ABSTRACT

Jesus on the Radio: Theological Reflection and Prophetic Witness of American Popular Music

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The image of God in humanity is the image of the creator, the creative spirit, the imagination, manifest in our ability to understand, appreciate, and reflect on the beauty of God in creation. Therefore, the spirit of imagination, beauty, and creativity is intrinsic to the fullness of a life of faith. Art is a boon to a life of faith; additionally art and creativity allow for and create a space for genuine theological reflection. Arguments made about art in general can be applied to forms of popular culture. The foundation for this project explores the nuances between definitions of "popular culture", and asserts that popular culture *can be* and often *is* meaning-making and identity-forming.

The theological significance of popular culture is couched in terms of theological reflection and prophetic witness. The implicit assumption that anything dubbed "Christian" maintains theological depth, and creations lacking that distinction are 'secular,' or 'profane,' and therefore devoid of any moral good or theological import, is false, and a distinction this project serves in dissolving. The third chapter asserts a strong link between theological and prophetic tasks, one flowing from the other. Genuine theological reflection must result in an outward and public response. Theological

reflection connects to the truth of one's lived experience, and speaks honestly about the human story; out of that experience, voices of prophetic witness speak truth to power, out of and in solidarity with lived experiences. By way of example, the fourth and fifth chapters highlight Over the Rhine, and the sixth and seventh chapters focus on the Indigo Girls. These chapters offer examples of how both theological reflection and prophetic witness are linked and manifest in forms of popular culture; they serve as 'ideal cases,' offering breadth and depth of long careers and prolific material to explore these themes.

The dissertation makes the case that popular culture, as it is consonant with artistic, creative expression, serves as a location for both theological reflection and prophetic witness on its own terms. Moreover, the participatory nature of popular culture as forms of consumption, relies on an audience to buy, watch, attend, interact with music, film, television, etc., and thus is able to *create* a space for others to participate in these tasks. By identifying the theological as lived, narrative, and contextual, I seek to democratize the potential for theological reflection and the resulting prophetic witness.

Jesus on the Radio: Theological Reflection and Prophetic Witness of American Popular Music

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod? . . . .
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bend
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.[1]

The Psalmist proclaims God's creation by singing of the beauty of God: "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise"[2] and "Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them."[3] This project builds on the assumption that creativity, creative action, and artistic endeavors are ordained, blessed by God: "the artist is the creator like God creates."[4] Because God created us, and we are created in the image of God, we are, then, created to create: "making beautiful forms is theologically connected to our call both to listen and respond

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[1] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Shorter Fourth Edition*. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 662.

[2] Psalm 66:1 (NRSV)

[3] Psalm 69:34 (NRSV)

[4] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 52.

to God in prayer, praise, and sacrament."[5] Therefore, the artistic ability and inclination in all of us, even if not to create, but to enjoy creativity and appreciate art, is part of being human, but can also be a means of understanding God and who we are as God's creation.

In the first creation narrative in Genesis 1, the record asserts that both man and woman were created in the image of God. This *imago dei* has been interpreted many ways, one significant strain of which is the *imago dei* of the human imagination and capacity to also create. Dorothy Sayers bases her contribution to theological aesthetics and literary theory on a similar claim. She states, "Looking at man, [the author of Genesis] sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the 'image' of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, 'God created.' The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things."[6] Artistry and creativity allow us to be fully human: these creative endeavors serve as reflection of our image of God shared by both men and women, but they are also a means to enjoy God and understand God. It is not just in the creation or act of artistry, but in the appreciation of these efforts of others. The spirit of creativity could be likened to the movement of the Holy Spirit.[7] It is that which brings to life the world around us—recognizing the beauty of creation in sights, sounds, touch, smell—and stemming from that the inspiration to participate—to make and enjoy our own sights, sounds, smells, textures.

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[5] William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001).

[6] Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1941), 22.

[7] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation,* trans. Margaret Kohl. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

Many, like Sayers, have elaborated on the artistic endeavors as means to enjoy God, to understand God, thereby as means by which we are more fully human—living out our God-ordained existence. This informs and demonstrates that the arena for arts, artistry, and creativity span wider and deeper than the traditional "fine arts"—what we often think of as belonging in museums or concert halls. Likewise, the democratization of culture and technology, developments some attribute to globalization, and the spread of mass media contribute to the accessibility of the worlds of creativity.[8] The widespread impact and manifold forms of cultural products in our culture demonstrates that artistic endeavors and products have something to tell us about our world, the people in it and how we relate to and understand God. This has led to a burgeoning path of religious scholars who look to popular culture as significant, a path to which this project aims to contribute.

Up to this point, religious scholars have looked to popular culture to identify religious symbols and language present in forms such as rock music, hip-hop, visual art, and film. Or scholars have adapted social scientific research to note how popular culture has served to *function* in similar ways to religion. Little has been concluded from a theological vantage point on the purpose, content and use of popular culture. We can look to theologians, to be sure, on their interpretation of culture, broadly speaking, or fine arts, but very little has been noted that takes popular culture seriously as a theological starting point. I reiterate the argument that the image of God is connected to our imaginative and creative power, and that creative acts lead us into fuller knowledge of

[8] Some would denigrate this development, arguing that the democratization and spread of mass media has contributed to the erosion of quality art. This, and other theories of culture, will be explored further in the following chapter, further articulating this mourning of the loss of "genuine" art, or the ability to recognize "good," "quality," or "true" art.

God, thereby allowing us to be fully human. It is this power that makes creative endeavors, artistic products, and the enjoyment of these theological. This project will elaborate on the theological aspect of popular culture and ask how, then, we are to understand the theological moment, content, and reflection of forms of popular culture. This project will focus specifically on music as a powerful form of enjoying God in this artistic sense. Music is one way we express, interpret, and understand the world around us. In this way, the creative sense within us can and must be taken seriously as a theological endeavor and as theological epistemology. Art can serve as a means of knowledge and understanding; therefore music is also religiously and theologically significant.[9]

The question must be explored as to what sets music apart. The foundation laid for this focus is necessarily broad, taking into account multiple forms of culture, and perspectives on popular culture in general (religious or otherwise). However, music offers something unique—both as a creative endeavor and as a cultural "product"—to be consumed, absorbed, and enjoyed. It certainly fits within the categories of art, creativity, and aesthetics, but offers something that other more stagnant art forms do not. Oliver Sacks, in *Musicophilia,* addresses the unique power of music in human life and experience. Interested in the scientific and medical connections between the brain and music, Sacks frames his book by telling stories, and doing his best to diagnose and explain these "disorders" or "freak" cases, insisting that there is something about music that resonates with the cognitive and neurological function of being human. He remains

[9] I use the terms "religious" and "theological" throughout this project as related but distinct approaches. "Theological" assumes a specific starting point, and specific set of questions about what it means to be human in relation to a sacred. "Religious," on the other hand refers to the more sociological reference points that analyze religion on substantive and functional terms.

unsatisfied with spiritual or transcendent answers to these curious situations. In telling one patient's story, the patient—also a doctor—replied that as a medical man he was at a loss to explain these events, and he had to think of them in "spiritual" terms. I [Sacks] countered that, with no disrespect to the spiritual, I felt that even the most exalted states of mind, the most astounding transformations, must have some physical basis or at least physiological correlate in neural activity.[10]

Sacks further argues for the integration of music with both the intellectual and the emotional facets of human experience: "Yet music calls to both parts of our nature—it is essentially emotional, as it is essentially intellectual. Often when we listen to music, we are conscious of both: we may be moved to the depths even as we appreciate the formal structure of composition."[11]

Moreover, sound is intrinsic to life. The language of sound—melody, harmony, rhythm, dissonance, tempo, etc.—seeps through in our description of the world around us. We talk about feeling out of sync when things do not work out well or if we are having a bad day. We talk about finding a good rhythm during moments of productivity. We talk about things being instrumental when we want to convey a sense of importance. Music blends sound, rhythm, pitch, and language.[12]

Likewise, music involves both time and space to enjoy. Pieces of music, songs, take a determined amount of time to enjoy. Unlike visual art, music demands our time.

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[10] Oliver W. Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 12.

[11] Ibid., 312.

[12] As obviously important as the melody, harmony, rhythm is, I am not a musicologist and there for I will not devote extensive attention to these elements. Because I will be focusing on music with lyrics, therefore the song itself—music and lyrics—will be of dual importance.

Similar to film, we must give a specific amount of time and of our attention to the work's consumption. Jeannette Bicknell explores the unique power of music in human experience, and this time aspect sets it apart: "Music, as it unfolds in time, creates expectation in the minds of attentive listeners."[13] She continues: "Music and the various forms of artistic narrative…share the fundamental feature of all being arts of time….they present themselves as temporal gestalts, demanding continuous and continued attention. . . . paintings and drawings exist in time, but they do not occupy time. Music and narrative, in contrast, fill up time; they impose an organization on time."[14] One of the most unique elements of music corresponds to the recent proliferation of means of enjoying music. With the onslaught of iPods, online music streaming (radio, Pandora, Rhapsody), CD players, satellite radio, etc., it is quite possible to surround oneself with music and sound all day long—in our cars, in the gym, at our desks, as background to the business of our days. Thanks to the ubiquity of earbuds, music is something we are able to enjoy as a solitary and isolated endeavor.

However, the fundamentally social aspect of music must not be dismissed or overlooked. Music festivals, concerts, Facebook groups and other social networking venues, and music writing all demonstrate the power of music to unite people through shared experiences. Bicknell further asserts this point, that music is first and fundamentally social. She states that music cannot be experienced alone: "The fact that music can have a private or individual use does not make it any less a social product. We are creatures of society; the fact that we sometimes want a break from other

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[13] Jeanette Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us* (Houndmills [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xii.

[14] Ibid., 114-115.

people…does not make us any less so. Communing with music is a form of communing with human reality, and that is social."[15] Several scholars who write about the intersection of faith, religion and/or theology and music focus on the musicological and musical theory facets of music. Jeremy Begbie is one such scholar who does this well. Though I acknowledge that music is unique among the arts, it is beyond my purview as a scholar to take on this level of analysis.

This dissertation will utilize several methodological frameworks—theological, literary, and popular cultural theories—in order to present an interdisciplinary approach to incorporating functional approaches to religion, with theological contributions, both to believers and the larger society (insiders and outsiders). Two contemporary groups will be used as "ideal cases", to apply the frameworks and demonstrate the potential for popular music to be taken seriously as both art form and *locus theologicus*. To lay an appropriate and sufficient foundation, the second chapter will offer a multi-disciplinary literature review. First, it will be necessary to define the term popular culture. In order to put forth a working definition for this project, I will explore theories of culture in general and developments in the usage of the term "popular" to qualify "culture." The third, and perhaps most significant, portion of the literature review will explore various theological perspectives, within the Christian tradition, on culture and art. Theological aesthetics has at various times and places been developed extensively, and at others, been dismissed, relegating art, creativity and culture to the margins. Finally, the literature review will turn to the burgeoning inter/multidisciplinary field of religion and popular culture. This

[15] Ibid., 93.

area will establish the three-part analysis used in later chapters, of author-text-audience, and will furthermore demonstrate the place of this dissertation within that field.

The uniqueness of music as a creative form attests to the importance of each of the aforementioned areas of study for the purposes of this project. As evidenced in the tradition of theological aesthetics, art and music can be taken seriously as pointing to God. This project argues that popular culture and popular music can also be seen as standing within this tradition of cultural products that point to God. Music can be a source of revelation—a source of theological reflection on the divine, the world, and our place among and in relation to them. It may go without saying that at this point we are most obviously referring to music (and culture in general) outside any "official" religious tradition. This project will focus on music that has its starting point outside the traditional church structure, and therefore, has an audience that stretches across religious traditions. Some may draw a bright line and call this music 'secular;' however, regardless of the label, the project at hand will intentionally blur the lines between 'sacred' and 'secular' music, in order to recognize the powerful potential for theological reflection in the perhaps unexpected sources of popular music. A three-fold analysis will be used to examine the text (the music, song lyrics), the author (the songwriters and performers), and the audience (the consumers, the critics). We can see a multilayered and rich creative effort in the writing and consuming of the music that translates into theological reflection and theological content.

The third chapter will define both the theological and prophetic as will be used in the present context. In identifying the religious and theological, I do not intend the highly systematized form of theology generally set apart from the culture in general,

avoiding an ivory tower theology. Rather, I will look theologically at existential questions and broad themes of what it means to be human (individual existence), how we are one among many (society), and how we understand God in relation to these questions (the transcendent, the sacred). From that come the themes of identity, loss, hope, evil, suffering, redemption, and justice. Insofar as music (and lyrics) wrestles with these issues and theological themes, we can understand popular music as a starting point for theology, and can hear voices of prophetic witness and critique. In order to take these voices seriously as theologians, we must also have in view an idea of theology as something that can and does take place in the realm of the "popular," i.e. we are all theologians, and theology happens when we ask questions about grace, suffering, sin, and redemption. I use the phrase "prophetic witness" to further clarify and name what I intend by exploring the theological reflection of music.

In terms of the prophetic, salient themes include the identity of prophets, content of prophecy, and identifying prophetic witness. A brief overview of the concept of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible will be a necessary foundation for this argument. Questions of "who" and "what" regarding the prophets and their task will begin the conversation. What sorts of messages did they communicate to their audience? What were their methods of communication and the content of their concerns? How did they perceive themselves and how did others receive their message?

Walter Brueggeman defines the prophetic task as "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[16] The prophet does not only announce, but calls to action

[16] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

and transformation, thus empowering people to engage in history. Brueggeman offers a further definition of the prophetic ministry, which "consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice. . . . The prophetic imagination can be discerned wherever people try to live together and show concern for their shared future and identity." Therefore, the witness of music to the experience of being human, as well as more overt forms of protest, will prove significant manifestations of this element of music's power and potential.

These issues will shape our attention to the general concept of a prophetic voice or witness in society. I will argue that not only can we locate streams of prophetic witness throughout human history, but we *must* find strains of this tradition of prophetic witness among us. It is a specific theological claim, and one that is central to this project, that the prophetic spirit bears witness to the providence, care, and ongoing creation of God in the world. Believing that God cares about the world, and that part of the human task of co-creating, is in the provision and care of the world, and in the ongoing nurturing of human solidarity and community, it is the prophetic witness that speaks out in service of these tasks.

Music—again outside the walls of the church—contains potential for theological reflection, and in its unique capacity to resonate among humanity serves as a prophetic witness for those both within and outside the church walls. While these are explicitly theological claims about culture and popular music, one further point to note is that it would be irresponsible to project a clear theological intent on the part of the songwriters as a necessary condition for the presence of this prophetic witness. Again, putting to use

an analysis that incorporates the text and the audience, in addition to the author, we can piece together a multifaceted, comprehensive picture of the product and both intended and unintended effects. To be sure, authorial intent is important, however equally, if not more important is analysis of the effect—the audience reception and interpretation. In fact, for the purposes of identifying theological reflection and prophetic spirit, these effectual elements may be even more important.

In order to demonstrate these more abstract concepts of theological reflection and prophetic witness, I will focus on specific artists, their *oeuvre* of music, and their audience. The chapters will focus on one artist at a time, and will examine the theological themes recurring throughout the corpus of the individual artist or group. Analyzing the recording and performing careers of Over the Rhine and the Indigo Girls, those chapters will engage with the music of the artists, identifying themes such as pain, suffering, hope, and redemption. Many of these themes relate to what it means to be human manifested in issues of relationship—to others and to the transcendent. In addition to specific reading of the "texts" of the music and lyrics of these artists, attention must be paid to the artists themselves. One of the most intriguing themes that both groups demonstrate in different degrees is the political thread, the element of protest present both in the music itself, and in the activism of the artists. The prophetic witness and imagination manifests itself in this unique ability of musicians to combine deeply personal expression and exploration of themes of humanity, suffering and redemption, and the impetus toward protest, engaging with the larger community and social systems.

The artists I will focus on, while their degree of "success" in the market of popular culture varies, their success, for the purposes of this dissertation, will be that they

are well-received by the critical world of popular music (they make "good" art), and they are successful enough to have enduring careers in music (they make "popular" art).[17] The data will primarily be song lyrics, album notes, and interviews to demonstrate the theological content of the music, and the intent of the artists. Popular music writing will also be helpful to understand the place these artists have in the society and how the wider audience receives them; this turn to the role of the audience in studying popular culture will be significant, particularly in establishing the prophetic element in popular music. The performative element, i.e. when the words actually become music, and the music is experienced, will also be a crucial piece in the puzzle. Music *qua* music (the combination of lyrics, melody, instruments, performance, and reception) will be the synthesis of each of these pieces of analysis. In essence, this will demonstrate the content of "popular theology," in that it is created *for* and received *by* a pluralistic audience, and the element of prophetic witness, as the message is not directed at a small subculture of people of faith, but for whomever is listening.

The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters will offer case studies to demonstrate the ways music can be both theological and prophetic. I have chosen to focus exclusively and intensively on two recording artists in order to offer a depth of analysis. The chapters will examine thematically the musicians, their work, and their audience reception (fans and critics) to establish them as examples of prophetic witness and theological reflection. Of primary focus will be song lyrics themselves—what do the songs communicate and how could they be interpreted? Further evidence will be derived from interviews, liner notes, websites, and other biographical information. Both artists

[17] Again, these themes and defining features of "popular culture" will be explored with greater depth and nuance in the literature review.

demonstrate strains of theological reflection and prophetic witness. The material on Over the Rhine will focus primarily on their music and careers as evidence of theological reflection, while the emphasis for the material on the Indigo Girls will be on their prophetic witness. Together the two artists offer an 'ideal case' of the mutual theological and prophetic character of popular music.

A word of justification regarding the artists selected: In many ways any research project comes from a place of personal investment and interest. While the examples and types of music that could serve as equally acceptable examples are myriad, the ones chosen are musicians with whom I am already familiar, and, in the interest of full disclosure, consider myself a fan. My academic interest in these artists, their *oeuvre*, and their audiences would be nonexistent if I were not also a fan of their music. My belief is that these concepts and themes are not limited to the case studies discussed herein, or even the artists I happen to enjoy in general. My hope is that the themes and theological content I discuss can be applied to other artists and other genres.

The subtitle assumes these groups qualify as American Popular Music. Members of Indigo Girls and Over the Rhine are native to the United States and have spent the vast majority of their writing careers on domestic soil (though, of course, have toured across the globe). The term "popular" likely necessitates the most refining. Certainly drawing from the critiques of mass culture theory, I am not referring to popular solely on terms of marketability and profit margins. As already mentioned, simple economic terms only tell part of the story of an artist's success. Certainly record sales and economic viability are legitimate measures of success, but on theological terms, or in terms of what constitutes "good," or "genuine" art, they are not always the most determinative factors. Mozart,

after all, now unquestionably considered a musical genius, was buried in a pauper's grave. I argue that they can still be considered popular in that their careers span decades, and their output (how many albums have they released) speaks to career longevity in their music-making efforts. On the other hand, they are not so obscure to have a limited audience. They have received critical acclaim, and touring success. The "popular" descriptor, therefore, speaks to their widespread appeal (as opposed to "high" or "elite" culture). It is with these criteria that I qualify the following artists as epitomizing this Prophetic Witness in American Popular Music. These artists blend—to varying degree—the elements of storytelling, and protest, which I identify as two parallel and overlapping pieces of prophetic witness and theological reflection.

Chapters four and five will focus on Over the Rhine, who in many ways, served as the initial inspiration for this project. Over the Rhine has been making music for over 20 years. Comprised of Karin Bergquist and Linford Detweiler, a married couple, and a rotating backing band, their personal stories of struggle, heartache, loss, love, forgiveness, and commitment speak volumes to the experience of being human in a world of disappointment, pain, and tragedy. Both are Christians, though not necessarily affiliating with any "official" church tradition or Christian subculture, their biographies as they intermix with their music speak to the life of faith in a way that is strikingly forthright and honest. The music they write and perform reflects doubt, hypocrisy, disbelief, and the struggle to be faithful and find love in the midst of the human struggle. They are able to tell the human story, and that power of narrative resounds with their audience in a way that is, in fact, deeply theological. The surrounding music, writing, and performing that comprises Over the Rhine's *oeuvre* further buttresses this, in addition

to the strain of protest present. While not activists, per se, they have brought a voice of protest speaking out not only in opposition to the way things are, but in a creative spirit of hope for the way things could become. Because of the breadth and depth of the material, the discussion has been divided into two chapters. Organized chronologically, chapter four follows the first part of the band's career, through the 2001 album, *Films for Radio*. Chapter five examines the most recent four albums, which takes us deeply into struggles of their marriage and the story told of redemption on the other side.

The Indigo Girls will be the focus of the sixth and seventh chapters. Perhaps the more obvious of the two artists selected as representing an element of prophetic witness, the Indigo Girls' music and lifestyle—their creativity and their activism—speak to issues of justice, peace, and love in their world. Amy Ray and Emily Saliers are the Indigo Girls and have been making music under that name for more than 25 years. Their music also contains religious symbols and imagery, which comes out of a certain bittersweet relationship with traditional Christianity. Ray has said that she likes the stories/ethics of Jesus, but has trouble with other Christians. Saliers grew up in a Methodist home, and her father, Don Saliers is a professor of Church Music at Emory University. She describes her relationship with Christianity positively, but has a "lover's quarrel"[18] with the church. The religious and biblical imagery in their music is, of course, significant, but overall, they demonstrate the prophetic tradition by speaking truth to power in their music and other forms of witness in society. The Indigo Girls can also be placed within the wider tradition of folk protest music. Giving voice to those without a voice, they use their creativity and music to bring to light issues of injustice. This material has also been

[18] Don E. Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, 1st ed., The practices of faith series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

divided into two chapters, organized thematically rather than chronologically. The sixth chapter discussed broad themes of theological reflection, made most clear in story-telling and songs dealing with relationships. Chapter seven is a survey of the Indigo Girls' prophetic witness exhibited through their activism, through their hands-on work, their advocacy and their music.

The final chapter will seek to answer the question: "So what?" After examining ways that theologians, biblical interpreters and other writers have understood culture, as well as taking a brief look at ways that culture is interpreted in the broader realm of academic study, I hope to put forth a reconstructed attempt at a theological aesthetic, one that is grounded in the tradition of human life, thought, and experience, as interpreted through a Christian lens, and one that also takes seriously biblical interpretation. It is important to understand the theories and perspectives on popular culture in the broader frameworks in order to make a case for what elements of culture are helpful, genuine, and open representations of human life, struggle, and hope, particularly in relation to understanding and awareness of the divine. The questions up to this point have largely originated in and remained outside of "the Church," meaning outside of any official religious institution or "orthodoxy," recognizing that all persons are created by God, and religious institutions are, for all intents and purposes, created by persons, that genuine theological reflection can and does occur outside of any institutionally-sanctioned outlet, or any sort of sanitized subculture. Attention will be paid to the identity of the prophet, particularly to the issue of self-awareness in that role. I do not use any sort of self-consciousness or overt intention to be a prophetic witness as a litmus test for the overall effect of the streams of theological reflection or prophetic witness. Paul Tillich speaks to

these themes when he says, "the Church listens to prophetic voices outside itself, in judgment both on culture and on the Church in so far as it is a part of culture. Most such voices come from persons who are not active members of the manifest Church. But perhaps one could call them participants of a latent church."[19]

However, I do not think it necessary to force those outside the church into any sort of churchly label. In this way, I will attempt to avoid "invisible Christian" language; I certainly want to preserve the integrity of what the musicians are doing. There is something to be said for the discrepancies between intended and actual effects of one's work. The combined effect of musician biography, music and lyrics, and the audience reception offer overwhelming support for locating genuine theological reflection and prophetic witness outside the walls of the institutional church.

What, then, should be the response on the part of the Church? Likewise, what are the theological implications of such an argument? The implications are manifold. Of utmost importance, I believe that the Church needs to regain a place of primacy for creative activity. Wrestling with the demons of the Enlightenment, too frequently we have either completely dismissed creative endeavors and the power of artistry and culture in the life of faith, or they are relegated to second place or lower, after more rational, logical, or intellectual efforts. At least one way that music, specifically, fills this niche is in its power to remind us of the theological act of telling and listening to human stories. The role of narrative to teach us about ourselves, others, our world, and our God ought to be reclaimed, and songwriting represents a wide-reaching, accessible means to remind us of that.

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[19] Paul Tillich, "The Church and Contemporary Culture," *World Christian Education* (Second Quarter 1956): 43.

Moreover, I believe a greater appreciation for and attention to the creative forms of popular culture imply an increased permeability to the walls of the church. With renewed energy, the church ought not to fear the outside world, thereby tossing aside false dichotomies of sacred vs. secular, sacred vs. profane, or us vs. them, but moreover ought to be challenged by and even changed, in a sense, by the forms of popular culture in the world that speak from humanity's genuine experience of pain, sorrow, tragedy, triumph, hope, and forgiveness.

Turning back to the traditional church, this dissertation will serve the theological and pastoral tasks by asking what effect these arguments could have on the church as a whole. If we can recognize theological elements and a prophetic witness in the artists, specifically the musicians, in our society, then what potential effect can this have on traditional sources of theology and institutional forms of religious authority? My goal is to add to the conversation that takes culture seriously and seeks to locate and articulate a theology that the church, in turn, can take seriously.

As countless theologians and preachers have observed, it is difficult to begin to write *about* the darkness of life—pain, suffering, death, grief. These experiences are so immensely and profoundly personal that speaking about them runs the risk of becoming sterile or inauthentic. Music, as the writers who focus on rap and hip-hop demonstrate, can express what 'mere' words cannot. The melody, the rhythm, the poetry, and the *experience* of that (both in the creation and consumption of the product) can serve as the cathartic moment and lesson of who we are, and how we struggle. In that sense, the personal becomes sacred, and demands no other response but to listen and receive.

According to Gordon Lynch, what is needed in the interdisciplinary field of religion and popular culture is developing the space for the academic and intellectual conversation between religion and popular culture.[20] This dissertation will serve that end, primarily by demonstrating the theological validity of cultural and art forms that exist independent from any denominational affiliation or Christian subculture.

The conclusion will include observations that there are grounds for a theological conversation between the religious beliefs and actions within the church doors, and the prophetic witness contained in the concert halls. The sermons inscribed on vinyl discs speak to the lives of the consumers and can contribute to the theological message generally reserved for the churches. It is through these media of popular culture that many people interact with and gain understanding of their world; therefore music ought to be respected as such and not marginalized by the religious professionals, or else the professionals themselves risk marginalization.

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[20] Gordon Lynch, ed., *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The present chapter will set a foundation for the project at hand by setting forth relevant definitions. On the surface the phrases popular culture, art, and religion, are far too broad, and could, in theory, encompass the entirety of culture and society. In order to set parameters on the words' usages for this project, I will explore how others have used the terms. The chapter will begin with an exploration of popular culture in general, and will include a brief overview of cultural theorists and popular culture studies writ-large to confront both positive and negative aspects of content and function of popular culture in society. The term indicates many things and implies a variety of purposes in social, political, and economic contexts. How I intend to narrow the scope will necessarily include some of these and leave others out.

The next question will be: how do culture and theology interact? The following section will offer a broad sweep of the Christian tradition's often-tenuous relationship with art and culture. The most significant reflection comes out of the twentieth century, so this section will—for reasons of brevity and relevancy—focus primarily on twentieth century theological engagement (or lack thereof) with culture to lay a skeletal framework for the theological aesthetics that will develop throughout this project.

Finally, this chapter will conclude with an overview of the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of religion and popular culture, by moving from more general to more specific. How have the two already overlapped and been studied? What are the dominant themes in the interdisciplinary areas? What are the questions asked and the

areas ripe for development? In order to situate this project in the developing field, I will explore some specific examples of how religion and music have been studied, and the relevant forms of inquiry in areas not directly connected to music. The final part of this chapter will demonstrate the area of scholarship to which this project will contribute. This will transition to the third chapter that will examine more specifically the concept of theological reflection, prophecy, prophetic witness, and prophetic action to then move the project into its specific applications.

The goal of this project is not to remain fixated on the specific artists in the application chapters, but to demonstrate concrete examples of how these concepts and forms of theological reflection matter in the lives of audiences and artists. This project will contribute a fresh perspective and deeper engagement with the ideas of culture, arts, theology, and prophecy—specifically in light of the culture of American popular music.

Culture Theory and Popular Culture

The development of mass, popular, and market culture have, in many ways, defined the twentieth (and the beginning of the twenty-first) century. This proliferation of forms of culture includes subfields within traditional art forms: television, film, novels, magazines, newspapers, weblogs, talk radio, public radio, music radio. The innumerable forms of media and culture available have been the objects of both criticism and adulation. Though perhaps obvious, ultimately I will side with those who embrace forms of culture as on-the-whole positive aspects of society. With all due caution, the terms need to be set clearly, but the position of this dissertation is that there are ways of appreciating and embracing certain forms of popular culture that define our time.

Many scholars, from different starting points, define popular culture in contrast to other forms of culture. Prior eras held art and culture with a certain measure of esteem. However, the term "popular culture" to large degree is set up in contrast to forms of elite or high culture. Bruce David Forbes defines culture generally as a "neutral term that includes the whole range of human products and thoughts that surround our lives, providing the context in which we live."[1] Forbes makes a distinction between high, folk, and popular culture; he uses food analogies to make the distinction clear: high culture is akin to a gourmet meal, folk culture to "grandma's casserole," and popular culture is a McDonald's hamburger. Popular culture, thus, is related to that which is readily available, and in many ways symbolic in the larger culture. He distinguishes popular culture, too, from mass culture; popular culture is generally disseminated through forms of mass media and mass culture, but does not depend upon mass culture to exist, or to find an audience. He goes on to say that popular culture studies ought to involve attention to the audience because "The popularity of a given cultural element. . . is directly proportional to the degree to which that element is reflective of audience beliefs and values."[2]

Jeffrey Mahan connects popular culture to the lives of "everyday people," therefore, it is defined by its ability to reach "a broad and general audience."[3] Mahan here essentially restates Forbes' definition from the Introduction of their collaborative edited

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[1] Bruce David Forbes, "Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Jeffrey H. Mahan, "Conclusion: Establishing a Dialogue about Religion and Popular Culture," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000), 288-9.

volume: "'Popular Culture' refers to a range of cultural material and activity which is understood. . . at least in part by its distinction from high or elite culture on one hand and folk culture on the other."[4] Hence, popular culture is more accessible to the "common," "everyday" population than "high" or "elite" culture, but also more widespread than folk culture, which tends toward isolation and insulation. Popular culture by-and-large transcends boundaries of geography, race, socio-economics and gender. It overlaps with mass culture in that it is often mass produced and widely available, but Forbes and Mahan resist equating the two, insisting on a value-quality of popular culture; things are popular because they express, communicate, and resonate with the values and concerns of the audience.

Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy define popular culture in reference to popular religion. For them popular culture includes a breadth of types of forms and products, and though we can identify them as religious (though I will reserve that portion of the conversation for later in the chapter), they "remain ostensibly secular sites of experience that neither the participant nor the casual observer would identify, at least at first glance, as religious."[5] Popular culture, as "secular sites of experience," communicates something about ourselves as participants in, and creators of society. In further defining the "popular" of "popular culture" Mazur and McCarthy "maintain the connection between the 'popular' . . . and its Latin root, *popularis* ("of the people")."[6] Similar to Forbes and Mahan, Mazur and McCarthy focus on the everyday quality of popular culture. Its

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[4] Ibid., 290.

[5] Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, "Introduction: Finding Religion in American Popular Culture," in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), 5.

[6] Ibid., 8.

sources and meanings are "ordinary" and "mundane" but serve as the "construction and maintenance of meaning that is so important in the fabric of culture."[7]

Though popular culture is an inherently vague concept, the value is that it undeniably expresses something about the audience, the culture that both produces and consumes it. Lynn Schofield Clark argues that because of its common nature and varied forms, popular culture has not traditionally been an object of academic study: "the study of popular culture was considered rather less important than studies of high and middlebrow culture such as news reporting or the more traditional arts." However, a reconsideration of the everyday can contribute to academic study by "reconstruct[ing] and reevaluat[ing] taken-for-granted notions of societal organization and individual experiences within it." Popular culture, then, "refers to those commercially-produced items specifically associated with leisure, the mass media, and lifestyle choices that people consume."[8] Clark highlights a distinction between mass culture, in that mass culture is marketed and driven by profit (the commercialization of culture). While popular culture is marketed to some degree, mass culture is directly related to things that are produced with the sole or primary intent to drive a profit.

Popular culture, Clark argues, is a much broader, and more positive concept: "Popular culture is anything that can be successfully packaged for consumers in response to their desire for a means to both identify with some people, ideas, or movements, and to distinguish themselves from others"; popular culture includes those products and/or art

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Lynn Schofield Clark, "Why Study Popular Culture? Or, How to Build a case for your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 8.

forms that can "express[] the *zeitgeist* of an era."[9] Because of this quality, she argues, "popular culture [is]. . . a prime location for communicating significant ideals and ideas."[10]

Catholic priest, theologian, and sociologist (and novelist), Andrew Greeley reflects on popular culture in contradistinction to general conception of serious, elite, and high culture on the one hand, and trash, folk, common on the other. Popular culture differs from the elite in that it speaks to and represents "ordinary folk," and trash and folk culture on the other in that it has the capacity to "offer paradigms of meaning" (rejecting the idea that "if people like it, it must be trash," reflected in the elite corners of academia).[11]

David Chidester seeks to break down what he sees as a false dichotomy between religion and popular culture. Traditional perspectives hold religion as serious, and popular culture as, well, not. The dichotomy is false because if religion is the realm of the ultimate, sacred and transcendent, then popular culture relates to the opposite of that: the ordinary, "the pleasures of our lives." This however, sets up a rather Manichean-like dichotomy, baptizing anything otherworldly, and demonizing things of the common or everyday realm. American popular culture, however, in its dealings with the body, with death, heroes, sacrifice, and social cohesion, do communicate something that is both common and meaningful.[12]

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[9] Ibid., 9.

[10] Ibid., 11.

[11] Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago, Ill: Thomas More Press, 1988), 9-14.

[12] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005).

Nicholas Wolterstorff traces the categorization of culture to a product of modernity. Our proclivity to categorize art forms is something relatively new in cultural/social history. Therefore, it has also become a product of the modern era that we delineate between types and forms of culture. Wolterstorff then elaborates on the contrast between high art and popular art. High art corresponds to the population of cultural elite, which could be, and is, traced back to the distinction between the laboring classes and the bourgeois classes, the latter characterized by their leisure time, and cultural pursuits. Art and culture, therefore, were elitist pursuits because only a small portion of the population were able to enjoy, appreciate, and consume art and culture. (One readily envisages theatre, opera, symphony, art galleries, and their elitist cultural status to illustrate this dichotomy.) While this traditional elitism of art has relegated it to separate people, separate places (galleries, theaters), and separate time (leisure), popular art and popular culture in a sense democratize art forms, making them readily available for production and consumption.[13]

Charles Lippy makes distinctions similar to those aforementioned, in referring to the etymology of "popular," in that it is of the people. Popular refers to the basics of ordinary existence. Lippy also draws a distinction between "official" and "popular." "Official" culture (and/or religion) relates to the professionals, whereas "popular" connotes in a different way the ordinary and the folk forms and expressions of culture.

[13] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

This distinction correlates to the division between clergy (the elites) and laity (the 'common' folk) in religious terms.[14]

Rounding out the dichotomies-as-definitions, Gordon Lynch acquiesces that popular culture is hard to define, and is often defined out of a sense of "otherness." The first "other" is illustrated by popular culture's opposition to high culture, which often connotes a sense of inferiority regarding what is popular. This "elitist attitude" emphasizes the "entertainment value and commercialization" of popular culture. However, Lynch argues, this distinction diminishes the value of popular culture because it "fails to acknowledge the complexity of the cultural life of the majority of the population."[15] Lynch further argues that the distinction many draw between popular culture and folk culture is not all that useful. While folk culture implies something indigenous and traditional, and while popular culture tends to be commercialized and mass-produced to some degree, "the two are truly more mixed than distinct or subsumed by the other."[16] Finally, Lynch articulates popular culture in "resistance to dominant or mass culture." In this sense, popular culture can take on a more positive meaning. Popular culture, therefore, can be understood as an "opposing dialectical force to the dominant or elite culture within a given society. [It is] whatever is excluded from the elite or dominant culture in a given society. . . the focus of attempts by that social or cultural elite to shape or control the culture of the mass classes, and is where those mass

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[14] Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States*, Contributions to the study of religion no. 37 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994).

[15] Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 7.

[16] Ibid., 9.

classes both concede to and resist those forms of social control."[17] Having explored these dichotomies, Lynch offers a definition of popular culture that is, on its face, neutral: "popular culture is therefore the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life for *ordinary* people within a particular society." However, he admits that this definition in its neutrality is too simple. Popular cultural studies are, by nature, broad because they relate to ordinary and everyday experiences and practices, and these things vary significantly among people. In order to understand popular culture, this definition is helpful, but must still recognize the complexity in both social and cultural life.[18]

How, then, will I use the term "popular culture" for the purposes of this dissertation? First, I offer two further clarifications on how I will *not* use the concept of "popular" in discussing forms of art and culture. These distinctions will be particularly important in applying popular culture to religious concepts of prophecy and theological reflection. As a response to the proliferation of cultural forms that were seen as competition for the attention of audiences and formation of cultural values, often deemed "secular" with every bit of derision as that word can connote, Christian sub-cultures developed. The Contemporary Christian Music Industry, established in the 1970s, is perhaps the most widespread of these (and most significant for this project). Observing the culture around theme as 'secular,' and therefore opposed to Christianity, CCM developed, thereby representing the "coalescing of evangelical interests in spirituality, evangelism, and business, a development that created 'religious' popular art out of the forces of leisure and consumption, marketing and profiteering, and the celebrity cult of

[17] Ibid., 11.

[18] Ibid., 14.

power."[19] These types of Christian sub-cultures represent not only an attempt to separate from the larger society, but have the effect of demonizing products and practices that remain in the broader, "secular" society. In keeping consistent with the purposes and argument of this project, I will focus on the definition of popular culture that focuses on the everyday and the ordinary, and is therefore available, accessible and utilized by the wider society, not just a specific subculture.

However, any and all forms of culture are not up for grabs. Not all forms and substances of popular culture are ultimately meaningful (what, specifically, is meant by ultimately meaningful will be discussed at length in the following chapter). Here, the distinction between art and kitsch is significant. Art and genuine popular culture (if it is to be considered "art," as I argue it ought to be), is different from kitsch, or bad art: "Art is bitterly iconoclastic; it opposes the phony, the empty, and the outrageous in life; thus does it ruthlessly demolish the dead wood of convention—and thus does it search for new images of the strange reality of nature, of ourselves, and of the sacred amid which we live."[20] Richard Harries and Joan Chittister both reflect on the loathsome quality of kitsch, and specifically from a theological perspective. Suffice it to say for now that kitsch is to be repudiated because it rejects the aesthetic value of art, and is a reflection of the focus on functionalism and efficiency in our technocratic, commercial culture.[21]

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[19] William D. Romanowski, "Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000), 104.

[20] Langdon B. Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 191.

[21] Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding*, Continuum icons (London: Continuum, 2005), specifically chapter 4; Joan Chittister, "from 'Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 366-367.

Therefore, for the purposes of the arguments at hand, popular culture is that which is a part of the wider and readily available social and cultural life of everyday Americans. It also relates to cultural forms that take seriously its form as a contribution to genuine art. It is not produced for the primary or sole purpose of marketing, consumption and profit-making. *Popular culture, as I define it, is of the common, ordinary social world, and is, therefore, able to reflect in a genuine sense the values and meaning of the "everyday" world from which it emerges, and to which it speaks, and among which it has an audience.*

Theological Aesthetics

Twenty-first century Christians must come to terms with the dual inheritance of the iconoclasm of the Reformation and the rationality of the Enlightenment. This heritage has, for too long, allowed an easy ignorance of art, aesthetics, and culture, on the part of Christians (both elite and lay), as in any way integral to the life of faith. However, the Christian tradition is broader and deeper than iconoclasm and rationalism; we also have a tradition that embraces, accepts, and responds to art, beauty, and culture as central to theology and to devotional and doxological functions of Christian life. Many theologians and religious writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have sought, and continue to seek, to reclaim this strain of spiritual genealogy in order to reintegrate culture and aesthetics for the Christian faith. To begin, it would be helpful to look historically to give a brief overview of the relationship art, beauty, and culture have had to the church and Christian tradition in general.

Early Christian theological reflections on aesthetics reflect Paul's charge to think on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever

is pleasing, whatever is commendable."[22] For these early writers, what is beautiful is synonymous with what is good, what is true. Beauty was defined, in the classical, philosophical sense, as what is the Beautiful, Good, Perfect, Symmetrical, and True. Therefore, when we recognize something as beautiful, good, perfect, whole, or true, then we are also able to understand God, because God is the ultimate vision and source of beauty, truth and goodness. Augustine saw creation as a means to understand God. In his *Confessions*, when he asks, "What do I love when I love Thee?," he reflects the idea that goodness and beauty of creation demonstrate God's goodness and beauty, but do not capture the completion or perfection of the beauty of God.[23] Many voices from the early and medieval church defended the use of images and music, for doxological and devotional uses, or even necessity. It is through the powers of our imagination and the contemplation on images and beauty that lead us to the Divine, who is the source of all beauty and perfection. Pseudo-Dionysius encapsulates this holistic conception of the God-head when he writes, "We call 'beautiful' that which has a share in beauty, and we give the name of 'beauty' to that ingredient which is the cause of beauty in everything. . . From this beauty comes the existence of everything, each being exhibiting its own way of beauty. For beauty is the cause of harmony, sympathy, of community. Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things."[24] The pursuit of beauty is here equated with pursuit of goodness and truth: "all things must desire, must yearn for, must love, the Beautiful

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[22] Philippians 4.8, NRSV.

[23] St. Augustine, *Confessions,* Trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, New York: Penguin, 1961. Book VIII.

[24] Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 76.

and the Good;" this pursuit, therefore, is a pursuit of the divine, which "brings ecstasy so that the love belongs not to the self but to the beloved."[25]

However, this is not to assume the entirety of Christian worship and reflection until the Reformation looked favorably on art, images, and creativity. Justin Martyr wrote against icons, arguing that the use and fashioning of them gets in the way of genuine worship.[26] Likewise Lactantius denied the value of material things to point to God: "For if religion consists of divine things, and if there is nothing divine except in things that are heavenly, images lack religion, since there can be nothing heavenly in that which is made of earth."[27] And Pope Gregory the Great referred to scripture to assert, "it must be shewn then by testimonies of sacred Scripture that it is not lawful for anything made with hands to be adored."[28]

To be sure, the Christian tradition has lacked catholicity regarding the use, purpose, and value of art in the life of worship, contemplation and devotion. Many, like Aquinas, are able to preserve the value of art in equating goodness and beauty: "A good thing is also in fact a beautiful thing, for both epithets have the same basis in reality. . .; and this is why *the good is esteemed beautiful.*"[29] And Anselm who describes God as, "harmony, fragrance, sweetness, pleasantness to the touch, beauty, after his ineffable

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[25] Ibid., 82.

[26] Justin Martyr, "from, 'The First Apology'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 44-5.

[27] Lactantius, "from, 'The Divine Institutes'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 47.

[28] Gregory the Great, "from, 'Selected Epistles'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 48.

[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Existence And Nature of God* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 73.

manner."[30] However, the suspicion and even rejection of images and art was also fairly widespread.

The Protestant Reformation picked up and developed the wariness toward art, and it is this theological lineage that, in many ways, destroyed the value of art for the Christian faith. John Calvin and Martin Luther resisted the centrality of art, primarily out of the Reformation critique of the corruption of the institutional Church. However, they did not reject beauty and art in total. As Thiessen describes, "it is not the presence of images that Luther attacks, but the spirit and reason by which they are installed."[31] Luther did not embrace visual art wholeheartedly, he loved music, reflecting, "next to the word of God, music deserves the highest praise."[32] Thiessen acknowledges the role Luther had in church music: "Luther's contribution to, and espousal of, music as a means of doxology was to be significant for the whole development of liturgical life and the musical tradition in Protestant churches."[33] Calvin emphasized what he believed to be the connection between images and idolatry, in writing: "We are forbidden every pictorial representation of God," [34] and "Any use of images leads to idolatry."[35] He seems to be preoccupied, however, not with images in general, but with images that purport to

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[30] Anselm of Canterbury, "from, 'Proslogium'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 74.

[31] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., "Part 3: The Reformation," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 126.

[32] Martin Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's Symphonie iucundae (1538)," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 145.

[33] Thiessen, "Part 3: The Reformation," 128.

[34] Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, The Library of Christian classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 99.

[35] Ibid., 1:109.

represent God: "We believe it wrong that God should be represented by a visible appearance, because he himself has forbidden it and it cannot be done without some defacing his glory."[36]

The Radical Reformation saw iconoclasm to completion, doing away with all images and decorations, declaring them to be idolatrous, thereby succeeding in alienating the church from any artistic appreciation of beauty. Thus, the Radical Reformation—the theological forebears of the Puritans—established beauty as, at best, a distraction, and at worst the work of the devil, luring us away from the Truth of God. Huldrych Zwingli proclaimed that all images are forbidden by God, and that we have lost focus in seeking images for devotion or contemplation: "We have begun to seek from creatures what we should have sought only from God."[37]

The Enlightenment furthered this impetus toward simplicity and Truth, by emphasizing the intellect, reason, and rationality. By rejecting all things irrational, beauty and artistry were seen as superfluous and accessory to a reasoned, intellectual life of faith. Things of subjective beauty were useless in efforts to gain knowledge or understandings about God or theological reflection. Thiessen describes this period of human history, "one of the least creative eras in theological history."[38] This era marked by a turn to human subjectivity, rationalism, intellectualism, and logic, also saw the development of aesthetics, but was developed primarily by philosophers, and rarely explored by theologians. There were, of course, exceptions, and voices defending the

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[36] Ibid., 1:112.

[37] Huldrych Zwingli, "from, 'A Short Christian Instruction (1523)'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 136.

[38] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., "Part 4: Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 155.

power of the imagination for religious contemplation. Hegel defends art, but one can sense the spirit of the Enlightenment in his words: "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. . . . Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that is not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is."[39] Likewise, Immanuel Kant echoes this somewhat favorable tone regarding art, but in a way that still focuses on the human mind and intellectual capacities: "Hence nature is here called sublime merely because it elevates our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature."[40] We hear, too, the emphasis on the powers of the human intellect to transcend the physical world, reflecting the intellectual hierarchy (which places human reason above all; human reason is equated with the image of God) of the Enlightenment. Søren Kierkegaard stands out in his attempt to reassert creativity and experience: "The Christian must not lack the eye, in a human sense the illuminating light, which for me makes it easier to comprehend a painted landscape than nature; there and in history he meets God's eye."[41]

The nineteenth century was marked by the Romantic and the Victorian eras, two divergent artistic, literary, and cultural periods. However, the role of the artist and art was similar; during both the Victorian and Romantic periods, art became a luxury, thereby the role of beauty remained auxiliary to the core of Christianity—for the common

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[39] Georg W. F. Hegel, "from *Aesthetics - Lectures on Fine Art,*" in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 192.

