

## Gospel Music

When I was about eight, I defected from the Episcopal Church to the Methodist church for reasons having more to do with sibling loyalty than theology. My older sister rebelled against attending Sunday school, and I joined her when she accepted the compromise of becoming a Methodist. Our two brothers remained loyal Episcopalians; and, when the time came to get serious about it at age twelve, I returned to the fold for confirmation. All through high school I was an ardent believer and acolyte. Charlotte eventually did me one better by converting to Roman Catholicism before her marriage.

The main thing I remember about being a Methodist is singing hymns. Two hymns in particular linger in the background of my brain. One was a silly thing set to the melody of the Ode To Joy in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. I have managed to erase most of it from memory, but enough of it persists to contaminate forever my enjoyment and appreciation of the symphony. The other, however, is a classic whose simple Romanticism still touches my heart:

*For the beauty of the earth,*

*For the glory of the skies,*

*For the love which from our birth*

*Over and around us lies:*

*Lord of all, to Thee we raise*

*This our sacrifice of praise.*

It may well be that I was struck by this hymn because I was so puzzled by the notion that "we" had always been surrounded by love, but I also think it connected with the part of me that later clutched at Wordsworth.

Episcopalians sing hymns too, of course - or at least the choir does. I mainly associate hymns in the Episcopal church with the procession I loved to lead when I got to carry the cross and wear the red cassock with the white surplice over it, Music was an important ingredient in the ritual, as was the majestic language, which the Church in its infinite wisdom has seen fit to throw out in favor of more colloquial diction:

*Lift up your hearts.*

*We lift them up unto the Lord.*

*Let us give thanks unto our Lord God.*

*It is meet and right so to do.*

*It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God.*

*Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious Name; evermore praising thee, and saying ...*

To my ear this was a far cry from the comforting sentimentality I associated with Methodist services and hymns. In all fairness I should point out that my main frame of reference besides Sunday school was the outdoor interdenominational services at the Church in the Pines on Lake Martin, where one could fulfill ones Sunday morning obligations with minimal disruption of the joys of vacationing at the lake. All of my relatives on my father's side whom I saw at Lake Martin were Methodists, and I just assumed that most of the congregation at the Church of the Pines was either Methodist or Baptist. Somewhere along the way I forged an association between another hymn and sweet, sentimental, perhaps senile older ladies like my grandmother. It is called "In The Garden" and came in time to represent for me the epitome of religion as ridiculously transparent wish fulfillment:

*I come to the garden alone  
While the dew is still on the roses  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear  
The Son of God discloses  
And He walks with me  
And He talks with me  
And He tells me I am His own  
And the joy we share as we tarry there  
None other has ever known.*

Eventually, of course, I began to see that the sense of identity and purpose I felt as an acolyte was every bit as suspect as the sentimental devotion I found at Church in the Pines.

In college as my hands slipped off the edge of the mighty fortress, I watched with nostalgic yearning as William Sloane Coffin marched up the aisle filled with self-righteous moral fervor and belting out a hymn about the power of God. About the same time I bought an album called *Country Pickin' and Singin'* by The Stanley Brothers. I don't recall what instinct or knowledge guided my hand in making that purchase. I am reasonably certain I knew nothing about Ralph and Carter Stanley or any of the songs on the album. I think I bought it because I was intrigued by bluegrass banjo playing. I had tried briefly to learn to play the banjo, but had abandoned all hope of mastering a finger-picking style and traded my five-string banjo in for a four-string one suited to Dixieland style strumming. I had been a fan of "hillbilly" music when I was 10 or 12. Even after I discovered rock and roll, I still got a kick out of the good gospel sounds of Wayne Raney and the Singing Raney Family which provided an appropriately ludicrous counterpoint to Howlin' Wolf or Lightnin' Slim on the Memphis radio station we could get in Alabama on a clear night - especially when the featured song was entitled "We Need A Lot More Jesus (and a lot less rock & roll)."

I immediately fell in love with the gospel songs of the Stanley Brothers and have held them close to my heart for 40 years. When it occurred to me to wonder why I like

them so much, my first reaction was to view it in terms of irony; but even when I was in the throes of rejecting the religion of my adolescence, I don't think I was simply laughing at this music. I might have told myself the music was joke, but few jokes last 40 years. To my ear bluegrass music, like Chicago blues, is a form of alchemy in which the totally unacceptable is transmuted into something which can be embraced passionately.

