtuoso finger-picker—while releasing some experimental material later in his career. But he struggled with many inner demons, including a bad case of stage fright and addiction to alcohol and prescription pills. Prone to self-destructive behavior, he even ended up homeless at one point. The fact that Fahey was able to maintain a long career and establish his own record labels, Takoma and Revenant, is in itself remarkable. While not always engaging, journalist Lowenthal does offer a sympathetic portrait of a troubled yet undeniably talented man. --June Sawyers "Offer[s] a sympathetic portrait of a troubled yet undeniably talented man." *Booklist*