[40] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett Publishing, 1987), 121.

[41] Søren Kierkegaard, "from *Journals and Papers*," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 198.

believer or worshipper.[42] David Tracy further notes that the Romantic period gave us the notion that artists are "geniuses," which for him is a faulty, and even dangerous, label, because it places artists in a separate category. This results in alienation; common people are set apart from what is artistic, what is beautiful, and in turn the artists themselves are alienated from their "common" humanity.[43]

Concurrently, the turn of the twentieth century, the "modern" world, the developing social science marked a strict divide between "sacred" and "secular," understood as two separate realms, never to touch, interact, or overlap. The sacred contained all that is transcendent, divine, and perfect, while the secular was to be overcome: it is evil, corrupt and fallen. Art and culture, for many, encapsulated the temporal, and thus the corrupt, and so could not represent goodness, beauty or God. Even Karl Barth rejected the idea that God was somehow or in any form revealed in nature. Rather, he argued, we only needed the Church to see God—in its Word and Sacrament; the world is only good insofar as it is useful for human redemption. These suspicions can be linked to the ongoing doubt on the part of the Christian tradition of the material, physical, or "outside" world to connect to the sacred, the transcendent, perfect God. However, the nature of culture, art, and even theology, would itself begin to change dramatically in the twentieth century.

The positivism and hopefulness of the years of the Social Gospel and the Gilded Age were quickly marred by two World Wars and a decade-long economic Depression in the United States. In tandem with these political and economic forces, the first part of the

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[42] *Inquiring After God: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Blackwell readings in modern theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[43] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

century can be characterized by growth in pluralism, fragmentation and disillusionment. Art styles have developed simultaneously, as well as cultural forms and the availability of these things. The proliferation of types of media, art, and culture in many ways democratized what was, especially in the previous century, left for the upper, "leisure" classes. Likewise, as globalization increased, and the awareness and accessibility of other cultures, ethnic groups, and religions, theology changed. Thiessen remarks that the central issues for the church in the twentieth century were "local theologies, ecumenism, and theology in dialogue with other disciplines."[44] During the twentieth century, the shift from modernity to post-modernity has signaled a shift away from the alienation of art and beauty from the rest of human life. The Grand Narrative of human existence (of the modern era) has been confronted with the challenge of a multiplicity of narratives.

Similarly, the idea of a singular, monolithic Christian Theology gave way to multiple theologies—of location, and within cultural contexts. The proliferation of cultural forms has certainly presented Christian theologians with challenges. However, it has created a wide range of means by which Christians can engage with culture, art, and imagination, thereby laying a foundation to reclaim the centrality of beauty and art in pointing us to God and in reconciling the sacred with the secular, and the transcendent with the immanent.

There are quite a few examples of 20th/21st century theological aesthetics, so for brevity's sake, it will be impossible to present each with significant depth, however, it is worth demonstrating the breadth of the developing theological cultural engagement to give at least brief mention of a number of them. Paul Tillich is perhaps the most

[44] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., "Part 5: The Twentieth Century," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 204.

significant theologian for these themes in his work in linking theology and art and culture; as Thiessen describes, he was "the first theologian to appreciate autonomous modern art as a source of and for theology."[45] He describes God as "ultimate reality," which, though "not another name for God. . . would not be God if he were not first of all ultimate reality."[46] Tillich then describes that "the two indirect ways of expressing ultimate reality are philosophy. . . and art."[47] Tillich describes human culture as containing the potential for revelatory power, promise and potential. In *Theology and Culture,* he argues for culture's ability to tell us something about ourselves. It is in recognizing the meaning found within culture that we in turn learn something about ourselves, both individually and as communal beings, and in turn we are able to learn something about God.[48]

Tillich further explains the power of culture in his idea of the "latent church," that is, those within our society who may not have specific religious affiliation or commitment but are still able to communicate something about human life and its relation to the divine. Tillich's approach is labeled "correlational," that is, we can look to culture for the questions it asks, and taking those seriously, offer equally serious answers out of theological reflection, thereby placing them in a correlational dialectic. For Tillich, art and culture have a transformative power in our world. If art and culture contain means by which we understand ourselves, and if we are confronted with the

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Paul Tillich, "from, 'Art and Ultimate Reality'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 210.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

indisputable reality of human life and divine truth, then we cannot help but be changed by it.[49]

David Tracy develops and revises Tillich's claims, developing what he calls the "revised correlational method." He places even more meaning in culture and art as revelatory. Instead of answering the culture's questions and issues with "merely" religious answers (which seems to institute a false dichotomy between the two—culture only asks, and religion only answers), Tracy argues that we ought to recognize the power of culture in providing answers and meanings on its own terms. If culture is a gift, which he says it is, and if culture is a human product, and humans reflect the image of God, then culture can also reveal something of the divine. We find ourselves confronted with the revelations of ourselves in the experience of art. Art is able to confront us with an image and understanding of ourselves in new and surprising—even often shocking—ways.[50] In this same vein, he defends the capacity for truth in art. When art surprises us with reality, it is surprising because it is the truth, and not a truth upon which we need to reflect or further articulate, but one that in many ways smacks us with an immediate sense and knowledge of its being true:

> …the work of art encounters me with the surprise, impact, even shock of reality itself. In experiencing art, I recognize a truth I somehow know but know I did not really know except through the experience of recognition of the essential compelled by the work of art. I am transformed by its truth when I return to the everyday, to the whole of what I ordinarily call reality, and discover new affinities, new sensibilities for the everyday.[51]

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 107-15.

[51] Ibid., 111-12.

Karl Rahner argues that unless art is taken seriously by religious persons, the theological task remains incomplete. He confronts the Enlightenment-informed heritage, by arguing for a broader understanding of arts: "'verbal arts' are very closely related to theology, which also comes to expression in word. Focusing for the moment just on those arts which do not employ words, like architecture, sculpture, painting and music, we can say that all of these arts too are meant to be. . . human self-expressions which embody in one way or another the process of human self-discovery."[52] Rahner further asserts that art can only be considered religious, regardless of *intent*, if it is a genuine expression and engagement with the depths of human experience. And it is art's capacity to engage in these things that necessitates theologians' attention to and acceptance of art: "The true artist, to be sure, proclaims what is eternal in truth, in love, in man's endless quest and boundless desire."[53]

The challenging and confrontive nature of art is a theme echoed in many contemporary theological and religious writers. John Dillenberger confirms David Tracy's remarks that art is transformative; because of the confrontation of modern art, "we are somehow different."[54] He further proclaims art's prophetic function in its capacity to present a vision of reality that is both affirmation and negation of the present reality. Thiessen in her own work in aesthetics argues that locating theological reflection in art is a positive affirmation of life, of creativity and of imagination. Also finding something of the prophetic in art, she asserts, "the work of art 'speaks' of life in all its

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[52] Karl Rahner, "Theology and the Arts," *Thought* 57, no. 224 (March 1982): 24.

[53] Ibid., 29.

[54] John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 241.

aspects, including death. . . Real engagement with visual art demands more than a glance, it demands to go beyond one's immediate reactions."[55] This prophetic function of art is generally ascribed to its inherent imaginative quality, to imagine an alternate world and to recreate the world.

Frank Burch Brown develops these ideas. He articulates the imaginative power of art is its contribution to the fullness of human life here and now, and further in its prophetic ability, "showing what is unjust or senseless, and possibly what is required in response. In this way as in others, art potentially can render. . . a 'massive blow' that 'leaves one changed'. For the heart, the world of the prophetic work is morally or politically or perhaps religiously charged."[56] Consistent with Tillich and Tracy, Brown calls on artists outside the church as equally powerful to contain religious or theological significance: "The art that has the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion, but rather the art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms needs most to see."[57]

The power of the imagination at work in art and in the lives of artists is a theological task according to many contemporary theologians. Emil Brunner reflects that "art is always the child of the longing for something else,"[58] reflecting the dual character of human reality of emancipation and melancholy. Brunner goes on to clarify this "longing:" "It shapes something which is not present, for and through the imagination,

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[55] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, "from, 'Theology and Modern Irish Art'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 248.

[56] Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 110.

[57] Ibid., 111.

[58] Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 499.

because that which is present does not satisfy man. In this sense it has more to do with Redemption than with Creation."[59] In a sense this encapsulates the already-but-not-yet spirit of the Christian life, the witness of the already redemption at work in the world, but the anticipation and hope of that redemption's completion. Liberation theology relies on the power of imagining alternate realities, though often focused on the socio-economic, political realities. Leonardo Boff momentarily reflects on the necessity of the imagination in liberation theology: "Creative imagination enables us to break away from things that are taken for granted, to abandon accepted presuppositions and begin to think in unorthodox ways."[60] It is the connectedness of artistry, creativity, imagination, inspiration, and fantasy that serve as the grounds to cultivate human hope.

Langdon Gilkey also elaborates on the imaginative power of genuine art. He repudiates the current state of art and culture, seemingly dominated by superficiality and kitsch. The prominence and influence of "present-day conservative religion" in both social and political spheres has given us "conformity in dress and morals, kitsch in art, and the American Way of Life in theology!"[61] Genuine art, however, should not be dismissed because of the potential for kitsch, because art, when it is true to its purpose, "creates immediate and experienced *meaning.*"[62] Art can also help us "see in *new* and *different* ways, below the surface and beyond the obvious. Art opens up truth hidden behind and within the ordinary."[63] Gilkey also gives heed to the element of protest that is

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Orbis Books, 1979), 96.

[61] Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," 187.

[62] Ibid., 188.

[63] Ibid., 189.

latent in this imaginative quality. In imagining alternate realities, art, thus, protests current realities, hence, art has a "prophetic role" that is both "moral and political."[64]

Further theological reflection on art has highlighted the cognitive function of art: we can know something through art and imagination. John McIntyre argues that through art's empathetic and communicative functions we know deeply about the human experience, and we share in this through the universalizing and recreation of human experience through channels of the imagination.[65] Thomas O'Meara reflects on the revelatory nature of aesthetics, in that aesthetics relates to "human theological interpretation of divine interpretation."[66] He further claims, "Theologians, like artists, strove to get beyond the landscape of simplistic salvation history, where biblical and supernatural objects were strewn. . . . Reflection upon aesthetic perception helps the contemporary theologian to resdiscover the objectivity of divine revelation within the horizons of human subjectivity."[67] Art, then, helps us see the reality of our own existence, and the possibility for other futures.

In a sense perhaps reminiscent of the early church reflections on art, some call on the importance of art in connecting us to the creative spirit of God. Gerardus van der Leeuw remarks that "the recognition of the creation of God in the creation of the arts is . . . a recognition of hope. . . . Religion and art are parallel lines which intersect only at

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[64] Ibid., 190.

[65] John McIntyre, *Faith, Theology, and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987).

[66] Thomas Franklin O'Meara, "The Aesthetic Dimension in Theology," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 205-218, 205.

[67] Ibid., 211.

infinity, and meet in God."[68] Patrick Sherry further illustrates this principle: "In exercising their creative powers in the production of things of worth, men and women may become channels of God's creativity; and the beauty of what they create may. . . have a sacramental significance, in that by it the material may convey the spiritual and indeed, . . . serve as a sign of God's presence and activity."[69]

In *Art and Action,* Nicholas Wolterstorff furthers the connection between God as an artist, and human creativity as mirroring divine creativity. The artist, therefore, is a creator like God creates, by bringing new objects and ideas into being; Wolterstorff calls the artist "the center of consciousness."[70] He operates on the assumption that art is for contemplation and creates parallels to God's divine creation: "Art can serve as an instrument in our struggle to overcome the fallenness of our existence, while also. . . anticipating the shalom which awaits us."[71] Therefore, the value of art is to open up another world beyond or alternative to our own; art opens up new ways of seeing the world. The value in the shared experience of art and imagination is that we might learn something of others and of ourselves, even if it ultimately does not leave us changed permanently.

One thing that theologians must be wary of—to the extent of vehement rejection—is kitsch disguised as genuine art. Art, if it is to be understood as meaning-making and –giving, and if it bears significance in its imaginative and cognitive

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[68] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty; the Holy in Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), 332.

[69] Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (SCM, 2002), 161.

[70] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 52.

[71] Ibid., 84.

capacities, then kitsch must be rejected as antithetical to the theological potential in aesthetic sensibilities. As already cited, Gilkey is clear on this point, calling art "bitterly iconoclastic."[72] Richard Harries and Joan Chittister also reflect on the theological significance of art apophatically, but denying the validity of kitsch. Whereas art can be understood as related to beauty, and thus connects us to God's beauty and creativity, kitsch is antithetical to the life of faith. Richard Harries elaborates: "kitsch, in whatever form, is an enemy of the Christian faith. . . kitsch reveals to us that the aesthetic, the moral and spiritual realms are inseparably interconnected. The failure of kitsch is a moral and spiritual failure as much as an aesthetic one."[73] Joan Chittister, likewise, remarks, "What we may be most missing in this highly technological world of ours is beauty. We value efficiency instead. We want functionalism over art. We create trash. We bask in kitsch. . . . A loss of commitment to beauty may be the clearest sign we have that we have lost our way to God. Without beauty we miss the glory of the face of God in the here and now."[74] Therefore, because art and culture correspond to part of what it means to be human, then to deny art's importance denies part of God and our knowledge of God.

William Dyrness reflects on the value of art for theological reflection and for Christian worship. He discusses in general the themes that connect art and theology, as important for society and as integral to the life of faith, but most specifically focuses on visual art. The value of art for the church lies in its doxological function: "making beautiful forms is theologically connected to our call both to listen and respond to God in

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[72] Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," 191.

[73] Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God*, 60.

[74] Chittister, "from 'Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light'," 366.

prayer, praise and sacrament."[75] Dyrness further connects art and imagination in the life of Faith to the Christian Trinitarian view of God: we create through God, and participate, then, in the sustaining, renewing, and recreative activity of God the creator, redeemer, sustainer: "When artists do capture something of the way 'God does things,' whether they are Christians or not, we are challenged to see the world, and even God's presence there, in ways that we have not seen it before. . . . Art. . . is a way of acting in the world that engages with its materiality in such a way that it illumines a way of knowing as well as doing."[76]

Hillary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin, in *Art and Soul,* state simply that Christian theology must begin with a doctrine of creation.[77] We begin with creation because it is our source of life and being. It reminds us of our collective dependence on God for life, land, and sustenance, all of which God calls "good." Their project begins with the premise that as part of the doctrine of creation, humans are bestowed with the responsibility to be stewards and to cultivate the earth. It is this that most closely correlates to the artistic impulse and creative potential. We are to cultivate the world; not only land and agriculture, but all the gifts God has given, and for humans, this includes, most especially, the image of God, the intellect, imagination, and culture. They trace the theological genealogy related to art, and claim that along the way the church has ignored, and so is now missing, an aesthetic understanding. A Christian understanding and appreciation of, and attention to, culture "is about taking responsibility to conserve,

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[75] William A Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*, Engaging culture (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2001), 9.

[76] Ibid., 99.

[77] Hilary Brand, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, CA: Piquant, 2001).

develop, and improve the world we have been given."[78] This further reiterates what others have said about the necessary capacity to imagine a better world.

Art further plays a role in the redemption and reconciliation of the world. The world has distorted what is good and holy, and in participation in the world of God, through art, we are able to work for the world's reconciliation, which "means not walking away from the world as it is. . . but having the courage to invite God's redeeming presence into it."[79] Most simply, though, Brand and Chaplin address the intrinsic Christian nature of art and imagination. Art, as part of the created world, " can point beyond itself to the Divine Maker."[80] Echoing the sentiment that the artistic and imaginative powers allow us to experience the fullness of life, they assert, "The aesthetic dimension of life feeds and enriches every other facet."[81]

That the creative imagination can be a means to understand God can be heard in other reflections on art and culture. Anna Kessler identifies this avenue this way: "the conception of the divine-human encounter is highly revelatory and deeply connected with individual human experience, more than with the world itself."[82] This creative imagination is significant for the life of faith because it is through this capacity that "humanity and God interact. . . Through the creative process itself individuals can access

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[78] Ibid., 46.

[79] Ibid., 61.

[80] Ibid., 89.

[81] Ibid., 102.

[82] Anna Kessler, "Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination: Nick Cave and the Divine-Human Encounter," in *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*, ed. Michael J Gilmour (New York: Continuum, 2005), 84.

and truly experience the presence of the divine. . . . humanity and God can encounter one another and communicate."[83]

Andrew Greeley puts forth what is perhaps the most theologically significant role of culture, arguing that culture itself ought to be understood as a sacrament. Because culture reveals something about ourselves, and through culture, we find both meaning and legitimation, culture can be an avenue of God's grace on earth. If culture provides connection, meaning, and identity in a very real way, then it ought to be embraced as having sacramental potential (a visible sign of an invisible grace). As both theologian (priest) and sociologist, he observes the human proclivity to find hope in the religious quest. Religious discourse is the attempt to share these experiences and affect others in some way. Therefore, any attempt to find meaning and articulate themes of hope or the search for hope ought to be understood as theological. The shared human experience and grasping for hope can be seen in the multitude of forms of popular culture. He calls popular culture a "theological place—the locale in which one may encounter God. Popular culture provides an opportunity to experience God and to tell stories of God or, … to learn about God and to teach about God."[84]

Moving now to specific reflection on the unique capacity for music, as an example of aesthetics, creativity and imagination, to relate humanity to the divine. Conrad Ostwalt remarks that there is a powerful gift of God that can be perceived and received through cultural means, in particular popular music in form and function. He takes music seriously both as art form and for theological purposes. While many remark

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[83] Ibid., 88.

[84] Greeley, *God in Popular Culture*, 9.

that the world is becoming increasing secular, and religion is disappearing, Ostwalt argues that the religious impulse and religious questions will not cease to be asked. Rather, we can observe a shift in the location of the questions, and so our attention must turn to art, culture, and, yes, even popular culture: "if it is true that the institutional Church is losing authority in contemporary society. . . we should not be surprised to find religion expressed with new vitality outside the institutional church. . . in 'secular' cultural forms like literature, film and art."[85]

Emily Saliers, a member of the Indigo Girls, and her father Don Saliers, professor emeritus of Theology and Worship at Emory University, wrote a book together on the role of music in spiritual practice. The text will certainly be of use in the later chapters focusing explicitly on the Indigo Girls, but for the purposes here, it is significant to note their reflection that "Music helps us enter our humanity more fully, by embracing the most mysterious things about us and about our lives in time and space."[86] Music, therefore, allows us to plunge the depth of our souls, regardless of labels like secular or sacred.

Jeremy Begbie is best known for his theological engagement with music, as theologically significant in both form and function. He asserts the uniqueness of music in its ability to be both *of* time and *above* time. Music consumes some of our time to hear a piece, a song, a symphony, an album. He also notes that music connects us to the divine in its integrity of rhythm, sound, melody, harmony, performance and experience. Similar to the sacraments, music must be both performed and experienced. In this spirit, music

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[85] Conrad Eugene Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 5.

[86] Don E. Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, 1st ed., The practices of faith series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 18.

represents the in-breaking of the transcendent into the temporal, where they mix together in an experience that is at once humanly cultural, and divinely ordered. He asserts that this potential in music continues especially in contemporary music: "In a wide range of musical genres today, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, theological or Christian themes are being explored, and often in ways that go far beyond using religious words simply for style or surface effect."[87]

Religion and Popular Culture: The Developing Discipline

To speak of religion and popular culture as a distinct discipline would be misleading. By its nature it is interdisciplinary, and relatively recent; the scholarship reflects this variety in both breadth and depth. It is also worth mentioning that because the area of study is also a contemporary one it necessarily has amorphous boundaries and is ever-expanding. To begin the review of this field, I will offer a glimpse at a handful of volumes of collected essays that have helped introduce and define the field.[88] Then, I will spend more attention on a few scholars who have been significant in the particular approaches pivotal for this project. Finally, I will give heed to scholarship that has focused specifically on music, popular culture, and religion, with an aim to situate this project as a contribution to that niche of the wide and growing interdisciplinary field of religion and popular culture.

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[87] Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 18.

[88] The three anthologies discussed are significant in that they illustrate the breadth of the field. They are often used in undergraduate courses on religion and popular culture.

Bruce David Forbes' and Jeffrey Mahan's *Religion and Popular Culture in America* is now in its second volume.[89] They focus on culture as a neutral term, and qualify popular in contradisctinction to associations of culture with terms like "high" or "elite". The essays are divided into four sections categorizing approaches to religion and popular culture: "Religion in Popular Culture," "Popular Culture in Religion," "Popular Culture as Religion," and "Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue." The essays discuss religious symbolism in forms of popular culture, for example in forms of popular fiction (*The DaVinci Code, The Secret Life of Bees*), and music videos, in particular focusing on Madonna. The second section examines the impact of popular culture on the religious culture and climate in America, particularly focusing on religion-as-entertainment, especially as manifest in the so-called megachurches. The third section observes the ways that popular culture has taken the place of traditional religion for much of the American population. Examples of this are particularly evident in sports, television, and music festivals, each of them in some way resembles the traditional forms and functions of religion in their display of ritual, myth and symbol.

The fourth section answers the question of how religion and popular culture can find common ground. Like Tillich and Tracy, these scholars look for ways that religion and popular culture are addressing the same questions. This section places interpretation at its core:

> [Religion and popular culture] interpenetrate one another, and many of the participants in this dialogue are themselves involved both in a religious community and in popular culture. For many, however, religion provides an

[89] Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000).

> interpretive lens through which culture may be read and critiqued, and popular culture raises realities and themes that cast religion in a different light.[90]

Hence, the book concludes by moving beyond surface comparisons of symbol and ritual, and looking for channels of interpretation, finding means by which religion and culture offer reciprocating interpretations of one another, thereby offering genuine meaning and relevance for the lives of their respective consumers (who are, in reality, often overlapping demographics).

God in the Details, edited by Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy approaches the field with an emphasis on religion *in* popular culture, looking for manifestations and evidences of religion in mainstream popular forms of culture and media. They begin with the presupposition that religious activity is how people, (hence popular culture) "are making the world meaningful (or discovering it to be so)."[91] They argue then, that popular culture can be a rich area of study for examples of religion because of the meaning-making and meaning-giving activity in which large portions of the population are engaged. The essays in this volume focus on forms of popular culture which reflect the traditional meaning-giving channels of religion: "As religious institutions have lost their monopoly on the construction and maintenance of meaning, religiosity has found expression in a wide variety of human activities."[92] The text is divided into five categories of religious-like meaning-centers: Myth: "specific references to the sacred narratives of religious traditions and its broader evocation of powerful culture-defining symbols and stories;" Ritual: "meaning…of shared symbolic activity in a multicultural, multireligious society;"

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[90] Ibid., 235.

[91] Mazur and McCarthy, "Introduction: Finding Religion in American Popular Culture," 4.

[92] Ibid., 10.

Spirituality and Morality: "extent to which such popular forms function for their audiences as spiritual directors and maps of a moral world;" and Churches: "we are seeing not only elements once reserved for religious institutions, but full wrought alternatives to traditional religion."[93] Specific topics for these popular religious forms include the 'promised land' imagery in the music of Bruce Springsteen, apocalyptic themes in movies, sacred space and meaning at the Burning Man Festival, religious parody and piety in *The Simpsons,* and rap and hip-hop culture as a religious community.

Gordon Lynch, (whose scholarship will be discussed at length below), edited a volume focusing on the developing field of scholarship of religion and popular culture.[94] The essays collected in *Between Sacred and Profane* are aimed at addressing the issues of a newly-developing interdisciplinary field of study. The questions Lynch poses in his Introduction include "Why does research in religion, media, and popular culture matter?;" "What is the role of the study of religion, media, and popular culture in the context of wider debates about religion, culture and society, and what distinctive contribution has the study of religion, media, and popular culture made (or could make) to these wider debates?;" and "How might the study of religion, media and popular culture inform broader concepts of religion and the sacred?"[95] The essays contribute to these questions, in attempt to further the methodologies and issues involved in studying religion and popular culture. These reflections include questions for further study, definitional issues, and ways to conduct multidisciplinary research.

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[93] Ibid., 13.

[94] Gordon Lynch, ed., *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

[95] Ibid., 3.

In the first essay, Lynn Clark reinforces the importance of this growing field: "To the extent that scholars want to understand life as experienced from the ground up, popular cultural studies are going to be an inevitable and highly salient way for us to probe meaning-making practices of everyday lives."[96] Another notable contribution to this volume is Jeffrey Mann's chapter, "Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture." He defends the field, answering the previous resistance to the popular because it was assumed to be trivial. However the tone has shifted, realizing the contribution of "Finding religion in surprising cultural locations, and seeing where religion is shaped by society. . . . theological and metaphysical questions remain a part of popular discourse, and that religion is practiced in diverse and sometimes surprising ways in contemporary culture,"[97] and in finding these new sources or locations of overlap, beginning to interpret them. He also reflects a prominent methodology in studying author-text-reader (which must be broadly understood in terms of forms of popular culture), which is widely embraced in the field of religion and popular culture. He concludes with a statement of significance for the wider contribution: "In order to understand religion in the post-modern world we must explore the porous boundary and creative tension between the seemingly secular and the seemingly religious."[98]

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[96] Clark, "Why Study Popular Culture? Or, How to Build a Case for Tour Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department," 15.

[97] Jeffrey H. Mann, "Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (I.B. Tauris, 2007), 51.

[98] Ibid., 62.

Michael Gilmour's *Call Me the Seeker,* is also relevant for the project at hand as it specifically addresses religious themes and symbolism in popular music.[99] Gilmour's introduction states that music cannot be underestimated in its potential to engage in religious themes and even "grand theological questions," though not always intentionally. He reflects this tri-part analysis (text, author, audience), by focusing on audience reception: "much can be learned about the large audiences that listen to the music, whose worldview is shaped in part by the songwriters they revere and the subcultures with which they identify."[100] The articles range in focus from protest in Woody Guthrie's music, Jeremiad themes in U2, faith and doubt in Nick Cave's music, to rap and themes of evil. The book is certainly related to the questions of this dissertation, in recognizing popular music—in its songwriters, performers, product, and consumers—as a form and function of religious meaning.

Many scholars have been particularly decisive in shaping the multidisciplinary field of religion and popular culture, particularly as relevant to the project at hand. Several of them have already been discussed in other ways in the above sections of this chapter. A handful merit mentioning again as addressing concerns and themes particularly germane to this dissertation. Gilmour's book, as previously mentioned, has taken the questions and methodologies of the field and applied it to specific examples of popular music. His questions and work in opening the area of research to popular music is obviously beneficial for this project.

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[99] Michael J. Gilmour, ed., *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

[100] Michael J. Gilmour, "Introduction: Radios in Religious Studies Departments: Preliminary Reflections on the Study of Religion in Popular Music," in *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*, ed. Michael J Gilmour (New York: Continuum, 2005), viii.

David Chidester addresses the forms of popular culture that reflect religion. The title of his book, *Authentic Fakes,* perhaps shows his hand, in arguing that often the way popular culture reflects religious forms and functions are not as substantial or as deeply meaningful as traditional religion. However, there are serious modes of reflection, particularly in the American psyche's fixation on death, dying and sacrifice, and even the less-serious modes, there is significance for serious research: "some religious activity appears transparently fake, including the proliferation of invented religions on the Internet, but even fake religions can be doing a kind of symbolic cultural, and religious work that is real."[101] His work is important in that it furthers the conversation in which the lines between religion and culture, or sacred and secular are blurred. I believe the significance of the multidisciplinary development is in its ability to transcend traditional boundaries, especially between things that "count" as religious or theological and everything else that lies "outside." In blurring these lines, new forms of knowing, understanding, and communicating can be opened up, hence allowing other, more traditional disciplines to be enriched.

Conrad Ostwalt's work is of interest for this project in his reflection on the notion of "secularization," and rejection of the term as a synonym for the disappearance or irrelevance of religion. Not so: religion and theological questions will continue to be important, as they constitute the core of human experience (lived, popular religion), but the location of the questions and the seeking have changed. Therefore, Ostwalt embraces culture, and the potentially powerful gift of God that can be perceived and received through cultural means. He particularly embraces popular music in its form and function

[101] Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 9.

as particularly communicative of the divine. Of further interest for the remainder of this dissertation is his interest in taking popular music seriously as both art form and theological purposes. We must look to art, culture, even—and especially—popular culture to examine issues traditionally reserved for the religious elite, in their contemporary context: "if it is true that the institutional Church is losing authority in contemporary society. . . we should not be surprised to find religion expressed with new vitality outside the institutional church. . . in 'secular cultural forms like literature, film, and art."[102]

Andrew Greeley offers a unique perspective as a sociologist, novelist and Catholic priest. He does not hide his appreciation of popular culture, calling culture a "sacrament" in its power to reveal something about ourselves. Through culture (especially contemporary culture and its twentieth and twenty-first century audiences), humans find meaning and legitimation. He argues that culture can be an avenue of God's grace on earth. Therefore, culture is not only significant in its reflection of religious symbols, rituals, and myths, but popular culture is *theologically* significant because it can provide meaning, connection and identity in a real way, and therefore ought to be embraced as having a sacramental potential. He further argues that religious discourse is the attempt to share these experiences and affect others in some way. Therefore, any attempt at finding meaning and articulating these themes of hope or the search for hope[103] can be understood as theological. He identifies these things in the surrounding culture, particularly in the multitude of manifestations of popular culture: "Popular culture is a

[102] Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, 5.

[103] Greeley makes a sociological claim here, identifying a human penchant for looking for and finding hope and the renewal of hope as the kernel of the universal human religious quest.

'locus theologicus,' a theological place—the locale in which one may encounter God. Popular culture provides an opportunity to experience God and to tell stories of God or, . . . to learn about God and to teach about God."[104]

Gordon Lynch has contributed significantly to religion/theology and popular culture studies. The edited volume, *Between Sacred and Profane* has been discussed above. These reflections include questions for further study, definitional issues, and ways to do multidisciplinary research, and will serve to inform the methodology and analysis involved in this dissertation. His *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* will serve as a supportive resource for this project.[105] This text offers an impressively comprehensive overview of the methodologies and issues involved in overlap of religious, theological, and cultural expressions. He identifies the theological task(s) in general terms of questions of meaning and existence.

Lynch's book is particularly helpful in two ways. First, he identifies four main approaches to religion and popular culture—two directly related to religious studies, and two related to theological interpretation. Second, he describes key methodologies for interpreting forms of popular culture: author-based, text-based, and ethnographic. The first two are relatively axiomatic; the latter focuses on audience reception and interpretation. The audience-focused approach seeks to "decode" the texts (in contrast to the artists' work of encoding the texts), to understand how the signs, symbols, meaning, and context influence and are used by the audience to internalize and interpret the author, text, and experience of popular culture. Lynch bases much of his argument on the

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[104] Greeley, *God in Popular Culture*, 9.

[105] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*.

necessity of seeing cultural forms on their own terms prior to infusing or overlaying meaning, through which we can see the foundation for identifying popular culture as a *locus theologicus*.

In both books, Lynch looks forward to the continuing development of the interdisciplinary field. I will use Lynch's call for serious theological engagement and development of discourse between theology and popular culture to further the argument that popular culture—specifically popular music—can serve as a location for developing theological reflection. Lynch argues that

> the study of religion and popular culture can also help us to map the complex reconfigurations of religion and the sacred in late modern cultures that are neither wholly secular nor neatly definable in terms of neither traditional religious belief and ritual, nor structures of traditional religious institutions. . . . how people make religious worlds for themselves. . . . construct religious identities, meaning, rituals, communities, and experiences,[106]

are all areas that the multidisciplinary approach of religion and popular culture can help observe, explain and interpret. He further states, in looking for further possibilities (necessities, even) for research:

> What I have offered here is no more than an initial set of notes . . . . As yet this is not a project that has seriously been undertaken within the wider literature in theology, religion, and popular culture. But my hope is that even the incomplete account I have given here may provide some encouragement for others to take up this challenge of thinking of how a theological aesthetics might inform a more conscious and critical reflection on the environments, resources, and practices of everyday life.[107]

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[106] Gordon Lynch, "Some Concluding Thoughts," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 158.

[107] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 193.

Jon Michael Spencer charts new territory in both coining a new term and establishing a new synthesis of disciplines with his "theomusicology."[108] He explores both sacred and profane realms by looking at the role of music in both of them. Spencer argues that music can give unique insight in its ability to transcend lines of sacred and profane, in its permeation of all human life. His approach can "discern how particular peoples perceive the universal mysteries that circumscribe their mortal existence and how the ethics, theologies, and mythologies to which they subscribe shape their worlds and *the* world."[109]

Spencer's book mirrors the three-fold approach for many scholars studying popular culture. It is not sufficient to study merely the "text" at hand, text in this instance being a somewhat misleading term, as the "text" could mean a film, a poem, an episode of a sitcom, or, for our purposes, the music produced. A comprehensive study of popular culture "texts" must also include serious attention to both the artists and their audiences—the creation and consumption of the "texts." He states that the interaction between author, text, and audience is integral to the meaning-making potential of popular music: "…although the popular music consumed by the secular may have no orthodox theology, it may be that, in addressing some of the concerns listeners believe are ultimate, it awakens the latent theologies within them."[110]

Spencer's attempt to create a new sub-field resulted in a short-lived *Journal of Theomusicology*. The subtitle of the journal, "Black Sacred Music" indicates the closest

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[108] Jon Michael Spencer, *Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology*, Contributions to the study of music and dance no. 23 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

[109] Ibid., xi.

[110] Ibid., 38.

parallel to the task at hand in this dissertation. The closest application of the concepts of theological reflection in popular music has most significantly focused on music of the black American tradition: rap, hip-hop, R&B, blues, jazz, etc. Perhaps the connection is obvious: the music genealogy of these forms of "black" music directly relates them to the Gospel, Blues, and Spiritual traditions from which they emerge; these music traditions mark eras of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Anthony Pinn writes in this specified field of research that focuses on rap, hip-hop, and other traditional black music genres. He develops what he calls a Nitty-Gritty Hermeneutics. According to his perspective, we can appreciate the rawness and seeming underbelly of culture and life represented in the anger and frequent vulgarity of rap and hip-hop. These genres of rap, hip-hop, etc., are often in response to contexts of injustice, inequality, violence and pain. Ultimately the value in these genres is their ability to tell a story and speak from a particular context. Art and culture, then, insofar as they are able to tell us who we are and what it means to be human, are truthful, which, if we are open to it, can connect us to one another and to our own story and experience of being human in God's world.[111]

Pinn further articulates theological strains in rap and hip-hop, arguing that these genres communicate existential and ontological quests; in these creative expressions, "ultimate questions and concerns of human existence and meaning are played out in many 'secular' modes of music expression."[112] The themes and arguments made by

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[111] Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

[112] Ibid., 2.

observers including Anthony Pinn and William Banfield[113] can be traced through other musical genealogies and styles. Some things are universal (that music can be a source of meaning, for example) and understanding their methods of studying rap can certainly be applicable to other musical expressions, and can also demonstrate a great deal about theological questions and their real-life answers. However, rap and hip-hop have been and remain engaged in unique, genre-specific cultural conversations, and occupy a special social location in American society. While these examinations can serve as models, to a large degree, the themes at hand will digress significantly from the rap and hip-hop traditions, but parallel their projects.

According to Gordon Lynch, what is needed in the interdisciplinary field of religion and popular culture is developing the space for the academic and intellectual conversation between religion and popular culture. This dissertation will serve that end, primarily by demonstrating the theological validity of cultural and art forms that exist independent from any denominational affiliation or Christian subculture. I will assert the potential for the writing, performing, and receiving of music as a *locus theologicus*, in which something is understood and we are called to act. The call-to-action portion rests on the sociological premise that all religion is social, and is consistent with a long history of protest music, ranging from the spirituals, to anti-war, to songs of peace, freedom, and justice. These concepts are concurrently theological; they contain theological content through themes of justice, peace, and freedom, which are equally theological as they are

[113] William Banfield, "The Rub: Market, Morals and the 'Theologizing of Popular Music'," in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 173-83.

political, and the protest music found from these artists can be seen as a form of prophetic protest.

CHAPTER THREE

Defining the Terms: Theological Reflection and Prophetic Witness

Introduction and Preliminary Questions

The following pages will address two primary theological concepts as applied to specific artists: the nature of theological reflection and the idea of prophetic witness. To discuss elements of popular culture as locations of theological reflection implies something specific about the nature and function of theology. I will draw on various theologians to articulate what it is that theology *does*—the goals of theological reflections—not only in the lives of individuals but for collectivities of persons, too. Important questions for these definitions include: What is the task of theological inquiry? What are the questions that theological reflection seeks to explore and answer? And how does it do so?

The second piece of the claims this dissertation makes about popular culture in general, and music in particular, is the potential for prophetic witness in popular music. Several questions will be pertinent to define the terms and to do so in ways that apply to popular culture. What exactly does prophetic witness mean? Who are prophets and what are their tasks? This will necessarily begin with the biblical tradition of prophets. Because the biblical prophets are primary for our understanding of prophetic speech, action, and power in social, economic, and political contexts, they will set the foundation for this section. However, the most significant piece of this explication will be in its relevance for post-biblical contexts. In what ways does the prophetic witness still manifest in more contemporary contexts? The latter portion of this chapter will draw on

the Hebrew prophets and interpretations of that material, in order to put forth a definition of prophetic witness that will then be applied in the following chapters. It will also be necessary to turn attention to the identity of the prophet. Because the musicians who are the focus of the case studies do not necessarily publicly profess faith, or do not do so as their primary public persona, the question arises as to whether the "prophet" must embrace that identity or recognize themselves as a prophet. Not necessarily: the potential for the prophetic witness or prophetic spirit to be alive and present in culture can reach beyond an individual's awareness as such. To address these points I will reference biblical scholarship, as well as theological reflection that makes note of the prophetic element in theological reflection—'doing' theology and 'speaking' prophetically are not two distinct 'tasks,' but rather work together through denunciation and proclamation. Using these broad themes, I will seek to take seriously popular music as both an art form and as religiously and theologically meaningful.

This chapter serves as a bridge between the literature review and the case studies. The field of theology and popular culture is a small and developing field. It is necessary to place this project within the larger framework of popular culture and religious studies. However, this work has at its core a specific theological claim. The following pages set out a framework for those claims. To declare something theological and prophetic presumes specific understandings of 'theology' and 'prophecy.' Herein are the definitions of those things as I understand and will use them, and moreover how theological reflection is by nature prophetic, and likewise, how prophetic denunciation and proclamation is a thoroughly theological task.

In identifying the theological, I do not intend a highly systematized form of theology generally set apart from culture in general, thereby avoiding "ivory tower" theology. Rather, theological reflection deals with broad questions of human life, relationships to others and to God, thus ranging from the individual, to the collective, to the transcendent and sacred. From that come the themes of identity, loss, hope, evil, suffering, redemption, and justice. In order to take seriously voices in culture and art as theologians, we must also have in view an idea of theology as something that can and does take place in the realm of the "popular," i.e. we are all theologians, and theology happens when we are seeking answers to questions about grace, suffering, sin and redemption.

What is Theology?

Most definitions of theology begin by breaking up the word according to its etymology. Theology comes from the Greek *theo* and *logos:* words about God, discourse about God, ideas about God. According to Karen Armstrong, Aristotle believed theology "was the 'first philosophy' because it was concerned with the highest mode of being."[1] However, these ancient Greeks did not have in mind the personal and involved God of the Bible, or even a specific God at all. Thus, their *theologia* "had no appeal for ordinary folk."[2] This philosophical theology remained just that—an intellectual exercise in abstraction. Many attempts to define theology usually begin with similar philosophical-sounding definitions: Words about God; Discourse related to God. However,

[1] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2009), 72.

[2] Ibid.

Armstrong's second comment points to the insufficiency of these starting points. They remain vague: Whose words? Which God? And what kind of discourse?

For most theologians, however vague and philosophical their writings might sound to Armstrong's "ordinary folk," theology is not directed toward a vague, unknowable, unnamable deity. Insofar as it emerges from a specific tradition and as soon as it describes a specific understanding of the divine, theology is specific. William Dyrness defines theological reflection as "simply the practice of naming and describing the major commitments that guide thought and action."[3] His definition would square with Paul Tillich who defines religion as "the substance, the ground and the depth of man's [sic] spiritual life…his *ultimate concern*,"[4] and therefore "the object of theology is that which concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us."[5] *Theology, therefore, must be personal and specific.*

According to Daniel Migliore, Christian theology is concerned with "the understanding of God as triune, the centrality of Jesus Christ and his work of reconciliation, and the hope of fulfillment of life in communion with God and with all others by the power of the Holy Spirit."[6] While the two former primary concerns are certainly important, some may even argue foundational, they are not often explicitly in the cultural forms addressed in the following chapters. Though it may at times be

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[3] William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*, Engaging culture (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2001), 87.

[4] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (HarperCollins, 2001), xvii.

[5] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 12.

[6] Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), xi.

appropriate to overlap these concerns with the message and/or interpretation of pieces of music, the ways music (and lyrics) wrestle with hope and the necessity of life in communion with God and others, (or, by contrast the struggle when this fulfillment seems out of reach) will be much more obvious. This latter element, then ("the hope of fulfillment of life in communion with God and with all others"), may be seen as a starting point, from which genuine theological reflection on the triune God and the reconciliatory work of Christ may take shape. Migliore would likely agree, as he, among others referenced herein, insists that theology must have a contextual basis, and must be reinterpreted among specific cultures and communities: "theology today is challenged to rethink the meaning of salvation along relational and communitarian lines, defining it not as a rescue of individual souls from the world but as the creation of a new and deeper freedom in community with God and solidarity with others."[7] *Theology, therefore, is a reflection on hope and reconciliation, in response to specific contexts.*

Tillich further defines theology as "a help in answering questions,"[8] and he relies on what he names the correlative method. Theology responds to the situation that humans find themselves in: "the totality of man's creative self-interpretation in a special period."[9] Theology is correlative in that it correlates questions that arise and are implied in human situations with theological answers. This method of correlation he articulates, is consistent with the experience of being human: "Being human means asking the questions of one's own being and living under the impact of the answers given to this question. And, conversely, being human means receiving answers to the question of

[7] Ibid., xv.

[8] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:viii.

[9] Ibid., 1:4.

one's own being and asking questions under the impact of the answers." Therefore, the correlation of theological method "makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions."[10] *Theology, therefore, deals with specific questions of human experience.*

Tillich champions cultural forms as valid and vital means of expressing these ultimate concerns: "Pictures, poems, and music can become objects of theology, not from the point of view of their aesthetic form, but from the point of view of their power of expressing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately, in and through their aesthetic form."[11] Here the unique ability of art (visual, music, language) emerges as able to stand in this correlative 'middle ground.' As Tillich articulates, aesthetic forms have the unmatched capacity to connect to and express the depths of human experience—persons' deepest hopes, fears, despair, faith and love (and the lack of any or all of these). The expressive capability of artistic forms ought to be instructive for those 'doing' theology, in bringing to light the objects of "ultimate concern," to which theology must find an answer if it is to speak a Christian message. He argues that theologians, as members of society, participate in cultural systems (politics, poetry, philosophy), and so must look to them in theological reflection: "[The theologian] uses culture and religion intentionally as his [sic] means of expression, . . . he formulates the existential questions implied in them, to which his theology intends to be the answer."[12] David Tracy revises Tillich's approach, putting forth the (aptly named) revised correlational method. Instead

[10] Ibid., 1:62.

[11] Ibid., 1:13.

[12] Ibid., 1:38.

of responding from the tradition to the questions posed by these 'external' cultural forms, Tracy calls us not only to listen to the existential questions that arise from position of aesthetic forms, but also appeals to openness in finding *answers* implied in such cultural forms.[13]

That theology is specific also dictates that it must be contextual. Theologians of the latter half of the twentieth century in particular emphasize the experiential and contextual nature of theology. According to Dorothee Sölle, "the object of theology can only be the relationship between God and human beings: in other words, reflection on the experiences that have compelled human beings to talk about something like 'God'."[14] For her, theology by its very nature cannot be abstract or essentially philosophical, bound up in logic and reason. Rather, the purpose of theology is the second step after faith and is "to lead to a deeper faith."[15] Therefore, theological reflection includes wrestling with ideas of creation, sin, grace, resurrection (redemption), and the church. She stands within a broad tradition of liberation theologies, for which Gustavo Gutiérrez laid the initial foundation out of his Latin American Catholic context. He claims, "theological reflection is born of the experience of shared efforts."[16] James Cone, by most accounts the architect of black liberation theology, echoes these contextual, shared, and experiential concerns; he concludes that the purpose of theology is full humanity: as humans, we "are made for each other and no people can realize their full humanity except as they participate in its

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[13] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[14] Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: an introduction to theology* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 1990), 1.

[15] Ibid., 6.

[16] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xiii.

realization for others."[17] *In sum, theology is specific, grounded in particular contexts, dealing with individual and collective human experiences.*

On a slightly different place along the spectrum, several writers who focus their study on theology, religion, and culture identify theology with an eye toward cultural conversation. Jeremy Begbie, who focuses primarily on music, claims all Christians are theologians. Because of this claim, we should avoid limiting theological conversations to what seem like the "official" church or "official" dogma, or anything that requires some sort of authoritative seal of approval; his perspective is thoroughly egalitarian and democratic. He defines theology as "the disciplined thinking and rethinking of the Christian gospel for the sake of fostering a wisdom that is nourished by, and nourishes, the church in its worship and mission of the world."[18]

Gordon Lynch, who has led the interdisciplinary field of theology/religious studies and popular culture defines theology this way: "the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth/meaning, goodness/practice, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in specific contexts."[19] He further defines theology as a normative discipline, which "implies an absolute reference point for our existence…it involves trying to find ways of understanding the absolute reference point of existence, and reflecting on the nature and significance of our existence in relation to this absolute."[20] In Lynch's edited volume, *Between Sacred and Profane,* Elaine Graham further illustrates the connection

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[17] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), xiii.

[18] Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 19.

[19] Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 94.