There have been moments in my life when I have wanted to rewrite the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in Death, Irreparable Damage and Permanent Loss ... " The religion I outgrew seemed to be based on the pretense that none of this is real, and what I hear in the strained nasal harmonies of bluegrass or the tortured amplification of the blues guitar is a reaction to the undeniable reality of death and suffering. If this is the context of ideas about salvation and eternal life, I can listen. Maybe this is still religion as wish fulfillment, but at least its wishes seem grounded.

The same thing is true for Black gospel music. I learned "spirituals" as a kid, but the singing at a church camp was totally divorced from the real source of this music. Because I grew up in Alabama, I had seen the remnants of the culture that produced "folk" music. One of the pleasures I feel when I hear the real deal - whether it is gospel, blues or work songs - is the recognition of the speech patterns and all the associations they conjure up. I get next to nothing when I hear Marion Anderson or Paul Robeson sing spirituals. I can respond cerebrally or politically; but it is not the same as hearing Mary Lee, Blind Willie Johnson or James Shorty and Viola James.

I feel compelled to insert that my religious upbringing also has a lot to do with my love of classical music. Even though a lot of classical music also appeals to my ego-needs for participation in something grand, I find nothing at all suspect in Bach's choral music or Faure's requiem. Classical sacred music helps me find my way back to glimpses of the real truth embedded in Christian dogma and ritual, just as my interest in philosophy is a continual attempt to retrieve what I may have lost when I threw out religious practice along with my simplistic religious beliefs.

Often when I listen to popular music I understand virtually none of the lyrics. In some instances I think I am so swept up by the music that the words don't matter at all. Some songs I love have poetic lyrics that I have never bothered to decipher or ponder. Blues and country music have simpler lyrics to the point where I sometimes wish they would just sing gibberish instead. With gospel music, however, I respond to the words. I may even invest them with overtones that others would find forced or inappropriate, but the resonance of the ideas conjured by the words is part of the experience. "Jesus Is Real To Me" is not just an amazing, house-rocking, primordial chant; it is a shorthand dissertation on the nature of reality and the presence of the divine in everyday life. The words themselves cannot stand up to scrutiny any more than the words to "In The Garden," but they come welling up from a depth that gives them undeniable validity and encourages my mind to look for the real meaning beyond the literal one.

I feel as though I don't qualify as a "religious" person. I doubt that I devote enough time and energy to the task even to qualify as a "Seeker." I identify very strongly with Washington Phillips when he wonders what "they are doing in heaven today" and

says it is his "business" to stay here "below" and sing about it. This is the song I listen for in art, literature, music and philosophy. I wish I myself could sing in this way.

At the same time a large part of me is a "believer." I believe that there is a profound truth expressed in all religions and that ancient or even primitive civilizations may have had more "direct" access to this truth than most of us do now. I believe life is a "mystery" which the mystic apprehends and attempts to communicate via inevitably inadequate ideas and rituals. I believe there are innumerable "ways" to find this mystery, but even more ways to bury it out of sight; and it is all too difficult to tell which is which.

Religious discourse is not just metaphorical philosophizing. Prayer and praise are obviously ways of being in the world which have more to do with attitude and commitment than with ideas. To stand and say, "I believe ..." is a ritual affirmation of ones identity as a member of a community. "Gospel" singing may be the most powerful of all the rituals associated with Christianity. The language of dogma and liturgy has become so familiar that it loses its power, but Blind Willie Johnson can send chills up and down my spine when he sings about "Judith the Lion (Judea's Lion?), Daughter of Zion" Even if I knew the Bible well enough to parse these references accurately, I doubt that it would make any more sense to me than passages from Blake about Urizen or the daughters of Albion, not to mention John's own hallucinations involving the Whore of Bablyon. What I believe is happening when Blind Willie and his ladyfriend sing about John the Revelator is some form of incantation which has less to do with verbal content than with the state of mind achieved through the performance of ritual. There is a hint here for me of the true magic of invocation.

My adolescent religion was really more philosophy than religion. The one sermon I recall hearing as a teenager (aside from the time Martin Luther King preached at the Yale chapel) was a standard homily delivered at the Church in the Pines on a passage from Proverbs: "Wisdom is the principal thing: therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding." This resonated because it seemed to be a confirmation of my most basic instinct: the need to "understand" which drove me to spend my college years studying philosophy rather than learning how to make a living. Part of me no longer believes it is possible to understand anything, but I still refuse to accept a definition of "faith" as the admirable ability to throw up ones hands and resign oneself to the absurdity of life. I once had a therapist advise me that I should stop trying so hard to understand things. I immediately understood he was a waste of time and money. When Leadbelly or The Stanley Brothers tell me "we shall understand it better by and by," I hear the need to understand despite the impossibility of doing so.