[20] Ibid., 94-5.

between theological reflection and cultural studies. When we study culture, we are studying the ways that people create meaning—both for themselves as individuals, and collectively. In that same way, she calls theology a practice; just as other cultural practices are meaning-making, theology is "one of the activities by which human beings build worlds of meaning and significance, and experience themselves as creative, moral, and purposeful beings."[21] *Theology, therefore, is an activity available to all persons, through which we create and discover meaning.*

One final point in attempting to define what theology *is* or the purpose(s) it *serves,* is that any definition of theology is going to be loaded, in that all definitions of theology will communicate something about both the intended (or assumed) audience and the intent of the writing. What theology *is,* is determined even further by what it does and to whom it speaks. John Franke argues that because theology is rooted in context, to define theology engages in the task of theology itself. He remarks that "there are no neutral starting points from which to engage in the world of theology, neither are there any neutral definitions of theology's nature, task and purpose. . . . Simply stated, the act of defining theology is part of the process of doing theology."[22] These definitions of theology will lead into a more in-depth discussion of the qualities of theological reflection to shape discussion in the realm of popular music.

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[21] Elaine Graham, "What We Make of the World: The Turn to 'Culture' in Theology and the Study of Religion," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 66.

[22] John R. Franke, *The Character of theology: An Introduction to its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Baker Academic, 2005), 44.

The Nature of Theology

Theology is Contextual

As already stated, theology is always contextual, which refers to its origins. Theological reflection emerges from particular contexts, experiences and praxes, or else it is void of application, of meaning, of substance.

Edward Schillebeeckx argues for a "hermeneutics of experience,"[23] meaning, all dogmatic and theological claims must pass through the filter of human experience before they are deemed meaningful. Without reference to, or expression of human experience—*all* of human experience(s)—"Theological talk is meaningless, and the questions whether the new interpretation is either orthodox or heretical is *a priori* superfluous."[24] He further illustrates the centrality of praxis by saying: "theology is valueless, whether it is progressive or conservative, as soon as it loses contact with the empirical basis of the praxis of the community of believers."[25]

This focus on praxis and context as a starting point becomes a common theme among mid-twentieth century theologians, garnering new and renewed definition across cultures and denominations. Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, articulates this by insisting that all theology is done in the midst of existence, language, culture, and custom. There is no such thing as a purely 'organic' theology that emerges detached from the outside world. Williams defines one of the crucial theological problems as: "relating its [the Church's] present social reality to the events of Jesus' life, death, and

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[23] Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 16.

[24] Ibid., 17.

[25] Ibid., 143.

resurrection."[26] The questions themselves (which in our logic-driven culture are expected to precede the answers) arise out of the already living community. 'Already living,' that is, both before and after the theologian becomes a theologian in any formal sense of the word. This applies to even the most basic, and fundamental of theological language: "The meanings of the word 'God' are to be discovered by watching what this community does—not only when it is consciously reflecting in conceptual ways, but when it is acting, educating, or 'inducting', imagining and worshipping."[27] Not only through abstract, theoretical reflection, but also through the day-to-day activities of the living community—through its context—theology finds concrete application, both in its 'problems' and in its answers.

James McClendon puts significant emphasis on lived experiences as the context for theology, primarily through his 'narrative theology,' which will be explored in greater detail below. While there is a divide between 'church' and 'world' for McClendon, as he claims that "The church's story will not interpret the world to the world's satisfaction,"[28] he also emphasizes the importance of the world informing the church as it is the arena in which experience is *lived.* McClendon echoes the correlation of Tillich and revised correlation of Tracy, though he remains careful to note that the church's task is not to give in to the world, but must engage the world to respond to it, without *becoming* the world. His focus on context informs, not surprisingly, his definition of theology as "the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a

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[26] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in contemporary theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 141.

[27] Ibid., xii.

[28] James William McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, volume 1*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 17.

convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another *and to whatever else there is.*"[29] *Theology, therefore, is as much about learning* how to be *as persons and communities, as it is about God.*

For Gutiérrez, the contextual nature of theological reflection means that even the language in which it finds expression is significant: "Although theology is a language for communicating God, in every place it must display the inflections given it by those who formulate it and those to whom it is directed."[30] He is clear, though, that contextuality does not translate to particularity or a limitation on theological conversation. Rather, "the fact that any understanding of the faith has its roots in a particularity of a given situation should not cause us to neglect the comparison of what we are doing with efforts being made at the level of the universal church. . . . But it is no less true that any theology is discourse about a universal message."[31]

James Cone, predictably, shares Gutiérrez' concerns, as they both participate in the liberation theological tradition, which holds as primary that theology is contextual, personal, and relevant. Repeating almost exactly Gutiérrez' above statement, Cone says: "While we must begin our theological reflection with the particularity of our own struggle for justice, we should never stop there. The truth of our particular struggle pushes us beyond ourselves to the truth of other struggles."[32] Cone also emphasizes the particularity of not just the theologian's surrounding context and community, but the theologian herself. The individual operates within a given community, influenced by

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[29] Ibid., 23.

[30] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxv.

[31] Ibid., xxxvi.

[32] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, xii.

certain political, economic, racial and social constructs. The person also is particular within this given community, informed by personal experience: "More often than not, it is a theologian's *personal* history, in a particular sociopolitical setting, that serves the most important factor in shaping the methodology and content of his or her theological perspective."[33] Therefore, genuine theological reflection cannot ignore the reality of human experience. As questions manifest, particularly "in times and situations of crisis such as sickness, suffering, guilt, injustice, personal or social upheaval and death,"[34] the theologian must find ways to respond authentically to the range of human life.

McClendon further claims that the theological task remains incomplete in merely or only discussing the role, nature and context of the church: "For theology is also the mirror that confronts today's church with a proposal to revise its convictions; it is a mirror which asks the church if here it recognizes itself not as it is but as it must be to be faithful to Jesus Christ."[35] This raises some important questions: *If theology is to be a mirror, what might be the vehicle for that mirror, the catalyst for that self-reflection? How is it to happen? If the church is not to adapt completely or to cede to the world's vocabulary and way of being, could we at least allow the world to hold this critical/self-critical mirror up to us as a church attempting to live out the work of Christ?* I argue 'yes' to this latter question. In an attempt to resist these church-world dichotomies that assume a strict division and absolute separation, the church certainly has interests that are not (or should not be) worldly (greed, fame, sexual exploitation), but yet the church exists in the rules, often has to play by (or appeal for exception from) the world's rules, and the

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[33] Ibid., xix.

[34] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 4.

[35] McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, volume 1*, 34.

church's people are also worldly people. There is more than overlap. Instead of attempting to remain separate or maintain some semblance of 'otherness,' (in essence, the church then defines itself on the 'other's' terms), perhaps the church should see itself as a witness *within* the world.

The church, as a central filter for theological reflection, can offer an example of how to confront the despair, fear, and suffering that is part of being human (regardless of 'churchly' or 'worldly' designation), and the church can serve as a living hope within the world, singing out: 'this is how we live authentically; this is how we love our neighbors; this is how we allow our neighbors to love themselves and others; this is what it means to confront but not give in to despair; this is what it means to live into the justice and the mercy of the hope of the kingdom of God.' Dorothee Sölle echoes this when she reflects: "Religion must stand in a living relationship to the culture around it and cannot in the long run encapsulate itself in a group which has quite different rules of life and customs."[36]

Theology is Lived

To say that theology is "lived," piggybacks on its contextual nature. Theology emerges out of and responds *primarily* to a specific community or context, therefore it emerges out of lived experience, to which Gutiérrez and McClendon have already hinted. Theology does not merely begin or exist in a context, but must take place among concrete stories—lived experiences, which includes the ugliness of despair and heartache, and the exaltation of peace, hope, and joy. All of these experiences are beautiful because they deal with humankind as created to be fully human and in the image of God, by God. To

[36] Sölle, *Thinking about God*, 13.

speak authentically about ourselves and the God we call Yahweh (I AM) happens not just in words; McClendon argues,

> [T]o speak truly and faithfully of God is indeed to speak in models, images, analogies—we have no other way. Yet images can speak not only falsehood but also truth. Some sets of images, some vision of reality, is better than all the rest because [it is] truer, more open hard fact and to beauty and to wonder—more open to the realms of science, of art, and of faith.[37]

For Gutiérrez, theology is itself "reflection." He calls this reflection, "a critical attitude," arguing that "theology *follows;* it is the second step."[38] This claim resonates with how life and faith and things that follow no order of reason or logic operate in the lives of humans. We live, we experience, we feel, we *know* certain things to be true. The reflection, the reason, the explanation and interpretation, come secondary; this is not to say they are secondary in *importance,* but they are *reflections upon* what it means to be human—as individuals, as social, and in community, in solidarity with and among others.

The boundedness of theology to lived experience connects most explicitly to the realm of culture, art, and imagination. Our cultural forms—and here this includes language, clothing, food, etc., in addition to music, literature, and art—express who we are, both as individual 'creators,' and as a society. Theology as an expression of lived experience, therefore, stands in coherence with these other cultural expressions, but also must respond to these other forms. Andrew Greeley demonstrates this connection primarily by focusing on popular culture, though he sets out his terms broadly: "Culture and religion are linked because religion too is about experiences. It takes its origins and its raw power from experiences that suggest that there are grounds for hope…No matter

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[37] James William McClendon, *Biography as Theology; How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 110.

[38] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 9.

how hard the creator and consumer may try, s/he cannot exclude religious experiences from the other experiences of life."[39]

Karl Rahner elaborates on the nature of theological questions that resonate with human experience; theology "must not speak only in abstract concepts about theological questions, but must also introduce people to a real and original experience of the reality being talked about in these concepts."[40] Echoing the tension between the particularity and the universality of theology, Christian theology is by nature subjective in both its contextuality and its lived quality. The individual is a subject, and communities are comprised of individuals, therefore "Christian theology must be subjective insofar as it has to speak of faith, hope and love and about our personal relationship with God . . . . It must describe, evoke and introduce one mystagogically to this personal and spiritual relationship between man [sic] and God."[41] After all, at the heart of Christian scriptures is a living God at work in the risen Christ and the stirrings of the Holy Spirit. Theology is subjective because it is personal, and what is personal has roots in lived experience. Because it 'describes, evokes, and introduces' (as Rahner defines) us to the spiritual realm, it must resonate with the totality of our lived experience. However, theology is not the only cultural form that emerges out of and expresses lived human experience. Therefore, theology must interact with and respond to all the other facets of human experience, in order to speak the truth of grace, redemption, and transformation of God through Christ, which is the ultimate purpose of theological reflection.

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[39] Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago, Ill: Thomas More Press, 1988), 27.

[40] Karl Rahner, "Theology and the Arts," *Thought* 57, no. 224 (March 1982): 26.

[41] Ibid.

Theology is Narrative

If theology emerges from particular contexts, and speaks to lived experience, then theological reflection must include narrative in both its form and quality. Attention to human stories resounds with the lived nature of theology; the telling, hearing, and sharing of stories are theological acts. James McClendon developed the narrative quality of theology, insisting that theology, because it is a journey, begins with biography. Biography as theology 'works' because, through the telling of (and reflecting upon) stories of real lives, it allows us to catch a glimpse of the truth of human suffering, struggle, hope, and love. He argues that "there is no more important inquiry than the one which sets out to answer those whence and why and whither questions. . . . In a word, some problems *are* hard problems, and turning away from them if they aren't my problems is neither easy nor a solution."[42] Biography as theology is inextricable from doctrine. Traditional theologians would place doctrine and theology as overlapping—the more scientific, the more rational, the more systematic, and the truer it is.

McClendon attempts to contradict this linear thinking by arguing that doctrine *must* relate to biography, or else doctrine is rendered empty. Biographical theology insists that theological doctrine must remain "in continual and intimate contact with the lived experience. . . . Without such living contact, theological doctrine readily becomes. . . objective—remote from actual Christian life, a set of empty propositions more suited to attacking rival theologians than to informing the church of God."[43]

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[42] McClendon, *Biography as Theology; How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, 89.

[43] Ibid., 178.

McClendon further addresses this in his systematic theology by articulating the necessity of the communitarianism of Christianity. Though we are created to be in relationship and in community with one another, our natural communities must also be understood as linked to the larger narrative of the story of God. He reflects:

> [M]y own story. . . taken alone. . . is hungry for a wider story to complete it. . . . My story must be linked with the story of a people. . . . *[O]ur* story is inadequate as well: The story of each and all is itself hungry for a greater story that overcomes our persistent self-deceit, redeems our common life, and provides a way for us to be a people among all earth's peoples without subtracting from the significance of others' peoplehood, their own stories, their lives.[44]

Theology Addresses What it Means to Be Human

Because theology begins within and reflects upon lived, human experience, and because it tells a story, then a significant facet of its function for individuals and communities is reflection on what it means to be human. Theology interprets human experience; through the telling of stories, and the reflection on praxis, theology addresses the reality and totality of human life, acknowledging and interpreting experiences of love, hope, fear, despair, pain, healing, suffering, and reconciliation. John Franke insists on the inextricable *humanness* of the task and nature of theology; to take the 'human' out of theology, or to assume that it can or does exist apart from human experience is dishonest to both: "To know ourselves as human beings we must know God, and to know God we must know ourselves. A proper understanding of these interconnected and dialectical aspects of knowledge leads to 'true and sound wisdom.'"[45] The significance of emphasizing the totality of human experience addresses the inadequacies of limited

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[44] McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, volume 1*, 351.

[45] Franke, *The Character of Theology*, 13-14.

language and the impossibility of dividing human experience between "religious" and "everything else." This lack or division often results in inauthenticity, with which Rowan Williams is concerned. He addresses a lack of authenticity in "Christian language"[46], which is also the language of traditional theology. Tillich seems to raise a similar critique and frustration some fifty years earlier. The question continually raised centers on how to remain authentic to both theological speech and Christian speech, and yet relevant to the world—the context, society, concerns to which theological discourse is addressed.

In anticipating the critique that cultural relevancy is equated to relativism, these theologies carry an implicit and thorough "no," instead insisting that theology *begins* with cultural relevancy. The solution (if there is one, it is surely not exhaustive), seems to be fuller attention to the sum of human experience—from birth to death, from elation to despair, from seen to unseen. McClendon remarks upon the importance of taking into account *all* of what it means to be human—the beauty *and* the pain: "unless theology can hear her own witnesses, unless she can take death in deadly earnest, take its grim enmity into her counsels and be shaped thereby, she ceases to be a serious discipline. . . . Theology must hear her witnesses, discover her own truth, shape her doctrine in faithfulness to that truth."[47]

Both Shirley Guthrie and Daniel Migliore similarly insist on the openness of theology to include the whole realm of human experience and emotion. Guthrie argues that in the face of death, suffering, and pain, we are called to be honest, and not sugarcoat

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[46] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 39.

[47] McClendon, *Biography as Theology; How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, 107.

the human reality of death: "The Bible does not pretend that death is not so bad after all because we do not actually die at all but only 'pass on' to a new form of existence when our souls escape our bodies. According to scripture, death is real, total, and dreadful."[48] The stark and often-fearful reality of death relates, also, to the 'little deaths' we experience throughout life—pain, heartbreak, doubt, fears, and despair. The antidote, according to the Christian tradition is faith (variously defined and understood). However, the antidote for genuine human experience in the face of the ultimate totality and dreadfulness of death *should not* be a simplistic or pat fix. Rather, faith is in many ways synonymous with theology, in that it is a struggle; it reflects on human life, and attempts to draw meaning from these experiences. Migliore states, "authentic faith is no sedative for world-weary souls, no satchel full of ready answers to the deepest questions of life. Instead, faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ sets an inquiry in motion, fights the inclination to accept things as they are, and continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, our world, and ourselves."[49]

Geoffrey Wainwright identifies eight "attitudes" of Christian worship, which can also be descriptive of attitudes of human existential struggle. They are, by and large, applicable to our human response to life itself (and from that, for Christians, to the triune God, and the redeeming and sustaining work and power of Christ and the Spirit). They are: adoration, confession, proclamation and thanksgiving, commitment, intercession, expectation, absence, and wrestling. While creativity is a chief avenue to the expression

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[48] Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Rev. ed. (Louisville, Ken: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1994), 379.

[49] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 3.

of these attitudes, music is particularly apt for expressing the latter two: absence and wrestling. Wainwright explains the attitude of absence this way:

> The sense of God's absence implies a relationship…it remembers a taste or betokens a desire not yet satisfied. The no-longer or not-yet of God's saving presence is a sign that the transcendent God remains his own, to give or to withhold himself. . . . It may be that the absence of the sense of God is a necessary state in human growth towards a maturity and a responsibility which eventually enhance the character of the free and personal communion with God which he himself desires us to enjoy.[50]

Therefore, to question the presence, concern or ability of God in the affairs of the world is not to deny faith; doubt is not heretical. Rather, as Wainwright says, this questioning, this darkness "implies relationship," which leads to the conclusion that this attitude of absence is an integral experience of the life of faith, and to deny it or ignore it is a disingenuous engagement in human existence in relationship to God. This, I find, reflects the human tendency toward despair—the posture of hands in the air barely even able to mutter a pitiful "why me?"

The attitude of "wrestling" Wainwright explains this way: "Depth psychology has hinted how close love and hate are to one another. . . . the theme may be that of a necessary temporary opposition between God and humanity, if humanity is to show its mettle as an eventually co-operating partner in God's design for creation (including humanity itself)."[51] The image of wrestling likely calls to mind the story of Jacob wrestling with God (or the angel of God) on the shores of the Jabbok. Jacob struggled with the deity, and out of that experience left forever changed—he bore a physical limp

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[50] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 42.

[51] Ibid., 43-44.

and a new name—Israel, the chosen of God.[52] This human wrestling is also the wrestling of our own experience and our own confusion at the 'unanswerables' of life. We wrestle with expectations, broken hearts, unsatisfactory relationships, and empty pursuits. Wainwright aligns even these struggles as struggles with God, because we are struggling with our own purpose, and our own identity, with the end goal (at least in the life of faith) of fulfilling God's design, for the world, for society, and for ourselves.

Greeley identifies potential for divine revelation in and through human experience via the realms of contemporary and popular culture. Speaking specifically as a Catholic priest and theologian, he states "people are sacraments of God, that God discloses Himself/herself to us through the objects, events and persons of life."[53] From this emphasis on sacrament, Greeley argues, "one must concede the possibility that in the sacramentality of ordinary folk, their hopes, their fears, their loves, their aspirations represent a legitimate experience of God, legitimate symbols of God, and legitimate stories of God." It is out of the lived experience of human persons and communities, out of our personal narratives of the entirety of our lives that, as Greeley insists, "we keep an open mind about the possibility that experiences, images, and stories of God are to be found in popular culture and indeed that these experiences, images, and stories provide a wealth of material of immediate practical use in catechetics and homiletics."[54]

Therefore, out of the reality of human experience, and the reflection upon the totality of our contexts, theology functions to provide meaning of how to understand the universal God in these particular contexts. Gutiérrez points out that theology's "true

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[52] Genesis 32.22-31.

[53] Greeley, *God in Popular Culture*, 17.

[54] Ibid., 17-8.

character is its hiddenness[;]…it has become something habitual, part of everyday life and cultural tradition."[55] This is an interesting move in that it points out how theology is already among the people, the practitioners, and the believers. However, the true nature to which he refers points out the significance of the element of protest, dissent, and challenge in theological reflection. It is much easier to reject outright that which is new, different or difficult, but Gutiérrez' point is instructive; the voices 'traditional' theology most needs to hear are rarely its own, beating the drum of the same 'traditional' doctrines, and oppression-laden tradition. In Gutiérrez, we hear a genuine drive toward the *semper reformanda* of the Reformation (though the irony is certainly noted, that he is a Roman Catholic priest); are we, in fact, willing to be challenged by the people, by their experiences, and are we willing to allow them to speak for the church?

The church, meant in the most general sense, responds to the needs of the people—*all people*. Theology as a 'second step' means that it is not limited to those who have degrees or those who have special knowledge, insight, or ordination. Rather, theological language observes, participates in, and absorbs the experiences of the world—of hope, despair, love, hatred, anxiety, confusion, and community—and reflects on those things through the lens of faith and Christian hope.

Theology, then, is ultimately about proclamation. For Gutiérrez this proclamation centers on "the reign of love and justice. Nothing human falls outside the purview of the reign, which is present in history and is transforming it."[56] Though Gutiérrez speaks from a particular perspective, and is certainly focused on political and economic structures, his

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[55] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxii.

[56] Ibid., xxxvii.

insistence on 'nothing human' must also include cultural forms, like art, music, and film, which are just as capable of representing what it means to be human, speak from the depths of human experience and reflection, and most of all have the capacity to speak not only of love and justice, but also of their absence.[57]

Types of Theological Questions

While it is significant to understand the nature of theological reflection, it is also necessary to identify what sorts of questions theology addresses, to identify in later chapters the theological themes present in popular music. Because of the contextual, narrative, and experiential bases of theology, it logically follows that theological inquiry is existential in nature, and has as its goal a search for deeper—spiritual and existential—meaning. Gordon Lynch defines this by saying,

> Whilst it is important for theology to understand and describe values, beliefs, practices, and experiences within popular culture, theological reflection cannot stop at this point. Rather, as a normative discipline, theology will involve asking critical questions about how true, good, or constructive these particular values, beliefs, practices, and experiences are.[58]

Because ultimately the nature of theological reflection addressed here is Christian theology, it would follow that theological inquiry has in view the particularities of Christian faith and doctrine. Justo Gonzalez and Zaida Perez organized their introductory theological text around several central questions. Included in their chapter headings are questions such as: Who is God? What is the world? Who are we? Who is Jesus Christ? What is the church? How does the Church live? What is our hope? What is the nature

[57] After all, as ubiquitous as love songs are, so are break-up songs.

[58] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 98.

of hope?[59] It seems that in order to fully and adequately answer these questions, with any sense of addressing genuine human experience and expectation, one would need to plumb the depths of the absence of these things: the (perceived) absence of God, Christ or the church, the lack of hope, faith and love—what do these experiences mean in the life of faith, and how can these 'lacks' be addressed satisfactorily? N.T. Wright's themes of longing for justice and right relationship further echo this theological quest for meaning, which Wright terms as 'echoes' in the human life, which he argues can be satisfied through the arts.[60]

One of the primary ways these questions can be identified is in the dichotomy between the yearning for hope and the temptation for despair, both of which are intrinsic to being human. Part of the human experience is an eternal restlessness, accompanied by an awareness that our lives do not play out in the ways we hope, or even the ways we believe God intended them; we are keenly aware of injustices, unfairness, pain and suffering in our own lives and in the collectivities of other lives in which we move and operate. We know the world is not as it should be. The two partner reactions to this human situation are hope and despair. We hope for something better, for something *other* than our current situation. Yet often we are confronted with situations that feel void of any promise of redemption; giving in to despair is a frequent and common temptation.

Christian theology addresses these human concerns, primarily in the nature, form, and substance of hope. Jürgen Moltmann addresses the human quality of dissatisfaction

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[59] Justo L. González and Zaida Perez, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

[60] N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pt. One.

and restlessness with the way the world is, noting "peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."[61] However, we are not satisfied with passive acceptance of "the way things are." Rather, as intrinsically human as the awareness of 'unfulfilled presents' is, the potential and promise found in the hope for eventual reconciliation: "that there is no pleasant harmony between us and reality, is due to our unquenchable hope."[62] According to Moltmann, the primary purpose of Christianity is in its vision of hope, and the nature of this hope is imaginative. Hope imagines an alternate future, a restored state of affairs, but this imagining reflects on the present by "revolutionizing and transforming the present."[63]

It is this imaginative quality that connects the theological to the creative. As has already been addressed in earlier chapters, the *imago dei* spoken into existence in the second chapter of Genesis, has been interpreted many ways, not least of which is the identification of the image of God as the creative and imaginative nature of humans; we are creative and imaginative creatures with the capacity to tell stories, create art, and imagine things as being other than they are. This imagination is what for many is the core of Christian hope. Not only does hope imagine alternate states of affairs, but through the power of hope we are able to bring about these alternatives. Moltmann argues this in saying, "Hope's statements of promise anticipate the future. In the promises, the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the

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[61] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 21.

[62] Ibid., 22.

[63] Ibid., 16.

present through the hope it awakens."[64] Through hope we create the world the way we envision it to be.

We know all-too-well that this imaginative hope is not easy, and often does not come naturally. In the face of grave suffering, oppression and bleakness, we despair that our life or our world are beyond repair. In addressing the character of despair, Moltmann calls this the great divide. Despair refuses to recognize hope, or represents the lack of or loss of hope. It is dangerous because it "does not even need to have a desperate appearance. It can also be the mere tacit absence of meaning, prospects, future and purpose."[65] We understand the reality of pain, suffering and injustice, and acknowledge that these realities often merit despair. And yet, if we cling to the commitments of Christian theology, we know that this must not be our final answer or our ultimate response. Rather, hope and creativity towards a redeemed world must persist.

Regarding the nature of Christian hope, Guthrie argues that hope looks toward a better future that goes beyond the mere optimism of the myth of human progress. We hope for a world in which "God will overcome inhuman and unjust social, political, and economic structures. The justice, freedom, and peace of the kingdom of God will not come *within* history as the result of human efforts; it will come at the *end* of history as the result of what only God can and will do."[66] Thus even though we are sure that the ultimate redemption of the world will not come out of our own doing, and doubt that we will see its realization until some ultimate or eternal fulfillment, we maintain an eye towards its transformation. Wainwright notes that we keep our expectations and hope

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[64] Ibid., 17-18.

[65] Ibid., 24.

[66] Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 375.

towards transformation: "The Christian vision is not meant merely to interpret a statically conceived world but rather to assist in a transformation of reality which it itself describes as the achievement of God's purpose. The Christian vision aims at a change for the better, or rather for the best of all."[67]

How exactly are we to hope for redemption and seek transformation? According to their introduction, Gonzalez and Perez assert the nature of Christian hope is indistinguishable from justice: "justice as promised by God…throughout the prophets. . . a reign of justice with peace."[68] This justice that is synonymous with Christian hope is not a retributive justice as we are conditioned by the western punitive system to conceive of; it "is rather the establishment of a new order in which all shall benefit from the bounty of creation."[69] Therefore, the nature and trajectory of Christian hope takes forms in acknowledging, yet resisting the temptation for despair, and in its potential to imagine an alternative order of human life and community of justice and reconciliation.

As observed above, the link between creativity, imagination, and hope is more than coincidental. The value of creativity can be applied here in its ability to help us see other ways of human relationship and social structures; the creative impulse allows us to see how things *could be.* These theological qualities and themes show up quite notably in popular music. Because lyrics speak out of human experience and tell stories, and music's unique ability to allow both performers and audiences to transcend their mundane experience through the confluence of melody, harmony, rhythm, dissonance, combined with the lyrics, music is able to communicate these themes in ways that

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[67] Wainwright, *Doxology*, 11-12.

[68] González, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 149.

[69] Ibid., 150.

resonate deeper than words alone might allow. In so far as music denounces systems, political oppression or inequality, and proclaims that this is not how we *ought* to live, and/or proclaims an alternative world, it certainly speaks in concert with the qualities and nature of hope. The longstanding tradition of protest music is instructive on this point.

Furthermore, I identify themes that speak in search of personal connection and relationship, questioning the reality of genuine love, while also speaking to the potential for hope. Of course, the flip-side of these proclamations is the tendency toward despair. Certainly music speaks out of this human location, and perhaps these examples will be far easier to identify. Because theology must emerge from and speak authentically to the full reality of human life, music that reflects doubt, pain, suffering, and despair is as important as that which proclaims hope, love, and redemption. In fact, as is the focus of the following three chapters, most popular music sings from the middle ground, expressing doubt, and seeking hope, but rarely falling into either situation with much ease.

Connecting the Theological and the Prophetic

Finally, we ought not to understand theology and prophetic witness as two distinct categories. Rather, theology must also be prophetic, implied in its very purpose. Because of the qualities of both theological reflection, as already explored, and prophetic witness, as explored below, art and creativity are identified as distinctively able to speak prophetically in content of theological reflection.

Tillich, using his idea of ultimate reality, argues that theology can be perceived everywhere because "If the idea of God includes ultimate reality, everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not," and he

identifies two "indirect ways of expressing ultimate reality [which] are philosophy. . . and art."[70] Further, Tillich describes both culture and art (which are, of course, overlapping categories) as having several functions, including various prophetic functions. Art is prophetic in its ability to protest the way things are. In its ability to describe authentically how things are, art "opens the eyes to a truth which is lost in the daily-life encounter with reality. We see as something unfamiliar what we believed we knew by meeting it day to day."[71] Art is also prophetic in its ability to express the element of hope: "What prophetic hope expects is affirmed as given in forms of perfection which the artist can produce in the world of images."[72] However, Tillich points out instructively the difference between what he calls, "artistic idealism" and "beautifying realism." The difference is this: "Genuine idealism shows the potentialities in the depths of a being or event, and brings them into existence as artistic images. Beautifying realism shows the actual experience of its object, but with dishonest, idealizing additions."[73] It is this latter expression that is dangerous, because it is inauthentic to human experience, protest and hope. Insofar as art is able to be authentic to both reality and potentiality, it operates prophetically.

Wainwright reflects on artistic creativity as an important function of the life of faith:

> …humanity may be considered to image God in relation to creation [through] artistic creativity. . . . the human artist also transcends his material in a certain sense; and on the other hand, the divine Creator also continues to shape what he

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[70] Paul Tillich, "from, 'Art and Ultimate Reality'," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 210.

[71] Ibid., 214.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Tillich, "from, 'Art and Ultimate Reality'."

> has once brought into being. It remains appropriate…to consider artistic creativity, properly exercised, as a participation in the creative activity of God.[74]

Specifically, Wainwright uses poetry as an example of this: "Poetry is able to 'speak' trans-historically, transculturally, and trans-personally: this fact presupposes some common experience and understanding between the poet and his circumstances and us in ours. Yet the poem is also able to enlarge and enhance our experience and understanding…"[75] Poetry and music are parallel in both form and function, and so, as Wainwright argues, music can speak both personally and universally, communicating truth about the human experience.

Other theologians emphasize the necessary prophetic role of the theologian and the prophetic content of theological reflection. The liberative mode of theology is akin to the prophetic task; theology is to be prophetic in its transformative quality. Likewise, both theology's and art's inherent imaginative natures speak to this prophetic role of transformation. Gutiérrez remarks that "theology is at the service of this proclamation of the reign of love and justice. Nothing human falls outside the purview of the reign, which is present in history and is transforming it."[76] Though clearly speaking from a particular perspective (and intentionally so), he says that "nothing human" falls outside reign of God. If he is true to his claims, to his own starting point, then this must include anything human, which includes art, especially music, in its capacity to speak out of human experience, from the depths of both hope and despair.

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[74] Wainwright, *Doxology*, 27.

[75] Ibid., 194.

[76] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxvii.

The prophetic dimension of theology also takes on an eschatological dimension, as "a task, a political occupation, through which we orient and open ourselves to the gift which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the Lord and with other humans."[77] The liberative element of theology is also prophetic, particularly as it is second-order reflection upon praxis, and as such "fulfills a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events within the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning." For Gutiérrez this is significant not just for the content of theological reflection but also for the person of the theologian. After all, one cannot differentiate the self from the content and task of one's theological reflection. Thus, "Theologians will be personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples."[78] James Cone echoes the identification of the role of theologian with the role of a prophet. Theologians,

> as prophets [must] make clear that the gospel of God stands in judgment upon the existing order of injustice. This task involves, as Abraham Heschel said, the 'exegesis of existence from a divine perspective,' disclosing that God is not indifferent to suffering and not patient with cruelty and falsehood. But God's power and judgment will create justice and order out of chaos.[79]

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[77] Ibid., 8.

[78] Ibid., 10.

[79] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 8.

The Nature of Prophetic Witness

Biblical Interpretation

An examination of the canonized biblical prophets is, (it probably goes without saying), a necessary starting point for any project that claims to identify or label something as "prophetic." That being said, in using words like "prophetic," and "prophet," I do not intend to engage the debate about the continuation of prophets in the same heritage as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the Twelve Minor Prophets. Rather, in answering the second question at hand, "what is the prophetic?" more attention will be paid to the message—the content—of the prophetic tradition. As Brueggeman notes in *Hopeful Imagination*, even the Hebrews contemporary with, or only a generation or so removed from, the prophets who would later become canonized, did not understand prophecy to begin with Isaiah and end with Malachi. Rather, the same prophetic spirit that spoke through Moses, Abraham, and Isaac spoke through the men of the prophetic books, spoke through Jesus, and continues to speak among those who will hear—denouncing injustice and proclaiming the peace, justice, and love of God.[80]

That being said, it would be irresponsible to proceed without due attention to the tradition of the biblical prophets. In general parlance, prophets are often and mistakenly assumed to be something akin to fortune-tellers. They are able to see into the future; they know what will happen in advance. That is not entirely accurate. Rather, the biblical prophets were more often engaged in the act of forth-telling, that is, denouncing the way things are, and proclaiming how God intends for the world to be. Their witness also

[80] Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

reminds the religious community (most often, of course, in the Bible, Israel), who they are. They do this by re-telling stories of God's faithfulness, like the Exodus, and God's presence through the exile.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote what remains the seminal work on the biblical prophets. He begins his tome claiming that the identity of the prophet is important along with the words proclaimed by him: "The prophet is not only a prophet. He is also a poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, moralist."[81] Primarily, Heschel interprets the prophets' work as interpretation: "Prophecy is not simply the application of timeless standards to particular human situations, but rather an interpretation of a particular moment in history, a divine understanding of a human situation…[it is the] *exegesis of existence from a divine perspective.*"[82]

Odil Steck echoes this assertion that the vision of the biblical prophets is not one comfortable with abstractions or otherworldly spirituality. Rather, from the perspective of the prophet, "unrest, contradiction, relentless appraisal, unmasking of current practice, and the sober correction of high-flying or stagnant hope appear. . . . It sees life from outside…concretely."[83] However, the prophetic books are not mere history, only applicable to their present time, "rather, prophetic books announce YHWH's historically related intentions, characteristics, and actions."[84] Heschel argues that the prophets speak

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[81] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), xxii.

[82] Heschel, *The Prophets*, xxvii. Emphasis in original.

[83] Odil Hannes Steck, *The Prophetic Books and Their Theological Witness* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2000), 4.

[84] Ibid., 45-6.

not only to a specific group, but "challenge the whole country,"[85] thereby serving as a reminder of "the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible."[86]

The primary distinction of the prophet is not unique characteristics of the person, or even the format of the speech, but rather the content and spirit of his message. Heschel names the prophet "An Assayer, Messenger, Witness." Biblical prophets emerge from and speak to specific contexts, "yet his ear is inclined to God."[87] He is a witness to the divine presence and intention for the world, and moreover, this witness is made known in the revelation of the prophetic witness: "In speaking, the prophet reveals God. . . . Divine power bursts into words. The authority of the prophet is that the word is divine."[88]

Heschel identifies characteristics of prophetic speech throughout the canonized biblical prophets, which, I argue, can apply to the presence of the prophetic throughout history. The prophet, he reminds us, is situated within a specific point of history, and so his attention is focused on concrete contexts; the prophet denounces specific forms of oppression, and proclaims specific forms of God's redemption.

Looking to the example of Isaiah, Harold Recinos describes this work of the prophet as "criticiz[ing] the established order," and "inspir[ing] faith in the God who is intolerant of injustice and who prepares a banquet for all people (Isa. 25:6)."[89] Further, Recinos, remarks, "The prophets faced turbulent events in their day. They spoke of the

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[85] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 16.

[86] Ibid., 19.

[87] Ibid., 25.

[88] Ibid., 27.

[89] Harold J. Recinos, *Good News from the Barrio: Prophetic Witness for the Church*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 37.

God of justice who gathers up the shattered community, who pays close attention to the cries of the poor, and who guides people walking in darkness toward light (Isa. 9:2)." This applies to our current context in that the prophetic witness "helps us image the God of saving justice who gives sight to the blind and promises a future where 'water shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert' (Isa.35:6)."[90]

Using Ezekiel as touchstone, Walter Brueggemann highlights the critical quality of prophetic witness; the prophet is critical of all things fake—including religion and politics: "The key to Ezekiel's proclamation of God is this: *God will not be mocked.* God will not be presumed upon, trivialized, taken for granted, or drawn too close."[91] Therefore the prophetic imagination also needs prophetic denunciation—speaking out against false gods, false hope, and false schemes of power, dependence and relationship.

Connected to the qualities of denunciation and critique are the ideas of indignation and anger. Heschel aligns these with the divine goals of justice and righteousness. Both justice and righteousness were of utmost concern for the prophets, though he distinguishes justice from righteousness by saying,

> Righteousness goes beyond justice. Justice is strict and exact, giving each person his due. Righteousness implies benevolence, kindness, and generosity. Justice is form, a state of equilibrium; righteousness has a substantive associated meaning. Justice may be legal; righteousness is associated with a burning compassion for the oppressed.[92]

The kind of justice proffered by the prophets is different than mere legalism, however. According to Heschel, divine "justice dies when dehumanized, no matter how exactly it may be exercised. . . The logic of justice may seem impersonal, yet the concern for

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[90] Ibid., 37-8.

[91] Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 53.

[92] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 256.

justice is an act of love."[93] The prophet proclaims justice with an eye towards divine love. Therefore, what is just is not a blind equality, but rather a sense of *equity* motivated by love for all of creation, and particularly with preference given in support of those without a voice. Moreover, the prophet is concerned with divine justice as it is a fulfillment of the biblical Covenant. The covenant involves participation, so by definition is deeper than a strict legal contract. The prophet reminds the people of their role in the Covenant, initiated by a God who promises righteousness, justice and compassion.

Heschel identifies other qualities that could describe the prophetic witness in any given context. First, the prophets were often angry. We live in a culture largely afraid of anger. Heschel warns against this tendency. He uses the phrase righteous indignation as a biblical imperative. To be angry in the face of injustice, unfaithfulness, and oppression is not sinful, rather indifference is evil. Heschel distinguishes God's anger though; it is an anger tempered by patience: "The secret of anger is God's care. . . Anger brings about destruction and distress, but not despair."[94] Moreover, as already alluded to, the prophetic religion is one of sympathy—of understanding the situation of the Other. The prophet is able to transcend his own particular consciousness; likewise a prophetic religion embodies the position of sympathy. The sympathetic perspective is "dialogical" and "interpersonal;" it is not individual-focused, but others-focused, and seeks to understand and speak for others.

Part of the prophets' speech within their particular contexts is to tell the narrative of a people. This becomes apparent when keeping in mind that the prophets speak out for

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[93] Ibid., 257.

[94] Ibid., 374.

those who have been oppressed. When others have been rendered silent, the prophet speaks out on their behalf, telling their story for them. Heschel parallels this to the universal human narrative. In the same way, Brueggemann notes that all particular stories are part of the larger story: "There are no personal issues that are not of a piece with the great public issues."[95] It is through the prophetic spirit that we are able to make the connections from specific and individual to general and communal.

As stated above, part of the prophetic task is to remind a people of their collective identity; the prophet reminds people of their own story, and reminds them of the God who always stands at the center with the intent to redeem, release from oppression, and give power for the powerless. Therefore, Heschel argues, to tell any particular story within history, is to tell One History. Because God is the God of all, what might seem isolated historical moments, in actuality, connect to the One Story of human history. The unity of the common human narrative, according to Heschel must include oppression, pain, and despair, which the prophet includes in his story. The prophet steps in to re-tell the story with a vision towards liberation, healing, and hope. However, Heschel argues, the prophet does not ignore the pain or gloss over the suffering in the service of proclaiming hope. Rather, "The prophet is prepared for pain. One of the effects of this presence is to intensify the people's capacity for suffering, to rend the veil that lies between life and pain."[96]

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[95] Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 18.

[96] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 228.

Brueggemann also addresses the reality of pain and suffering for the work of the prophet. He uses Jeremiah as an example for the identification of the prophetic understanding in general:

> He [Jeremiah] understood in the vexation of his person, that hurt is real, that pain is powerful. If one follows the pain to the 'therefore' of God in the poem, God will be transformed into healing power. But if the hurt is covered over and the pain denied, God does not discover how great is his love, how deep her compassion. Where there is no public voice of hurt to express the incongruity, God remains a one-dimensional God of anger and resistance.[97]

Hence, the prophet is creative, and the prophet's work dwells in imagination, but it is always in response to a concrete reality. The hope that emerges out of the prophetic imagination is rendered meaningless if the pain, hurt, and suffering are not taken seriously and accepted as human reality. Brueggeman continues: "…if the hurt is fully expressed and embraced, it liberates God to heal. Then all of the old power arrangements are jeopardized as the new healing transforms. Nothing but grief could permit newness. Only a poem could bring the grief to newness."[98] In saying this, not only does Brueggemann highlight the dual significance for the prophetic witness of both a concrete reality and a powerful imagination, but he makes an argument for the necessity of creativity; only through the artistic reinterpretation of a distraught and despairing world can hope and newness begin to re-create.

Finally, Heschel makes the connection between the prophets' speech and poetic inspiration, identifying the prophetic task as both a deeply emotional one, and a poetic one. He says that the prophet "feels fiercely. . . [it] is the voice that God has lent to the

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[97] Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 43.

[98] Ibid.

silent agony."[99] The poetic turn of the prophet is not (necessarily) the poetry of tranquility, rather the poetry of "agitation and anguish" with the goal of communication between God and a people.[100] The prophet is distinct from "ordinary" people because he possesses "a heightened and unified awareness of certain aspects of life. Like a poet, he is endowed with sensibility, enthusiasm, tenderness, and above all, with a way of thinking imaginatively. Prophecy is the product of poetic imagination."[101] Heschel continues to make the distinction between the prophets and anything ordinary. Prophets see differently, understand differently, speak differently, and tell stories differently. There is something artistic about the spirit of prophecy and prophetic witness, which Heschel identifies as poetic: "*Prophecy is poetry,* and in poetry everything is possible."[102] He clearly sees this poetic and prophetic spirit as limitless in scope and capacity: "Revelation occurs at all times. . . Thus, prophetic inspiration is not to be denied. . . It is the same as the inspiration of great religious thinkers and poets through whom God is speaking everywhere in nature, philosophy, and the arts."[103]

Brueggemann also identifies the prophetic style with the poetic; he calls Jeremiah a poet because "[his] language is free, porous, and impressionistic."[104] In the sense that they operate like poets, prophets "want people to see differently, to re-vision life. They are not coercive. They only try to stimulate, surprise, hint, and give nuance."

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[99] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 5.

[100] Ibid., 7.

[101] Ibid., 469.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid., 481.

[104] Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 23.

Brueggemann argues that they do not force these alternatives onto their communities because they cannot: "they are making available a world that does not yet exist beyond their imagination; but their offer of this imaginative world is necessary to give freedom of action. The poets want us to re-experience the present world under a different set of metaphors, and they want us to entertain an alternative world not yet visible."[105] Here, again, we hear the combination of the imagination of the artist—the poet—and the vision of alternate realities intrinsic to the prophet. In the same way artists reflect the world with a different perspective, or imagine alternative metaphors by which to exist in the world, the prophet reflects a system rife with God's sense of justice, compassion, and power; the prophet offers alternatives through the lens of divine intention. Reminiscent of Heschel's emphasis on the participation and covenant at the invitation of the prophet, Brueggemann's poet-prophet invites and "trust[s] other people to continue the image, to finish out of their own experience. But that requires the kind of rich metaphorical language that is open and polyvalent. . . . It intends to violate and shatter the categories with which the listener operates."[106]

In Brueggemann's extensive discussion of the prophets, he identifies what he calls a "governing metaphor" of exile throughout the writings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah. The task of the prophet "was to help people *enter into exile,* to *be in exile,* and *depart out of exile.*"[107] Brueggemann identifies the words of the prophet as useful beyond the words themselves, because they "*wrought* the new actions of God by the power of their imagination, their tongues, their words. New poetic imagination evoked

[105] Ibid., 24.

[106] Ibid., 25.

[107] Ibid., 1.

new realities in the community."[108] Brueggemann uses the historic exile and the year 587 BCE as continuing metaphors for the life of the religious community and the action of prophetic witness.[109] Therefore that year and the theme of exile are symbolic in that they represent "the end of the known world and its *relinquishment*," and "the *reception* of a new world given by God through these poets," respectively.[110] The loss for the Israelites in 587, "is analogous to the loss of certainty, dominance, and legitimacy in our own time."[111]

Brueggemann discusses the nature of promise—the content of hope—illustrated by Second Isaiah. Recalling his primary metaphor of *exile,* Brueggemann argues that the prophet denounces false power structures, false religion, and false relationships to the divine, and hence imagines alternatives to all those things through the lens of God's image and intention. Therefore, unless we are willing to look at the world through the denunciation and imagination of the poet-prophet, we cannot bear the prophetic promise: "The promises are not available to us or effective for us while we are people who cling to the old city and to old organizations of reality. To use the poetry of homecoming without the prior literature of *exile* is an offer of cheap grace."[112] Therefore, to skip ahead to the prophetic words of promise and hope, without a prior understanding of loss (the exile), awareness of false worlds (the denunciation), or the imagination of alternatives (the poetic), the promise is empty; grace and hope are meaningless. Brueggemann applies

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[108] Ibid., 2.

[109] The year 587 BCE is significant because that was the destruction of the Temple, and the city of Jerusalem, and also marked the end of the Davidic dynasty.

[110] Ibid., 4.

[111] Ibid., 6.

[112] Ibid., 90.

this to the our context: "The exile of the contemporary American church is that we are bombarded by definitions of reality that are fundamentally alien to the gospel, definitions of reality that come from the military-industrial-scientific empire, which may be characterized as 'consumer capitalism.'"[113] The prophetic imagination is not merely a thing of the ancient past, then, but rather is the essence of the Holy Spirit that continues to move; it is the ability to remain alive and aware of injustice and unreality, and the imagination to proclaim the hope of a different way to be.

The poet-prophet remains in the ambiguity between exile and homecoming, exile being a "sense of not belonging," and homecoming, "a dramatic decision to break with imperial rationality and to embrace a place called home where covenantal values have currency and credibility." Hence, too, the significance of the prophet as storyteller and the prophet's role in memory is demonstrated; the prophet reminds the community of her identity and covenant with God, and moreover, the prophet, acting through collective memory, reminds the community "how it was before…this particular set of hopes and fears gained hegemony." The prophetic imagination proclaims that "we may go home," and home is neither a concrete place, nor a merely spiritual 'heaven,' "Home, rather, is God's kingdom of love and justice and peace and freedom that waits for us."[114] This is the power of the prophetic imagination: that we are not home yet, but yet we can imagine what that home might feel like. By being part of the community who has been exiled from their home, from the world as God intended it, the prophet can also speak for those in the community who cannot; the prophet speaks honest words about pain and grief and

[113] Ibid., 92.

[114] Ibid., 130.

alienation, yet reminds the community of the hope and promise that there are alternative ways of being, through the divine purpose of love, justice, and grace. Brueggeman sums it up this way: "*Grief* should permit newness. *Holiness* should give hope. *Memory* should allow possibility. . . All three affirmations argue that life comes out of death."[115]

The Prophetic and the Creative: Brueggemann's Prophetic Imagination

Walter Brueggemann develops his approach to the prophets through what he calls the "prophetic imagination," a way of seeing and knowing, unique to the concept of the prophetic. The prophetic imagination also overlaps with ideas of the poetic and the creative, an intersection of particular application and value to the project at hand. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this prophetic imagination is the vision of alternate worlds. In the same way the prophets critique current relationships, political and social systems, and empty religious rituals, the unique content and interpretation of imaginative prophetic speech is that it offers "alternative social realit[ies] that might lead to direct confrontation with 'presumed, taken-for-granted worlds'."[116] Not only is the prophetic task one of honesty—in critique, in empathy to human suffering, in the hope of God's covenant—but it is also one of change. The prophet seeks change: "What the prophetic tradition knows is that it could be different, and the difference can be enacted."[117]

Brueggemann here again emphasizes the absolute necessity of truth-telling before one can 'jump ahead' to hope, change, and transformation. If the story is told honestly, then grief will emerge as necessary, "because [grief] is the most visceral announcement

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[115] Ibid., 132.

[116] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), x-xi.

[117] Ibid., xxi.

that things are not right."[118] In other words, the first task of the prophetic imagination is to tell the reality of the situation, and because that will always be a story of how things *ought not* to be, grief and sorrow will be necessary. It is then that the prophet motivates and envisions alternative realities; the prophet is an enactor of transformation.

Prophetic witness that leads to transformation is the heart of the prophetic imagination. Here, imagination is deeply related to the poetic, artistic and creative ways of seeing and communicating. Brueggemann claims the "poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality. . . to create such poetry and lyrical thought requires more than skill in making rhymes. I am concerned. . . with the substantive issues of alternative prospects that the managed prose around us cannot invent and does not want us to permit."[119]

Do the Prophets Need to Recognize Themselves as Prophets to Speak Prophetically?

In short: no. With specific reference to the artists in the following chapters, it is not necessarily intrinsic to the message that the musicians/songwriters recognize themselves as such. In fact, the message, the proclamation, and denunciation are likely more effective given the context of popular culture when/if they do not see themselves with any sort of Savior-God-Prophet complex. Given that the world of popular culture is also the world of celebrity, marketing, and consumption, a self-identification as the mouthpiece of God will likely become indistinguishable from the desire to sell music—motivation, after all, is nearly impossible to determine objectively. All this would necessarily beg the question—is it important to sell records to spread a divine message or

[118] Ibid., 11.

[119] Ibid., 40.

for the financial and fame rewards? Most significant in this case is the distinction between intention and effect. What is the effect of the music, lyrics, and audience reception? This is not to say musicians are not important, but in the larger scope, what contributes most significantly to the question of theological reflection and prophetic witness is the full picture of artist, song, and audience. Brueggemann offers this as an example:

> The best-known case, of course, is Martin Luther King, Jr. We ought not to miss the power of his language. He no doubt was a master politician and a social strategist and an adept manager of the media, but first and best, he had the tongue of a poet and the cadence of liberty in his speech. He was able to summon an exiled community out beyond the imperial definitions of the day which held his people in bondage . . . . The dream functioned as an act of incredible hope, but it was also an act of heavy critique which asserted that the present social reality is not working. It was an announcement that things would not stay as they were.[120]

Brueggemann, further answers this by arguing that there are no limits to expectations as to where the prophetic spirit of God is proclaimed through 'ordinary' persons: "God can 'raise up prophets' and authorize prophetic voices and deeds in the fullness of God's own freedom, anywhere, anytime, in any circumstance[;]. . . . prophets are 'naturally' in subcommunities that stand in tension with the dominant community in any political economy."[121]

It is helpful to return to Heschel here. He claims that a prophet "was an individual who said No to his society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism. He was often compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his heart expected. His fundamental objective was to reconcile man to God."[122] We

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[120] Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 97-8.

[121] Ibid., xvi.

[122] Heschel, *The Prophets*, xxix.

can take from this that prophets feel compelled to speak, regardless of even being able to accept the message. This addresses the above question in some degree. If the prophet does not offer the same interpretation, then we can conclude that the message they proclaim transcends their willingness to embrace their role as such. In other words they fill the role, and serve as a prophetic witness even though they likely did not seek the job.

Prophetic Witness as Protest, Dissent, Proclamation

Brueggemann's analysis identifies three primary tasks of prophetic witness. First the prophetic presence offers tools to the community to "confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial."[123] Though this rhetoric sounds dramatic, he intends any aspect of life that evokes fear, pain, sorrow or hopelessness. The prophet then gives us these tools by being a voice for these feelings out of the darkness of human experience. The prophet also speaks using metaphor, thus not only challenging the dominant pattern, even in communication, but provides images, comparisons, and stories to help us find solidarity in our fears and sorrows. Furthermore, Brueggemann names three actions the prophet undertakes following this honest confrontation with human reality. The prophet cuts through grief, pain, and despair by "offering of symbols that are quite adequate to contradict a situation of hopelessness in which newness is unthinkable."[124] The prophet contradicts attitudes and realities of hopelessness by reminding the community of God's sovereignty and God's grace.

In much the same way that the prophetic task is to be a voice for the pain and suffering and fear of human life, the prophetic imagination is also to bring "public

[123] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 45.

[124] Ibid., 63.

expression [to] those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied too long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there."[125] Similar to the metaphors and symbols offered in relating human fear and hopelessness, the prophet brings metaphoric language to the reality of hope and "newness that comes to us and redefines our situation."[126] In fact, it would appear that the prophetic imagination can be described as a movement.

Rooted in concrete historical, political, and social context, prophetic witness begins with an honest assessment of the situation, and is able to give voice to the pain, suffering, and fears of the community, from this the prophetic imagination moves to give voice to hope, first remembering the promise of God, and then giving voice and vision to alternatives to the current state of fear, despair and injustice. It is only through what Brueggemann decisively calls the "action" of the imagination, putting into word, metaphor, poetry, and song, forms of the imagination, that the movement of the prophetic imagination is possible: "The prophet seeks only to spark the imagination of this people, and that in itself turns despair into energy."[127]

As noted above, a central component of the prophetic is in its spirit of critique. Harold Recinos equates prophetic denunciation with evangelism. He understands Christ's message as one of liberation and equality. Proclaiming the message of Jesus, the definition of Christian evangelism, then, is denouncing structures that are used by a few to oppress others. This type of proclamation and denunciation involves the prophetic spirit present in Christ's ministry, but also throughout the biblical story. One way this

[125] Ibid., 65.

[126] Ibid., 67.

[127] Ibid., 77.

denunciation is lived out is through the church's imagination, its spirit-led ability to imagine an alternative way of being: "The prophetic imagination begins with nothing less than people guided by faith in God to create social, political, economic, and cultural institutions and practices that map a new road toward a different future for society."[128]

The prophetic imagination, as developed by Brueggemann, prompts the biblical community to envision a world liberated from hate, oppression, destruction and despair. Further, I prefer to associate this prophetic imagination with the "image of God" borne at Creation, that the first chapter of Genesis indicates all persons are created bearing this same image of the divine. This corresponds not only to the aesthetic—the creative, which it certainly is—but also to our powers to hope and imagine something alternative. To be sure, we are a destructive species. We are selfish and violent, ignorant and indulgent. Juxtaposed with that, I believe, is this *imago* and imagination, here specifically called the "prophetic imagination" that allows us to recognize the harm we exact on ourselves, others, and the world, to reflect on it, and to hope for an alternative—alternative humanity, relationships, world, political, economic, and social orders. In essence, this *image of God* is the imagination, that is, in fact, prophetic, when we are able to see another way *to be*.

Brueggemann notes that while we begin with the biblical tradition of the prophets, whose speeches, sermons, songs, and (mostly in brief) biographies have been canonized, that the prophetic spirit, and the prophetic imagination continue to speak to and affect transformation in our own world. Setting aside the question of canon, the essential point here is that we can—in fact must—continue to observe and participate in this prophetic

[128] Recinos, *Good News from the Barrio*, 36-7.

imagination: "Prophetic witness is a mind-set. It is a countercultural consciousness of how the community of faith sees all things. . . . The community of God's people who are striving to remain faithful to the whole counsel of God's Word *will* be prophetic voices crying out in the wilderness of the dominant culture of our day."[129]

Defining the Prophetic Witness

Therefore, as I will use the term for this project, a prophet is someone doing the work of theology (that is reflecting on the truth of human experience as it relates to the truth of God in hope for renewal and restoration) in the midst of and confronting the world as it is, but does not remain satisfied that the world stay as it is. Hence, prophetic witness is any message—given or received—that speaks honestly out of human experience, relating authentic human struggle, pain, hope, and love, and that denounces injustice and despair.

Conclusion

For the purposes of this project, I identify the prophetic with the companion word "witness" or "spirit". These two words are significant because the prophetic is intangible—it is not composed of the person—the messenger—but rather the sum of the parts, specifically, the musicians, their music and lyrics, and their audiences, embody this spirit. Witness is a significant word, and one I use very much aware of the evangelistic meaning it has garnered, but moreover, as a better descriptor of what it means to relate with candor the contrasts of human experience—pain and healing, suffering and joy, despair and hope. The witness of the prophetic spirit takes on three forms, or

[129] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 125.

characteristics, which I will use as reference points in the following chapters: Protest, Dissent, and Proclamation. These characteristics describe the critical honesty in contexts of fear and despair, and also refer to the proclamation and promise of hope and future contexts of justice, righteousness and hope given voice in the prophetic witness through the poetic nature of prophecy. For the artists discussed in the following chapters, these three characteristics will take on interesting forms.

One of the most intriguing themes that will be discussed, which each of the musical artists demonstrates in different degrees, is the political—the element of protest present both in the music itself, but also in the activism of the artists. While not necessarily overtly political, it will be an interesting component to observe, because of both the public nature of their critique, and the intrinsic poetic and lyrical nature to their work, which we have noted is an indisputable and imperative characteristic. The prophetic witness and imagination manifests itself in this unique ability of musicians to combine deeply personal expression and exploration of themes of humanity, suffering, and redemption, and the impetus toward protest, engaging with the larger community and social systems.

By way of example, in reflecting on the prophetic potential of hip-hop, Robert Beckford identifies prophetic potential through testimony—or telling the story of human lives—"through dialectic of thought and action."[130] This echoes both the narrative and praxis-oriented characteristics of theological reflection, which is also prophetic in its potential to critique and denounce what is contrary to justice and human reconciliation.

[130] Robert Beckford, "House Negro with a Field Negro Mentality: New Positions in Theology and Culture," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 111.

Beckford warns against complicity: "education and the media systems are part of an elaborate system of domination, serving to reinforce dominant ideas through a process of interpellation. . . . I must therefore constantly ask myself whether my work serves to challenge or merely reinforce dominant ideas."[131] Calling to mind the necessary artistic quality both Heschel and Brueggemann attribute to the prophet, the connection is clear between the artist and the prophet, when we consider Beckford's remarks (and he is not alone, merely representative), that the artist must remain attentive and self-reflective of the quality of her work.

To explain, I offer a bit of self-reflection. Theology is always rooted in something, as Cone remarks, "More often than not, it is a theologian's *personal* history, in a particular sociopolitical setting, that serves as the most important factor in shaping the methodology and content of his or her theological perspective. Thus theologians ought to be more honest and let the reader know something about those nonintellectual factors that are so important for the opinions they advance."[132] It is appropriate to conclude this exploration of two key terms that is foundational for the following chapters, by addressing the question of why theological reflection and prophetic witness are important, particularly the overlap between the two. And perhaps that is best addressed from a more personal perspective.

In reflecting on my own approach to theology, I am reminded of James McClendon's words, when he calls theology a struggle: "in matters of great moment, the human heart yearns ceaselessly for secure truth, and it is easy for us to believe that

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[131] Ibid., 112.

[132] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, xix.

unchallenged beliefs are self-evident truths. The struggle begins with the humble fact that the church is not the world. . . . the line between church and world passes right through each Christian heart."[133] I believe that the work of the church is of vital importance, but come to that work wanting to deconstruct in large part the dividing line between sacred and secular. These divisions between what is 'baptized' and fit for spiritual consumption and 'everything else'—the secular—have served more often than not to cull fear and distrust on either side. I have developed in a generation that is saturated in media of all forms—audio, visual, tangible, digital—and find these dividing lines impossible to maintain.

Even if the 'secular' were something to be avoided and feared (though it is probably obvious that I do not hold to such an understanding) it has become impossible to not be aware of and affected by forms of culture that feed us messages through image, word, and sound. This project comes out of a two-fold conviction: 1) that not every form and message from the surrounding culture is edifying, but 2) that there are elements within our culture, that we all participate in and aid in creating, that can serve as locations of theological reflection and voices of prophetic witness.

Using the qualities of theological reflection and prophetic witness described in the first part of this chapter, the connection between the two lies in the component of theology that reflects on the reality of human life, and in its consequent prophetic proclamation of love, grace, and redemption of God through Christ. However, this work cannot be complete without the simultaneous prophetic denunciation of corruption, power, oppression—on the institutional level—and hate, despair, and rejection—on the

[133] McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, volume 1*, 17.

personal level—all the while honestly confronting the reality of grief, hurt, pain, unfairness (and, of course, joy, love and fulfillment).

My task in the following chapters is to identify ways that popular music that does not first claim to be from any particular religious perspective speaks (or sings) both theologically and prophetically. Thus, not only the songs, but the artists and the audiences will be included in the analysis. The first example, which is split into chapters four and five, will serve as a primary example of the potential for genuine theological reflection through popular music. Over the Rhine, comprised of husband and wife duo Linford Detweiler and Karin Bergquist, has offered a host of reflections, both through music and writings, on their role as songwriters as a manifestation of a deeply-rooted sense of calling. Their music, then, is theological in its content, in their own vision, and in its audience reception. There remain certain elements of prophetic critique and proclamation in their body of work as well, as companion to their theological reflection. However, the primary contribution of Over the Rhine is their role as "theological prophet-poets," as I dub them for the chapter title.

Chapters six and seven focus on the work of the Indigo Girls, the collaborative work of Emily Saliers and Amy Ray. Their songwriting offers theological reflection through their story-telling and a sense of solidarity and relationship among fellow human beings. What will take primary focus, however, when discussing their work is the activist projects they have contributed to, started, and advocated for, which they feel is *at least as* important to who they are as their songwriting careers. Their activism emerges from a prophetic vision that denounces systems of injustice, and proclaims alternative

modes of living. Their work for issues of equality and freedom are important because they manifest from a deeper sense of calling, justice, love, and human solidarity.

As the following analyses unfold, two common themes emerge: the artists are both theological and prophetic in their truth-telling and their truth-seeking. Clearly those things will develop differently among the various artists, songs, albums, and audiences. Further, the importance of narrative and story-telling are vital to each artists' work. Therefore, as I proceed, I will use narrative as a thread woven through the following chapters. Calling to mind the centrality of narrative to the work of theology, as noted in the previous chapter, James McClendon argues that theological reflection must include narrative in both its form and quality. Attention to human stories resounds with the lived nature of theology; the telling, hearing, and sharing of stories are theological acts. McClendon insists that biography as theology 'works' because, through the telling of (and reflecting upon) stories of real lives, it allows us to catch a glimpse of the truth of human suffering, struggle, hope, and love. He argues that "there is no more important inquiry than the one which sets out to answer those whence and why and whither questions. . . . In a word, some problems *are* hard problems, and turning away from them if they aren't my problems is neither easy nor a solution."[134]

Hence, the question of the artists' biographies is not a trivial one. Rather, I assume that their personal stories influence their role and position as musicians, and I will address both their biographies and their work looking for points of influence, in order to demonstrate how their own narratives illuminate the theological content (and intention) behind the music. Moreover, narrative emerges as significant in all three instances in the

[134] McClendon, *Biography as Theology; How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, 89.

ways that they are story-tellers. Without being so bold as to meld the stories of the artists' biographies with the stories they tell through their songwriting, it remains that stories are integral to the work of all three artists. The role of narrative—both personal, and as a songwriting style—will be foundational to exploring the deeper themes of the musicians in the following chapters.

Throughout the in-depth analyses, we will examine the artists' attempts to seek truth. They have spoken (in interviews or writings) or sung (in their actual music) of the goal to be honest, genuine, and to offer something real. This connects to the narrative quality they bring to their music, in that their stories must connect with their audiences as 'true' stories; that is, they must connect on a deeper level as being honest about the human experience. Though narrative and truth-seeking are central threads connecting the artists in this project, each of them fits in distinct ways. Utilizing these core 'threads' in common, I will build off of those to look deeper into the music and lyrics, the artists' audiences to identify how they are theological, and where we might identify a strain of the prophetic witness in what they are doing, and within the realm of popular culture in which they create and perform.

My goal in the following examples and analyses is, first, to offer specific examples of these abstract and theoretical concepts, and secondarily to widen the lens through which we understand the cultures around us, and expectations for the nature and forms of theological depth and prophetic witness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Over the Rhine—Part I: 1989-2002
"We're all broken, and it's all sacred": Theological Poet-Prophets

Over the Rhine: Introduction

Over the Rhine is primarily comprised of husband and wife duo Linford Detweiler and Karin Bergquist. The two met at Malone College (now University), in Canton, Ohio, where Detweiler graduated with a BA in Piano Performance in 1987, and Bergquist graduated in 1988 with a BA in Vocal Performance. They did not know one another well while at Malone, though he recalls accompanying her vocal recital and being impressed at her ability to "actually bring real tears to people's eyes when she sang."[1] They formed Over the Rhine in 1989, after Linford returned from New Zealand, touring with another musical act. Bergquist remarks on her eagerness to join Detweiler: "I didn't just jump at the chance. I lunged."[2] The two joined forces to create music, and they released their first full-length album in 1991. The band generally plays with other members, though over their 20 year career, the other members have rotated on and off; Over the Rhine remains, heart and soul, the work of Bergquist and Detweiler. The two married in 1996, and have released twenty albums in total, which includes the four-volume (and counting) "Live from Nowhere" live releases and five discs of outtakes, live cuts, and alternative arrangements of pre-recorded material, and one re-release: essentially eleven albums of original material (one a double-disc album). Detweiler has

[1] "Malone College, interview with Linford," June 2002, Accessed 9/30/10. http://overtherhine.com/story/pressarchive/2002/06/01.html.

[2] "Band Bio," Accessed 9/15/10. http://overtherhine.com/otrstory.php.

also released three discs of instrumental piano music. In 2006, *Paste* Magazine named them in their list of "The 100 Best Living Songwriters," saying: "Over the Rhine's music is redolent of brokenness: personal, spiritual and emotional, sometimes redeemed, other times unresolved, but paradoxically uplifting."[3]

Beginning in Cincinnati (both Detweiler and Bergquist grew up in Ohio, though mostly in rural, coal-mining towns), the band is named after a neighborhood in downtown Cincinnati, that has an image of gritty and a little rough. Linford explains that they chose the name, too, because "The phrase evoked images of going Over the Rainbow, being drunk with joy, getting high on leaving home or whatever was keeping us up at night. We were young. We were free to do anything or be anybody. We needed to pick a new favorite dilemma. We needed a name. We were Over the Rhine."[4] Since their beginnings they have had in mind the goal of writing music that "in little ways helps to heal the wounds that life has dealt us or the wounds we've dealt ourselves."[5] Each of their recordings in some way contributes to this work, in part realizing this lofty goal of truth-telling, truth-seeking, and eventual healing.

Because the first three albums were released so closely together and at quite an early point in Over the Rhine's career, I will discuss these most briefly and together as the themes are quite similar. Further, like many artists, their work has developed, matured, deepened over the course of their career. While it is worthwhile, and pertinent

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[3] Louis R. Carlozo, "Over the Rhine" in "The 100 Best Living Songwriters," *Paste Magazine*, July 2006.

[4] "FAQ," Accessed 9/15/10. http://overtherhine.com/faq.php.

[5] Ibid.

in the context of their catalog in total, I prefer not to spend too much space on the songs from these albums, in order to discuss more fully their more watershed albums.

Till We Have Faces

Over the Rhine's first full-length album, *Till We Have Faces,* was released independently in 1991, using little professional production equipment. On this album, "the band is born,"[6] and out of a hodge-podge of in-home and makeshift recording set-ups. The album, though it did not have the advantage of wide circulation backed by studio or label budgets, garnered quite the critical embrace. One critic said of the album that, "Although Over the Rhine may be a hit away from stardom, it's this artful alternative pop group's intelligent poetry, emotionally engaging music and self-conscious creativity that bespeaks the possibility of a real breakthrough."[7] Though the album's sound is rough around the edges, the themes of the album emerge as poetic, thoughtful, and spiritual, touching the depths of human experience. The songs range in themes from identity, renewal, and the need for saving. The album's opening song, "Eyes Wide Open," is a haunting look at fearfulness facing an unknown future. Linford looks back on this song in an essay written in 2007, remarking,

> Thus far, songs had been my mile markers in life, my companions when I was lonely, my cup of cool water when parts of me that I could not name were thirsty. . . . I started writing the song that would usher in the rest of my life. The first line of that song, which became the first track recorded on the first Over the Rhine record, remains: "Eyes wide open to the great train robbery of my soul."[8]

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[6] "Letter November 27, 2004," http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=67.

[7] Brian Quincy Newcomb, "Till We Have Faces Reviews," http://www.overtherhine.com/cd01_reviews.php.

[8] Linford Detweiler, "A Song Before Dying," *Image*, no. 55 (Fall 2007): 99.

This song still holds a significant marker in retrospect over his life and career. It speaks to him on the deepest levels of life and death and what it means to live: "Maybe a life without soulfulness is dead already. …Play me a song before dying. Play me something good."[9] Detweiler looks back at all that has happened in his life and career with Bergquist and other band members, most of which they could have never predicted, expected, or made happen of their own volition; life took its course and took them along with it—like a "great train robbery." The closing lines of the song ask: "does anybody really want to grasp / my hand and lift me to my feet? does / anybody really want to be the breeze / that frightens off this heat?"[10] Here, the song is about facing fears of the unknown and the speed of life that moves along, and feeling the desire to be saved, but wondering if anyone actually wants to be their savior.

The album also deals with the themes of pain, and finding joy and promise in those experiences. In "Gentle Wounds," the themes are manifest, particularly in the crucifixion imagery used to illustrate these ideas. The song juxtaposes images of death and love:

> the ground around receding
> feel love's stinging sword
> cut deep and catch
> the joy that's bleeding out of
> gentle wounds[11]

These words cull images from the Passion narrative, potentially even calling to mind the words of the hymn: "see from his head, his hands, his feet, / sorrow and love flow

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[9] Ibid.

[10] "Eyes Wide Open," *Till We Have Faces* lyrics, accessed 10/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd01_lyrics.php.

[11] "Gentle Wounds," Ibid.

mingled down."[12] The juxtaposition of images of violence and mortality to epitomize love and forgiveness are central to Christian symbolism. As the song unfolds, the parallels to the crucifixion imagery of Jesus become clearer,

> symbolizing agony that
> made the women weep
> feel love's stinging sword
> slice deep and catch
> the joy that's bleeding out of gentle wounds
> bruised and beaten torn apart
> the price that's paid for love divine
> can't spare your life don't spare
> your heart
> just feel the joy

The images here are clear allusions to the story of the death of Jesus, but the song ends twisting the story a bit, playing with the symbols. Generally interpretations of the crucifixion rest on some theology of atonement—that Jesus' death *did* spare our lives in some sense.

Here, though, she says "the price that's paid for love divine / can't spare your life." These words are not intended to undo the symbolism they previously presented; rather, this is a testament to the living, and the importance of doing so honestly and presently, which is why it is most significant that the song ends with the line: "just feel the joy…" The song also speaks to renewal: "feel the pang of hunger / feel the new life awaken / restoring everything / that once was taken…" These symbols of death and sacrifice, beauty and joy from the wounds are placed in a context of redemption, which deepens the meaning behind the final lines. The song speaks with certainty that this death, and these gentle wounds, are not meant to spare our lives to the extent that we stop

[12] Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, Hymn Text, 1707.

living our lives that we have, to the extent that we "spare [our] heart[s]," but that we are free to "feel the new life awaken" and "just feel the joy."

The album speaks out of a spiritual place of questioning; it is early in their career, and the band is young, both as a band and as persons. The songs, the questions, the themes reveal their youth. They offer questions; they speak of a fearfulness facing the unknown. That is not to say that they are at all basic songs or simplistic. They are complex, poetic observations on life, love and all that matters most on this fragile globe. And at the heart of these songs is an awareness and pursuit of spirituality that suggests meaning and direction without preachiness or pandering."[13]

Patience

Patience, the band's second album was released in 1992, and this time they had the support of a major label, IRS (which went out of business in 1996). It received continued critical praise, building off the success of their debut. It also deals with themes of pain and death, comfort, solitude and love. One critic calls it "riveting" and remarks, about the tone of the album, "Karin Bergquist, [the singer], grabs hold of the listener on the first track and only reluctantly lets go at the end. Her vocals are a silk thread that binds the group's satisfying blend of rock, jazz and folk. … [H]er voice … brings shading to the group's visual and musical images."[14] The song, "Circle of Quiet," the title of which is an homage to a book of the same name by Christian author, Madeleine L'Engle, offers an evocative song of solitude and stillness, that plays with images of time and eternity. At its heart, the song is a love song, in which the subject struggles with the

[13] Newcomb, "Till We Have Faces Reviews."

[14] Jo Ellen Meyers Sharp, "Patience Review from the Indianapolis Star," Accessed 11/06/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd02_reviews.php.

tension between the inevitable temporality of love, and yet the desire for love to last forever. It is unclear to whom she is singing. Throughout most of the song it would seem she is singing to a lover:

> every time I hear the rain amid the thunder
> I want to run outside and shed my clothes
> but I want to stay with you
> long enough to love you right
> and I want to say to you
> I love the patience in your eyes.[15]

This would intimate that there is a person to whom she is speaking. However, the song ends with these lines: "there is no shadow of turning with thee / there is no shadow of turning," the allusion of which is two-fold. First, to the verse in James 1.17: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,"[16] and to the hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness," which contains the line: "Great is Thy Faithfulness, O God my father / There is no shadow of turning with thee."[17] Therefore, the object of the song could also be God; the singer is "standing in a circle of quiet / waiting for the world to turn" and says, "I want to go out and chase the stars / but like the catcher in the rye / I want to stay where you are." The song, then, could be interpreted to reflect the spiritual journey of trying to locate God in the stillness, but also the impracticality of "waiting for the world to turn," of laying in wait while time moves on.

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[15] "Circle of Quiet," *Patience* lyrics, Accessed 10/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd02_lyrics.php.

[16] James 1.17, NRSV

[17] Thomas O Chisholm, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, Hymn Text, 1923.

The album tackles love many ways, though perhaps one of the most melancholy and yet strangely hopeful iterations is in the song "Rhapsodie," perhaps best presented in its entirety.

> And I couldn't love you
> any more
> than I do right now
> and the Furies that I feared were Eumenides to lead me here
> here I linger
> and the cadences we hear
> may grow different in coming year
> still I'll tell you
> that I couldn't love you
> any more
> than I do right now
> and if you should ever leave
> then I would love you for what you need
> I could still tell you
> that I couldn't love you
> any more
> than I do right now.[18]

The song reflects the depth of love one could have for another person, even should the spirits of temptation and destruction and vengeance (the Furies), take hold, the singer will still be certain that she loves the other. Perhaps the most troubling, and counterintuitive, is the proclamation that even if he leaves her, he can be assured that she will still love him, saying she will even "love you for what you need." This is a difficult song to hear, because it almost presumes an ending to the relationship, but yet assumes an eternal quality to her love.

According to the commentary accompanying *Patience*, the album "established Over the Rhine as a band that most likely would never be accused of making the same record twice." Contextually, the rest of the American popular music scene remained

[18] "Rhapsodie," *Patience* lyrics.

captivated with Seattle grunge rock (bands like Nirvana); meanwhile, "Over the Rhine was whispering instead of shouting, blowing kisses instead of minds and wooing the word with a quiet revolution that continues to unfurl even now."[19] The power of Over the Rhine's music, even at this early stage, is related in a story from Karin, locating letters received from fans around the world; the letters "separately described people meeting each other to Over the Rhine's music, falling headlong in love to Over the Rhine's music, walking down the aisle to Over the Rhine's music, dancing their first dance, conceiving and giving birth in the hospital to Over the Rhine's music and…reflecting on the memories of recently lost loved ones to Over the Rhine."[20] The band had been, and continues to be in the business of making music by which people live their lives, and experience life's most significant milestones: birth and death, love and loss, pain and joy, all themes at the heart of what they are doing.

Eve

As the band matured, so did its music. Over the Rhine's work on its 1994 release, *Eve,* its third, represented a maturation of their songwriting. Consistent with their work thus far, *Eve* contained elements of darkness and confusion, while leaving room for hope, love, and joy. One reviewer remarked that the songs on *Eve* deal with "life's paradoxical elements—conflict, resolution, aesthetic beauty and ugliness, indecision, eros and pain."[21] The songs on the album, as a whole, wrestle with regret and fallenness, searching for definitions of self-satisfaction, and freedom. One example of these themes

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[19] "Patience Commentary," http://www.overtherhine.com/cd02_commentary.php.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Thom Jurek, Review, Detroit Metro Times, *Eve* Reviews, accessed 11/06/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd03_reviews.php.

on the album is on the song "Should," which utilizes religious imagery. The song centers on the spiritual emptiness, wondering "should I never…" and finishing the sentence with various exercises and experiences:

> should I never speak
> the wisdom of hands
> should I never use
> the fingers that find
> should I never read
> the words on my feet
> leading me to you
> the blind lead the blind.[22]

In between the verses she sings the line "bone dry," making this song, in effect, a song about the desert, the "dark night of the soul," in the words of the Christian tradition (John of the Cross, most specifically), to mark a time of spiritual emptiness, lack of joy, hope and general desolation. The song briefly turns into a prayer when she sings:

> should I never feel
> the healing you bring
> take a look at me
> I'm breathing, I'm breathing
> should I trace a line
> from lips to heartbeat
> shoulder and across
> to shoulder again.

The prayer wonders what if she never experiences the healing (of God), and insists on her breathing, perhaps in attempt to even convince herself of her own life, and then asks should she make the sign of the cross. This gesture is perhaps in the service of conjuring up faith—though she feels "bone dry," perhaps she should go through the motions in hopes of ending the spiritual hollowness.

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[22] "Should," *Eve* lyrics, accessed 9/21/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd03_lyrics.php.

Finally, "Birds," also uses religious symbols to address the theme of freedom. Clearly, the title itself calls to mind images of flight, often associated with freedom. The first verse focuses on the past, the birds are stand-ins for the two lovers:

> birds of a feather and a featherless cap
> poor lovers breed songs in a two-room flat
> moist hands fold to pray for a painless truth
> we dance on the tracks of a train called youth.[23]

The verse is wistful for a time gone by, and the innocent prayer for truth that is painless, though in reflection that wish is clearly a product of their youth. The second verse continues focused on the lovers:

> truth's on the table like a toxic spill
> and we wrestle in the sheets with our own freewill
> if we never shake hands with a phantom called fame
> I'll still have your picture in a picture frame,

communicating the loss of hope for easy truth, and instead it is "toxic." The wrestling that follows certainly has a sexual undertone, but in the context of their "freewill," it could be interpreted to speak to a larger struggle with decision in life.

Looking at this song biographically, we have two musicians, who are not married yet, but by this time were falling in love (Bergquist and Detweiler married in 1996), and exploring their lives together as lovers, and as songwriters; hence the significance of the verse that contains allusions to both the shared bedroom and potential shared fame. The third verse continues on the what-ifs of fame-or-no-fame:

> forty-acre farm we can call our own
> with a chocolate lab and no telephone
> the full moon's leering in a lover's swoon
> and the apple tree's swaying to a windy tune
> (save me I'm falling for you).

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[23] "Birds," Ibid.

The image of having forty-acres is a cultural symbol related to freedom, and the idea of having no telephone, and being removed certainly reflects the desire for freedom from responsibility, even perhaps shunning the potential effects of gaining popularity (and fame). The song seems to return, assured in their work, though:

> but we won't get to heaven if we just sit still
> if we don't cry murder maybe no one will
> we're riding tandem down Sycamore hill
> if we hit the brakes we're gonna take a big spill.

They could run from fame; they could remain hidden from all the potential changes if they continue to follow their artistic aspirations, but this final verse re-asserts their sense of call, a sense of urgency in what they are doing. How all of these themes work in some greater spiritual sense is perhaps best summed up by the band itself. In the commentary to *Eve,* these reflections are offered:

> *Eve* is a microcosm of the fall of man, a captain's journal of unmoored spiritual bearings, a woman lost at sea who sort of knows where she's going but hasn't yet been able to put it into words. *Eve* is more than the loss of innocence, it's not being able to remember for the time being what innocence feels like. Eve suggests that sometimes the only way to touch hope is to step into a ring and lace up the gloves and put on a blindfold.[24]

Good Dog Bad Dog

In 1996, Over the Rhine released *Good Dog Bad Dog* independently. The album is significant because it garnered them an increased critical acclaim, and increased their audience; the band considers it "the heart and soul of [our] repertoire."[25] Later, in 2000, Virgin Records re-released the album on their Back Porch imprint. The album, therefore, has a noteworthy position in the Over the Rhine catalog because it was released twice,

[24] "Eve Commentary," accessed 10/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd03_commentary.php.

[25] "Good Dog Bad Dog Commentary," accessed 11/06/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd04_commentary.php.

giving fans who began following in the years between 1996 and 2000 a chance to 'catch-up' on the band's older material. Before its first release, the album had a bit of a stuttered birth; in mid-1996, Over the Rhine parted ways with the record company with which they worked on *Eve,* and shortly thereafter the company closed business.

Bergquist and Detweiler and the rest of their co-conspirators had to find means to release the record independently. That they did, and with much success. Reflecting on the making of the album, Detweiler remarks in the album's liner notes:

> Oh, we had plans alright, and this is a much simpler version of the story, but it's still undeniably our story. And by telling it even in broken sentences, we feel the river begin to move again, making room for new stories. … [O]nce again, we find ourselves with homespun pieces of reality. Memory markers in the meanwhile. The same story. Which, if you've read this far, obviously involves you.[26]

Upon both releases the album received wide acclaim. After its independent release, it was called "their most powerful work to date."[27] In 2000, one reviewer noted the album is "…a work that dips into the regions of the soul and inspires new sight, new life, and creativity. This is an album to fall in love by, or find God with.. . . . [*Good Dog Bad Dog*] is a passionate collection of honest unconditional, songs."[28]

The album is moving, emotional and ethereal. One reviewer sums it up thusly:

> The title suggests the simplified version of the Lutheran doctrine of total depravity that circulates in Sunday School classes: 'There's a good dog and a bad dog inside each of us, and we must choose to make the good dog win.' Of course, no one ever tells us how to make the good dog win, and that is where this album sits, with its eyes toward heaven and its feet in the mud, Eve remembering life before the apple.[29]

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[26] "Good Dog Bad Dog Liner Notes," http://www.overtherhine.com/cd04_notes.php.

[27] John Davis, East Carolinian Review, *Good Dog Bad Dog* (Independent Release) Reviews, accessed 11/06/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd04_reviews.php.

[28] Jen Waters, Patriot News, Harrisburg, PA, *Good Dog Bad Dog* (Virgin Records Re-release) Reviews, accessed 11/06/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd08_reviews.php.

[29] Davis, Review.

Like the cartoon renderings of a soul in struggle, with a demon on one shoulder, and an angel on the other, the album exudes this existential and spiritual struggle, particularly what it looks like when those struggles also involve other people or our spiritual existence.

The album begins with the song "Latter Days," which opens with simple piano notes, which build to a chord, which build to several chords (one may imagine a single note—one finger playing—to a chord with one hand, building to both hands on the piano keys). Then the song lyrics begin with the line: "What a beautiful piece of heartache this has all turned out to be,"[30] which sets the tone, both musically and lyrically for the rest of the song and album. "Latter Days" is a poignant song about human experience, wrapped up in pain, joy, sorrow, and forgiveness. It is directed to another person, perhaps a lover, and recalls time gone by, and what is lost, to be sure, but also in the act of looking back on what has happened, and how we wrestle with the reality of lives that do contain both sadness and joy. The song is sung from a middle place, looking both back, and towards the future:

> There is a me you would not recognize, dear. Call it the shadow of myself
> And if the music starts before I get there dance without me. You dance so gracefully.
> I really think I'll be o.k. They've taken their toll these latter days.

Here it is obvious she is wrestling with the reality and pain of losing something, and yet not regretting having lived through the experience—this paradox is obvious in the first line as she labels the context a "beautiful…heartache." The reflection continues: "Ah, but baby if all else fails, nothin' is ever quite what it seems. / And I'm dyin' inside to

[30] "Latter Days," *Good Dog Bad Dog* lyrics, accessed 9/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd04_lyrics.php.

leave you with more than just clichés." Here the struggle is in the pain of the reality that differs from expectation, and the struggle to remain honest and authentic through it all. This opens up one of the clear themes throughout the album—the disconnect between expectation and reality (in multiple forms) and how to wrestle with the demons of pain and disappointment.

The second song on the album responds to the idea of disappointment, laboring to understand what one really needs, and what one can control. "All I Need is Everything," takes on a spiritual tone, manifested in the lines:

> Slow down. Hold still.
> It's not as if it's a matter of will.
> Someone's circling. Someone's moving
> a little lower than the angels.
> And it's got nothing to do with me.
> The wind blows through the trees,
> but if I look for it, it won't come.[31]

The image of something blowing in the trees, something outside of herself, could be an allusion to the Holy Spirit. Linford has written on multiple occasions of the symbolism of the Holy Spirit as a wind in the trees. For example: "the wind in the pine tees sounds like the holy spirit arriving, passing through, moving off to participate in whatever God is trying to get done," and references author Lauren Winner's suggestion that "the holy spirit is what quiets all the other voices in our heads so that we can occasionally hear what God might have to say."[32] Calling on the image of the Holy Spirit here is significant as the song continues to reflect on the need to find grace, renewal, and in that reclaiming the sense of self. The opening verse concludes with the line: "There's nothing harder

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[31] "All I Need is Everything," Ibid.

[32] "Letter July 27, 2005," accessed 10/13/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=77.

than learning how to receive."[33] The struggle here is in learning to not be independent, learning the lesson that we are dependent on other people, and other forces outside ourselves.

The lesson of receiving is difficult, particularly when one feels like one cannot give in return, is unable to give, or to realize one can receive something without the expectation to give in kind. What exactly it is that the singer is to receive continues to be connected to the idea of the holy, the transcendent. The song continues:

> No hand writing on the wall:
> just the voice that's in us all.
> And you're whispering to me,
> time to get up off my hands and knees,
> 'cause if I beg for it, it won't come.

These lines contain specific biblical allusions; first to Daniel, with the writing on the wall. In Daniel 5, during a feast, King Belshazzar watches a hand begin writing on the wall; Daniel is summoned to read the writing, which predicts the undoing of the kingdom of Babylon. The reference to the "voice that's in us all," could be a reference the voice of God, which is described as a still small voice in 1 Kings 19, when Elijah encounters the voice and presence of God not in the earthquake, wind or fire, but in the sheer silence on the mountainside. In the context of the song, then, the singer asserts that she and her subject are not facing an impending doom; rather, she assures him that there is instead, the voice of the Holy Spirit, perhaps the same imagery continued from the opening images. To this voice she pleads;

> My hands are empty.
> God I've been naïve.
> All I need is everything.
> Inside, outside, feel new skin.

[33] "All I Need is Everything."

All I need is everything.
Feel the slip and the grip of grace again.

She is pleading for renewal, restoration and grace. She develops this theme in the latter piece of the song:

'Cause we can't run truth out of town,
only force it underground.
The roots grow deeper
in ways we can't conceive.

The force of grace and renewal is also found, then, in the acknowledgement that we can't run from truth. Not a dogmatic or singular form of truth, but rather in the context of relationships and personal identity, the song communicates that what we ought to strive for is what is true—meaning, what is authentic about ourselves and our lives—even if it is painful, or ugly, or unpleasant. Because, the song seems to say these truths will reveal us in the end, and even in our attempts to hide them, they only grow deeper and larger; they are only hidden for so long.

Some have commented that this album is like Eve reflecting on the Garden after having been kicked out.[34] At least two of the songs speak directly to this theme, though of course there are hints of it throughout. "Faithfully Dangerous," could reflect the relationship between Adam and Eve after the Fall, and life after Eden. The opening verse of the song includes the lines: "Maybe we're best close to the ground. / Maybe angels drag us down. / I wonder which part of this will leave the scar."[35] The contrast of images of land and sky parallels the mythology of the Garden of Eden, in which Eve is cajoled by the serpent, and Adam becomes her co-conspirator, to eat the forbidden fruit.

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[34] For example, Davis in his review for the *East Carolinian Review*, Op. cit.

[35] "Faithfully Dangerous," *Good Dog Bad Dog* lyrics.

The mythology, perhaps best perpetuated by *Paradise Lost*, is that the tempter was really a fallen angel—imagery certainly at play here if we read this as a song from Adam to Eve. During the chorus he says: "No matter what they say, you'll always be / faithfully dangerous, lost and lovely, / so beautiful to me." If the 'you' is Eve, then perhaps the 'they' is the Christian tradition that has posited Eve as merely a seductress, wholly sinful, Adam merely the putty in her lusting and evil hands. Here, though, Adam's voice finds solidarity with her, acknowledging that she is 'lost' but also calls her faithful, lovely and beautiful.

In this song, the sin and expulsion have a much more mixed connotation: "Red is blood. Black is sky. / White's the dove that longs to fly. / You set it free and it beats its wings in me." This play on the colors and images flips between the mortal and dark to the hopeful, particularly using the dove, a symbol for peace and purity. What is clear through this song is that the speaker and the subject (whether they be Adam and Eve, or some other abstract couple) are together, and that seems most important: "We cradle together and fall down on our knees. / Let the whole world drift downstream. / We'll always be different." Throughout the third chapter of Genesis, which relates the eating of the tree and the consequent curse and expulsion from Eden, Adam and Eve are together through it all, in action, huddled hidden from God, and together as they leave Eden. The song alludes to this as well as the permanency of the Fall—Adam and Eve—all of humanity will be different. Or so the mythology goes. The lyrics continue the theme of solidarity: "We cradle together and fall down on our knees. / The heart that beats is yours inside me. / Red is love. Black is night." Here the color imagery from before is reinterpreted as they move on united even unto their very organs.

"Happy to be So," the penultimate track on *Good Dog Bad Dog,* could be interpreted as Eve's reflection after being cast out from Eden. That interpretation is certainly valid, and fits within the greater scheme, though the song should be interpreted more broadly, as a spiritual reflection on grasping for an experience of the divine. The song is about the human attempt to pray, and questioning what it is that happens—or does not—in the act of prayer, of communicating with one's God. There is a restlessness and unsettledness at work here. Before we get a clear picture of what troubles the singer, the song begins with words that echo a legal accusation:

> Anything I say will be held against me,
> so I won't say much or I'll spill it all.
> By the light of day it's an elusive feeling,
> but every single night that's immaterial.[36]

The song plays with the contrast between light and dark, night and day, again with the nighttime being the darkest, a sense of unease confronting the escaping daylight. The song continues,

> I know a love that will not let me go.
> My heart is bound and happy to be so.
> It's so happy to be so,
> happy to be so,
> happy, happy, happy to be so.

These lines are somewhat counterintuitive following the lines of apprehension and accusation. They allude to the Christian hymn, "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go," though it seems to turn the image on its head. The hymn says, "I rest my weary soul in thee," but this song continues with the language of arrest, saying her "heart is bound," and though she says she is "happy to be so," the repetition of the words betray the

[36] "Happy to Be So." ibid.

assertion; it seems as though she is trying to convince herself that this is so. This is evidenced particularly as the song continues:

> If I try to pray, it's like a game of red rover.
> I take a real good run at it, but I can't break through.
> Don't matter anyway. I'm so redhanded.
> The game is over. I'll just tell the truth.

The struggle here is in the resistance of the singer to be honest in her words of prayer.

If we read this song as a reflection from Eve's perspective, then the legal tone makes more sense. Eve has messed up and broken a rule, but realizes she cannot avoid being caught. She does not want to speak because she will be forced to tell the truth. In the end, she realizes God knows exactly what she has done, so she will "just tell the truth." The song ends as she has been found out: "I know a love that will not let me go. / My heart is bound and gagged and on death row. / It's so happy to be so…" This closing image offers a troubling juxtaposition of her heart being bound by a love—she continues to use the word 'love' over other alternatives—God, force, being, rule—yet, it is hard to see hope in this. The song, if we open the interpretation up to a broader subject, still operates the same, reflecting the resistance to confess openly to a God who already knows the truth anyway. Yet perhaps the good news in this, the hope, is found in the label of 'love.' The reality the singer faces feels like a criminal accusation, and she deserves something like 'death row,' yet she continues to sing, "I know a love that will not let me go."

One of the primary lessons this album seems to offer is the importance of recognizing both our common humanity and our interdependence necessary because of that. There is a sense that this album sings underneath everything else, "we are all in this

together." "Etcetera Whatever" opens with words of comfort. The togetherness of the song clearly relates to two lovers. The song begins with these words:

> Don't speak.
> Words come out your eyes.
> You're wet with this nightmare.
> Like thorns you hold these secrets to your breast,
> your slender fingers closing into fists.

Out of her torment, the singer expresses concern and senses presence. The words of comfort come when the singer says,

> You think you have no other gift to give,
> but we have so much left to live.
> We don't need a lot of money. We'll be sleeping on the beach,
> keeping oceans within reach.
> (Whatever private oceans we can conjure up for free.)

Here the song offers comfort in words of assurance, but also through images of escape, dreamlike words transcending the pain of the here and now. The reality of the encouragement rests in the words and presence of the other. The singer bolsters up the other saying: "And courage is a weapon we must use / to find some life you can't refuse." The shift in pronouns here is significant. The struggle is a collective one, in order that the singular can find life. The interdependence is certain here in order for both to move forward, hopeful, in their individual lives.

The interdependence emerges further in "Everyman's Daughter," this time focusing on the collective nature of human beings. The song begins as the singer reflects on her own confusion and wandering:

> Look inside for the elusive goldmine.
> Broken glass and a little cheap wine
> is all that I can find.
> And bundles of contradictions,
> my heart is full of loose connections,

hands across my eyes.
I cannot disguise I'm everyman's daughter.[37]

Consonant with the other songs on the album, the song echoes a deep sense of brokenness and sorrow. The hope found here is in realizing she is the same as other people. In fact, she brings nothing new: "It's always the same old question. / Who am I and whose invention?" Here, she perhaps echoes the words of the Teacher from Ecclesiastes:

All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been and what will be,
and what has been done will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.[38]

That she is the same as other people, that she can see herself in others, is not entirely a source of consolation, though:

There's so much of us in each other.
If I hate you you're my best reminder
of all I wish I was. / … /
I am hurting someone.
I am hurting someone just like, just like you.
Insulting the wounds of others,
my sister, my brothers,
my vision's way too good.