The problem with my teenage religion/philosophy was that I had convinced myself that life could only have meaning if we didn't really die. All it took to pop this balloon was the obvious question from a freshman roommate: "Who said life had to have meaning?" I already knew in my heart of hearts that someday I was going to die, so it just took a little nudge to push me into a lifelong wrestling match with Martin Heidegger, who epitomized to me the attempt to rescue the truth of religion with a philosophical life raft.

I may not believe in Nobodaddy, but I certainly still believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. I have put aside what I consider childishly "linear" ideas about life after death, but I do have some sense of the miracle and mystery of rebirth as it can happen in the present. I also still cling to the conviction that life is serious and that every individual is faced with a fundamental choice about how to live. One of the Bible stories I remember fondly from Sunday school is the story of how Samuel was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of someone who kept calling his name. When The Stanley Brothers hear a voice calling from heaven on high, it is not just a phone call telling them they have won the lottery; it is also, at least for me, what Heidegger attempted to rename the call of conscience. It is the vocation, not in the sense of being chosen to be someone special in the world but as the realization of the ultimate moral perspective from which each individual life can be evaluated. It has nothing to do with being punished later on; it has everything to do with the obligation at every moment to get it right.

The terrifying fact that we are each responsible for what we are and do, that we can do things which hurt others and cause irreparable damage or that we can wreak havoc simply by not doing anything at all is what gives the metaphor of Judgment Day its power. "Ain't nobody's fault but mine." The more sensitive one allows oneself to be to this aspect of life; the more one realizes how hopeless it is to do and be what one ought, and the more desperate the need for forgiveness.

The problem with religion as I see it is that it must be based on experience ("I saw The Light"), and I have never had what I felt was a religious experience. Admittedly I have not devoted myself to the practices which are reputed to help one have such experiences. I have never made the commitment to meditate systematically nor have I ever had the courage to ingest seriously mind altering substances. I tried to take LSD once with some friends while I was in the army, but the sample we had was so weak that I got nothing from it. I also took EST training in the early 70s after two friends recommended it highly. I did manage to get a brief natural high from the concluding session, which was an interesting experience; but the most valuable result of it was probably a meager insight into the connection between my propensity to get sore throats and the way in which I repress my emotions. I have read a fair amount about Buddhism, and I believe there is such a thing as an experience of nirvana. Conceptually I can understand it, but existentially I cannot commit to it. The bottom line is probably that I do not want to lose my ego and become one with the All – even if it would mean that I could stay "centered" in my everyday activities. The same thing goes for surrendering my will to the will of God. I'm not sure I can tell the difference between holy surrender and resignation fueled by self-deception and despair.

The role modeling provided by my parents does not help. Mother felt obligated to attend church. Her involvement with the women's auxiliary was one of her prime social connections, but her religion always seemed to me at its best to be a social conformity motivated by fear and guilt and at its worst an arena for her snobbishness. It is primarily from her that I get my distrust of "simple" sentimental religion. My father was a quiet rebel from a very strict religious upbringing. His parents and at least two of his siblings

were devout Methodists. His other sister channeled her religious upbringing into the study of philosophy and a commitment to political liberalism. Daddy also preserved the idealistic and liberal social views derived from his religion. In fact he ended up much more liberal than his Methodist siblings. But he finally drew the line in a way that I admired as a teenager and refused to attend church even when he was committed to taking my younger sister to Sunday school. He would sit in a nearby park for an hour rather than participate in any Sunday school or services. He even once explained it to me by making references to how conservative and repressive he felt the Church was as an institution. As serious as I was about my own religion, I don't think I ever felt a need to bring him back into the fold. He also viewed death with a light irony, and I love the memory of the twinkle in his eye and smile in his voice when he made a reference to "meeting on the other shore." He had a wonderful sense of the absurd in everyday life, and I think laughter and a bemused resignation were his religion. I have inherited his sense of the absurd, but I somehow managed to turn it into an existential gladiator match in which I cannot just laugh and roll with it

Now that I have more of my life to look back on than forward to I am tempted to say that I wanted so bad to be a searchlight or a beacon that I could not accept the fact that I am just a candle. I stay hidden under my bushel for fear that the wind will blow me out altogether. I think the tasteless wafer of wisdom that Life is placing on my tongue as I age is the realization that every life is unique and uniquely valuable in some way - including my own despite my inability to live up to the grand expectations of my youth and despite my inability to care about the person standing next to me at any given moment. What I need to do before I die is not erect a monument to myself but keep excavating and find ways to share what has been given to me. For some reason this feels to me as though it has something to do with religion.