The pain of hurting others appears acutely worse than the pain of being alone *because* she can see herself in other people. However, this is a powerful realization, a leveling of sorts, to be able to acknowledge that the pain she inflicts on others mirrors the pain she feels herself. This song, while mournful, speaks deeply to the interconnectedness, to the

[37] "Everyman's Daughter," ibid.

[38] Ecclesiastes 1.8-9, NRSV.

fundamental tie we ought to recognize with each other as members of a common humanity.

This album also contains an undercurrent of mournful lament. One example of this thread is "A Gospel Number," which, anecdotally, was not included in the 2000 re-release, but comes eighth on the original track listing, in between "Jack's Valentine" and "Poughkeepsie." "A Gospel Number," does, in fact, sound like a Gospel song, in its dealing with images of release, redemption, and overt religious language. The song begins with the question: "Will a man called Jesus ever take me in his arms?" Following this question she sings: "I lack grace and I lack charm. / This is cause for no alarm, / if a man called Jesus ever takes me in his arms."[39] The lack of grace could be two-fold; on the more material level, it could be a personality 'flaw,' which also fits in the companion lack of "charm." However, in the context of the song, it has more to do with spiritual grace; she lacks grace of her own accord, and therefore wonders if, and hopes for, Jesus to "take [her] in his arms." The motif continues, as the song develops into a lament. This time, the question is

> Will a man called Jesus ever touch me on my face?
> The tears I cried would be erased.
> This to me would be amazing grace,
> if a man called Jesus ever touched me on my face.
> Waiting, waiting, waiting,
> I'm still waiting.

The song here could be read as an example of doubt, of questioning the presence of Jesus. This is more accurately an example of lament, a crying out, bordering on despair, yet hoping for, waiting for the presence of the divine, here Jesus, to erase tears. She continues this lament:

[39] "A Gospel Number," ibid.

Burn away my alibis,
separate the truth from your vicious lies,
if a man called Jesus ever looked me in the eyes. / …/
Mercy, mercy, mercy,
I'll cry mercy
if a man called Jesus ever looks me in the eyes.

The singer acknowledges her own inability to find "grace" and "charm;" therefore this song is an acknowledgement of the status of a person needing grace, forgiveness, and mercy, and crying out "how long?" much like the Psalmist or the words of Habakkuk.[40]

Likewise, "Poughkeepsie" is a song that begins with lament, the singer on the verge of despair, and she is, literally, on the verge of a bridge. Though the song is in the middle of the album, it is a fitting way to conclude the discussion of the album because it so beautifully wraps up the themes throughout the rest of the collection of songs. The setting of the song is in Poughkeepsie (New York, about 80 miles north of New York City), along the Hudson River:

I thought I'd go up Poughkeepsie,
look out o'er the Hudson,
and I'd throw my body down on the river.
And I'd know no more sorrow,
I'd fly like the sparrow
and I'd ride on the backs of the angels tonight.[41]

The tone of the song begins on a sorrowful note; the singer is clearly facing despair as she contemplates suicide, thereby finding release from this world. She further imagines if she could follow through:

No more drowning in my sorrow,
no more drowning in my fright,
I'd just ride on the backs of the angels tonight.
There are those who know sorrow

[40] C.f. Psalm 35.

[41] "Poughkeepsie," ibid.

and those who must borrow
and those whose lot in life is sweet.
Well I'm drunk on self-pity,
scorned all that's been given me,
I would drink from a bottle labeled Sure Defeat.

These lines offer a reflection on what has led her to this place. It seems that one's lot in life is random, and she has found herself seemingly at the bottom, and absorbed in self-pity from her perceived misfortune.

However, the song relates a shift in perspective; before she jumps:

Then the skies, they fell open
and my eyes were opened
to a world of hope falling at my feet.
Now I've not more or less
than anyone else has,
what I have is a gift of life I can't repeat.

The shift that happens is an awareness that, yes, life is sometimes seemingly random in terms of who seems to have more—if the assessment is made based on possessions or material wealth. However, she realizes that she is no better or worse off than anyone else because she has "a gift of life," just as all other humans have. This realization is described as initiated by something outside herself—it comes as a revelation or an epiphany from above "to a world of hope falling at [her] feet."

The song continues with the parallel wording from before, but this time a marked change:

So I go up Poughkeepsie,
look out o'er the Hudson
and I cast my worries to the sky.
Now I still know sorrow,
but I can fly like the sparrow
'cause I ride on the backs of the angels tonight.

This closing piece of the song reflects a clear shift in perspective; further, this place along the Hudson has become for her a place-marker of sorts, a reminder of the hope she has that is stronger than the sorrow that will inevitable persist. Whereas in the beginning of the song she feels very much alone in her sorrow and despair, and sings "I'd take to the sky with all my might," here at the end she sings, "I take to the sky with all *their* might."[42] She has experienced a total change, and now relies not on her own strength or power, which was admittedly quite feeble, but through the hope she has realized, "cast[s her] worries to the sky" and rides on the strength of the angels.

The songs on this album collectively might seem to fall on the side of despair, however, that is certainly not the musicians' intent. Rather, this album epitomizes what Over the Rhine attempts to do with their music—to write honest songs about authentic human struggle, a struggle made more poignant in its temporality. In a letter, Linford reflects on a statement Karin made about the fleeting nature of life: "We are rich, but none of this belongs to us…The only things we own are the moments. Everything else is like a book borrowed from the library: it will all be returned."[43] Pondering this, and what they try to do with their music, Linford writes, "There's a dark side, but we root for the beauty of it all. And we believe the reckless beauty that surrounds us will somehow win the day. We build our occasional fires after dark with a few friends, and try to figure it all out. We help each other laugh."[44] The songs on this album, if they speak for anything, speak for the necessity of living with, among, and in relationship with other people, a sentiment also repeated throughout the band's writings.

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[42] "Poughkeepsie," emphasis mine.

[43] "Letter July 27, 2005."

[44] Ibid.

In 2005, after driving to be with a friend following her son's sudden death, Linford writes: "Now we all try to take some of the heartbreak home and live with it. We can't imagine, but we hope in small ways to bear each others' burdens. We think about our faith. We believe, and we pray for help with our unbelief. Make sure the people you love know they are loved."[45] This sentiment, though written roughly ten years after *Good Dog Bad Dog,* sums up what this album represents as a whole—the struggle with faith, but the persistent necessity of finding community with others that we may: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way … will fulfill the law of Christ."[46]

The Darkest Night of the Year

Over the Rhine's first Christmas album was released in 1996. *The Darkest Night of the Year* is a collection of 10 songs, most of them instrumental, and includes two versions of the traditional hymn, "Silent Night." According to their own description, the album as a whole "conjures up some of the real mystery of Christmas, snowy open spaces, frozen stars, warm, lamp-lit rooms."[47] The title of the album refers to the Winter Solstice: the day of the year where darkness far outweighs sunlight. For months the days have grown shorter and shorter; we await the solstice where we can watch as the days grow longer, and the sun shines longer, brighter. In concert with this astrological shift, Advent, the Christian liturgical season leading up to Christmas, adds another spiritual and eschatological dimension to the image of darkness, light, and waiting. As we watch the sky remain darker for more hours, and wait and hope for sunlight; during Advent,

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[45] "Letter February 11, 2005," accessed 10/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=73.

[46] Galatians 6.2, NRSV

[47] "Letter October 20, 2005," accessed 9/15/10/. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=79.

Christians wait for the birth, hoping for the proclaimed coming kingdom. The darkest night of the year is a day of bleakness, yet also of anticipation for the coming light to come—the promise of longer days. Likewise, Advent into Christmas is a time of anticipation—the ritual of bleakness with hope for the promise of new light and life.

At the heart of this proclamation are stories of angels who appear to Elizabeth, to Mary, to Joseph, to shepherds. They proclaim an end to the darkness. Angels sing out "Fear not!" and "Goodwill!" The seventh track on the album, "Thank You My Angel," plays on this motif. It is a prayer to an angel, and through the lyrics it seems a specific being, perhaps a guardian angel. However, the substance of the singer's gratitude is certainly nontraditional, particularly after the first verse. The first verse, like the others offers thanks for provision, here for words—perhaps intending to be self-referential, being thankful for the song itself. It also communicates thanks for answered prayer:

> Thank you my angel
> for blessing me
> with these words
> and for giving me
> what I was hungry for
> taste of dirt
> from the floor of heaven.[48]

Here is a hint, possibly, to the provision of the Hebrew people in the wilderness through the manna, which fell from heaven onto the dirt. There is then, the idea that the words—the song—is life-sustaining and life-giving, and understood to be divinely-given much as manna was food for Moses and his people. The song also thanks the angel for the struggle, recognizing the journey in which she thanks the angel for "cutting off my hands" and "for making love a foreign language." These likely seem odd things to be

[48] "Thank You My Angel," *Darkest Night of the Year* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd05_lyrics.php.

thankful for, particularly aimed at an angel. The singer, though, reflects that all these struggles, limitations, were "your way of bandaging the bleeding." The wilderness imagery returns as the song closes, as she sings

> thank you my angel
> for the clutter of my life
> for dragging me
> to the edge of the wilderness
> to lie here by myself
> just outside the land of promise.

Here, the answers are still not completely clear and the destination remains just out of reach. What she is thankful for, still, is the messiness, the struggle, and the wilderness, and through it all remains assured that she is being guided, guarded, provided for and heard by an angel—a messenger of God.

Over the Rhine have also remarked that through this album, "The band revisits a childhood Christmas."[49] The eighth track, retells a childhood story. "Mary's Waltz" is a slow and melancholic song that on the surface "revisits a childhood Christmas," but deeper into the song more complex symbols emerge and a meditation on themes of blindness, sight, light and darkness in the context of Christmas:

> There was a blind girl with braids and a black dress
> Lived next to me I could tell you the address
> I saw her climb out her window one midnight
> In to the oak tree scared sacred with moonlight
> See Mary dance with the light on her shoulders
> She has a secret, like a lover discovers her
> Guardian angel with limbs white as lambs wool
> Expensive perfume on her feet[50]

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[49] "Letter November 27, 2004."

[50] "Mary's Waltz," *Darkest Night of the Year* lyrics.

The story here is of a girl next door, who stands out in the childhood memory of the singer. It is apparent Mary is a significant figure; the singer learned quite a bit from her friendship. In these first lines however, we do not have any interaction, just observation as Mary interacts with the nighttime. Mary, who is blind, dances in the moonlight, and the singer uses a cacophony of images to describe what she sees. The lambswool is a symbol of purity, the 'lamb' certainly more powerful in it biblical use of lambs as Holy, particularly in light of Jesus who is described as the lamb of God.

If the comparison is to Christ, it is made all the more clear and powerful in the last line, which alludes to the woman anointing Jesus' feet with "expensive perfume." This story of anointing is one to which Over the Rhine refers as a powerful guiding image. In a letter from March 2000, Linford uses the language to try to understand his father (a Methodist minister): "Maybe this is how my father felt after pouring his heart out in the pulpit like a bottle of perfume to the little church full of coal-miners in Fairpoint, Ohio. He steps back after the benediction like a blind man who has seen the face of God and lived, his soul raw and trembling but somehow strangely quieted and at rest."[51] Though these words were penned several years after the song the two reflections get at the same thing. The story of the anointing, on the surface, is a story about a woman making a lavish purchase, which likely cost most—if not all—of what she had. She pours it out at the feet of Christ. In Linford's letter, he compares his father's ministry to this act, the giving of all (or most) of what one has, pouring it out at the feet (altar) of God, and left blinded by the power of the encounter. In the story we have a literal blind girl, whose

[51] "Letter March 21, 2000," accessed 8/25/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=33.

dancing, alone in the moonlight shares the same imagery of lavish sacrifice and divine encounter. Elsewhere, Linford calls on this imagery again:

> I still crave the extravagant gesture, the woman spilling a year's wages on the feet of Jesus, the rarest perfume, washing his feet and drying them with her hair, a gesture so sensual it left the other men in the room paralyzed with criticism, analysis, theoretical moral concern - for what - the poor? Or was it just misdirected outrage in light of the glaring poverty of their own imaginations? . . . . Someone once described our music as a mash-up of spirituality, whimsy and sensuality. . . . Music and art and writing: extravagant, essential, the act of spilling something, a cup running over.[52]

Even though this letter was also written significantly later than the song, it speaks to the description of the blind girl being lost in the music as she pours herself out in the movement.

In the following verses, we are told of the interaction between the singer and Mary:

> Blind Mary taught me how eyes can make pictures
> I showed her mine and then she showed me all hers
> You have to close them she whispered a warning
> Be sure to open them before it's morning.

Here we have a meditation on the themes of blindness, darkness, sight, and light. Mary, who is blind, teaches the singer how to see, and we are clearly to understand this as a metaphorical, yet deeper way of seeing. She learns from Mary how to see—how to create with her eyes—though they must remain closed to see these pictures. Then the chorus repeats with a shift in pronouns, this time the singer takes part in Mary's extravagant dance:

> See how we dance with the light on our shoulders
> We have a secret like lovers discovering
> Guardian angels with limbs white as lambs wool
> Expensive perfume on our feet.

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[52] "Letter April, 2009," accessed 8/25/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=115.

In the third verse, the story continues, all the more melancholy:

> Mary fell ill on a night in December
> And how they tried then to cool down her fever
> But she lay so still like a child in a manger
> While I closed my eyes tight and prayed for a savior.

Here the Christmas imagery unites the song. It is a vague night, so we are not told if it is exactly December 25, but the month is certainly significant, and Mary is described with further Christ-imagery as she is compared to the infant Jesus. We are left with the singer praying for a savior. The chorus repeats and ends the song, with Mary once again at the center:

> Let Mary dance with the light on her shoulders
> Tell her a secret and let her discover her
> Guardian angel with limbs white as lambs wool
> Expensive perfume on his feet.

This seems to be a freer dancing than before and perhaps a sense that Mary, released from her human body and human blindness, and the singer's prayer from the third verse continues as she seems to pray for Mary's peace. The possessive pronoun in the chorus' fourth line shifts again here—to "his"—this time perhaps symbolizing the presence of Christ.

The album is certainly more contemplative and quiet than many of the heavily-produced, "Jingle Bells"-filled holiday albums often released during the fourth quarter of the year. *The Darkest Night of the Year* offers a meditation on the more mysterious, darker themes of Christmas, especially emphasizing the waiting and anticipation. In the liner notes they write: "we saw a beautiful woman off in the distance and someone told us

if we worked for seven years we could have her. (Jacob ended up with the wrong woman for all his trouble, but Jesus Christ still came through her lineage.)"[53]

Films for Radio

Over the Rhine released *Films for Radio* in 2001. In reflecting on the album, they remark that it is a "complex collection of home movies…we may never run with the popular crowd at school, but it feels as if we are uncovering a secret world."[54] The album weaves together a collection of stories and reflections—snippets of human life. That it is rife with storytelling as a method is significant—though not unique to this album. One clear thing that permeates these stories-in-song is the question of identity and the desire to be meaningful. The role of memory in the search for meaning also drives these stories through the album.

The album's opening song, "The World Can Wait," hits on the idea of time. The song opens with the two verses that set up a story of a relationship that seems on the edge of breaking up, or at the very least, the singer is wondering what would happen, "if this should end tomorrow."[55] It is a song of spiritual, existential doubt, communicated as she wonders:

> but tomorrow I can't imagine
> how I'm supposed to know
> what's yet to go down
> is there only one religion?

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[53] "The Darkest Night of the Year Liner Notes," accessed 10/10/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd05_notes.php.

[54] "Letter June 3, 2001," accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=42.

[55] "The World Can Wait," *Films for Radio* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd09_lyrics.php.

The questioning here revealed is about more than the relationship—there is evident a deeper level of questioning, related to the world of the eternal. The chorus sings:

> The world can wait
> I want to drink the water from your well
> I want to tell you things I'll never tell.

These lines parallel the gospel story of the woman at the well in John 4. In the story Jesus tells the woman, and she confesses to things about which she is otherwise ashamed and goes to great lengths to keep hidden. He also offers her the gift of eternal life—in the "living water."[56] So the chorus of the song plays with images of eternality and finitude, longing for something eternal while the worldly and temporal is placed on hold. She expresses this desire through the quest for more: "I want to feel and then some / I have five senses / I need thousands more at least." The theme of storytelling and the album title make a connection to the following verse:

> So fade to black and white now
> roll the movie of my life
> inside my head
> 'cause like all true believers
> I am truly skeptical of all that I said.

The contradictions again emerge this time between belief and doubt; she plays with these themes setting them as companions rather than one detracting from the other. The theme of storytelling plays in relation to the desire for eternity, but yet being bound by one's own finitude. One cannot actually stop the world, one could not actually wait and watch a movie of his/her own life, but yet there is a pervasive desire to absorb all one can,

[56] C.f. John 4.13-14: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (NRSV)

experience, learn, sense all there is. In a letter from 2000, Linford reflects on these contrasts,

> I have found the secret of eternal life. I now know how I want to live and it's so obvious… I am going to die. These few words, if I embrace them, will tell me what I must do with this gift of too-large life I've been given…All of us here on this sweet terrain are terminal…So to live a good day is to live that day as if it were my last. This key can unlock the double-bolted door of what it means to be truly alive.[57]

A great many of the remaining songs deal with questions and struggles for identity. This overarching theme can be summed up in the worlds from the album's seventh track, "Goodbye (This is Not Goodbye)." The song, addressed to an anonymous object—could be God, could be a friend, or lover—opens with the plea: "Help me tell the truth you see / that's all I'm trying to do is / tell the truth."[58] There is a latent desire behind the expression of identity and desire for meaningfulness that behind all that is the expression of one's genuine self. To be meaningful, to have identity is to be honest: "I don't know who else to be / more and more I'm secretly just me." The sense of self is here and elsewhere intimately connected to the idea of truth-telling. In reflecting on the album after its release, Linford writes: "I've been asking myself what the themes of the record are…There seem to be several, but one running theme seems to be about the surprising difficulties involved in telling the truth to ourselves and others."[59]

This theme of truth-telling, particularly as related to self-realization emerges in "Give Me Strength," a song that echoes like words of prayer. This song's story revisits the singer's past—perhaps without her consent: "Something's drawn me here again and I

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[57] "Letter March 21, 2000."

[58] "Goodbye (This is Not Goodbye)" *Films for Radio* lyrics.

[59] "Letter November 26, 2000," accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=37.

/ I cannot leave the past alone."[60] She reflects on the past, feeling like she has been changed since her past, and yet she is confronted with her past, which is still part of who she is: "now I find the child in me is going to remind me that I / I can't forget my past for long." The chorus asks for several things:

> give me strength to find the road that's lost in me
> give me time to heal and build myself a dream
> give me eyes to see the world surrounding me
> give me strength to be only me.

Behind all of these requests is the desire for authentic selfhood. The struggle here is wrapped up in how one changes and grows and yet still remains connected to the past—a past we cannot escape nor change. The freedom from all this, the answer to the requests might be offered in the reflection that she needs to "cast off the fear that holds me here." The inner struggle with one's own demons of the past and who one is or has become because of—or in spite of—them is one that requires strength and the relinquishing of fear.

The final song on the album also takes on these themes. "When I Go" asks the question: "I want to know / will it make a difference / when I go."[61] She seems to address a lover and acknowledges that his presence—and potential absence—would make a difference to her, but wants assurance that her presence makes the same kind of difference to him: "it makes a difference / when you walk through a room / with that worrisome smile." She acknowledges, at the very least, that it makes a difference to her:

> that I'm feeling this way
> with plenty to think about
> and so little to say

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[60] "Give Me Strength" *Films for Radio* lyrics.

[61] "When I Go," Ibid.

> except for this confession
> that is poised on my lips
> I'm not letting go of God
> I'm just losing my grip.

Again, here, relationship- and identity-related doubts are wrapped up in spiritual questions. The story is one of loss, and the question of identity—does one's sense of self change—does it make a difference—if one's relationships change? The role of memory and remembering tie this together as she sings: "I just want to hold you / in my gaze for awhile / so I can remember / every line around your smile."

The role of the memory and past in forming one's sense of self also flow throughout the song "Fairpoint Diary." The setting is clearly autobiographical; Linford grew up for a time in Fairpoint, Ohio, and the song says: "I grew up south of here in towns / they tore apart for coal."[62] The landscape is significant as he uses it as a metaphor for spiritual reflections:

> I can't see my hands in front of my
> face on a night like this
> I just look back on my life
> and think of all I've missed
> I grew up south of here in towns
> they tore apart for coal
> as if to excavate the darkest
> secrets of my soul.

The idea of blindness and light also form the backdrop for the quest for identity and meaningfulness. He pleads: "don't let me drown / if the rest of the world's goin' down / you've got to breathe your breath in me." These lines allude to Creation—and the sense of dependency—the plea to be saved from drowning and for breath are about more than

[62] "Fairpoint Diary," Ibid.

literal life and death. He is asking for hope amidst darkness, and life amidst a ravaged soul (much like the ravaged landscape of the coal mountains where he grew up). The song seems to communicate a temptation towards despair:

> everybody's story is more
> interesting than mine
> it took me twenty-some-odd-years
> to see I'd been born blind
> so I just feel my way to you
> I try to keep you close
> I'm never very good at getting
> what I need the most.

He feels he's been blind and now wants to find the light, wants to be able to see, but acknowledges his own dependency on some other life-giving power to do so. A hint at epiphany comes as he says,

> the darkest part of every night
> is just before the dawn
> the sun begins to rise
> when we admit that we were wrong.

The light/dark image further parallels his spiritual state—it is darkest *just before* the sun starts to rise. Likewise, he realizes he was "born blind" and so the awareness of the darkness before any light has seeped in feels the darkest. At his lowest point, he acknowledges dependency, and "here I stumble home to you / … / don't let me down." "Moth" revisits the doubts and questions, and wraps up these issues of identity with the presence of the other. The song opens on a despairing note:

> same old question
> without words
> so familiar
> seldom heard
> if i answer
> i confess
> i am only
> just a guess

and with my eyes
it's hard to see
with my ears
it's hard to believe that
if I ever lose my will to live
it was me that I could not forgive[63]

Here, the persistent questions remain; she is haunted by the same questions, the same struggles of trying to see, hear, and believe clearly. All of these doubts are wrapped up in the idea that she must forgive herself. The chorus begins with the lines, "There's no savior hanging on this cross / it isn't suffering we fear but loss." This points, not to an anti-Christian reflection, but a re-framing of the doubts and questions in the previous lines. Again the questions of meaning are wrapped up in fear; throughout many of these songs the questions at the core center on the loss of self or relationship or the potential loss of the other. Here the song claims that these losses are so significant because they are really the root of our fears. The second verse is addressed to another person:

Isaac's knife can
cut away
all the poisoned
yesterdays
and the anger
ease it down
into the ocean
let it drown
as far as east is
from the west
I let you go
I know it's best
and my answer to the years of strife
is the way I choose to live my life.

Here the other has been lost. The role of the knife is sacrifice ("Isaac's knife"), but it is a knife that *did not* kill the firstborn son. It is a biblical symbol used to talk about shedding

[63] "Moth", Ibid.

the years of pain and anger wrapped up in the other person, and though loss is feared, she is sure it is the right thing. The song offers an interesting image about identity found in the other:

> maybe I should take your face tonight
> let you see yourself in a different light
> if I were to take your place tonight
> wouldn't Jesus be surprised?

These lines present a fascinating comment about our ability to find ourselves in other people—through our relationships we see our own identities more clearly. The latter lines perhaps offer an interesting juxtaposition of images—of substitution and sacrifice—of assuming another's place.

The cacophony of images, the glimpses of stories, the mash-up of these "films" on the album serve as tidbits of testimony to human loss, fear, love, doubt—all wrapped up in the desire to be authentic—to be "truly me"—and moreover to be authentically seen and understood by another person. Regarding the album, Over the Rhine reflects,

> We prayed to Jesus you would hear what we were hearing in our heads. As always, our prayers were answered in ways that made us wonder if they were answered at all. Maybe that's the beauty of recording: even after all these years, we have no idea what to expect. Capturing songs is something we've never been able to control or quantify: sooner or later, we surrender all, and something emerges with a life all its own.
>
> I think maybe this recording, this collection of songs is about internal worlds, about the dialogue that runs inside all of us, conversations we have with ourselves. We hope anyone who hears these songs will find some fresh language and maybe a soundtrack of sorts for the stories we're all writing everyday with our lives, whether or not we ever pick up a pen.
>
> These days are pages, these years chapters. A plot emerges which is sometimes lost, often revised. Characters come and go, the people I have known, the limited cast of humans that one life can bear. Some I betray, some I love. Some I admire, some I pity. Some I teach, some teach me. Some I lust after, some are naked and I hope to clothe them.[64]

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[64] "Films for Radio Liner Notes," accessed 10/10/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd09_notes.php.

The effect of all this, they write, is to share and be shared as part of the common human story; the album is "a messy juice record full of doubts and hopes and tiny epiphanies… [It is full of] closed eyes, blindfolded hearts, outstretched arms, fingers brushing deliciously against smooth fleeting dreams and trembling toward downy hidden places enfolded with musky spirituality and melodic sighs."[65] Part of this story is in the honesty confronting darkness and light. Years later, Linford wrote:

> But then do you have days, certain days, when you know you've been given so much, probably much more than you deserve, more vast good than you're even aware of, and yet you can't muster up the strength to kick the melancholy out of the house? What is that about? Those days when we can't access our joy. Voices in our heads telling us lie after lie after lie. . . . I think of these thrown days as emotional tantrums where I commit every significant sin in the space of a few hours - the sin of ingratitude, the sin of wanting it all, the sin of not loving myself and therefore finding myself incapable of loving anything or anyone. . . . We need to try to be good to ourselves and each other.[66]

Even those these words were written at least five years later than most of the songs of the album, I think they speak directly to what is going on on this album—the struggle with darkness and the lies we hear and tell ourselves and believe, and the resistance necessary to these demons. In the same letter, Linford also writes that he does not feel that they (Over the Rhine) are particularly 'deep.' Rather, he says, they write "songs about simply wanting to love well those closest to us. Songs about…all our unanswered questions."

This album is about that, the last piece particularly; it is about too many unanswered questions and the darkness that comes when those questions give way to fear, doubt, despair. In contrast, *Films for Radio*, like the other albums in the Over the Rhine catalog, ultimately speaks to the courage necessary to overcome those things and

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[65] "Letter February 5, 2001," accessed 9/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=39.

[66] "Letter October 20, 2005."

claim one's identity, and the subsequent necessity of dependence on something that transcends the self and the temporal world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Over the Rhine—Part II: 2003-2010
"We're all broken, and it's all sacred": Theological Poet-Prophets

OHIO

OHIO, the band's 2003 release, is a double-album, packed full of 22 songs (including one hidden track). Many regard double-albums in general as an offering manifested out of collective hubris or perhaps a band's inability to edit its own work. However, by most accounts, this could not be farther from the truth for Over the Rhine's double-disc release. The album was critically acclaimed, and Over the Rhine consider it in many ways their magnum opus up to that point (completely unbiased reflection, of course). The songs on this album speak thematically to psychological struggles, questions of good and evil—both internal and external—the search for identity, meaning, and for something 'genuine'. It is also an album about 'home' (hence the title) and what it means to be homeless, to go home, and to feel at home.

The song that speaks most directly to the idea of home, and searching for a way to reclaim home, is the title track, "Ohio," which is the fifth song on the first disc. The song opens with the chorus:

> Hello Ohio
> The back roads
> I know Ohio
> Like the back of my hand
> Alone Ohio
> Where the river bends
> And it's strange to see your story end.[1]

[1] "Ohio," *OHIO* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd11_lyrics.php.

The verses of the song are a mixture of scenery—most of which seems hollow or dead in some way, and memories of years ago. Both Bergquist and Detweiler grew up in Ohio, though by and large this is a song claimed by Bergquist—the writing credits go to her, and when they perform the song live, she sits alone at a piano and sings the song without the backing band. It sounds like a song sung in remembrance of things past. The line: "And it's strange to see your story end," carries the song.

In the small towns of their youth, Bergquist and Detweiler were surrounded by an economy still determined almost exclusively by the coal mining industry. The first verse paints this scene:

> In my life I've seen a thousand dreams
> Through the threshers all torn to pieces
> And the land lay bare
> Someone turned a profit there
> And a good son lost his life in the strip pit.

Clearly this song is not romanticizing the landscape in the singer's memory, and seems to mourn *with* the land and people, the ravaged ecology and broken dreams. The rest of the song focuses more on personal memory and loss. The remaining verses tell stories mentioning names:

> When the sun went down we would all leave town / … /
> 'Cause we knew we would
> Dream outloud in the night air
> Holly said, Don't go inside the children's home
> Mary said, Don't leave your man alone
> Valerie was singin' to the radio
> Ohio.

Here are images not just of a bygone town, ravaged by industry and depressed economy, but old friends stuck in their memories, and reduced to a singular phrase.

The final verse turns slightly more inward:

It was summertime in '83
We were burning' out at the rubber tree
Wonderin' what in the world
Would make all this worthwhile
And if I knew then I was older then
Would I see regret to the last mile.

The song here reflects on the self, using the empty town, and the memories of friends as a metaphor—What does it mean to grow up, move away, and have home be destroyed, or changed? If we are to read this song as truly autobiographical, Karin would have been 16 in 1983, so this last verse could refer to her own memory of her adolescence—on the cusp of leaving home, perhaps not even fully understanding the sense of home she carried with her. All of these stories in one way or another have ended, and now all that remains are either the literal dead embers (of the town) or the figurative "burnin' out" of the bygone years. The song ends on a mournful note, sad for what has ended: "And it's strange to see your story end / How I hate to see your story end / It's so sad to see your story end."

One of the most persistent and striking themes throughout both discs is the struggle with the loss of some sort—of feeling lost—generally in some spiritual or relational sense—of having lost someone or something—or feeling alienated, reflecting a struggle with a pervasive sense of loss of identity. The making of and touring in support of this album would witness the near-undoing of the personal relationship between Bergquist and Detweiler, (which will be explored in the following section), and the songs on this album, when heard in retrospect seem eerily foretelling. Detweiler frequently remarks that music is so important because it has the power to transcend and plunge depths where words cannot otherwise go. There is something *true* about what music can

say, what songs can communicate that ordinary, 'reasonable' discourse might not. Having made that case, I will move on to explore some of the specific manifestations of the theme of loss on *OHIO*.

Certainly not every song needs to be read through revisionist interpretation; knowing what would unravel in Bergquist and Detweiler's personal life does not necessitate an interpretation in which every song is about that. That said, there are a few examples that do seem to fit a greater sense of loss, confusion or alienation in personal relationship; the song, "Show Me" is one of these. Through the song, the singer seems in search of something real—there is a sense of restlessness and the desire to find something genuine to latch onto. The song opens with the lines: "I've lost the words / It ain't my way,"[2] and it seems clear the song is directed at a love interest: "Baby you're my favorite rolling stone," though the loss seems even more profound as the opening verse ends with: "I have never felt so alone." It remains plain that the singer sings *to* or *about* someone specific, but the other is not present:

> It's only me in this flimsy dress
> I could spread this love from the east to the west / … /
> I close my eyes I see your face
> Every inch of your skin I begin to retrace
> Let me be the voice inside your head.

The title of the song comes from the chorus, where she pleads with the invisible object of her desire: "Come on and show me how it feels / Can we make it last can we make it real?" There is a sense here of distance and desire, of loneliness and anxiety. The antidote seems to be a genuine connection with this mysterious other person, despite the expressed doubt that it will last. The other hints we get to what might alleviate this

[2] "Show Me," Ibid.

loneliness are lines that really further the questions more than certainty: "Maybe we've got it backwards / Maybe we should just care less." She seems to pose the idea that releasing her grip, needing less control might reveal the path toward "something real."

"Professional Daydreamer" is even more explicit about the fear of losing one's partner. The song opens: "Part of me / You are a part of me / I never want to lose / … / What will I miss the most / Pray I'm haunted by your ghost."[3] As the song opens the two are together, but the singer is pushed to near-despair at the thought of the other leaving. In the second verse she asks, "Why don't you turn and run at break-neck speed / Just to get your way?" The song seems to be about a relationship under duress, and she is afraid she's said too much, or caused this person, whom she cannot fathom losing, to want to run. The song's last verse gives further insight:

> Broken down
> We're all so broken down
> Bandages on our wings
> I know I don't have to tell you
> Only broken hearts can sing
> I'm hoping for a sign
> Pray I'm anything but fine.

It is clear that the relationship at the center the song is broken, though perhaps the image of the bandages speaks to hope for healing. The last line is curious, she is praying she is "anything but fine," which I understand to be a desire that *this*—this state of loss, brokenness and fear—is *not* what it means to be fine.

The following song, "Lifelong Fling," on the other hand, is not about the fear of losing (or never getting back) someone loved, but is about reaching out for—desiring—something she never had; an aura of unrequitedness persists through this song. The

[3] "Professional Daydreamer," Ibid.

singer keeps referencing a long-past wish: "I wrote down a dream."[4] The object of this dream, though, is someone beyond her reach: "What I wouldn't do / To give something good / To a love like you." The song dwells in dreamlike imagery, and in this dream she sings: "Sailed 'round the world / We were hoping to find / More than the sum of all we left behind." This love—if it ever was real, now feels like a distant dream, and now is certainly beyond her possession. Whether she ever had him, she seems to feel now that it is lost: "Did I take too long / Did I get it wrong / You're still the missing line in my favorite song." The 'still' in this last line, and the eternality communicated by the title inhere that this longing has always been for a relationship that exists only in her dreamworld, so a certain melancholy and loneliness characterizes these otherwise happy fantasies.

The opening track of the second disc is a bit more ambiguous about the object, but the alienation and loss is undeniable. "Long Lost Brother," begins with these lines:

> I thought that we'd be
> Further along by now
> I can't remember how
> We stumbled to this place.[5]

This song coheres with the way other songs on the album identify loss, the feeling of having lost something that one never had in the first place—the loss is summed up by a sense of longing. This song adds another layer to that—there is a sense of blindness, of ignorance—of wondering how they wound up in this place, distant from each other. The song continues: "I've loved you like a long lost brother / On a bad day maybe I thought why bother / I've seldom seen so much anger / In a face." The closeness described in the

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[4] "Lifelong Fling," Ibid.

[5] "Long Lost Brother," Ibid.

first two lines (the title) seems to say that the connection between the two defies rationality or expectation—it is the intimacy of shared DNA.

The song then shifts to a more ambiguous subject. Whereas it seems fairly certain at the outset this is about love, the song deepens here adding more layers to what's been lost:

> I wanna do better
> I wanna try harder
> I wanna believe
> Down to the letter,

here still communicating a relationship, but also seems to add a spiritual sense of loss and questioning to the context. The song continues with a prayer: "Jesus and Mary / Can you carry us / Across the ocean / Into the arms of forgiveness," which widens the loss and struggle of the relationship at the beginning to include a general sense of struggle and felt-need for forgiveness.

This spiritual struggle is described further in the next verse: "I'm trying to come clean / Trying to shed my doubt." Certainly this doubt could be narrowly cast in the context of the relationship, but given the abstract and prayerful tone of the song, I think we are intended to see multiple layers. The song goes on, shifting back to the relationship:

> More often than not
> When it comes to you
> You want whatever's not in front of you
> Deep down I know this includes me too
> So tell me your troubles
> Let your pain rain down.

Here is a sense of restlessness, the sense of loss could be false, and/or something that only exists because the other is constantly in search of the Next Best Thing. The singer,

though, seems patient by contrast, and is willing to absorb the other's pain, calling herself "a low cost dumping ground." The prayer returns as the song ends:

> Trouble is I'm so exhausted
> The plot you see, I think I've lost it
> I need the grace to find what can't be found.

What is it that cannot be found? It could be the object of the other's restlessness, that she thinks she must find to alleviate both of their losses. It could also be something intangible, perhaps, that would calm their alienation, anger, struggle, which is only found in grace. This grace, according to the song is two-fold—it is in the presence of the other person, who allows the other to expel troubles and pain, and it could also be divine grace, whereby one is carried "into the arms of forgiveness." This song's ambiguity makes a profound link between one's interpersonal relationships and one's sense of spiritual doubt and need for grace. This song speaks truthfully, like many of the songs in the same vein, in the way it tells honestly about the deep and all-encompassing sense of doubt when love is lost, and the consequent need for grace and forgiveness both relational and divine.

The song "Nobody Number One" takes the pain of loss to a more personal level; here the singer struggles with the sense of loss of identity and alienation from self, and the pain of those feelings. The song begins:

> I'm afraid I've lost the piece of me
> I need the most you see
> The puzzle is really just about the need
> To be somebody.[6]

The singer fears she has lost not a relationships or another person, but something of herself—and not just anything; she fears she has lost what makes her most herself. She

[6] "Nobody Number One," Ibid.

begins the song at a loss, searching for identity and feeling an overwhelming desire to be significant. The second verse begins, and it is apparent she is addressing someone else:

> But you came so close and I assumed
> You were looking
> For the piece of yourself that's lost
> It is the hiding place inside everybody.

As she looks to the other, she reflects that she thought he was the same as her—she thought they were both looking for pieces of themselves. The song inheres that this piece of oneself can actually be found in the other; we are only fully ourselves to the extent that we are in relationship with others. The verse continues this idea:

> And though we try to numb the pain
> We come to learn that it's in vain
> Pain is our mother
> She makes us recognize each other.

Here is the idea that if part of our identity (even the most significant piece), then we cannot attempt to close off ourselves to pain and struggle. In fact, it is in these experiences we come to see ourselves in each other.

These songs come full circle—we begin with a loss of identity and the presence of another who also is looking for a piece of himself. This sense of loss is not ameliorated in numbing the loss, but rather, it is in being open and honest, and thereby seeing oneself in the other's pain, that we experience empathy and might regain what has been lost. The song continues with further images of loneliness:

> Sometimes I feel all alone
> Here in this city I call my home
> They say, Hey, you're one of us
> Funny I should feel so anonymous.

Connected to the powerful feeling of loneliness is the sense of home, explored earlier. Here, although the singer calls one place 'home' that does not alleviate a profound sense of lack of significance.

Bergquist and Detweiler have frequently discussed the idea of home. They moved out of the city (Cincinnati) in 2005, to a five acre farm far enough outside the city to feel remote. They remark that there is a necessary balance in isolating themselves from the busy-ness and density of the city. They need both the farm and the city. Despite the anonymity felt, the singer continues, "But I'm drawn to you / And that still small voice is talking too / And that's the voice that so seldom can get through." The 'you' that is the song's object remains rather ambiguous. The "still small voice" is an allusion to 1 Kings 19, when Elijah encounters God in the stillness on the side of the mountain (as opposed to the fire, wind, rain).[7] This kind of description repeats throughout scripture; God, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is often associated with stillness and quiet.[8] The antidote to this anonymity here is something transcendent and divine. The object seems to shift back as the singer says, "That's the trouble with you and me / We always hit bottom before we get set free," and she sings, "You need questions / Forget about the answers."

Here the song concludes with the necessity of the other person, and the intrinsic complexity and ambiguity of genuine relationship. One problem is finding one's missing identity that can be found in relationship with another, but only if it is a genuine relationship that does not attempt to shut out pain. Another problem is anonymity and

[7] 1 Kings 19.9-17 (NRSV)

[8] C.f. Psalm 46

alienation, which seems alleviated by openness to solitude, and the still small voice of God to be let in. Finally, a problem is in using too much energy in finding certainty and answers, when what is really needed is the comfort with an ability to ask questions and accept mystery.

Finally the sense of loss takes on certain metaphysical and spiritual qualities in "What I'll Remember Most," which seems a reflection on death and memory. The chorus sings,

> This is what I'll remember most about dying
> Slipping through my hands in vain
> You were 80% angel
> 10% demon
> The rest was hard to explain.[9]

This focuses on something past—something dead—and reflects on the contradictory nature of life: "The saddest songs are the happiest / The hardest truths are the easiest." These oxymoronic lines carry waves of regret as the song centers on death in some form; it could be interpreted as the subject, now dead, reflecting on life, another person is dead and the singer is grieving, or more abstractly, perhaps some relationships or ideal has perished.

The second verse sings:

> Angel or demon
> You know they can share one bed
> I've laid awake so long
> I've got them both inside my head.

Here she reflects on the ambiguity of truth and of determining good and evil, and the difficulty in separating the two. The song, if it is about the death of an ideal, could be about death of the picture-perfect "when-I-grow-up-image:"

[9] "What I'll Remember Most," *OHIO* lyrics.

This American dream may be poisonous
Violence is contagious
Crowded or empty
I walk these streets along
Whoever brought me here
Is gonna have to take me home.

The critique shifts from the interior and interpersonal to a more exterior and structural critique—perhaps the sense of loss is based on a premise that was always false and doomed for disappointment. The last two lines are curious and vague: where is "here"? and who is it that brought her there? On a large scale, the who could be a Creator, the here being the state of existence. The 'here' could also be something more specific—the "city streets." Or, in the context of "this American dream," the "here" could be more abstract—the structural and idealistic systems that are "poisonous," marked by "violence." Whichever, the verse communicates a problem much larger than the subject, which will require something of comparable magnitude to remedy the situation.

However, the sense of loss, while profound, is far from the only note struck throughout the music and lyrics of *OHIO*. The theme of redemption comes through in powerful ways. The way these salvific themes are handled are not swift, simple, or trite. Rather, consistent with the rest of the album, even redemption is a struggle. Over the Rhine offers thoughtful ways to speak about doubt and struggle, and to still find hope. Moreover, the songs about redemption and reconciliation must be read in light of the themes of loss, struggle, and alienation—and vice-versa—not only because they are all intermixed on the same album, but because, understood together they enhance the meaning of the whole.

Several of the songs that fall in this category are more about the hope for redemption or the pleas for a divine reconciliation than any firsthand experience of that

redemption. One of the ways Over the Rhine frequently sing about redemption, how they seem to define it, is in an alternative way of living. There is a here-and-now (or here-and-later) sense—an expectation that redemption can happen—peace, justice, beauty—can be achieved in *this* world. "Changes Come" is a strikingly personal intercession hoping for an alternative state of affairs. By its very title and opening lines, this song sets forth an image of transformation: "Changes come / Turn my world around,"[10] offering the context of dramatic changes, accompanied by an underlying hope: "I look for redemption in everyone." We get a sense at some of the changes at the heart of the reflection:

> I wanna wear your ring
> I have a song to sing
> It ain't over babe
> In fact it's just begun.

Here is the hope found in relationship, in having a song; there is a new beginning. We get our first hint at an unsettledness in the second verse:

> I wanna have our baby
> Some days I think that maybe
> This ol' world's too fucked up
> For any firstborn son.

Despite the new beginning in the first verse, we hear the fear of what all that truly means; can they really bring new life into a world rife with violence, heartache, corruption, pain? The song continues with an attempt to resolve these fears: "There is all this untouched beauty / The light the dark both running through me / Is there still redemption for anyone?" Here the fear and critique of the world in the second verse turn inward, and the singer sees partial responsibility in herself. She as an individual bears the capacity for

[10] "Changes Come," Ibid.

both good and evil, and there is a sense that it is, therefore, partly her role to reveal the "untouched beauty" and perhaps this is the redemption for which she looks "in everyone." The song ends with a prayer:

> Jesus come
> Turn the world around
> Lay my burden down
> Turn this world around
> Bring this whole thing down
> Bring it down.

While some of the responsibility lies within the individual, the hope is ultimately transcendent. She hopes for a divine intervention to step in and redeem the world. I think these words of prayer add a deeper theological meaning to the lines, "This ol' world's too fucked up / For any firstborn son." We might understand this son to be Jesus, and this song about transformation and the search for redemption communicates a deeper fear that maybe if Jesus is to be the vehicle of transformation and reconciliation, then the world has devolved so much that we would not—could not—accept him if he did show up to "Bring the whole thing down."

Another song that is also about fears, and offers a possible antidote is "Bothered." The song begins with the singer imploring "Don't be bothered by the fears / I'll try to bottle them / Like my mother's perfume / She wore it only on Sunday."[11] The perfume here is clearly seen as something sacred, even if only as a childhood relic. Over the Rhine has often called on the gospel story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume as a favored image.[12] Likewise there is something sacred in the fear in this song. She does not instruct the other to ignore his fear, but to entrust his fears to

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[11] "Bothered," Ibid.

[12] C.f. Matthew 26.6-13; Mark 14.3-9; Luke 7.36-50; John 12.1-8.

her keeping, to hold and protect them as a luxury, to be saved for sacred use. The second verse continues with further words on the other's fears:

> Don't be bothered by the fears
> They'll only join us like the sky
> That blushes red tonight
> And makes the wind die down
> Calms the troubled sea,

which is an unmistakable parallel to Mark 4.35-40, in which Jesus, by the power of his spirit, calms the sea (and the fears of those in the boat with him).[13] The song ends with further sacred images regarding their fears: "Don't be bothered by the fears / … / I never thought I could be this free." Here their fears are part of the story that sets them free. It is not through ignoring or denying them, but by welcoming them, in many ways, as something sacred. This could also call to mind the contrast in 1 John between love and fear: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."[14] It is not through denying that our fears exist, but through acknowledging them, bringing them into the presence of the sacred—the Holy Spirit—a relationship—that they can be cast out and set us free.

The song that closes out the album, "Idea #21 (Not Too Late)" is a gospel song, both in style and substance. Bergquist sings lead vocals, backed by a gospel choir. The

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[13] Mark 8.35-40: "On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (NRSV)

[14] 1 John 4.18. NRSV

structure of the lyrics reads like a psalm of lament, crying out "How Long O Lord?"[15] The questions asked in the song are full of biblical images that primarily call to mind promises of redemption and reconciliation. The first verse asks the questions:

> Till we lay these weapons at your feet, Lord
> How long, how long
> Till we call all hatred obsolete, Lord
> How long, how long
> Till we walk like lovers thru Bethlehem
> How long, how long
> Till the lion lies down with the lamb, Lord
> How long, how long?

The imagery here is dense, pulling on symbols from Psalms, Isaiah, Revelation, the Gospels, each question asking how long until God brings about redemption, until the earth and humanity are restored.

The second musical phrase proclaims: "Too late / I know it's not too late / To wrestle with this angel," referencing Genesis 32.22-32, when Jacob wrestled an angel (and some interpretations claim he wrestled with God specifically) until daybreak. Out of this experience, Jacob's name was changed to Israel, and Jacob claimed: "I have seen God face to face and prevailed."[16] While one piece of this song laments to God, asking for restoration and redemption, it is balanced by a proclamation that it is not too late to struggle with God, to see God face to face. The latter section ends with the line: "We're all riding on the last train / Trying to find our way home again," which connects to another Gospel song, "This Train," in which the train symbolizes the 'trip' to Heaven, or

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[15] "Idea #21 (Not Too Late)," *OHIO* lyrics. C.f. Psalm 35.17: "How long, O Lord, will you look on"; Psalm 13.1ff: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?", Habakkuk 1.2: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" (NRSV). Also: Revelation 6.10: "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" (NRSV)

[16] Genesis 32.30, NRSV

ultimate redemption. The train will be the vehicle through which we receive our liberation or redemption. Certainly in its original iteration, this was a song utilized along the Underground Railroad, and the image of liberation was twofold: slaves might reach literal, political emancipation by crossing to the North; they also risked death, which would bring them eschatological and spiritual release. Here Over the Rhine have reinterpreted and re-appropriated the image, using the image of home in concert with the desire for peace, justice and reconciliation, and the presence of God. They have made the symbol consonant with the universal human desire to have a home and to *feel at* home.

The second set of questions hones in on the idea of the universality of human nature and human desires:

> Till we wash the blood from the hands of our fathers
> How long
> We're all sisters and brothers sons and daughters
> How long, how long
> Our eyes all shine in different colors we cry, Lord
> How long
> Our dreams are all the same by and by, Lord
> How long how long?

Calling on scriptural images of Cain and proclamations from the New Testament[17] the song expresses the desire that in putting down weapons and seeking peace, we would realize our commonality as humans, and, moreover, that we are *family*. The song pleads with God that we all might learn to see ourselves in each other. The second piece returns with another allusion to Jacob: "Too late / I know it's not too late / To climb up Jacob's ladder," referring to Genesis 28.10-22. Jacob, after fleeing his family's land in Beersheba towards Harran, stops for the night and has a dream in which he ascends to

[17] Galatians 3.28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (NRSV)

Heaven on a ladder. In the dream he sees God, who promises Jacob: "All the families of the earth shall pray to be blessed as you and your descendents are blessed. I will be with you, and I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised."[18] Upon waking, Jacob proclaims: "Surely the Lord is in this place."[19] Before leaving to continue his journey, Jacob vows, "If God will be with me, if he will protect me…then the Lord shall be my God…"[20] Here again we have the proclamation in the song that it is not too late to seek God's presence, and find promise in God's promise, balanced with the persistent question, "How long?" The song ends repeating the lines, "We're all riding on the last train / Trying to find our way home again / It's not too late."

"Jesus in New Orleans," is a song that plays on an extended metaphor, and one that emerges out of a true experience. The song begins by claiming

> The last time I saw Jesus
> I was drinking bloody marys in the South
> In a barroom in New Orleans
> Rinsin' out a bad taste in my mouth.[21]

She continues describing the scene:

> She wore a dark and faded blazer
> With a little of the lining hanging out
> When the jukebox played Miss Dorothy Moore
> I knew that it was him without a doubt.

Here is this striking combination of images that likely provokes some cognitive dissonance. So far the setting is far from the pristine, holy image of Jesus most of us

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[18] Genesis 28.14-15, NRSV

[19] Genesis 28.16, NRSV

[20] Genesis 28.20-21, NRSV

[21] "Jesus in New Orleans," *OHIO* lyrics, http://www.overtherhine.com/cd11_lyrics.php.

might have. The singer is drinking in a dark bar, and the person she identifies as Jesus is female, and seems poor. The song intentionally juxtaposes these images as a challenge to the dichotomies between what is sacred and what is not, ultimately challenging our expectations. The song continues with some further reflection as they converse,

> I said the road is my redeemer
> I never know just what on earth I'll find
> In the faces of a stranger
> In the dark and weary corners of a mind.

There is a play on the theme of home; rather than finding redemption in home, the singer finds redemption elsewhere, as she encounters strangers along the way. The woman responds:

> She said the last highway is only
> As far away as you are from yourself
> And no matter how bad it gets
> It does no good to blame somebody else;

the imagery plays with concepts of identity, building off the language of traveling in the previous verse. This woman, who has been attributed to be Jesus tells the singer that if the goal of traveling—of leaving—is to find one's sense of self, to understand oneself, then she will find herself continuing to run. Rather, she communicates, the journey is primarily inward, and responsibility lies within us to reach our destination—not in others.

The singer seems to take back over the voice as she sings:

> Ain't it crazy
> What's revealed when you're not looking all that close
> Ain't it crazy
> How we put to death the ones we need the most.

Again we get hints of an understanding of redemption. As in, "What I'll Remember Most," this echoes the idea behind the line: "The hardest truths are the easiest," that in all our work, traveling, and struggle, the revelation is really in knowing ourselves.

The last line of that section has several layers of meaning. If the most important and most revealing piece is in knowing and accepting ourselves, then perhaps this line reflects the self-destructive human tendencies of denying ourselves or ignoring ourselves. It could also refer to the necessity of community that shows up repeatedly throughout Over the Rhine's catalog, though it is not a predominant theme here. These are both important and probably intentional meanings to this lyric. However, another interpretation is latent, particularly given the title of the song. The line, "How we put to death the ones we need the most," functions theologically and christologically. Given that the singer is interacting with "Jesus," the link to the crucifixion narrative seems more than coincidental.

Further, the song parallels Jesus' identity as savior and being put to death, but the object is plural. This is about religious, moral, spiritual leaders in general, which becomes obvious as the singer claims: "I know I'm not a martyr / I've never died for anyone but me." The reason, perhaps, that we need to turn inward to feel completion, to feel at home, is because of our tendency to reject (even unto death—literally and otherwise) those among us who would save and lead us. She sings on: "The last frontier is only / The stranger in the mirror that I see," again reiterating the complexity of knowing ourselves, alienation has run so deep that we are not even able to recognize ourselves in the mirror. The final lines of the song are:

> But when I least expect it
> Here and there I see my savior's face
> He's still my favorite loser
> Fallen for the entire human race,

giving us the most overtly theological lines in conclusion. The lines play with our expectations in the same way the first section does, alluding to portions of scripture in

which the sacred is made manifest in the ordinary: entertaining angels[22] or Jesus' claim that "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."[23] In other words, we have chances to encounter Jesus in unexpected places—even the 'frontier' of ourselves, reexamined.

Finally, "Cruel and Pretty," could be interpreted as a retelling of the Passion story. The song begins: "He woke / He knew that he was dying,"[24] which could parallel the gospel telling that Jesus knew what would happen. The song continues:

> He spoke
> And found that he was flying
> Upstairs
> High about the city
> Through the ceiling of the stars
> So cruel and pretty.

If the 'he' here is Jesus, then this imagery reflects the mystery of the passion story, as Jesus, both man and God "had" to die, and yet would, in three days, be resurrected and ascend to Heaven in his restored body. The contrast of adjectives—cruel and pretty—is striking and perhaps parallels other Christian language: "Good Friday" as the day Jesus was killed, the "wonderful" cross, which was the ancient instrument of torture upon which he died.

With the further lines, "Arms spread across the dark river," the song illustrates cruciform imagery with the "river" a traditional religious symbol for "crossing over" from one stage of existence to the next. The verse continues with anachronistic visuals:

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[22] C.f. Hebrews 13.

[23] Matthew 25.40, NRSV.

[24] "Cruel and Pretty," *OHIO* lyrics.

The night air causing him to shiver[25]
Like the florescent lights in the Seven Eleven
Meet me in the backstreets of Heaven
I don't wanna kiss you goodbye.

This very well could be read as a reinterpretation that places the singer into the passion event. There is a kiss at the center of the story—it was the formal means by which Judas betrayed Jesus—and so in some way the singer identifies with this act of betrayal, and yet communicates reluctance and regret. The last line of the song repeats: "Meet me in the backstreets of heaven," which perhaps offers an element of hope amidst a story so 'cruel' of death and betrayal, with something so 'pretty' at its center (the kiss), and something genuinely beautiful—the promise of reunion and freedom.

Drunkard's Prayer

Over the Rhine released *Drunkard's Prayer* two years after *OHIO,* and as they've written and acknowledged in interviews, this album marks a shift in several ways—as a band, and, moreover, for Detweiler and Bergquist's marriage. While on tour in support of *OHIO,* the two realized their marriage was suffering. They cut their tour short and went home "to do some much needed caretaking and work to preserve this part of [their] lives."[26] Out of that time, their marriage was restored, and from that came *Drunkard's Prayer,* which is, in many ways, an album of forgiveness, healing, hope and love. According to their email upon cancelling their tour, they realized almost all of their collective energies had been channeled into their music: "We've poured our hearts and our souls into our music this year, and we've seen that bear a lot of fruit and flourish."[27]

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[25] "Christ was all-but-naked, his clothing having been gambled on." C.f. Luke 23.34

[26] "Letter October 28, 2003," accessed 8/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=62.

[27] Ibid.

So, they returned to their home in Ohio, stating, "We're not willing to sacrifice our relationship and marriage on the altar of a career."[28] They returned home, broken and questioning, wanting to restore and reconcile but not altogether sure if that would be possible. Linford says, "We decided we had to…go home and figure out if being together was something we were still committed to."[29]

Drunkard's Prayer is the result of that re-directed energy and time away from touring and focusing elsewhere: "We opted to start over, reinvent our own relationship…toward our life at home together."[30] In reflecting on their time in between, before *Drunkard's Prayer* was released (when it actually carried the working title, *Born*), Linford wrote: "Karin and I are looking around as if for the first time after a much needed sabbatical. We've been lying low and in each others arms, basking in the small joys and victories of being home together."[31] The cover of the album is a stark, somewhat out-of-focus white horse, which they chose because "the image has been associated with redemption. The songs on this record tell the story of two people finding their way back home after almost losing everything, each other included."[32] And so the songs on this album are meant to be heard, absorbed, understood as part of a whole, and as part of a story of redemption, of healing, of forgiveness, but most of all, a love story.

The opening track, "I Want You to be My Love," is a simple and straightforward song that sings the title words repetitively. It also sings, "I want you to know me now /

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[28] Ibid.

[29] "Drunkard's Prayer Liner Notes," http://www.overtherhine.com/cd13_notes.php.

[30] Ibid.

[31] "Letter March 3, 2004," accessed 8/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=64.

[32] "Drunkard's Prayer Liner Notes."

Break a promise make a vow," which echoes the place they found themselves in before starting this record, of feeling like strangers, and not knowing how or if their marriage would survive. Yet this song demonstrates the place Detweiler and Bergquist wound up in while making this album—a place re-dedicated to their marriage and each other. The songs ends,

> I want you to be my love
> 'cause I want you
> I know all you—
> All you've been through.[33]

Though this song is simple, the content, the ideas of what it means to love are far from it. There is the idea that love is a choice, in spite of broken promises, and love means choosing to love, not only in spite of, but because one knows the other intimately, knows "all you've been through," and having the context of these songs' formations adds a great depth of pain and struggle to the "simple" love song.

The next song, "Born," is more complex and more overtly autobiographical. Similar to the previous song, "Born" picks up on the mixture of joy and sorrow that is the stuff of genuine love and is (obviously by this point) a frequent theme throughout Over the Rhine's work. The song begins,

> I was born to laugh
> I learned to laugh through my tears
> I was born to love
> I'm gonna learn to love without fear.[34]

This song deconstructs the cliché that love (even love songs) should be all fluff, and happy, but rather acknowledges that genuine love—a love that takes work, effort, and

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[33] "I Want You to be My Love," *Drunkard's Prayer* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd13_lyrics.php.

[34] "Born," Ibid.

energy, is tenacious ("love without fear") and a mixed-bag ("laugh through my tears"). The song continues: "Pour me a glass of wine / Talk deep into the night / Who knows what we'll find," which comes directly form Detweiler and Bergquist's personal experience: "When we came home from the tour, we bought two cases of wine and decided we were going to put a bottle on the kitchen table every evening and start talking until nothing was left. The idea was not to get piss-drunk, but to talk face to face deep into the night."[35] Here they tell their story of (re)discovering each other and their love through those conversations lasting "deep into the night." The story continues, as the lines "Put your elbows on the table / I'll listen long as I am able / There's nowhere I'd rather be," further remarks on these late night conversations.

The following two verses speak to the journey through their brokenness:

> Secret fears, the supernatural
> Thank God for this new laughter
> Thank God the joke's on me
> We've seen the landfill rainbow
> We've seen the junkyard of love
> Baby it's no place for you and me.

Bergquist and Detweiler have been to the bottom—they subsisted (though just barely) on the scraps of love, and have come through; they learned to see each other and listen to one another. They learned: "I was born to love / I'm gonna learn to love without fear."

The third track is the title song of the album, and perhaps the most ethereal in tone (though I'm not one to make such decisive categorizations), boasting an instrumental introduction in excess of one minute, and consisting of pared down and barely-produced strings. When the lyrics finally begin, Karin sings: "You're my water / You're my wine /

[35] "Drunkard's Prayer Liner Notes."

You're my whiskey from time to time."[36] These words repeat later as the song's concluding lines. The religious symbolism of the first two lines is perhaps obvious on the surface, as water and wine are juxtaposed, calling to mind Jesus' first miracle, according to John's gospel, where Jesus turns water to wine at a wedding in Cana (and not just any wine—the steward mistook the converted wine for the hosts best skeins of wine). Further, the theological significance of wine stands out in its sacramental imagery—the cup of wine (or juice, as it were) represents (or becomes) the spilled blood of the crucified Christ on the cross. Therefore, the song begins with overt Christological imagery.

The third line is perhaps surprising, then, in this context. However, a closer read of the letters and other writings that are part of the Over the Rhine catalog reveal this gem from Linford, "and there we were sitting in a tent, the sound of our laughter and real conversation and music in the distance, something resembling the Holy Spirit in our glasses (if bread and wine remind us of Jesus, a glass of Scottish Whiskey aged with care in the misty hills is a pretty good symbol of the third member of the Trinity.)"[37] Taking this reflection into context, the third line of the song fits into place in a rounded-out Trinitarian theological image. Not to put too fine a point on it, however, in the context of the album it would likely be disingenuous to read this song as *merely* or *solely* a Trinitarian apologetic. Suffice it to say then, that there is ambiguity here—this song is certainly a love song. Consonant with the album as a whole—but the words leave the

[36] "Drunkard's Prayer," *Drunkard's Prayer* lyrics.

[37] "Letter August 27, 2007," accessed 8/20/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=99.

object somewhat blurred—it could be romantic love, but there is a depth to the music and lyrics leaving room for a more mystical or spiritual substance.

The ambiguity of the song's object is demonstrated in the imagery evoked in the continued lyrics:

> You're the hunger
> of my bones
> All the nights
> I sleep alone,

which might clearly evoke romantic love—the physical hunger of another's body nearby at night, though there is a mystical tradition within Christianity in which writers (like Julian of Norwich) write similar sentiments about intimacy with Jesus Christ, not to mention the sensual spirituality of Song of Songs. The words might also evoke a spiritual interpretation, if we are aware of the 'bread of life,' wording rampant throughout Christian scriptures. The story continues:

> Sweet intoxication
> When your words
> Wash over me
> Whether or not
> Your lips move
> You speak to me.

In concert with the opening lines, these lines suggest further sacramental imagery, here offering baptismal symbols of water and being "wash[ed] over." The sacramental connotations continue if we listen for them:

> Like an ocean
> Without waves
> You're the movement
> That I crave
> And in that motion
> I long to drown and be lost not to be found.

The baptismal waters are calm, yet all-consuming. The singer desires to be covered with the waters (which are identified as the object of the singer's craving). There is present here a death to self—a longing to be so closely identified with the other that one's own identity is subsumed. However, in this song that desire is not communicated with a sense of despair or hopelessness, rather it comes out of the depths of desiring the other—all of this imagery can be identified as theological. Regarding how this song came about, Linford remarks,

> Everybody wants to be drunk on the good stuff—drunk on life, love, music, the wine of God and what not. In the New Testament, when the believers were first filled with the Holy Spirit and started speaking in tongues, the onlookers thought they were drunk. It takes some of that same holy foolhardiness to attempt to be an artist, a lover, a true friend, an adopted child of God.[38]

We are not to see this as a song about reckless intoxication, but a song about the desire to get consumed by—overcome by—"the good stuff," and that includes human, physical, spiritual love, but is even more about spirituality, and feeling so loved by God—the water of the Creator, the wine of the Redeemer, the whiskey of the Spirit—that one longs "to drown / And be lost not to be found."

The following song on the album, "Bluer," takes us back to the piece of Detweiler and Bergquist's story most likely in the days and weeks following the cancellation of their *OHIO* tour. They have remarked on the overwhelming uncertainty of that time, not knowing for sure how—or even if—their marriage would survive. Read through that lens, this song reflects on that period of doubt, and the accompanying deep sadness and grief. The words to the song are simple and few; they begin with: "I cry just a little bit /

[38] "Drunkard's Prayer Liner Notes."

Just a little bit / Everyday,"[39] reminding us of their deep sadness and the emotion accompanying the unknown and doubt. We further hear the personal reflection on their story in the lines:

> Bluer
> Than the blue devils
> Bluer than this pale blue angel
> Bluer than all of my troubles
> Love is never far from danger,

which reflect a sense of fear when faced with the reality that their marriage is not something they can take for granted. Linford acknowledged as much when he wrote: "we had to learn that putting a long-term relationship on autopilot indefinitely can be dangerous if not fatal."[40] The song continues: "I die just a little bit / Just a little bit / Everyday." There are a couple of layers of interpretation here. On the surface, this could be a further step in this deep sadness. The unknown—the doubt—the questioning—all contribute to a sense of loss, so much so that the singer feels a piece of her dies as the relationship faces an uncertain future. Another layer to these lines, in light of knowing how (at least this chapter of) the story ends, is an acknowledgement of necessary humility—the death is not necessarily a tragic thing, but could be a death-to-self, or perhaps the death of misplaced pride, false expectations, and grudges. Reading the song this way echoes the words of the New Testament about dying to oneself. In the gospels, Jesus says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those

[39] "Bluer," *Drunkard's Prayer* lyrics.

[40] "Drunkard's Prayer Liner Notes."

who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it."[41] His teaching here can be understood to be a condemnation of selfishness and pride; in order that one may realize true self-lessness one must die to self.

"Bluer," ends with a question: "Are we gonna leave here strangers?" which has an obvious autobiographical significance. Detweiler and Bergquist chose to—felt they had to—cancel a national tour to focus on their relationship, and part of that healing process included learning how to communicate again, involved sitting over a bottle of wine and talking to each other. They had come home feeling estranged from each other—and this track sings out of a deep sadness and sense of loss, wondering if that is how things will stay forever.

The following song, "Spark," returns to some of the more mystical imagery, and carries as its overarching theme the concept of living without fear. This song also offers a break from the obvious autobiographical content. The connections can be made, but are less clear-cut, particularly taking lines like, "What you think you'll solve with violence / Will only spread like a disease / Until it all comes 'round again,"[42] into account; perhaps here is a more abstract context, offering a philosophical/theological commentary. These lines could be read with a larger cultural context in mind—is it our cultural violence that

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[41] Mark 8.34-35, NRSV. C.f.: Matthew 10.38, and Luke 14.27. Paul echoes this in Romans, when he says: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6.3-11, NRSV)

[42] "Spark," *Drunkard's Prayer* lyrics.

is actually exacerbating rather than preventing or solving problems? The antidote, this song seems to suggest, to the "fire," "flame," and "violence," is something akin to imagination—dreaming, mystical capabilities.

She asks, "Was John the only dreamer?" This is a likely allusion to John the Revelator—who is the traditionally-assumed author of the book of Revelation. The final book of the Christian Bible is full of mystical often-bizarre, thoroughly symbolic, allegorical imagery and many have assumed that John had to have dreamed most of what he "saw;" these were ecstatic visions. With reference to John, the song seems to suggest that the cause of violence and destruction is fear, and the antidote to all of that is our dreaming—our imagination: "When we lay our cold weapons down / We'll wake up dreaming." Putting this in the context of John the Revelator, and a later line that asks, "Is God the last Romantic?", we are not to understand this as a trite daydream of fancy. Rather this takes on the weight of the kind of prophecy that imagines an alternative way of living. Part of the problem—and here is where the song returns to a more personal focus—is the weight of fear:

> Obsessions with self-preservation
> Faded when I threw my fear away
> It's not a thing you can imagine
> You either lose your fear
> Or spend your life with one foot in the grave.

So, while this song certainly can be interpreted on a broader, more abstract level—and I believe it should be—there is also the sense of personal fear and hope in shedding the fear and destruction it brings. The songs ends with this verse:

> Only love can turn this around
> I wake up dreaming
> Everything we've lost can be found
> We'll wake up dreaming.

These lines offer an interesting oxymoron, which again points to a more complex intention in the use of "dreaming." This is not intended to be an unconscious state of thought. Rather, in saying that fear must be shed in order to gain "Everything we've lost," and that the ability to 'dream' will squelch fear, violence, and the need for weapons, suggests that the remedy lies in an alternative way of living—one built on imagination and love.

The four songs that collectively conclude the album are best taken together; they all build off the theme of fear—and getting rid of it; they all can be interpreted autobiographically; and they all leave on a rather melancholy note twinged with hope. "Lookin' Forward" speaks from a place where things are not yet healed, but moving in that direction. The phrase repeated through the song: "I'm lookin' forward to lookin' back / On this day," seems to assume that there is hope for a future, that "these days" of sadness and doubt will pass, and yet there is still something good to be found in the present. This song picks up on the theme of letting go—as a catalyst for finding freedom, reclaiming identity, and restoring relationships: "Good news can be so unkind / When it's everything you have to / leave behind."[43] Further, there is an allusion to the prayers of Jesus in the lyrics: "Prayed last night / Dear God please no / But I was never good at letting go." In these lines we might hear a parallel to the words Jesus prayed the night before he would be crucified: "'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'"[44] I note this parallel, not as a trite re-appropriation of these words from the gospels, but as a way to connect a real-lived human experience,

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[43] "Lookin' Forward," Ibid.

[44] Matthew 26.39, NRSV

and all the pain and suffering that entails, to the suffering, abandonment and reluctance felt and expressed by God Incarnate. This parallel should not serve a "lower" Christology, but to add depth and identify with religious symbols and theological themes.

The next song, "Little Did I Know," seems to come from a place of Detweiler and Bergquist's story when they were on the verge of splitting up. The basic pattern to the lyrics is: "Little did I know/ … / without you." The singer is looking at the relationship on the brink of falling apart, and reflecting on all that she has taken for granted:

> Little did I know
> That I almost let you go
> Until I caught a glimpse of life
> without you
>
> Little did I know
> How deep these roots had grown
> Until I felt the earth quake here
> without you
>
> And this ache is gonna break me love
> Until you come back home
> Right or wrong
> There is no home without you
>
> And these eyes are never gonna dry
> I never knew how I could cry
> Until I thought I'd really lost you
>
> Little did I know that I almost let you go
> Until I caught a glimpse of life
> without you.[45]

The song as a whole has the benefit of seeing things from the 'other side'—there is a fringe of hope here; although she did not know it, that she is able to articulate what she almost lost means that there is hope in acknowledging and understanding what is worth preserving.

[45] "Little Did I Know," *Drunkard's Prayer* lyrics.

The final two songs, "Who Will Guard the Door," and "Firefly" rely on more mystical images. The former is apocalyptic in tone. The movement of the story is about letting go—releasing—in attempt to get close to the object of the song (whomever or whatever it might be). The song begins:

> You were the hand that I tried to take
> You're the decision that I could not make.
> You're the religion that I should forsake
> You were the story that I tried to tell.
> You were the savior that tripped and fell.[46]

These images evoke a sense of an object that is simultaneously misunderstood and just out of reach. The idea of letting go here seems to be about the need to let go of a sense of control and of the past in order to combat this sense of isolation and abandonment, reflected in the title's question: "Who will guard the door / When I am sleeping?" The song further speaks to a sense of feeling stuck, particularly in relationship:

> You were the season that would
> not change
> I often was the same
> Then four horseman came and stole
> my name.

If this song fits in the theme of letting go, this piece speaks directly to the consequences of that—feeling stuck—and using the idea of a season that will not change rings hopeless—there is no movement toward renewal or restoration. The four horsemen are symbols from Revelation 6,[47] which tells of the coming of the Last Judgment, the

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[46] "Who Will Guard the Door," Ibid.

[47] Revelation 6.1-8: "Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword. When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to

horsemen symbolize war, conquest, famine and death. The idea that these horsemen stole his[48] name, in the biblical context indicates not just one's name, but one's entire identity. The speaker felt stuck, without any movement toward renewal, until he released completely, including his sense of identity.

"Firefly," the final song is an ethereal conclusion to the album, and one that builds in instrumentation and intensity. The overarching theme of this song is the importance of memory; it is imperative to remember the past, to remember from whence one comes, in order to move forward with honesty and intention. The song begins with the haunting line: "My memory will not fail me now."[49] The image of the firefly carries the bulk of the song: "Firefly in the night sky / Only lights on the rise / And I need you so firefly." The firefly here represents hope. Against the darkness of a night sky, particularly in a removed area, fireflies are the only source of light as the day grows darker. And it is their flickering that lights up the darkness, serving as a reminder that the surroundings have not disappeared entirely. Further, fireflies are also an early sign of warmer weather. Like the first sighting of a robin, which signals the coming spring, the sighting of fireflies promises renewal of seasons, and promises longer days and warmer temperatures. However, like the seasons they represent, fireflies do not have an immortal presence:

> firefly in the night sky
> Only lights on the rise
> After the killing frost

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be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!" When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth." (NRSV)

[48] We hear the speaker is male in the final line: "I am my father's son".

[49] "Firefly," *Drunkard's Prayer* lyrics.

Where do you go
Firefly.

Without the fireflies to light up the night sky, all there is is darkness—the empty, hollow, cold winter. It can be difficult to remember, but as the song continues: "My memory will not fail me now / And the rest is history." In the face of utter darkness, how is one to see, how is one to hope that darkness is not all there is? This is why memory becomes so crucial—we remember the renewal of the seasons, the warmth and light that may seem so distant apart from the fireflies. As the conclusion to *Drunkard's Prayer,* this song sums up the themes of pain, loss, of letting go, of healing, by offering hope found in memory. There has been a lot of pain, fear, doubt, but there also exists a depth of love, healing and restoration, and only through our memory can we move forward with any true grasp of the latter.

In reflecting on the significance of this album, and what he hopes others might garner from this offering, Linford writes,

> [W]henever I encounter a work of art that moves me in a significant way, I always walk away wanting to be a better human being. I feel it all over my skin. This chemical reaction is a mystery. I don't begin to understand it. … I hope this is what happens when people hear this music. I hope people breathe more deeply and find ways to be more courageous, more open, more generous, more fearless, more loving.[50]

In reflecting on what Linford describes as an album that is "special—hard to put into words,"[51] he describes this sense of calling as something I can only hear as pastoral. Earlier they remark: "we made peace finally with the idea that this music has a lot to do with why we're here. Writing and recording songs is just what we do, and I think we're

[50] "Letter February 25, 2005," accessed 8/20/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=74.

[51] "Letter February 11, 2005."

letting go of the suspicion that maybe there is something more important lurking around the corner. … It's good to know what it is that you're meant to be doing."[52] He describes his desire to share his gifts and passions—including sorrows, struggles and doubts—in order that it will help him be a better person, and moreover that those who listen, who consume their music, will also walk away changed for the better, as something that comes out of a deeps sense of calling, and sounds ministerial.

Snow Angels

Over the Rhine's second Christmas album, *Snow Angels* can be seen as a bit of a companion album to *Drunkard's Prayer*. It is a Christmas album, to be sure, but to see it as a whole, reads very much like a follow-up to *Drunkard's Prayer,* containing many parallel themes of forgiveness, hope, and love.

The second song on the album, "Darlin' (Christmas is Coming)" carries themes of starting over and forgiveness. Using Christmas as the backdrop, the singer begins: "So it's been a long year / Every new day brings one more tear," and then a few lines later sings, "Let's start a brand new year."[53] Knowing the story of Detweiler and Bergquist's marriage in the years prior to this album's release, it is difficult to not hear this song in the context of the pain and healing in their own lives. She goes on to sing,

> Darlin' Christmas is coming
> Do you believe in angels singing
> Darlin' the snow is falling
> Falling like forgiveness from the sky.

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[52] "Letter July 1, 2003," accessed 8/20/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=58.

[53] "Darlin' (Christmas is Coming)" *Snow Angels* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd15_lyrics.php.

Again, using the backdrop of the holiday, and the shifting seasons, the song tells of a shift in a relationship—seeking to acknowledge the pain of the previous year, but insisting on moving forward, forgiving one another. Looking forward into the new year, the song closes with

> Tear these thorns from my heart
> Help the healing to start
> Let's set this old world free
> Let's start with you and me.

The song's scope enlarges here, drawing on the more theological and religious themes of the Christmas season, finding freedom and the chance to start over in the coming of Christmas. They will find forgiveness for themselves, symbolized in the changing season, and moreover freedom for the whole world, symbolized in the birth of Jesus. In all directions, there is freedom in forgiveness—which falls from the sky—and the healing and renewal of a chance to start over.

"White Horse" follows that track on "Snow Angels," and continues with the themes of forgiveness. The white horse is an image that shows up elsewhere in Over the Rhine's music (and the cover for "Drunkard's Prayer"). The simple, haunting image of a white horse is a choice explained in the liner notes, "because that image has been associated with redemption."[54] So, the song begins: "Bring me a white horse for Christmas / We'll ride him through the town." Here, the image carries over from the previous song of togetherness and hope for their relationship. The white horse represents redemption, and also serves as a hint to something beyond, particularly in the manner used in the rest of the song. The chorus sings,

[54] "Drunkard's Prayer Liner Notes."

Hush now baby
One day we're gonna ride
Hush now baby
Our white horse through the sky.

The visual is certainly mystical, as the singer promises a future voyage on the animal linked with redemption: "All the way to Bethlehem / 2000 years ago," which brings the song into its Christmas context. The couple in the song have ridden their symbolic redemption to the time and place of Jesus' birth. She sings:

I wanna speak with the angel
Who said do not be afraid
I wanna kneel where the oxen knelt
Where the little child was laid.

She reveals her desire to see for herself the events of that particular night in Bethlehem. On the heels of a song about the promise of freedom and hope found in redemption, "White Horse" begins with intentionally mystical symbols of redemption that will transport the singer, allowing her to see for herself the birth of Jesus. This song then offers a dream-like image, juxtaposed with this desire to see concretely what happened. Particularly significant is the desire to speak with the angel. The singer does not want to speak with the Holy Family, but rather the mouthpiece for God who implored, "Fear Not!"[55] throughout the infancy narratives. Given the context of the album, the desire to understand those events and to let go of fear takes on both concrete, relational meaning and larger, theological significance.

Taking a cue from the theme of renewal, restoration—or the hope of these things—Over the Rhine's catalog includes songs that have been reimaged, two of which appear on their 2006 Christmas album. *Snow Angels* borrows material from previous

[55] C.F. Luke 1.30, for example.

musical traditions, which is perhaps not entirely surprising as it is a Christmas album, and includes traditional songs in addition to new material. Two of the songs, however, are a blend of both old and new.

The fourth track, "Little Town," reinterprets the melody and shares its first two verses with the traditional hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."[56] The following four verses follow the same melody and measure, but reinterpret the quiet words of the hymn. They juxtapose the ancient nativity story with the modern situation in the Middle East. The 'new' hymn seeks meaning in the Christmas Story, but with a different backdrop:

> There is no peace in Bethlehem
> There is no peace in sight
> The wounds of generations
> Almost too deep to heal
> Scar the timeworn miracle
> And make it seem surreal.[57]

The song ends with the child in the manger as an adult: "And still we try to listen now / To what he had to say," then using words culled together from the Gospels:

> Put up your swords forever
> Forgive your enemies
> Love your neighbor as yourself
> Let your little children come to me.[58]

This movement is significant: from the stillness of the verses of the words of the traditional hymn, to the contemporary overlay of the centuries-old context of religious warfare, ending with the reminder that Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, is no longer peaceful and has not been for centuries. The song ends with the words of Jesus, who

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[56] Phillips Brooks, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, Hymn Text, 1868.

[57] "Little Town," *Snow Angels* lyrics.

[58] Matthew 26.52; Matthew 5.44, 6.24; Luke 16.13; Leviticus 19.18, Matthew 22.39; Matthew 10.14.

grew up to preach peace, love, and welcome. The song still sounds like a Christmas hymn, but yet reminds us of the restoration still to come, even to the holy place where the infant Jesus laid his head.

Immediately following "Little Town," comes "New Redemption Song," which likely intends to call to mind the oft-covered Bob Marley song, "Redemption Song."[59] In the Over the Rhine version, the lyrics read as a prayer, explicitly addressed to "Lord," and begins with a request for "a new redemption song," explaining "Lord we've tried / It just seems to come out wrong." There is an underlying concern that we might be responsible for more than we can actually produce or affect. If we as humans are to bear some responsibility to bring about redemption—or to usher in restoration—we might be doing it wrong; their song, therefore, implores for help: "Won't you help us please / Help us just to sing along." Later it also explains, "All our worries / Keep getting in the way." In the final movement, the words of the song communicate an acknowledgement that it is not up to us entirely, but still admits there is a lack, something is missing. They want to pray for redemption day, but yet still ask, "Won't you help us please / Help us just to sing along / A new redemption song." The song is short, and relatively simple, yet there are some indications as to what redemption means. Music—or singing—seems an integral piece of that. Redemption—and achieving it—involves singing a song, and singing

[59] Bob Marley, ""Redemption Song" Lyrics," accessed 11/09/10. http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/redemption-song-lyrics-bob-marley/326f5783c5461a6048256945000e6461: "Old pirates, yes, they rob I; / Sold I to the merchant ships, / Minutes after they took I / From the bottomless pit. / But my hand was made strong / By the hand of the Almighty. / We forward in this generation / Triumphantly. / Won't you help to sing / These songs of freedom? / 'Cause all I ever have: / Redemption songs, / Redemption songs. / Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery; / None but ourselves can free our minds. / Have no fear for atomic energy, / 'Cause none of them can stop the time. / How long shall they kill our prophets, / While we stand aside and look? Ooh! / Some say it's just a part of it: / We've got to fulfill the Book. / Won't you help to sing / These songs of freedom? / 'Cause all I ever have: / Redemption songs, / Redemption songs, / Redemption songs."

together—the plural pronouns and the words "sing along" indicate that the song of redemption is not a solo venture. The integration of singing and redemption is certainly consonant with biblical understandings. In the psalms, and throughout the exilic literature, those in exile wonder how long until they can sing a new song?[60]

The final three songs on the album continue the picture of forgiveness and healing, though they are quite different in rhythm and style. "Here It Is," is an upbeat pop song, with the chorus proclaiming, "I'm wrapping up my love this Christmas / And here it is."[61] In spite of its upbeat sound, the song begins, "I cried when I wrote this / I'll always remember." But we clearly are not going to remain with this emotion: "The act of forgiveness is always a mystery / The melting of ice / And the future of history." Again, this song is in the context of the healing of the marriage, that is at the core of Over the Rhine's career of the past five years or so, and stands as an affirmation of the pain of the past, and yet the ever-stronger hope and mystery of love and forgiveness. The song continues: "I call it commitment / I make my confession / I make it in public," implying that there is something significant, or even necessary, (even if unavoidable given the nature of their jobs as performers), in publicly acknowledging the sins of the past and the forgiveness required to move forward: "I hope that it's helpful / That others can use it.")

The song continues, closely relating fear and love: "I'm so scared of losing / The deeper the love goes / The deeper the bruising," indicating that fear and love are related because the more one loves another person, the more vulnerable one becomes, therefore

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[60] C.f. Psalm 40.

[61] "Here It Is," *Snow Angels* lyrics.

the more at risk of being hurt. The song also acknowledges the difficulty in being honest in being able to surrender when loving another person:

> There's a loop of excuses
> That plays in your mind
> And makes the truth
> Even harder to find.

The song then concludes on a hopeful note, saying that when all things may come to an end ("When they blow Gabriel's horn") she wants to be caught in "some radical act / of love and redemption," which is defined as: "The sound of warm laughter / Some true conversation / With a friend or my lover." Here is the idea that being able to openly relate to someone—to be able to discover something real in the risky business of relationship—is rare and meaningful enough to constitute an act of redemption. All of this is summed up with the lines:

> The heartbreak and laughter
> The joy and the tears
> The scary beauty; of what's right here
> I'm wrappin' up my love this Christmas.

These juxtaposed seeming-opposites echo the opening line of their 1996 album, *Good Dog Bad Dog*: "What a beautiful piece of heartache / this has all turned out to be,"[62] and suggest that real, genuine relationship, the kind that could bruise deeply, the kind that causes one to cry when remembering, is filled with both sorrow and joy, and it is in opening oneself up to this that one might "get caught / in some radical act / of love and redemption."

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[62] "Latter Days," *Good Dog Bad Dog* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd04_lyrics.php.

The final song on the album, at this point, likely needs little explanation. "We're Gonna Pull Through" sounds certainly more melancholy and mournful, but closes out the album on a note of hopefulness. The second verse sings:

> We've been careful, we've been good
> Doing most of the things we should
> But the picture is much bigger than we knew
> We're gonna pull through.[63]

In the context of their marriage, this song echoes the comments about how they had simply stopped putting work into their relationship; they felt they had basically been going forward on some sort of marital auto-pilot, so while they felt they had been doing what they were supposed to, "the picture was much bigger," meaning the work was greater, the damage was deeper, but yet they discovered the love was stronger than they had thought, or perhaps believed. The song and the album ends with these words sung: "Breaking our own rules / … / And we're gonna pull through." In spite of rules that they will inevitably break (for better or worse, and in spite of all the uncertainty that comes with being such an intimate part of your life, there is still the hope that genuine love runs truer and deeper to outlast these things.

Trumpet Child

In 2007, on the heels of *Snow Angels,* and two years following the release of *Drunkard's Prayer,* Over the Rhine released *Trumpet Child,* an album that sounds resoundingly different from both *OHIO* and *Drunkard's Prayer* (and frankly, any of their full-length albums to that point). The album's instrumentation changed, relying more on percussion and horns, as did the tempo—it is generally more upbeat; *Trumpet Child* is

[63] "We're Gonna Pull Through," *Snow Angels* lyrics.

generally a more *fun* album as it reflects a "sense of Friday-at-5pm bliss, the sleeves-up fun of friends hanging out."[64] The album is overtly political in places, and directly theological in other moments, and often both. In between are songs that are sensual and whimsical, revealing that the doubt, pain and cautious hopefulness that summed up the movement from *OHIO* through *Drunkard's Prayer* has, at last, given way to release, confidence, hope, and even joy.

Perhaps this shift, noticeable through *Trumpet Child,* is best explained through a struggle that seems to have been (mostly) resolved for Bergquist and Detweiler. One sentiment they express time and again in letters and interviews is their wrestling with vocation and the appropriateness of making a living—making a life—out of playing music. It feels frivolous, it feels self-indulgent.[65] Early in their career, Detweiler reflects on the music with a sense of risk and intimidation, acknowledging the power of what they do: "For I have learned that a good song even partially dressed can make me shiver and discover places inside that I didn't know were there."[66] And several years later, he reflects again on this vocational struggle (part of which has been previously cited, but bears repeating),

> we made peace finally with the idea that this music has a lot to do with why we're here. Writing and recording songs is just what we do, and I think we're letting go of the suspicion that maybe there is something more important lurking around the corner. While we were making OHIO, I had the calm but happy realization that barring some unforeseen catastrophe, we'll still be making records 20 years from now. It's good to know what it is that you're meant to be doing.[67]

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[64] Jason Killingsworth, "The Trumpet Child Review," accessed 11/10/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd18_reviews.php.

[65] This is a theme that has carried them through confidently in the making of their 2011 release *The Long Surrender*.

[66] "Letter May 1997," accessed 10/10/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=9.

[67] "Letter July 1, 2003."

In a letter from 2008, after the release of *Trumpet Child,* Detweiler relates the core of the struggle they face as career musicians:

> But then there are days when we feel like we're auditioning for a starring role in the book of Ecclesiastes. Did any of it matter at all? Did we accomplish anything even remotely unique, or worthwhile, or useful? We know the work did matter to us and to others. We know the music at times played a life-giving role in some of our stories. We know some folks listened to the songs during their last few days on earth. But some days are a drawn veil: we just can't seem to access the meaning in any of it.
>
> ….[T]here are days now when we pan back on a chapter that's ending, and the overwhelming feeling is, we had so little time. The years vanished. Take care what you hang a life on.[68]

The song, "I Don't Wanna Waste Your Time," opens the album, and is a simple, stark confessional that sums up these concerns, claiming: "I don't wanna waste your time / with music you don't need."[69] They acknowledge that they see "music and art and writing [as] extravagant, essential," comparing it the woman spilling perfume on Jesus' feet: "the act of spilling something, a cup running over."[70] They take seriously the idea of making music as a vocation, a calling, not wanting to take their work or their audience for granted; in the band's biography from their website, Detweiler is quoted as saying, "Believe me, we don't want to waste anybody's time. . . . When we stop believing we're doing our best work, we're done. Every song has to be good, every record has to be great, every concert has to have some spiritual significance—something that we can't quantify, something bigger than all of us."[71] This conviction clearly informs this opening song; its

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[68] "Letter September 2, 2008," accessed 10/10/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=112.

[69] "I Don't Wanna Waste Your Time," *Trumpet Child* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd18_lyrics.php.

[70] "Letter April, 2009."

[71] "Band Bio."

placement on the album serves as an invitation either to keep listening to turn the album off. The song continues expressing this idea:

> Come on lighten up
> Let me fill your cup
> I'm just trying to imagine a situation
> Where we might have a real conversation.

Elsewhere they have offered gratitude and hope that their music fosters just such a thing: "We love the fact that Over the Rhine's music invites people with vastly different backgrounds to join an open conversation."[72] The song continues: "But I don't wanna waste the words / … / With music you don't need." Over the Rhine sees their musical vocation as not 'mere' songwriting, but has deep hope that they are able to offer something profound and worthy in return for those who choose to invest their time in Over the Rhine's music. This is echoed beautifully in their words following the September 11 terrorist attacks:

> Like so many artists and musicians, we were at a loss for words. We too had to ask ourselves, What place does art and music have in times like these?
>
> Our hope is that we can somehow participate in tiny redemptive acts in the coming months and years, that may (even if in ways embarrassingly small) help to heal this broken world of ours. When any of us encounters beauty, we subconsciously dream of a more perfect world, the door is flung wide on new possibilities that we can't yet imagine, we breathe more deeply and wonder if we have more to offer than we know.[73]

The album continues, and so has their career with the confidence and assurance that what they do is worthy: "So as we pack our suitcases…this is what we do."[74]

In writings and interviews, Detweiler has called on a quote from G.K. Chesteron to articulate why he believes in the importance of his own works: "I don't deny that there

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[72] "Letter March 10, 2007," accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=93.

[73] "Letter October 10, 2001," accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=45.

[74] "Letter October 29, 2009," accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=118.

should be priests to remind men that they will one day die. I only say it is necessary to have another kind of priests, called poets, actually to remind men that they are not dead yet."[75] He has elsewhere reflected on the importance of music—and Over the Rhine's vocation of making and playing music. In an essay for *Image* Journal, Detweiler answers the question "Why do you believe in God?" with words absorbed in music. He tells a story about a friend in the hospital who, in her last hours, unplugged the bed from the wall in order to plug in her CD player. To Detweiler, "This tiny subversive act allowed our friend, on her next to last day on earth, to listen to music."[76] Over the Rhine does what they do—will only do what they do—if they can offer something genuine, something soulful, something that people will listen to in the milestones of life—in the last hours of life. And because they know that their music has filled—and continues to fill—these moments and spaces that they are companions to others' lives, they remain committed to their work.

Trumpet Child also levels a certain critique against the establishment, variously understood, challenging forms of authority, complacency, and authenticity (or lack thereof). The second track, "Trouble," begins with coy, flirtatious words, seeming simple and sweet: "If you came to make trouble / Make me a double honey / I think it's good."[77] The second verse levels an interesting critique however,

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[75] G. K Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 378; paraphrased by Detweiler in, Linford Detweiler, "10 Questions: Linford Detweiler of Over the Rhine," interview by Nichole Wagner, online, October 30, 2009, http://www.uncommonmusic.org/2009/interview/linford-detweiler-of-over-the-rhine/.

[76] Detweiler, "A Song Before Dying," 98. This essay was part of a series called, "Why I Believe," in response to the "new atheists" who posit religion as antithetical to science, and therefore antiquated and naïve.

[77] "Trouble," *Trumpet Child* lyrics.

Novices have expectations
'Cause they think they should
Experts have their revelations
Like they knew they would
What may seem complicated
Is overstated downright misunderstood.

This is not necessarily a critique against any formalized system of authority, i.e. politicians or other institutions. However, the object is the idealized system in general, against false systems of wisdom, or notions about how things "work" or "ought to be." The song challenges a general idea of a status quo. By making the distinction between novices and experts predictable, they seem to challenge the categories in general. These distinctions and misplaced expectations make things more complicated than they are in reality. The next few lines reveal the relational, romantic context of this critique:

Love will not be outdated
Maybe placated but it's got to be good
We're so precarious with semantics
I think this could be trouble;

they are reacting to the sterilized, clinical, ready-to-diagnose culture that has absorbed our culture, even our romantic and love relationships.

"Nothing is Innocent," which appears fourth on the album, begins to get a little more specific, reflecting on a context where we can no longer claim ignorance or innocence. They begin their explanation with these lines: "We'd wake the dead / With voices in our head / We've gotten used to ignoring the truth."[78] The pronoun here is first person, plural—and is ambiguous—likely intentionally so. How 'big' is the "we"? Does it include the listener? If this song is interpreted broadly, the 'we' indicates *at least*

[78] "Nothing is Innocent," Ibid.

American culture. Though not explicit, this song certainly contains implicit political critiques—levied at both citizens and leaders. The lines,

> We close our eyes
> And breathe and eat the lies
> That tell us we're so much better than you
> Silence is loud
> Humility is so proud
> Nothing is innocent now,

offer a critique of the "people" who have allowed ourselves to be victim of those in power who would have us believe we are not significant or powerful. That message is a lie, and it has rendered us silent. Their line about humility offers a seeming-oxymoron that speaks to the pridefulness that comes as a result of swallowing the lies, thereby believing ourselves to be humble. The most political lines of the song,

> All the king's men
> Will serve scrambled eggs again
> When white-washed walls come crashing down,

calls on the mythology of the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty." The song has been used as an analogy to demonstrate the fragility and superficiality of systems of power and control that otherwise maintain façades of magnificence. Meanwhile our ignorance will keep us powerless: "We'll blink and nod / And say, How odd / And wonder why old friends don't come around." The song does not wrap up neatly or turn suddenly optimistic. Rather, it continues with a warning:

> The acid rain
> We fear the pain
> Will blister and burn the skin
> But what is more
> The fear we bore
> Will eat us alive from within,

which returns to a favorite theme of Over the Rhine: a critique of fear as inhibitor or motivator. The song concludes by repeating the question, but even more explicitly:

> Nothing is innocent now
> For you and me
> In the land of the free
> Is anything innocent now?

Here we see a clearer object, and reflection on what it means to be innocent. We cannot or should not remain innocent to the lies and the fear, because, they warn, we will be unprepared for the inevitable crumbling of the structure created by our false humility.

The album concludes with a critique that is expressly political; "If a Song Could be President," is a series of hypotheticals that imagines an American political system if music were the leader, the commander in chief (though it is significant that they use 'song' instead of 'music'—calling to mind Detweiler's essay in which he distinguishes a *song* from mere *music.*) In their letter from May 2007, (right around the time the album was released), they comment on the current political climate in the United States,

> In America, in recent years, it sometimes seems like many folks are becoming increasingly entrenched in their political camps. Certain religious affiliations are becoming increasingly rigid. When groups of people insist on surrounding themselves almost exclusively with others most like themselves, real conversation can be hard to come by. (Conversation that celebrates the reality that since people have the ability to see things very differently, maybe we can actually learn from each other, be surprised.)[79]

The song seems to be their way of imagining what would happen if music could continue to be the vehicle for real conversation, translating all the way to affecting elected and political officials. Throughout the song they call on specific singers who might specifically take part in the 'song''s administration: Steve Earle, Lightnin' Hopkins, Patsy Cline, Neil Young, Emmylou Harris, John Prine. The list functions in a few ways;

[79] "Letter March 10, 2007."

it grounds this vision in some sense of tradition, acknowledging the leaders who have been examples and 'founders,' in a sense. The naming of names also serves as a list similar to the one in Hebrews, the speaks of a "great cloud of witnesses."[80] The 'cloud' functions as a list of role models—those who have gone before and whose example we ought to emulate, and also as a confidence-booster—we are not alone in this struggle. This latter piece is why the names listed are significant. They are musicians who are no strangers to the blues—to singing of love and loss, to singing of faith and the search for it, and to singing songs of protest aimed at ill-functioning governments. The list in the song adds to the song's whimsy, particularly in lines like, "We'd make Neil Young a senator / Even though he came from Canada," and "John Prine would run the FBI / All the criminals would laugh and cry."

The song also imagines an alternative political system by using musical language to develop the metaphor and describe a utopian system with a song as its head. The song opens with a musical interpretation of democratic government:

> If a song could be president
> We'd hum on Election Day
> The gospel choir would start to sway
> And we'd all have a part to play.[81]

The musical dimension of our elected government, serves to emphasize unity—each of us is important, each adds his and her voice to our system, and musically that creates a blended choir, not a cacophony of competing soloists. They take this musical imagery further:

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[80] Hebrews 12.1.

[81] "If A Song Could be President," *Trumpet Child* lyrics.

We'd vote for a melody
Pass it around on an MP3
All our best foreign policy
Would be built on harmony.

The song begins to move outward; the melody would be infectious—like a viral mp3 that can be emailed and shared. This verse sound hopeful, of course, that an abstract melody, if voted upon, could unite us, even in our dealings with other countries—seeking harmony.

The lyrics respond somewhat more specifically to the context contemporary to the writing of the song:

If a song could be president
We could all add another verse
Life would teach us to rehearse
Till we found a key change
Break out of this minor key
Half-truths and hypocrisy
We wouldn't need an underachiever-in-chief
If a song could be president.

This song was written during George W. Bush's second term, which was a time marked by general disillusionment, disenfranchisement, and dissatisfaction among the general public with the government and Bush's administration, which has resulted in deeper and deeper social, economic, and political divisions among the American population. In the song, what is interesting is that despite low approval ratings and a general sense of discord, the song has not stopped. Rather, we are in a 'minor key,' the effect of this interpretation is that there is hope—there is an eternal song, music that *can* unite us. What is necessary is continued practice, and fine-tuning to find the notes, the words, the key that we all play together to continue the song.

Finally, the title song to the album offers this same stream of hope, but in a much more overtly theological and eschatological way. One of the stories Linford tells throughout his career is of his earliest memory. He describes being at a Pentecostal camp meeting as a very small child. While sitting in the congregation, he hears the sound of a trumpet and realizes he "wants to be where the trumpet is."[82] This desire works on two levels. He felt drawn to the music itself, wanting to hang his life where music is—the stage (literally), and the place in the human spirit where music speaks most deeply. He believes music—where the trumpet is—is where the human spirit meets God's spirit and communicates. When Detweiler introduces this song in writing, and on stage in concert, he reflects:

> Both Karin and I grew up around a lot of old church music. I think some of the old hymns taught us that words could be beautiful, with their titles like 'Softly and Tenderly,' 'When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,' and 'Let the Lower Lights Be Burning.' A theme that recurred in a lot of the old hymns was the idea that the world would be reborn with the sound of a trumpet. We've all heard many of the great American trumpet (and horn) players—Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Stan Getz—and we've been wondering about the sound of that trumpet. Is it real? Is it a metaphor? What, exactly, is on God's iPod?[83]

The song is a musically-infused reinterpretation of the gospel story, with a particular eye and ear toward final restoration. The song imagines a time in the future when the 'trumpet child' will come to earth. This child is mythical, mystical, divine, and intended to usher in all sorts of changes, resembling redemption. It is best to print the lyrics in their entirety and then discuss the image, in total, as an extended metaphor:

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[82] Linford Detweiler, "Missionary Training," *Image*, no. 30 (Spring 2001), http://imagejournal.org/page/journal/articles/issue-30/detweiler-essay.

[83] "Band Bio."

The trumpet child will blow his horn
Will blast the sky till it's reborn
With Gabriel's power and Satchmo's grace
He will surprise the human race

The trumpet he will use to blow
Is being fashioned out of fire
The mouthpiece is a glowing coal
The bell a burst of wild desire

The trumpet child will riff on love
Thelonious notes from up above
He'll improvise a kingdom come
Accompanied by a different drum

The trumpet child will banquet here
Until the lost are truly found
A thousand days, a thousand years
Nobody knows for sure how long

The rich forget about their gold
The meek and mild are strangely bold
A lion lies beside a lamb
And licks a murderer's outstretched hand

The trumpet child will lift a glass
His bride now leaning in at last
His final aim to fill with joy
The earth that man all but destroyed.[84]

The song is rife with biblical images, especially from Revelation. Throughout the Bible, the trumped is used to announce—war, festival, victory, celebration, gathering—and is used as an instrument in praise and worship. It is associated with divine realms, announcing something from or to Heaven. In Revelation, the trumpet plays a significant role in announcing the return of Jesus Christ, the Day of Judgment and ushering in redemption and restoration.[85] In Revelation 11.15, the seventh and final angel, "blew his

[84] "The Trumpet Child," *Trumpet Child* lyrics.

[85] C.f. Revelation 8.6-13, 9.1, 13-14)

trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."[86]

Elsewhere in the New Testament the sound of the trumpet is connected with the final resurrection and redemption.[87] So the song sets up the scene of the trumpet sounding and opening up the sky "till it's reborn." The trumpet child is connected, also, to the angel Gabriel, who features prominently throughout biblical stories and Judeo-Christian folklore. Gabriel is seen as one of the archangels and is a messenger of God. Rabbinical tradition places Gabriel as one of the witnesses at the wedding of Adam and Eve, and he was present with Abraham at the verse of Isaac, and sits at the left hand of God at the throne of Glory. Throughout scripture, Gabriel is present throughout the book of Daniel.[88] He is also the angel who appears to both Elizabeth and Mary to announce the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, respectively.[89] Folklore traditions, one likely source being Milton's *Paradise Lost,* has Gabriel blowing the horn to initiate the Last Judgment. With this *power,* Over the Rhine juxtapose Satchmo—the musical pseudonym of Louis Armstrong—also a trumpeter. The power, revelation, finality and music of these two figures ultimately will catch us off guard. The biblical account of the future-return of Christ uses similar language: "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a

[86] Revelation 11.15, NRSV

[87] C.f. 1 Thessalonians 4.16, 1 Corinthians 15.52.

[88] C.f. Daniel 8.15-26; 9.20-27; 10.5-12.13

[89] Luke 1.10-20, 26-37, respectively

pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief."[90]

From here we get a deeper and clearer portrait of what exactly the trumpet child will initiate and what exactly will catch us by surprise. The second verse describes the trumpet itself using two images directly alluding to biblical language. The idea of a refiner's fire is significant—particularly in the Hebrew Prophets—where God is the uses fire, often symbolized in purifying metal, to 'refine' the hearts of those gone astray. In Zechariah 13, on the Day of Judgment, "In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, "The Lord is our God.'"[91] The image of the metal from the fire is a biblical symbol pointing to the purification of something (or someone) to be used for a divine purpose.

The line including reference to both "mouth" and "coal" calls to mind the call story of Isaiah: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'"[92] Isaiah is called to be a prophet by the hot coals placed on his lips by the angel. The image is one of purification—as the companion refining-fire image—and one of sacrifice. The hot coal is taken from the altar, where it may have already been used—or will be used for sacrifice.

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[90] 1 Thessalonians 5.2-4, NRSV

[91] Zechariah 13.8-9, NRSV

[92] Isaiah 6.6-7, NRSV

In the third verse, the trumpet child begins to play his music. Again, the contrasting sound of jazz music is significant. The trumpet child does not play a well-rehearsed concerto or a precisely arranged symphony; rather he "riffs on love," and will "improvise a kingdom come." Over the Rhine play with the idea of the last days being something one can predict or plot out with precision and exactness to days and hours. They seem to say here that the coming of this kingdom is one of surprise, improvisation, and counter to expectation (it is of "a different drum"). Most importantly, the song that ushers in the kingdom has love at its core—everything that happens will be a variation on this theme.

The fourth and following verses continue on this improvisation imagining what the kingdom might look like. The image of the banquet is central—and is an eternal banquet lasting "until the lost are truly found." Throughout the New Testament, the banquet is used as a potentially equalizing force. Jesus eats with all manner of people and instructs his followers to do the same. Further, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the banquet feast is a recurring event variously marking Sabbath, the community, religious celebrations. The idea of an eternal banquet comes from Revelation 19, where John reports he "saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God.'"[93] The banquet could last 1000 days, 1000 years—language that shows up in both Old and New Testaments.[94] The banquet, in the song, is also an equalizing force—the language of

[93] Revelation 19.17, NRSV.

[94] C.f. Psalm 90.4, and 2 Peter 3.8.

'lost' and 'found' is used to describe the guests. Throughout Jesus' teaching he uses these descriptors, often with sheep participating in the metaphor.[95]

The kingdom description continues flipping power paradigms on their heads. The rich no longer care about their material wealth, and "the meek and mild are strangely bold." Here, these characteristics connect to Jesus' plentiful condemnation and warnings about the futility (to put it politely) of pursuing material wealth, and the blessing of the meek, "for they shall inherit the earth."[96] The juxtaposing of the lion and the lamb is an oft-used image of the peaceful kingdom to come in the final redemption. Though the word is translated in Isaiah as "world", the effect is still the same: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."[97] The kingdom coming will be one of peace that reinterprets the entire systems of life, translating all the way to animals. The description of the lion who "licks the murderers outstretched hand," incorporates crucifixion imagery, alluding to the criminals who were also crucified alongside Jesus on Golgotha; the peaceable kingdom extends even unto them

Finally, the trumpet child moves to toast this motley gathering. The next line intimates that this is not just any banquet, but is a wedding feast (it is perhaps not insignificant that Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding, in John 2). The trumpet child's "bride now leaning in at last," certainly links to biblical imagery of weddings and

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[95] C.f. Luke 15.3-7.

[96] Matthew 5.5, NRSV

[97] Isaiah 11.6, NRSV, C.f. Isaiah 65,25

marriages. In the writings of Paul, the church—the Christian community—is described as the bride of Christ.[98] Moreover, this symbol shows up in John's vision in Revelation.

John writes: "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."[99] And later, one of the angels beckons John, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb."[100] Together, the Spirit and the bride speak the Kingdom into being: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."[101] The goal of all of this, then, becomes clear as the song ends: "His final aim to fill with joy / the earth that man all but destroyed." The song levies judgment on the human role in destruction—both of the natural world and of the relationships as God intended. But the final word is one of love, peace, joy and redemption:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.[102]

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[98] C.f. 2 Corinthians 11.2, Ephesians 5.22-31.

[99] Revelation 21.2, NRSV

[100] Revelation 21.9, NRSV, Here the lamb is the resurrected Christ.

[101] Revelation 22.17, NRSV.

[102] Revelation 21.1-7, NRSV.

Conclusion

What do we do with this cacophony of images, the mixture of hope and sorrow, of despair and joy, the stories of love and loss, the wrenching beauty of authentic human experience? How do these songs speak theologically? What can we say about the prophetic dimension of these songs? In reflecting over their 20 year career, and looking forward to the next chapters, to "the next twenty," they offer thoughts on where they have been and why they continue to move forward, continue to make music, and they name three reasons why they still want to create songs. First, it has something to do with calling: "We believe making music has something to do with what we were put on this earth to do. If we leave our songs alone, they call to us until we come back to where we belong. When we live in the sweet spot of that calling, it gives others…permission to discover the sweet spot of your own calling and live there." The second reason emerged out of both Karin and Linford's "occasion to bury loved ones," and the inevitable reflection upon one's own mortality, and life's meaning. Regarding this they remark that what gives their lives meaning is "doing work that you can leave behind, your personal token of gratitude to the world in return for the gift of getting to be alive in it."[103] The third articulated motivation is summed up in the word "presence." Linford further explores this idea:

> There is a beautiful passage of scripture that made an impact on me as a child that I have never forgotten. Jesus said that if you help someone in need, someone hungry or naked or thirsty or imprisoned, if you are able to be present with them and soothe them in some way, it's the same as if God was hungry or naked or thirsty or imprisoned and you found a way to help God. There is so much need in this beautiful broken world it can be overwhelming. . . . [W]e have watched people invite our music to be part of the big moments of their lives . . . . Unfortunately, big moments also occur during seasons when it feels like

[103] "Letter April 23, 2010," accessed 9/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=121.

> everything is going horribly wrong. We all need music during those dark times too – I know I do too. It's always humbling and amazing to learn that our music can be present in those too-difficult-too-imagine times. In some small way, through our music, it feels like we get to be present too, even when that is physically impossible. We get to be there in spirit.[104]

These reasons they identify for making music, are perhaps appropriate guiding points in identifying both theological and prophetic elements to the work, music, and lives of Over the Rhine.

Throughout their career, in writings and in interviews, the idea of *soulfulness*, of something *extra* that happens when a song takes on new meaning, reaches deeper, when a song has power to communicate beyond words—when music becomes bigger than the sum of its individual melody, harmony, rhythm, percussion, more than the mere words. Regarding this, Detweiler remarks that "I have learned that a good song even partially dressed, can make me shiver and can discover places inside that I didn't know were there."[105] In spite of their work, their effort to create something beautiful, they have come to acknowledge that, "songs have a way of finding lives for themselves, and developing their own voices and it's all a little bit dangerous."[106] The life that these songs take on often catches Over the Rhine by surprise, and it is in putting words to these feelings, emotions, and this power that they turn to the spiritual and theological. On the commentary to *Besides,* an album of live tracks, outtakes, and alternative arrangements, Linford describes: "Every once in a blue moon, God surprised even us, and walked

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[104] Ibid.

[105] "Letter May 1997."

[106] "Letter April 3, 1996," accessed 10/14/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=7.

through the room."[107] It is this surprise, and this effect, that has caused a general audience reception described thusly: Over the Rhine "constantly breed music that sings straight to your soul and clings there with triumphant beauty, sincerity, and warmth."[108]

The riskiness of songwriting, and the sincerity of their music does not remain in the interior world. Rather, as previously discussed, latent in many of their songs is a critique of and/or response to the structures around them. Both Bergquist and Detweiler take their work seriously; they consider their pop songs art, and they hope that their art affects their audience, epitomized in the question they ask: "Can there be art without change?"[109] Many of these songs are not overtly political, though we have seen examples of some that are, however, there is something at work in their music that is designed to upend the status quo.

Detweiler remarks that part of music's powerful potential is to challenge power dynamics and power structures: "I think music is a great way to take power away from people that have too much power and to give power to people that have too little." This is at work, too, in traditional forms of religion, in challenging the comfortable, or predictable iterations of religious authority. This challenge is not intended antagonistically, but with an eye towards fostering conversations, questions, and reflection: "music is a great way for people that are very wrapped up in the church and are comfortable with that culture, I think music—like my music, I would hope, would

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[107] "Besides Commentary," accessed 10/10/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/cd06_commentary.php.

[108] Linford Detweiler, "Over the Rhine Interview," interview by The Milk Carton, online, August 13, 2007, http://www.themilkcarton.com/forums/showthread.php?t=1264.

[109] "Letter September 21, 1999," accessed 8/15/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=30.

make them a little uncomfortable, would gently push them out of their comfort zone where they had to engage in a new way with some spiritual question." Therefore, Detweiler hopes that people who have not been introspective about their faith might be challenged in the images they present, in the questions they ask, and in the realities they confront. He also has hopes that Over the Rhine's music might also confront others, casting their net over a diverse audience: "At the same time, people that maybe aren't interested, or maybe don't think about where they are spiritually, I would hope that they'd … hear […] our songs and something would sort of start to twitch and moan a little bit, in terms of their spiritual curiosity."[110]

Essentially, their task as song writers is to confront and challenge their audience, and that works on structural, political levels, and, perhaps most powerfully for Detweiler and Bergquist, on the personal, spiritual level: "there is something dangerous and subversive about it [songwriting], and if I'm not risking anything as a writer I might be wasting people's time."[111]

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this riskiness, the subversiveness, is in their willingness—their insistence—on telling the truth, in confronting authentic human experience. This is one piece they return to over and again in articulating why they think their music is important. The truth-telling element of their music, Linford believes, has everything to do with the quality of Karin's voice; he remarks:

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[110] Linford Detweiler, "Conversations - Linford Detweiler, Over the Rhine," interview by Meridith DeAvila, online, December 27, 2007, http://www.thedroponline.com/2007/12/27/conversations-linford-detweiler-over-the-rhine/.

[111] Linford Detweiler, "Beauty and the Sacred, 'Twenty Years In': An Interview with Over the Rhine's Linford Detweiler," interview by Elizabeth Sands Wise, emailed proof of article, July 2, 2010 (pre-publication).

> [Karin's] voice [is] directly connected to the part of her where her pain lived. Sometimes what comes out of Karin's mouth is as much crying as singing. It doesn't get any more universal than that. One thing about being human: we all know what it feels like to hurt. Art in general, especially good art, whether it's music, painting, dancing, writing, acting, has everything to do with man's search for healing, for meaning.[112]

The songs throughout Over the Rhine's career are remarkable in their confrontation with both darkness and light, with both sorrow and joy, and that characterize the universal human experience. Moments in which we meet head-on with the entire range of human emotion are of particular interest for the two as song writers. Again, Linford sums this up in saying: "I like moments that make me laugh uncomfortably, moments that bring tears – sometimes form being happy and sometimes from dealing with the place where your pain lives. I like to shove it all in there, comedy and tragedy in a head-on collision."[113] Behind all of this, he articulates is an "unwillingness to divide the world into sacred and secular, or an unwillingness to divide the world into the broken and the unbroken. I think we see it more as those divisions cannot be made. We're all broken, and it's all sacred."[114]

Their devoted fans recognize this quality to their songwriting, as well. In 2001, a group of Over the Rhine listeners compiled a two-disc album of cover songs. Included in the set is an essay about Over the Rhine's music: "because we were so tongue-tied we couldn't trust ourselves to say our own words. Some days, the heart and mind are so weak, that you need someone to speak for you. To go before you. To relieve you of that

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[112] "Malone College, interview with Linford."

[113] Karin Bergquist and Linford Detweiler, "Over the Rhine::The AD Interview," interview by Marty Garner, online, August 12, 2008, http://www.aquariumdrunkard.com/2008/08/12/over-the-rhine-the-ad-interview/.

[114] Detweiler, "Beauty and the Sacred, 'Twenty Years In': An Interview with Over the Rhine's Linford Detweiler."

burden of speechlessness. The psalms are good for this. Over the Rhine is good for this."[115] This fusion of the range of human experience comes through clearly throughout their catalog, in the mixture of religious symbolism, the adaptation of biblical stories without neat explanation, all of this serves their "insistence on telling the truth and not faking something for the sake of finishing a song or a record." Over the Rhine will "sit with a song until something is revealed that feels real and honest and sort of connected to the people that we are."[116]

Over the Rhine offer a trove of words through their writings and interviews that offer a glimpse into their own personal spirituality and faith. Though Linford is far more prolific in his words than Karin, it is clear that they both share a Christian heritage, and a faith rooted in scriptures and hymns of the church; they are not afraid to talk about Jesus. However, they have never desired to limit their music, or potentially thwart listeners by adhering labels to it. They write that, from their first songs, they always and only wanted to play for anyone who would listen; if someone wanted to hear their music, then they were welcome in the conversation. They did this because as they wanted their music to speak honestly about the range and reality of human experience, so too they wanted their audience to reflect that full range. Linford notes, "we took our music…out of the church and just put it in a physical place where people were listening to music, in any particular town, regardless of where that might be. … I've always been interesting in breaking down [even] if it's an artificial barrier that's dividing us into camps when we're really all

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[115] *"Over the Rhine--an essay" accompanying What it Takes to Please You: A Tribute to Over the Rhine*, print and CD (independent, 2001).

[116] Detweiler, "Beauty and the Sacred, 'Twenty Years In': An Interview with Over the Rhine's Linford Detweiler."

part of the same family."[117] Their music only exists insofar as they are reminded of their common humanity, relating them to every other person. Therefore, they try to "write music that is undeniably connected to the story we're writing with our lives. We can show up and wait for God to walk through the room and settle for nothing less. . . . we still believe we have something potentially significant to contribute to the American music scene."[118]

The effect of the raw honesty of Over the Rhine's music, is that it has been invited along to be part of other people's stories and journeys. They have remarked that this has been one of their deepest hopes in doing what they do, "that people would find some value in our songs and want to pass them around to friends or make them important mile markers in the stories that they were writing with their lives, and we've seen that."[119] They have heard, through letters, emails, personal conversations, that their music has been present throughout significant milestones, from birth to death, and all manner of events in between, and Linford and Karin find themselves humbled by knowing this. That their music has become so significant in the lives of others they consider their gift of presence; Linford explains (above, under the third reason they still make music) using "what Jesus was about into the most simplest [sic] core message, you know, I was hungry and you were there, I was lonely and you were there, I was in prison and you visited me, whatever, I don't feel like physically this is always something I can live up to but through music it is a way, some small way of being present with people when they might need

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[117] Ibid.

[118] "FAQ."

[119] Detweiler, "Conversations - Linford Detweiler, Over the Rhine."

someone."[120] It is this gift and calling of presence that has continued to motivate them to "write songs that would stick to the listener's skin. We tried to write songs that someone might want to listen to on their next to last day on earth. Isn't that, after all, pretty much every day? We tried to write songs that were relevant to the moments in life most pregnant with significance and possibility."[121]

That their music can be a gift of presence in these significant events in the lives of listeners is intimately wrapped up in the honesty of their music. Because they are able to communicate something authentic about the range of human experience, that is also universal, Over the Rhine is able to share their stories in the lives of other people, in the stories that other people tell. Again this effect of their songs is evident in the words that speak on behalf of the fans who contributed to *What it Takes to Please You*:

> There is a marvelous quiet and wonder to life. There is a beauty in the crevices of alleyways and the nuances of sidewalks, and yes, those rain-drenched nights and broken-winged angels. Over the Rhine has let us in on a pocketful of those enigmas. They've given us a peek of that mystery and awe, in their music, in their melodies, in their words. . . . Over the Rhine is amazing to me in their humanity. Their broken fumbling humanity. . . . But the stuff of Over the Rhine is not easy to define, as I find it gets under my skin, into my veins. . . . Over the Rhine has been, for me, very effective in getting through my thick skull, past a million melancholy lies, past everything I claimed I wanted to get on my knees. This is our way of saying that all of it has made a difference.[122]

The work of these stories, the work of this authenticity continues to be an expression of gratitude for them. They write songs, they share their music because out of gratitude for the life they were given, and they believe that they are to offer something in

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[120] Ibid.

[121] "Letter October 6, 2009," accessed 11/08/10. http://www.overtherhine.com/journal.php?id=117.

[122] *"Over the Rhine--an essay"* accompanying *What it Takes to Please You: A Tribute to Over the Rhine*.

return, a gift to leave behind. Their music, then, is theological in its ability to reach truthfully into the lives of other people, and in so doing is able to offer hope in the solidarity and community fostered in the shared story. Linford remarks that what he feels he is doing in his music is, in large part, to offer hope to others: "in terms of whispering hope versus shouting from the mountaintops, you know, I'm much more interested in the former. I just doubt my ability to shout convincingly from the mountaintops."[123] The gift that they hope they are able to leave behind is the gift of hope for renewal, in proclaiming restoration and renewal: "what I want to do more than anything these days is just to give the world a little something beautiful. To participate in some tiny way in the work of redemption. . . . This all seems somehow miraculous to me. . . . it's wonderful to have your life's work tangled up in the everyday lives of diverse people here and there."[124]

Linford grew up in a pastor's home, and grew up learning about missionaries, and felt a certain degree of pressure from his parents and community to consider the missionary vocation. Though he (nor any of his siblings) did not go into 'professional' mission work, the language, vocabulary, and theology of missions remains lodged in his perspective on his artistic work. Linford writes that he considers his work, to some degree, missionary work: "as a songwriter that travels around and meets all kinds of different people and tries to encourage real conversation and I think music is a way to sort of engage people on the big questions."[125]

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[123] Detweiler, "Beauty and the Sacred, 'Twenty Years In': An Interview with Over the Rhine's Linford Detweiler."

[124] "Malone College, interview with Linford."

[125] Detweiler, "10 Questions: Linford Detweiler of Over the Rhine."

Perhaps the most thoughtful and profound reflection of Over the Rhine's songwriting as a work of theology comes in Detweiler's essay for *Image* magazine, in which he reflects on pondering missionary work,

> And now the whole spinning world is my record player. The coal black, starry sky begins to revolve. I hear sinfully loud music in my head. Therefore will not we fear. The music drowns out everything else and wants to wash me clean, and my life is a story that I must record, a character-building story, of course, like the ones we listened to over and over with the blind man in his leaning house with the dirt floor. I want to tell my secrets to the wide world in the best English I can muster. . . . I want to be forgiven and to baptize the whole sleeping world with the ensuing joy and sadness….
>
> And tonight,… while I look up at the northern lights and listen to the music inside of me, the gospel is this and only this: what must I do to make my life a true story?[126]

Therefore, the work of the songwriter, the work of Over the Rhine is thoroughly theological, not only in the ways that they express, but in its ability to tell a story, and tell the story with complete authenticity. They honestly confront the full range of universal human experience, and articulate the depth of human sorrow, doubt and despair. Their work is prophetic, too, in its challenge, and proclamation. Though it is oftentimes darkness that seems prominent in their work, the message does not end in despair. Rather, as they have articulated themselves, they hope to participate in the work of redemption, and offer hope and community in the face of the brokenness. Perhaps all of this is best concluded with Detweiler's words on songwriting "as a spiritual discipline," in "that the heart of it was a search for soulfulness."[127] Their songs are soulful and open

[126] Detweiler, "Missionary Training."

[127] Detweiler, "Conversations - Linford Detweiler, Over the Rhine."

up a "place of surrender, openness, where joy and sadness blend freely, as in the words of the old hymn: *Sorrow and love flow mingled down.*"[128]

[128] Detweiler, "A Song Before Dying," 99. Referencing the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross": "When I survey the wondrous cross / on which the Prince of Glory died / … / See from his head, his hands, his feet, / Sorrow and love flow mingled down" words, Isaac Watts, 1707.

CHAPTER SIX

Indigo Girls—Part I
"Through our activism we embrace the sacredness of life"[1]: The Theological and Prophetic Vision of the Indigo Girls

Introduction

The Indigo Girls have been playing music together for over 25 years, their earliest recordings date to 1985. The musical partnership of Amy Ray and Emily Saliers maintains a presence that can be described as prophetic in its denunciation of injustices, and its proclamation of hope and alternative modes of living. The two singer-songwriters' prophetic presence transcends their musical catalog; in addition to their numerous albums, both Ray and Saliers express a dedication to activism, particularly using the vocabulary of justice and equality. This activism is expressed through their written reflections on their website and emails, as well as using their concerts as avenues for education and recruitment for various issues. Using both song lyrics and biographical examples, I identify the Indigo Girls as an example of prophetic critique and proclamation. They clearly denounce injustice and inequality; they also offer hope through their music, imagining possibilities of a world qualified by justice, peace, and grace, instead of division, violence, and oppression.

Whereas for the previous chapter it seemed axiomatic to organize the discussion chronologically, letting the artists' stories and maturation shape the analysis of their music, it seems more appropriate to take the Indigo Girls' catalog and work as a whole,

[1] "News from Emily 12.05.06," accessed 9/16/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2006/2006-12-05-e.html.

and form the discussion thematically. The present chapter will discuss examples of Indigo Girls' music that, in general, deals with religious or theological themes, particularly in the context of human relationships. The Indigo Girls consider their activist work at least as important as their songwriting work, therefore, a significant portion of the following chapter will be devoted to discussing the types and areas of activism in which they are involved, how that is integral to their songwriting, and, finally the degree to which and qualities by which we can characterize their work as both theological and prophetic.

The Indigo Girls is the name by which musical partners, Emily Saliers and Amy Ray have been known since the mid-1980s, when they began performing together in Georgia. Saliers was born in New Haven, Connecticut, while her father was working on his Ph.D. at Yale; she is the second of four daughters. Her family moved to Decatur, Georgia, (a neighborhood of Atlanta), when she was in the sixth grade, where he father taught at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, and has held the William R. Cannon Distinguished Professor of Theology and Worship and Director of the Master of Sacred Music Program, Emeritus, since his retirement in 2007. Saliers grew up in a Christian home where music and theology were common parlance, so the language and imagery of the Christian tradition show up in her songwriting, and is a tradition of which she considers herself a part.

Amy Ray grew up in Decatur, and met Saliers when the two were children. The two have been close friends since being classmates in a Decatur elementary school. They would play music together in high school (though not yet under the Indigo Girls moniker). Both Saliers and Ray left the Atlanta area for college—Saliers to Tulane, and

Ray to Vanderbilt—though neither finished at their respective schools; instead, they both returned to Decatur, and attended Emory University. Ray graduated in 1986 with degrees in both English and Religion; Saliers in 1985 with a degree in English. Both Amy Ray and Emily Saliers are openly lesbians, though have never been romantically involved with each other. Their sexuality is important, not because it changes their music on its own terms, but because it is important to them as gay women working in the music industry, and is one of the central pieces to their activist work.

As the Indigo Girls, Ray's and Saliers', first recordings were independent and saw minimal release; the first, a self-titled EP was released in 1986, and their first full-length, *Strange Fire,* released in 1987, only had 7,000 copies in its initial run. Following a wave of women singer-songwriters in the late 1980s, like Tracy Chapman and Natalie Merchant of 10,000 Maniacs, they were seen as potentially part of "the next big thing", and Epic Records signed them in 1988; their first national release was their self-titled 1989 album, which eventually went double-platinum, and for which they received the 1990 Best Contemporary Folk Album Grammy.[2] They remained with Epic through 2005, during which time they released seven more full-length albums: *Nomads Indians Saints, Rites of Passage, Swamp Ophelia, Shaming of the Sun, Come on Now Social, Become You,* and *All That We Let In*, two live albums: *Back on the Bus Y'all, and 1200 Curfews*, and one rarities collection: (appropriately named) *Rarities*. During this period of their career, the Indigo Girls saw modest success, at least as far as music industry charts are concerned. *Nomads Indians Saints* went gold, and *Rites of Passage* and

[2] They were also nominated for Best New Artist, but lost to Milli Vanilli, who later had their award revoked, following a notorious lip-synching scandal. This piece of trivia, if anything, ought to serve as evidence, and a reminder, that 'success' is much more than awards, nominations, chart-placement, and financial reward.

Swamp Ophelia both went platinum. While supporting *Shaming of the Sun,* they toured with the original Lilith Fair, during the summers of 1997-1999, which garnered them even larger audiences.

After fulfilling their contract with Epic, the Indigo Girls moved to Hollywood Records, where they signed a five-album contract. They would only release one album on Hollywood Records, however: 2006's *Despite Our Differences.* In the midst of touring in support of the album, Hollywood dropped the Indigo Girls from the label. In 2009, the Indigo Girls released *Poseidon and the Bitter Bug,* their first independent record since their debut, more than twenty years prior. Their most recent releases, *Staring Down the Brilliant Dream* (a two-disc live compilation), and *Holly Happy Days* (a collection of holiday songs), are both 2010 independent albums.

Amy Ray has also pursued solo recording and performing as a side project, in addition to founding and managing, Daemon Records, a not-for-profit Indie/Folk Rock label. She has recorded three albums with her label: *Stag, Prom,* and *Didn't It Feel Kinder.* About the desire to found her own recording label, she says,

> The genesis of Daemon Records arose from my own frustrations with the music industry. While reaping the benefits of a major label deal, I realized that all around me "music" was getting lost among the checkbooks, executives, and mountains of paperwork that are all such a primary part of any major label. I watched while so many musicians that had inspired and influenced my fortunate career went unrecognized. As an Indigo Girl, I enjoyed being part of the indie scene and I wanted to remain supportive and open to the underground. I decided to stop complaining about the evils of the music business and do my part to support the arts.[3]

This critique and description of her own perspective on the music industry reflects what has remained at the core of the Indigo Girls work (both in music and activism): they are

[3] Amy Ray, "Daemon Records - About Daemon," accessed 11/17/10. http://www.daemonrecords.com/about/index.htm.

as passionate about issues of justice and equality as they are their music. There is no duality; in fact, for both Ray and Saliers what they do is wrapped up into one purpose. About their activism, Emily writes: "through our activism we embrace the sacredness of life,"[4] and reflects that music has power "as a healing force to help mend the brokenness of this world."[5] Not everything is overtly political. Before diving too far into exploring the specific issues and how they correlate with their musical work, some space must be given to the general theological and religious themes that appear throughout their music. By beginning broadly, I will set a foundation for understanding the Indigo Girls as artists, demonstrating consistent themes throughout their music, and then moving toward more specific concerns they address both in music and otherwise, through writing or activism.

The Sacred in the Everyday

Emily co-wrote, with her father, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice,* a book as part of Jossey-Bass' The Practices of Faith Series. In it, she writes: "Music and faith are, for me, intimately related, even as I continue to wrestle with questions about organized religion."[6] She sees "music…[as] some kind of mysterious mediator between us and the God we seek."[7] Part of the goal of writing this book together—a professor of sacred music and ordained minister, and his lesbian, folk-rock songwriter daughter—is to break down the typical sacred-secular boundaries between "Saturday night" and "Sunday morning" music. They argue that these

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[4] "News from Emily 12.05.06."

[5] "Notes from Emily 9.19.06," http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2006/2006-09-19-e.html.

[6] Don E Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, 1st ed., The practices of faith series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 4.

[7] Ibid., 5.

categories are useless, because the creators and the listeners to music remain the same people regardless of externally-pronounced transcendent (or not) quality: "the point is to notice that we are in the presence of a human soul and to listen with care and respect from the depths of our own souls."[8] Much of the Indigo Girls' music is wrapped up in these definitions of music and its power. Though both Saliers and Ray are hesitant to align with any particular religious dogma, religious themes persist throughout their songs. The following reflection from *A Song to Sing,* is instructive in how we can understand their music as religious, even though by institutional accounts many would consider them 'secular':

> Music can evoke the divine and not necessarily mention God all the time. Not all music with religious import needs to be explicitly liturgical… [or] addressed to God…At the same time, any music that explores human life in all its range of extremity and ordinariness can evoke the presence (or absence) of God. Music that moves toward the good, the true, the just, and the beautiful often brings a sense of transcendence to hearers…Some nonchurch music that truly expresses the heart's torment, the soul's lament, or the ecstatic joy we experience within the beauty of creation may be more religious than hymns with poor theology sung without conviction.[9]

The first set of Indigo Girls songs will be discussed with this perspective in mind, looking at examples of songs that could be considered religious; some explicitly use religious language, others are more vague, all of them are significant insofar as they explore the fullness of human experience, and because of this type of music "opens us to what is most real in humanity's suffering and glory, and in the mystery of the God who is searching for us, a source of life and hope deeper than we can conceive."[10]

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[8] Ibid., 16.

[9] Ibid., 165.

[10] Ibid., 181.

One of their earliest songs, "Hey Jesus," takes the shape of a conversation, or a prayer, to Jesus. The singer allows that she does not often communicate with Jesus: "hey, jesus, it's me. I don't usually talk to you but my baby's gonna leave me, and there's something you must do."[11] The song continues with a confession of sorts, followed by a supplication: "I am not your faithful servant, I hang around sometimes with a bunch of your black sheep, but if you make my baby stay, I'll make it up to you and that's a promise I will keep." This particular song is an excerpt in what appears to be a string of conversations she has attempted with who she feels is a divine intercessor, however estranged she also feels she may be. The substance of the song shifts from her relationship and heartbreak to deeper theological questions:

> you've got the power to make us all believe in you and then we call you in our despair, and you don't come through. hey jesus, it's me, I'm sorry. I don't remember all I said, I had a few, no, too many and they went straight to my head, made me feel like I could argue with god but you know, it's easy for you, you got friends all over the world, you had the whole world waiting for your birth but now I ain't got nobody, I don't know what my life's worth. I'm not gonna call on you any more. I'm sure you've got a million things to do, all I was trying to do was to get through to you, get through to you because when I die and I get up to your doors I don't even know if you're gonna let me in the place, how come I gotta die to get a chance to talk to you face to face?

Here the singer risks complete honesty, fueled by her position of utter despair. She clearly feels abandoned—both by her "baby" and by Jesus. She begins by asking Jesus to bring her lover back, but the song falls into a place of desperation, questioning Jesus on where he is and how he chooses to use his power. According to this song, Jesus is all-

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[11] "hey jesus" *Strange Fire* lyrics, accessed 9/20/10. http://indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/strangefire.html#.

A note about the quoted lyrics in this and the following chapter: Where the lyrics have been quoted directly from the Indigo Girls' website, I have left them as-is. Some of their lyrics are given in verse form, with line-breaks, and clear punctuation. Others (such as "hey jesus") are given sans capitalization and punctuation. Lyrics from later albums, which are borrowed from other online sources, I took a bit more liberty with proofreading.

powerful and utterly transcendent; although she addresses him directly and rather intimately, there is a sense that she lacks any response or sense of presence that would convince her otherwise that Jesus cares about her situation. She feels her time and words are in vain, particularly in the closing line of the song in which she asks why she has to wait until after this life to get concrete answers to her questions. Through the words of this prayer, out of her desperation, she also longs to identify with Jesus, or perhaps implore him to identify with her plight, saying that the whole world is waiting for him to come, and now she is waiting for him, once more, to come and fix her situation. Instead, she seems to beg of him, desperate, for some sign or clue that he will intercede. This song represents the depths of doubt and despair that are common to the human experience.

From the Indigo Girls' first full-length album, *Strange Fire,* "hey jesus" also comes at the naissance of their career, when both singers were pretty young. This is significant because it communicates the position of late-adolescence/early-adulthood in which most things of life are unknowns, and the future feels heavy.[12] That, coupled with spiritual seeking and darkness, are powerful because they are universal to the human experience and human development.

Another song that speaks to physical and spiritual despair is "Prince of Darkness," which is on their second and self-titled full-length album. Saliers reflected on this song's theme:

> My own constant battle with my inner darkness, and the prince of darkness [is], obviously, the diabolical force. So it's about light and darkness. And how darkness, you can feel sometimes like it almost is going to pull you under. But there are people in your life who can save you. … And it's like, in the end, it's an

[12] The "Dark Night of the Soul," perhaps.

> affirmative statement. I'm not going to be a pawn for the prince of darkness. You know, I have the strength to find my light rather than to dwell in my darkness.[13]

The song begins by setting up a contrast: "My place is of the sun and this place is of the dark,"[14] and continues as the singer reflects on the world around her. The images we are given reflect on the desperation she sees around her. She is haunted by these images, as she compares them to bad dreams: "The words of my heart lined up like prisoners on a fence / The dreams came in like needy children tugging at my sleeve / I said I have no way of feeding you, so leave." The images that follow are haunting indeed:

> And now someone's on the telephone, desperate in his pain
> Someone's on the bathroom floor doing her cocaine
> Someone's got his finger on the button in some room
> No one can convince me we aren't gluttons for our doom.

These images are gritty, and reflect lives lacking hope, those who have given in to pain, desperation, even suicide, as alluded to in the latter line. The people described here, however, are to be understood as *others*; there is an intentional distance between the hopelessness of those described, and the singer. She sets her own life up as a contrast:

> But I tried to make this place my place
> I asked for Providence to smile upon me with his sweet face
> But I'll tell you
> My place is of the sun and this place is of the dark.

The contrast here is not merely existential or situational—between sadness and happiness, or happenstance. Rather, the difference she sees between these others who seem buried in their own desperation and pain, and herself, rests on a spiritual level; it is vague, but through words like "Providence," and the light/dark contrast we see what she

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[13] Emily Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls," interview by Carl Wiser, online, nd , http://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/emily_saliers_of_indigo_girls/.

[14] "Prince of Darkness," *Indigo Girls* lyrics, accessed 9/20/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/indigogirls.html#.

is getting at. The powerful language that follows testifies to her capacity to feel others' pain and her desire to find a salve for that:

> And my heart flew from its cage and it bled upon my sleeve
> The cries of passion were like wounds that needed healing
> I couldn't hear them for the thunder
> I was half the naked distance between hell and heaven's calling
> And he almost pulled me under.

These words offer a raw glimpse at the struggle of living in the world where "we are gluttons for our doom," meaning where we are constantly battered by temptations toward despair and pain.

She uses avian language to indicate a longing for freedom from these temptations. The hints we get as to how she does resist the burdens of the world come in these lines:

> My place is of the sun and this place is of the dark
> (By grace, my sight grows stronger and I will not
> be a pawn for the Prince of Darkness any longer)
> My greatest hope my greatest cause to grieve.

She attributes the power of grace to be able to see more clearly in order to resist the power of darkness, here using one of the proper names traditionally associated with Satan. The last line here is curious: from the same source come both deep hope and grief. If her hope is found in the antithesis of the Prince of Darkness, and in Providence, then we can interpret this to be a spiritual sense of hope in opposition to darkness, grief, and despair. Perhaps this serves as both a source of grace and grief because she is able to see all the people who *have* given over to the darkness.

The final song of the same album, "History of Us," continues these themes of hope in the midst of despair, light amidst darkness. The song begins as the singer is abroad, in Paris. Addressing some unknown person (though by all indications, a lover or intimate relation of some sort), she says she has gone to "forget your face." There, the

structures around her serve as metaphors of the spiritual and relational destruction she feels:

> Captured in stained glass
> Young lives long since passed
> Statues of lovers every place
> I went all across the continent to relieve this restless love
> I walked through the ruins, icons of glory
> Smashed by the bombs from above.[15]

The rubble around her serves as embodiments of the remains of her love. As she wanders in and out of the gothic cathedrals, she uses the Christian imagery as continued metaphor:

> So we must love while these moments are still called today
> Take part in the pain of this passion play
> Stretching our youth as we must, until we are ashes to dust
> Until time makes history of us.

Here she sees her own life paralleled in the Passion narrative, which could be interpreted as a story of sacrifice, of pain and destruction, but it is called "passion," because it is also a story of grace, mercy, and love. She continues among the ruins, and finds hope: "In the midst of the rubble I felt a sense of rebirth / In a dusty cathedral the living God called / And I prayed for my life here on earth."

At the outset of the song the landscape serves as a symbol of her own grief and the pieces remaining after her relationship has ended. Here her surroundings continue to mirror her own life, particularly as she transitions from rubble to redemption. She continues to reflect on the setting as it reflects her situation, and resolves:

> From my hotel room, watching the half moon
> Bleeding its light like a lamb
> And the town is illumined, its tiny figures are fast asleep
> And it dawns on me the time is upon me
> To return to the flock I must keep.

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[15] "History of Us," Ibid.

The old buildings, faces long-dead frozen in stained glass, and the decay of the gothic structures initially serve as mere reminders of what the singer has lost. As she looks closer and recognizes the sacred images in the windows and statues, she is reminded of the peace of the "living God," and her prayers change in tone, allowing her to find a sense of resurrection amidst the rubble, which also connects to her language of the "passion play," as the resolution to the biblical passion narrative is also found in resurrection. She concludes her reflections realizing that her life is not yet over, and she has responsibility to others back home, notably using language of sheep—the light is soft and white ("like a lamb") and she must "return to the flock [she] must keep," remembering her own responsibility outside of this temporary brokenness.

The tension between despair and hope emerges throughout the Indigo Girls canon, often relying on the contrast between light and darkness. Other examples of lyrics to this effect include the song "123" off their 1990 release, *Nomads Indians Saints:* "How long can you be agile, dancing between the alter [sic] and the mercy seat? / Here's a chance to make a choice, are you aware of the fire beneath your feet?"[16] And from the same album, "Hand Me Downs:" "…all with hope that / Emptiness brings fullness and / Loss of love brings wholeness to us all."[17] These contrasts are often brought to light as a dance between two worlds, perhaps demonstrating the mixture of sacred and secular that is intrinsic to living as a spiritual being but embodied on the earth and in relation to other human beings, and attempting to understand or relate to God, variously understood.

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[16] "123" *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics, accessed 9/20/10 http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/nomadsindianssaints.html#.

[17] "Hand Me Downs," Ibid.

Throughout the Indigo Girls' catalog, religious language also persists in songs about love relationships, offering images and interpretations of what 'real love' is, and through words about living in general that parallel language of spirituality and spiritual journey. Many of these examples rest on the assumption that relationships involve dependency, and our personal identity, and even spiritual well-being is wrapped up in our relationships with other people—our willingness to open up to others and to allow others into our own lives. As they talk about love, language of gift is often present. For example, the song "Love's Recovery" from their 1989 *Indigo Girls* album, looks back on a time when "it was hard to turn the other cheek."[18] The singer reflects on that past, and clearly feels she is in a different place, mentally and spiritually, as she sings,

> My compass, faith in love's perfection
> I missed ten million miles of road I should I have seen
> Meanwhile our friends we thought were so together
> Left each other one by one in search of fairer weather
> And we sit here in our storm and drink a toast
> To the slim chance of love's recovery.

As she looks around and reflecting on the past, she realizes the naïveté of believing that 'love conquers all.' Rather, that love can persist, or does persist, she feels, is "slim chance."

She uses theological language as she goes on to reflect:

> Oh how I wish I were a trinity, so if I lost a part of me
> I'd still have two of the same to live
> But nobody gets a lifetime rehearsal, as specks of dust we're universal
> To let this love survive would be the greatest gift we could give …
> Though it's storming out I feel safe within the arms of love's recovery.

Here she expresses the desire to be divine, but in the paradoxical Christian Trinitarian form; this desire is not so much for divine power, but because she believes she would not

[18] "Love's Recovery," *Indigo Girls* lyrics.

feel so alone facing the heartbreak that feels like she has lost part of her own identity. She follows those lines with a recognition of her own human finitude, calling on the image of ashes and dust from the Old Testament: "…until you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."[19] What does give her solace in the end is that love has survived (or 'recovered') and that is what she has, and all she needs to keep her feeling safe; she closes these thoughts with her own love, realized as a gift.

Other songs in their catalog relate to love and relationship as part of a struggle, focusing in the end on the utmost significance of finding solidarity and security in relationships with others. In *Watershed,* a documentary and compilation of interviews and music videos from the Indigo Girls' career, they both remark on the significance of relationships for them, both in their personal lives, and in their songwriting. Emily remarks: "All of 'em are true-story songs." And in further details she describes how her personality emerges in her and Amy's body of work, particularly her priority on relationships. She remarks that she can see in her own music, "how important interpersonal relationships are to me. I think about 'em all the time—love relationships, or just how people treat each other—just the whole human intrigue."[20]

One of their most popular songs, "Power of Two," from the 1994 album, *Swamp Ophelia*, epitomizes this perspective. The song tells a story of two lovers, and is sung from one to the other, as a song of reassurance. The chorus sings: "we're okay we're fine baby I'm here to stop your crying chase all the ghosts from your head I'm stronger than

[19] Genesis 3.19, NRSV. See also: Ecclesiastes 3.20: "All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again." and Job 30.19: "He has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes" and 34.15: "all flesh would perish together and all mortals return to dust." (all verses NRSV)

[20] Susan Lambert, *Watershed: 10 Years of Underground Video*, DVD, 1998.

the monster beneath your bed smarter than the tricks played on your heart we'll look at them together then we'll take them apart adding up the total of a love that's true multiply life by the power of two."[21] The backdrop of the song is a weekend road-trip, which sets the metaphorical tone of the relationship as a journey. The road is not easy, made obvious by the beginning of the chorus in which the singer promises to stop the other's crying. The third verse continues relating the bittersweet journey:

> all the shiny little trinkets of temptation (make new friends) something new instead of something old (but keep the old) all you gotta do is scratch beneath the surface (and remember what is gold) and it's fools gold…and now we're talking about a difficult thing and your eyes are getting wet but I took us for better and I took us for worse and don't you ever forget it is the steel bars between me and a promise suddenly bend with ease and the closer I'm bound in love to you the close I am to free[22]

The words here relate the difficulty of being in, and remaining in relationship, particularly amidst all the other temptations and distractions of the 'outside' world. The words allude to marital vows ("for better or worse"). She further plays on the image of a prison, but proclaims that these are not prohibitive bars, but rather, in binding the two of them together, ultimately set her free. The "power" in the title of the song is not, therefore, a coercive or harmful power, but the power of security, love, and freedom.

A later song, "Free in You," from 2004's *All That We Let In*, sets up the contrast between the singer's perspective on her own, and in relationship. The opening verse:

> A hard knock
> A cold clock
> Ticking off my time
> A long look
> But no luck

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[21] "Power of Two", *Swamp Ophelia* lyrics, accessed 9/20/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/swampophelia.html#.

[22] Ibid., Keen listeners might also notice in the echo (the words in parenthesis) the words to the Girl Scouts theme, an interesting added layer.

Couldn't seem to find
Or unwind
Into peace of mind
While I was trying.[23]

As she describes, before she 'found' this relationship, she felt like a wanderer, without peace of mind. The chorus relates the 'after':

And I'm free in you
I've got no worries on my mind
I know what to do
That's to treat you right
And love you kind
Thank you ever on my mind
Love is just like breathing when it's true
And I'm free in you.

Again, here in this song, the 'after' of finding love, and the security of relationship are framed in terms of safety, security, and freedom.

Another theme that runs through the Indigo Girls' songs, which relates to the universal human experience, is the idea of life itself as a journey. This language is also often used in theological and spiritual conversations about one's "spiritual journey", or one's "faith journey," meaning the path we take throughout life towards increased understanding of faith, God, and spirituality. For the Indigo Girls this takes on a spiritual connotation, looking at life as a journey and calling into question the idea of fate, and pondering the idea of a specific destination or goal. One such song is from the 1990 album, *Nomads Indians Saints.* "Watershed" begins with these words:

Thought I knew my mind like the back of my hand
The gold and the rainbow, but nothing panned out as I planned.
They say only milk and honey's gonna make your soul satisfied

[23] "Free In You," accessed 9/20/10. http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Free-In-You-lyrics-Indigo-Girls/5E19D028C0F364B648256E27002BC5A6.

Well I better learn how to swim
'Cause the crossing is chilly and wide.[24]

She explains that she has been taken by surprise at the course her life has taken. The destination here is not as simple as where she ends up as she has grown older. The language she uses alludes to biblical symbols for the Promised Land or Heaven. The milk and honey relates to the promise of God to the Hebrew people in Exodus 3.8: "and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."[25] They are promised that once they reach the Promised Land (which also symbolizes freedom, and power) it will be a land flowing with milk and honey. Further, the "crossing" could allude to the crossing of the Jordan River, which is a significant symbol, first used in Joshua.[26] The image has come to symbolize any major transition, most familiarly in the American slave spiritual, which indicates the final crossing over from this life to eternal life. The title of the song itself indicates a turning point—a watershed moment—a place in time, a place-marker, after which everything seems (or, in fact, *is*) different. She observes the fragility of life: "Twisted guardrail on the highway, broken glass on the cement / A ghost of someone's tragedy," as she observes signs of other lives cut off too soon, which makes her realize: "How recklessly my time has been spent."[27] All this has caused her, in a sense, to realize that this moment—or any moment—could be a moment that changes everything, a watershed in her own life.

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[24] "Watershed" *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics.

[25] Exodus 3.8 NRSV. The phrase is also used in Numbers 16.13, and Ezekiel 20.6

[26] c.f. Joshua 3.1-4.24.

[27] "Watershed" *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics.

The title of the song appears in these lines:

> Up on the watershed, standing at the fork in the road
> You can stand there and agonize
> Till your agony's your heaviest load.
> You'll never fly as the crow flies, get used to a country mile.
> When you're learning to face the path at your pace
> Every choice is worth your while.

These lines seem to spin the 'watershed' symbol on its head, claiming that, in reality, any moment could be a watershed moment; any decision we face could be a life-altering decision. What is significant is living our lives honestly, facing our own path with integrity and intention. She addresses next, the idea of looking back:

> Well there's always retrospect to light a clearer path
> Every five years or so I look back on my life
> And I have a good laugh
> You can start at the top, go full circle round
> Catch a breeze, take a spill
> But ending up where I started again makes me wanna stand still
> …Until every step you take becomes a twist of fate.[28]

Here she wants to reject the notion of regret; obviously, it is easier to see one's own path clearly by looking backwards, but all that is really good for is a "good laugh." The closing line of the song concludes by reiterating the idea that the only 'fate' there is, is the fate we create for ourselves through every decision we make, each one with the potential to create a watershed moment. What becomes most significant is remaining honest to oneself along one's personal path.

Another song from the same album, "World Falls," contains the album's title, *Nomads Indians Saints.* The title connects to their desire, to understand life and death—the ultimates—as explained on *Watershed.* The song is about death, or the fear of the

[28] Ibid.; Interestingly (or anecdotally), on their 2010 live release, *Staring Down the Brilliant Dream*, the words sung change to "every five days or so I look back…"

transition from life to death, which is something Amy explains frightens her the most: "I'm not paranoid about natural disasters…I can't deal with…that split second after you die when your life is leaving your body—I can't deal with that thought. It's not *how* you die; none of that stuff bothers me at all. It's just that split-second thing."[29] In the song she seems paralyzed between the fear of dying and the beauty of living:

> I'm looking for a sacred hand to carve into my stone.
> A ghost of comfort, angel's breath – to keep this life inside my chest.
> This world falls on me with hopes of immortality.
> Everywhere I turn all the beauty just keeps shaking me.
> I woke up in the middle of the dream, scared the world was too much for me.[30]

She is struck by the beauty of living, and yet finds herself preoccupied with the fear of what happens after death. As Amy explains in the documentary, it is not the *way* she will die that frightens her, but the moment when life leaves her body, what happens then, that paralyzes her. There is a sense in these lyrics that life itself seems so beautiful, so vivid, that it overwhelms her. She elaborates further:

> Everywhere I turn all the beauty just keeps shaking me.
> Running – end – earth – swimming – edge – sea – laughing – under – starry sky
> This world was meant for me.
> Don't bury me, carry me.
> I wish I was a nomad, an Indian or a saint.
> The edge of death would disappear, leave me nothing left to taint.
> … This world falls on me with dreams of immortality.

In these lines she relates her wish to not know so much, so that perhaps she would not be so preoccupied with death. She longs for immortality, so that not only would she not fear death, but that she could also continue to enjoy the beauty of the world.

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[29] Lambert, *Watershed: 10 Years of Underground Video*.

[30] "Word Falls," *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics.

One of the Indigo Girls most notable songs, "The Wood Song," comes from *Swamp Ophelia.* Emily describes this "as a kind of Philosophy 101 for myself. Even after all these years, I still think about the words as I sing them and try to live my life by them."[31] "The Wood Song" reflects, much like "Watershed," on life as a journey, with the question of fate, destiny, and conclusive answers at the center: "the thin horizon of a plan is almost clear my friends and I have had a hard time bruising our brains hard up against change."[32] The moment of the song seems to be a frozen moment; life is still, and she is able to look back on her journey. As she reflects, she says, "only the heart that we have for a tool we could use." She realizes that the most important moments and matters of life are those relating to matters of the heart: pain, love, relationship, empathy. The guiding metaphor of the song portrays her and her friends in a boat, which represents their lives together. She describes the boat thusly: "love weighs the hull down with its weight but the wood is tired and the wood is old and we'll make it fine if the weather holds but if the weather holds then we'll have missed the point that's where I need to go." She again echoes the idea discussed above that the most significant and defining parts of life are those lived together and those defined by love, even when it is painful and hard.

As the song continues, we hear a bit more of a spiritual reflection:

> no way construction of this tricky plan was built by other than a greater hand with a love that passes all our understanding watching closely over the journey yeah but what it takes to cross the great divide seems more than all the courage I can muster up inside but we get to have some answers when we reach the other side the prize is always worth the rocky ride.

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[31] "The Wood Song," notes from *Staring Down the Brilliant Dream*, live album released 2010.

[32] "The Wood Song," *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics.

Here she insists that there is some greater power watching over and guiding her journey. We could interpret this to be God. Although she does not name the "greater hand," she attributes it with a "love that passes all our understanding," thereby alluding to Ephesians 3.19 "…the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God," or possibly Philippians 4.7: "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."[33] There is a clear understanding of the divine, informed by Christian scripture.

The song also references the "crossing over," as discussed above, the spiritual symbol for a major transition, often the transition from earthly life to eternal life. The song concludes with reflection on the destination:

> sometimes I ask to sneak a closer look skip to the final chapter of the book and maybe steer us clear from some of the pain that it took to get us where we are this far but the question drowns in its futility and even I have got to laugh at me cause no one gets to miss the storm of what will be just holding on for the ride.[34]

The 'point' then of this journey, of the 'boat ride' is not to know how it will all end, or to even have the ability to know the 'right' answers. Rather, she contradicts that there is any 'right' answer or singular destination. "The Wood Song" reflects the philosophy that life is about the journey, the questions, and the fellow companions, not about getting everything right, or being able to know how it will all end up. However, realizing that the journey guided by incomprehensible love, and the pain that accompanies the love and companionship make it all worthwhile; they are what define the journey, not the destination. This is certainly not a teleological philosophy. Instead of focusing on the

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[33] Both verses NRSV.

[34] "The Wood Song." *Swamp Ophelia* lyrics.

end-goal, the song clearly relates a philosophy that places the journey itself, including pain and hardships, as the most significant.

Two other songs (among many) will serve as further examples to this theme of the Indigo Girls catalog. Another from *Swamp Ophelia,* "Least Complicated" echoes the paradoxical sentiment that often the hardest lessons life teaches are, in retrospect, really the easiest to learn. The song begins as the singer watches from her window and reflects on life: "I sit two stories above the street it's awful quiet here since love fell asleep there's life down below me though the kids are walking home from school some long ago when we were taught that for whatever kind of puzzle you got you just stick the right formula in a solution for every fool…"[35] As she watches children below, she thinks about her former, childlike perspective, when everything seemed quite simple; for every problem, there was a solution. But now she has grown older, and the song also gives us the context that perhaps she has had her heart broken. Her reflection continues in the chorus: "what makes me think I could start clean slated the hardest to learn was the least complicated;" here we get her paradoxical realization, akin to the lyrics of "The Wood Song" (discussed above) or "Closer to Fine" (discussed below), that sometimes what we make out to be the most difficult is, in reality, much simpler, and vice versa.

Elsewhere Saliers has reflected that this song is about her not wanting to be cynical: "I looked down at them, and it looks so easy, and I was just like, you just wait—wait. Because what human beings do is repeat their patterns, oftentimes. . . . And the fact that truly, if we could live our lives so much more simply in principle and not repeat the

[35] "Least Complicated," *Swamp Ophelia* lyrics.

same mistakes, then we'd be happy."[36] Before the final chorus, the song ends with these words: "I'm just a mirror of a mirror of a mirror of myself the things that I do the next time I fall I'm gonna have to recall it isn't love it's only something new."[37] The sentiment here reflects the necessity of relationship with other people in order to have genuine self-understanding. Though these words also speak to the danger in wrapping our self-identity completely up in other people; all the mirrors set up likely leave her confused as to who is the real self. She ends hopeful that she has actually learned from this experience and hopefully will not have to experience the same pain the next time. "Deconstruction," from their 2002 album, *Become You,* recounts a fight between the singer and a lover, and addresses the tricky nature of truth in matters of relationship and love. The fight has had no real closure: "We started a fight that ended in silent confusion."[38] The song goes on to describe what lies at the heart of the anger and hurt:

> We get to decide what we think is no good
> We're sculpted from youth, the chipping away makes me weary
> And as for truth it seems like we just pick a theory
> The one that justifies our daily lives
> And backs us with quiver and arrows
> To protect openings cause when the warring begins
> How quickly the wide open narrows
> Into the smallness of our deconstruction of love.

What the song seems to be saying is that these fights that begin and end in the same place, the all-nighters of arguing and stalemate essentially serve to deconstruct the love that has been built between them. What exactly begins to break down the trust and companionship between them is the individual insistence that truth is nonnegotiable,

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[36] Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls."

[37] Ibid.

[38] "Deconstruction," *Become You* lyrics, accessed 9/20/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/becomeyou.html#.

when really, they "get to decide." The song is a bittersweet warning against this destructive situation, setting up in the importance of realizing that 'truth' is not a bulwark to divide loved ones.

The significance of these types of songs in the Indigo Girls catalog is their witness to the human story. Through these songs, in their narrative, reflection, and assertions, they speak truth to and from human experiences. The Indigo Girls, then, in their music serve as an example of the power of music within the 'secular' or 'popular' culture to offer a voice out of a particular context. This connects to the essential narrative quality of theology, as addressed particularly by McClendon, and the manifold contextual theologies (like Cone, Gutierrez, Solle, etc.). Theological reflection, if it is to be genuine and meaningful tells a story that resonates with lived human experience (the experience of "real people" or "on the ground," as it were), and through the story-telling, resonates with audience members, and in turn communicates something that is *true* in deeply personal and transcendent ways. In the particulars of the stories told in these songs, we find truth spoken to what is common in the universal human experience. They allow for epiphany moments of solidarity and empathy.

In particular, the Indigo Girls' songs of this nature, like many of the songs from Over the Rhine already discussed, ask questions about things that matter in the day-to-day human life: what is love?, what is a real and honest relationship?, why do we suffer?, what is true and honest?, how do we deal with pain and heartbreak?; the songs themselves may not *answer* these questions, but offer a witness to these questions, and it is in offering a sense of solidarity with the human family, that their music is theological—both in content and in its reflection on human life. Regarding this quality of

theological reflection in their music, Saliers comments for both her and Ray, "music has compelled both of us to face the truth of how we feel when perhaps we would rather not. Music has exposed our wounds, named our losses, and made us cry. Yet we have also been consoled, comforted, and healed by song."[39] The power of music to serve as an avenue to name truth, wounds, pain, and struggle, and its consonant ability to be a salve for those wounds is deeply theological and spiritual.

Even if their music does not name "God,", or even if in their songs they do not address explicit theological concepts, (although much of it does both these things), the sum of the emotions, struggles, and reflections expressed through their music remains theological, as Saliers concludes: "We want to consider the songlines of human life as pathways along which we human beings find ourselves searching for God."[40]

To conclude this section, I will explore the song that is perhaps the definitive Indigo Girls' song, if for no other reason than it is their best-known song. "Closer to Fine," is the opening track on their 1989 self-titled album. The song is set up as a conversation, and begins with the singer saying to another:

> I'm trying to tell you something about my life
> Maybe give me insight between black and white
> The best thing you've ever done for me
> Is to help me take my life less seriously, it's only life after all.[41]

The rest of the lyrics follow this sentiment of learning how to best approach life, moving from a dogmatic black-and-white perspective to something more nuanced. The lines that

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[39] Saliers and Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live*, 116.

[40] Ibid.

[41] "Closer to Fine," *Indigo Girls* lyrics.

follow speak to taking risk and moving beyond fear, perhaps reminiscent of "The Wood Song":

> Well darkness has a hunger that's insatiable
> And lightness has a call that's hard to hear
> I wrap my fear around me like a blanket
> I sailed my ship of safety till I sank it, I'm crawling on your shore.

The lyrics here communicate a sense of the necessity of risk, and the futility of seeking safety by maintaining a grip on one's fears ("like a blanket"). The revelation comes through the chorus (and perhaps some of the best-known lyrics in the entirety of the Indigo Girls catalog):

> I went to the doctor, I went to the mountains
> I looked to the children, I drank from the fountain
> There's more than one answer to these questions
> pointing me in a crooked line
> The less I seek my source for some definitive
> The closer I am to fine.

Here the song's message is clear, speaking to the fruitless search for ultimate or conclusive truth; instead we ought to be satisfied with the questions, and the variety of answers to questions. Saliers remarked on the significance of this song for their catalog:

> ["Closer to Fine"] is about not being yourself up too hard to get your answer from one place. There's no panacea, that in order to be balanced or feel closer to fine it's okay to draw from this or to draw from that, to draw from a bunch of different sources. So it's about being confused but looking for the answers, and in the end knowing that you're going to be fine. No[t] seeking just one definitive answer.[42]

The song also maintains an implicit critique of ways we attempt to acquire knowledge and answers that may not actually help us arrive at any more secure place:

> I went to see the doctor of philosophy
> With a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee
> He never did marry or see a B-grade movie
> He graded my performance, he said he could see through me

[42] Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls."

> I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind, got my paper
> And I was free.

This verse implies that four years of formal, higher education cannot (or did not) teach her everything she hoped to learn, and her self-worth cannot be wrapped up in the grades given to her by someone who perhaps has not actually experienced *living*—a critique implied in her words: "He never did marry or see a B-grade movie." The third verse offers another critique in contrast to the second verse:

> I stopped by the bar at 3 a.m.
> To seek solace in a bottle or possibly a friend
> I woke up with a headache like my head against a board
> Twice as cloudy as I'd been the night before
> I went in seeking clarity.

This verse offers a comment on the similar futility of "drinking away" one's problems, or otherwise trying to find solidarity or clarity. The chorus repeats three times, the final chorus changes the words to:

> We go to the Bible, we go through the workout
> We read up on revival and we stand up for the lookout
> There's more than one answer to these questions
> pointing me in a crooked line…

These lines manifest the religious implications most clearly, offering an argument against trying to read any singular, irrefutable interpretation out of any one source. Though those sources can be viewed as authoritative in varying degrees, the song ultimately disputes any notion that any source is authoritative in the *exact same* way for all interpreters and seekers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Indigo Girls—Part II
"Through our activism we embrace the sacredness of life": The Theological and Prophetic Vision of the Indigo Girls

Activism & Prophetic Witness

Perhaps the most defining aspect of the Indigo Girls' career (outside of their music, of course) is their activism. Amy Ray and Emily Saliers have taken initiative in working towards various causes defined by their ideals of justice and equality. An overwhelming portion of correspondence to those on their fan email list encourages their audience to join them in these causes. Both Ray and Saliers are openly homosexual; though they do not wear their sexual identity on their sleeve, as it were, gay rights and sexual equality have (not surprisingly) been issues about which they have remained quite vocal. They have not only been involved with issues that affect them personally, however; they have additionally loaned their efforts toward working on issues related to the environment, peace and nonviolence, and indigenous peoples. Particularly during George W. Bush's two terms as president, they expressed concern regarding the war in Iraq, and worked towards peace. All of their activism ultimately relates to their understanding of justice and equality, rooted in both Ray and Saliers' clear views on social justice, mercy, and peacekeeping and peacemaking. This activism manifests in their music, their own personal endeavors to get fans involved, as well as their personal activity while "off duty," so to speak.

For both Ray and Saliers their activist work is *at least as* important to them and defining as their identity as folk-rock songwriters. While they have certainly gained a

larger audience and platform from which to speak on behalf of their causes *because* they are musicians, they have a difficult time dividing between the two in terms of their calling—their most important work, or most significant contribution. In one interview, Saliers said, "Our music and activist work are married. We've used our music and shows to provide education and information and if people are interested in it and want to take part, that's great."[1] Ray has remarked: "I'm torn between being most proud of our social justice work or most proud of our music."[2]

Although not every issue on behalf of which they work may personally affect them, they feel intimately involved and invested in all parts of their work. This personal investment derives from a deeply-ingrained sense of solidarity and community across cultures, ages, and demographics. As Saliers remarks, "Just because you're not from someone's neighborhood doesn't mean that you can't empathize and relate to their issues, make the connections to your own issues, and to national and international issues, and try to be part of the change." This sense of empathy and solidarity is something they hope to pass along to their fans, or beyond that, they believe their fans expect from them: "[O]ur fans obviously know that we're activists, they know we have this long history of marrying our music with our activism, so they expect it from us."[3]

Their audience certainly has grown to expect and appreciate activism and advocacy as part of the Indigo Girls 'experience'—their website contains links for organizations including the Carter Center (human rights), WITNESS (human rights),

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[1] Emily Saliers and Amy Ray, "Interview: Indigo Girls," interview by Michael Hubbard, online, March 2002, http://www.musicomh.com/music/features/indigo-girls-2.htm.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Emily Saliers, "Let it Be Me: An interview with the Indigo Girls' Emily Saliers," interview by Kathryn Schulz, online, April 8, 2003, http://www.grist.org/article/let/.

Honor the Earth (Native environmental issues), Native Wind (welfare of indigenous people), National Youth Advocacy Coalition (young people who are part of the LGBTQ community), National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Democracy Now (independent media), Riot Grrrl Ink (independent queer female record label), as well as an entire section of the website devoted to their more concentrated advocacy work, with sub-sections devoted to Gulf Coast/Hurricane Katrina recovery, Honor the Earth, and an archive of previous activist "alerts" and resources.[4]

The Indigo Girls have grown to expect something in return from their audience and fan-base. They release frequent appeals to join them in their causes, sometimes through basic education about different issues, sometimes implorations to contact senators and representatives regarding other political issues. During campaign years they encourage fans to register to vote: "We hope you will get involved in your communities—educating yourself, getting out the vote, and heading to the polls on November 4 [2008]."[5] Additionally, they will work with organizations to have booths at their concerts to help register audience members who might not be registered to vote. They have also brought their activism on tour with them, asking their ticket-holders to contribute in addition to enjoying their live shows. On one recent tour, they sponsored a food drive at each concert, partnering with Rock for a Remedy and local food banks to provide food in the communities. Animal rights and wellbeing are also important to both Saliers and Ray, so in addition to the food drive, they worked "with animal rescue groups

[4] www.indigogirls.com/home (embedded sections under the headings "Activsim" and "Links"), accessed 12/11/10.

[5] "Correspondence: 2008-05-20: Election 2008," accessed 9/20/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2008/2008-05-20.html.

and pet food banks to organize a collection of pet food at concerts. . . . We believe everyone's bowl should be full!"[6]

By most accounts, this piece of their activism—involving fans and concert attendees—is quite successful; Ray wrote amidst the 2009 tour: "The food drive is gaining momentum and at this point we have collected nearly 2 tons of food plus financial donations to distribute an additional 28 tons more. You are really all doing your part."[7] In almost every piece of correspondence emailed from either Emily or Amy (or both), they include a line of conviction and encouragement, entreating listeners to also work towards common goals of peace, justice, and equality. For example, a line from a letter from Amy Ray: "I am wishing you luck out there and hoping you feel up to an engagement with the world. We need you right now."[8] While they are aware of the greater presence their higher-profile affords them, they believe that everyone has something to contribute, and ought to contribute in order to change the world. As this section moves forward to more specific issues, examples will be given from interviews, and writings, and then examples from the Indigo Girls' musical catalog will buttress the discussion of the particular avenues of activism.

As stated above, both Ray and Saliers are openly homosexual, and therefore issues surrounding sexuality have been a part of their rhetoric throughout their career. Their discussion of issues surrounding sexuality extends into politics, the music business,

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[6] "Note from Emily and Amy March 24, 2009," accessed 9/21/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2009/2009-03-24-ea.html.

[7] "Note from Amy May 29, 2009," accessed 9/21/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2009/2009-05-29-a.html.

[8] "A Letter From Amy Ray April 8, 2003," accessed 9/21/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2003/2003-04-08.html.

and gender issues in general. Because they are also women, issues of sexism are also wrapped up in their addressing sexuality and gender. When asked in interviews, Ray and Saliers both express a thorough and longtime confidence in their identities as homosexual. They were both fortunate to have accepting communities of friends and family. Saliers relates that she was briefly, and personally fearful of homosexuality: "just before I started to discover that I thought I might be gay, I was very homophobic. I remember thinking, 'ugh, homosexuality, that's perverse; I don't know anybody who does that…' I didn't know what it was so I didn't know how to react." However, as she describes her own coming out, once she 'realized' she was gay, she never really had any internal struggle with it: "I never felt bad about it; I never felt like this is wrong or I'm going to fight this, I just realized what it was, finally."[9] She relates that her family (perhaps to the surprise of many interviewers, considering her father is a Methodist minister, and she grew up going to church), has always been completely supportive. Saliers has also been asked if her Christian background and spirituality has caused her conflict with her sexuality, to which she responds:

> I have never had a spiritual struggle with being gay. I think those that do suffer from years and years of spiritual misinterpretation, and that God created us to love each other. When two people love each other consensually and with respect, it doesn't matter if they are of the same sex. In time, the evolution of gay rights…will make us look back and wonder why there was such hatred and homophobia.[10]

She repeated this sentiment in an interview with the *Huffington Post*: "It's a schizophrenic feeling to be involved in church life and then feel that there are so many

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[9] Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, "INDIGO GIRLS: An interview with Amy Ray and Emily Saliers," interview by Linda Wolf et al., online, 2004, http://www.teentalkingcircles.org/8_interviews/indigoGirls.htm.

[10] "2000-12-19: Emily's Answers To Site Visitors Questions," accessed 9/21/20. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2000/2000-12-19-e.html.

people that stand against you. Personally, I've never had an issue with my sexuality and my faith. I felt like I was born to be who I am and I never had issues."[11]

Several of their songs incorporate issues related to sexuality, gay rights, and gender issues. "Philosophy of Loss," from *Come on Now Social,* takes head-on the issue of homosexuality and the Christian church. Emily remarks that the song addresses: "how the church deals with gays and so on," stating that the issues are "political, but they're also very personal to me, and that comes out in the song."[12] The lyrics waste no words to get to the heart of the matter, explaining:

> Welcome to why the church has died
> In the hearts of the exiled in the kingdom of hate
> Who owns the land & keeps the commands
> And marries itself to the state
> Modern scribes write in Jesus Christ:
> 'Everyone is free.'[13]

Throughout the Bible the theme of exile emerges to identify God's people—sometimes the people were placed into exile by enemies of God, against God's will, other times scripture depicts the exile as part of God's punishment for injustice, oppression or other evildoing. In "Philosophy of Loss," exile is used to separate the singers from those religious voices; in a sense the religious elite, the church, has placed them in exile. The kingdom here is not the Kingdom of God (as is the common language in the Bible to explain God's kingdom of peace, justice, and goodness), but the kingdom of hate. The song continues to explain the experience of the exiled:

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[11] Emily Saliers, "An Interview with the Indigo Girls' Emily Saliers," interview by Marissa Moss, online, March 31, 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marissa-moss/an-interview-with-the-ind_b_180772.html.

[12] Saliers, "Let it Be Me: An interview with the Indigo Girls' Emily Saliers."

[13] "Philosophy of Loss," *Come On Now Social* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/comeonnowsocial.html#.

> Everyone is free
> And the doors open wide to all straight men & women
> But they are not open to me
> And who is teaching kids to be soldiers
> To be marked by a plain white cross
> And we kill just a little to save a lot more.

Here the song includes a critique of a church that has institutionalized anti-homosexuality, and violence, and by setting them up in the same critique marries them as part of the same system of sin. It also surmises that a significant piece of the problem is the "marriage" of the church to the state, systems in which the state has granted political power to the church, which they apply to the American context. The critique about political abuse of power continues:

> And don't think that our hands haven't shoveled the dirt
> Over their central American graveyards
> Doctors & witch hunters stripped you bare
> Left you nothing for your earthly sins
> Yeah but who made this noise just a bunch of boys
> And the one with the most toys wins.

They continue to ask the question "who is teaching kids to…", suggesting that all these unjust practices and systems are taught, not a 'given,' and therefore the kids must also be taught otherwise. They insist that "There are a few who would be true out of love / And love is hard." What will manifest as central to the Indigo Girls' theology is the centrality of love, and often when systems and structures deserve critique it is because love as a driving force is missing. The song ends with a glimmer of hope, asking: "Who is teaching kids to be leaders / and the way that it is meant to be."

Ray came to terms with her own sexuality much the same way Saliers did; she faced no major personal struggle or conflict with her closest friends and family. However, the external struggles of members of the greater homosexual community, as

well as political and social struggles for equality have given them a personal stake in the matter. One of the initial ways this became a personal struggle for the two was in their musical career. Both Ray and Saliers have been 'out' since the genesis of their musical career, and their sexuality certainly played a role in the perceived validity of their songwriting. In large part, being part of a music community gave them a greater sense of identity; Ray relates that after she moved back to Atlanta to attend Emory, "I…found a music scene….It was a scene I could be a part of. I met a lot of older women—not all of them were gay, but they were strong women. Music became my whole identity—not my sexuality."[14] However, as a band, they certainly faced significant critique and prejudice because their sexuality placed them outside the mainstream. They have remarked consistently about the difficulty for women in general in the music business, and that is significantly magnified if the female's sexuality is also seen as contradicting the 'norm.'

The Indigo Girls participated as one of the headlining acts during the initial iteration of Lilith Fair (1997-1999), a touring music festival founded by Sarah McLachlan as "a celebration of women in music."[15] The Indigo Girls saw their participation in this summer event as vital because they believed in the importance of recognizing "women's growing role and visibility in the music business."[16] Although Lilith Fair remains "one of the highest grossing touring festivals in the world," Emily recalls "there were naysayers, and, you know, there is no way women can sell this many tickets. There was a lot of sexism in the industry at the time. Lilith held this joyous 'yes

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[14] Amy Ray, "Rockin' Out Interview: Indigo Girls' Amy Ray," interview by Jessica Robertson, online, June 11, 2007, http://www.spinner.com/2007/06/11/rockin-out-interview-indigo-girls-amy-ray/.

[15] "About Lilith Fair," accessed 12/11/10. http://www.lilithfair.com/content/about.

[16] "1999: Come On Now Social Biography," accessed 9/16/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/1999/bio.html.

we can' feeling and it was a great tour."[17] Not only have they had to fight discrimination in the music industry as females, but they have had amplified detractions because they are women and gay.

Relatively recently in her career Ray wrote a response to an August 18, 2002, piece in the *New York Times Magazine,* in which she reflected "It's never really a good time in the mainstream music industry to be a queer girl with a guitar. I can look at the trajectory of my own career and see that the more political the Indigo Girls have become, the less radio play and press we have received." She continues with, "Being a woman, being a gay woman is socially very different from being a straight man. There has been a need for people of second or third class social statuses to create separate spaces for community and expression."[18] The original article claims that lesbians limit "the growth of folk music, [and] are also damning it with mediocrity," to which Ray responds, "gay musicians suffer more, because as far as the mainstream rock media is concerned, our image is our handicap."[19] She continues to levy her critique, largely aimed at media saying,

> Maybe the movement for acceptance is making some progress on the street level, but it's not being reflected by the media. We are still distilled down to the demographic of our audience and the particulars of our sex lives. Our music is not written about positively or for the inherent worth of the music, our progress as songwriters is never noted, and we just aren't taken seriously as artists.[20]

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[17] Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, "Brilliant Dreams: Conversations with the Indigo Girls and Sugarland's Kristian Bush," interview by Mike Ragogna, online, July 29, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-ragogna/embrilliant-dreamsem-conv_b_663241.html.

[18] Amy Ray, "2002-09-12: "Queer And Fucked" in response to "Queer as Folk," by David Hadju, New York Times magazine, 8/18/02," accessed 9/16/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2002/2002-09-12-a.html.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

A bit of an overstatement, considering the Indigo Girls are considerably popular, however, these thoughts from Ray give insight into the felt-struggles she and Saliers have faced throughout their musical career because of both their gender and their sexuality.

Several of their songs take these issues on directly, others include passing references to sexuality and gender as the hot-button political and social issue that it is. Two examples of songs that address issues of gender and sexism include "Pendulum Swinger" (from 2006's *Despite Our Differences*) and "Virginia Woolf" (from 1992's *Rites of Passage*). "Virginia Woolf" subtly takes on the idea of gender, primarily in terms of the struggle of a female artist. The song tells the story of the singer reading the writings of Virginia Woolf, obviously more than a century later, and feeling an intimate connection to the author, perhaps best known for her work *A Room of One's Own* (to which the song refers in the lines: "they published your diary and that's how I got to know you a key to the room of your own and a mind without end"[21]), which contains the line, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."[22] By reading Woolf's words, the singer feels she has, in some sense, gained her own salvation: "here's a young girl on a kind of telephone line through time the voice at the other end comes like a long-lost friend so I know I'm alright my life will come my life will go still I feel it's alright I just got a letter to my soul…you say each life has its place."[23] Woolf, a prolific author, struggled with her own identity as a female writer and with mental illness, until she ended her own life at the age of 59. The singer finds through Woolf's writing a

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[21] "Virginia Woolf," *Rites of Passage* lyrics, accessed 9/16/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/ritesofpassage.html#.

[22] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991), 2.

[23] "Virginia Woolf," lyrics.

sense of solidarity and companionship. She sings to Woolf: "but if you need to know that you weathered the storm of cruel mortality a hundred years later I'm sitting here living proof," assuring the dead writer that her life, though tortured, served a greater good, even if through the life of this one reader.

As the song continues, she reflects on this author-reader relationship: "so it was for you when the river eclipsed your life but sent your soul like a message in a bottle to me and it was my rebirth so we know it's alright life will come and life will go still we know it's alright…" Though the song does not address gender inequality or sexism specifically, by relating to the life and work of a female author who struggled with similar issues of gender identity as an artist, the song speaks to the need for community, for shared understanding, and possibility of transformation in realizing the truth that stretches across centuries about human experience, rejecting the despair of the former woman.

The song "Pendulum Swinger," on the other hand, takes on sexism directly, as an institutional manifestation of inequality. While the song is primarily about sexism, it also addresses "what the Girls view as President Bush's wrongheaded approach to the war on terrorism."[24] The song is a conversation between two friends. The singer has met a friend for coffee, and she is frustrated: "I got a bad case I can't shake off of me," and has sought out this friend for some counsel, or perhaps hope:

> You work in the system
> You see possibilities and your glistening
> Eyes show the hell you're gonna give 'em
> When they back off the mic for once and give it to a woman.[25]

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[24] "Biography - Despite Our Differences," http://indigogirls.com/biography.html.

[25] "Pendulum Swinger," lyrics, accessed 9/16/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/pendulumswinger.html.

The singer perhaps seems confounded because she observes the world and is left with "the fevered walking round wondering how it ought to be," and yet her friend who is part of the "system" (Emily relates later that this is a true story and the friend is a clergy member[26]), seems to remain hopeful and full of possibilities. This friend believes in a future when women will have the opportunity to speak from a position of power as part of the "system." The song levels a direct critique of religion as it relates to (or has neglected to do so, as it were) to women in the verse:

> It's fine about the old scroll Sanskrit
> Gnostic gospels *The Da Vinci Code* a smash hit
> Aren't we dying just to read it and relate
> Too hard just to go by a blind faith
> But they left out the sisters
> Praying to a father god so long I really missed her
> The goddess of benevolence
> You should listen to your mama if you have a lick of sense left
> Pushed under by the main press, buried under a code of dress
> Relegated by the Vatican
> But you can't keep a spirit down that wants to get up again.[27]

The song here critiques institutional religion (in the initial reference to Sanskrit), but most specifically Christianity, naming Roman Catholicism, for leaving out women's voices and glossing over women's experiences. Saliers explains the feeling behind the lyrics: "[The song] takes on the patriarchy in the church, and the squelching of women's voices in power within organized religion. . . . The language of organized religion so often is so male-oriented, the male pronouns, …and it's all male, male, male. So part of that song is about I miss the goddess. I miss the balance of female/male spirits both together."[28] The symbol of the pendulum swinger functions as an emblem of hope that the patterns,

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[26] Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls."

[27] "Pendulum Swinger".

[28] Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls."

systems, and powerful will shift and swing back in another direction; for the purposes of the imagination at play in this song women are the ones who will swing the pendulum back, undoing and redeeming injustices and inequalities: "The epicenter of love is the pendulum swinger / She is she is she is."[29]

Because the song addresses inequalities, particularly at the hands of institutions and systems, it also addresses political power and control. The album was released in 2006; the song was likely penned during or shortly after George W. Bush's re-election, and several years into both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The song, then, as Saliers explains, is also "about the Bush Administration and his macho posturing and the bull-whip and the gunslingers and all that, like hawks, war hawks." The song, as much as it is about women and religion, becomes about much more than that, shifting focus to institutionalized violence, control, and the improper uses of such power. This is illustrated by the following verse:

> What we get from your war walk
> Ticker of the nation breaking down like a bad clock
> I want the pendulum to swing again
> So that all your mighty mandate was just spiting in the wind
> It doesn't come by the bullwhip
> It's not persuaded with the hands on your hips
> Not the company of gunslingers.

This song links institutionalized violence and systems of sexism as parts of an unjust whole that requires the swing of the metaphorical pendulum. This swing depends on what, for Saliers, is summed up simply as love: "And my belief is that we have to come from a place of love in order to heal the world. So in order for the pendulum to swing back the other way, away from war and violence and death and desecration, is to come

[29] "Pendulum Swinger".

from a place of love."[30] Hence, the crux of the song, which proclaims, "the epicenter of love is the pendulum swinger." She emphasizes this idea in reflecting on the political overtones of the song: "you're not gonna win this with a bullwhip or posing with your hands on your hips like Mr. Tough-Guy President. The only way to stop this madness is through love. That's a simple sentiment, but I believe it at my core."[31]

Saliers' and Ray's deep conviction about the power and necessity for a life well-lived, and for genuine social and/or political change also drives much of the content in their songs related to sexuality and gay rights. As Saliers says in the above quotes, love is what is missing in public discourse, domestic and international policy, in addition to mundane human interaction, and love is the only thing that will genuinely change things. Another song from *Despite Our Differences,* "I Believe in Love" is "a gorgeous folk-soul lullaby, proves the point with its message of tolerance and the necessity of understanding 'despite our differences.'"[32] The song itself is a love song, proclaiming, "I still believe despite our differences that what we have's enough / And I believe in you and I believe in love."[33] The song itself is general, and does not address particulars about what constitutes an 'appropriate' relationship, in terms of gender, but rather offers a testament to struggle in relationship, and the commitment to remaining with someone because of love, and despite the reality that someone could get hurt:

> So we went rolling on down through the years
> Taking time off we could steal

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[30] Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls."

[31] "Biography - Despite Our Differences."

[32] Ibid.

[33] "I Believe in Love," lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/ibelieveinlove.html.

Until the thief of things unreconciled
Stuck its stick into the wheel
Now we're tumbling in a freefall
No one's gonna go unscathed.

However, the song is about more than love; the title of the album, *Despite Our Differences,* comes from the chorus of the song, and represents a depth of love that transcends one-on-one relationship. The line of the song is meant to illustrate: "in a global context how we can, despite our differences as peoples, or cultures, or countries, or whatever it is, we can co-exist without destroying each other. So that's the hope and that's the belief."[34] Therefore, although the song does not explicitly address sexuality or gay rights, I place it at this point in the conversation because of the interpretation of love, and the power of love to transcend differences, from as local as between two people, to global, cultural differences.

Another song from the same album addresses, still somewhat abstractly, the difficulties persons not obviously in the 'mainstream' face in the music industry. "Rock and Roll Heaven's Gate" begins with the proclamation: "no one wants to hear the truth, / coming from three political queers / Plucking the punk rock bloom."[35] As discussed above, the Indigo Girls have felt a significant pushback from the mainstream music industry because they do not fit into a neat 'market-friendly' category. This song speaks to that experience, and the subsequent freedom they have felt by actually not fitting into expectations of the media or the mangers: "Free to be a loser / … / Free to be a trend / …

[34] Saliers, "Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls."

[35] "Rock and Roll Heaven's Gate," lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/rockandrollheavensgate.html. The 'three' includes Ray and Saliers, and singer Pink, who collaborated with them for this song.

/ Free to be a backlash over and over again." Even though they have felt discrimination and even neglect because of their image, they have remained free from conformity. The song also speaks to potential audiences who have been numbed or dumbed-down by the conformity of the mainstream, Top-40 music industry; they perhaps speak for these audiences with the lines: "You say, 'I'm losing inspiration, / one band at a time. / I gotta know there's someone, somewhere, out there singing for our side." Again, even though they do not explicitly name "our side," we can connect the dots to understand this as being artists outside the industry's standards of conformity, and for the Indigo Girls relates directly to their sexuality. They further address this struggle in the lines:

> So here's to your survival
> and swimming up the stream,
> crossing over one dam after another
> until we get to Rock and Roll Heaven's gate.

Using the biblical eschatological symbol of "crossing over" there is an element of hope that there will be an eventual shift in the landscape, even if it is in the metaphorical 'afterlife' (applying the symbol here to their music careers and the music industry).

A third song from *Despite Our Differences,* "They Won't Have Me," relates the existential feeling of isolation resulting from being 'different.' The song begins with the line: "They won't have me, but I love this place."[36] There is a sense of simultaneously being at home and being alienated from where (or what) one belongs. The chorus sings: "All this love to offer, all this love to waste," which could be interpreted from the perspective of the Indigo Girls' sexual identity, and being *able* to love, but not being *allowed* to love, in political and social contexts and systems that explicitly or implicitly

[36] "They Won't Have Me," lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/theywonthaveme.html.

outlaw and alienate homosexuality. Though the song is implicit in all of this, perhaps the clearest hint we have to what is meant is in the lines: "Now you know what divides us / Is just a difference someone made / Some got tired of trying, some were just too scared to stay." Here the theme of 'difference' of the album emerges, which could likely be interpreted again to have sexuality at its core, claiming that sexual identity is really a man-made division. It is a rather melancholy song, somewhat lacking in the hope of previous songs, but still centered on love as the most crucial thing, "despite our differences."

One of their earlier songs, "Trouble," from the 1999 album *Come on Now Social,* offers of the most explicit examples of songs addressing sexuality. The song begins addressing all forms of 'trouble', putting it in the geographic context particular to the Indigo Girls: "Trouble came around here / Here in the South we fix it something to eat."[37] The song then delves into different forms of 'trouble', using the words "strangers" and "aliens" to set up the context that follows, thus linking 'trouble' with things that do not belong, or perhaps people that do not 'fit'. We then hear a combination of images that fit, for the Indigo Girls, into this understanding of 'trouble':

> …who would take out the Dominican Republic
> And send God's sweet children floating down a poison stream
> Secret society of conference rooms
> I pledge my allegiance to the dollar
> And when the clergy take a vote all the gays will pay again
> Cause there's more than one kind of criminal white collar.

Here they have set up critiques of the trouble they observe by turning others' rhetoric around to perhaps illustrate its illegitimacy or illogical nature. The song wonders how God could be blamed for natural disasters (as, perhaps, we heard following the 2005

[37] "Trouble," *Come On Now Social* lyrics.

Hurricane Katrina or the 2010 earthquake in Haiti); and they also critique industries that potentially poison water that flows into poor populations ("poison stream"). These lines also include an implicit critique of capitalist consumer culture, in which we pledge allegiance, not to the American flag, but "to the dollar."

Finally, the song offers an explicit critique of anti-gay discrimination by saying that clergy vote on definitions of sin, suggesting that homosexuality is not necessarily antithetical to religion, but that result from decisions by those in power. They go on to imagine a future in which some of this 'trouble' will be resolved: "One day the war will stop & we'll grow a peaceful crop / And a girl can get a wife & we can bring you back to life / … / And maybe we'll take a walk on Pluto." However we get the sense that the heart of the problem will not be resolved, as they claim we will "be no closer to the understanding." Even if the trouble is gone, that does not solve the central problems of misunderstanding and lack of communication. The song does take head-on the issue of homosexuality, and clearly illustrates that is a source of 'trouble' in our society, but perhaps not for the reasons many think, in fact it is trouble *because* of the perspective that there is a reason for "gays [to] pay again."

On their 2009 full-length, *Poseidon and the Bitter Bug,* the song "Love of Our Lives," offers a message of hope and solidarity, again with love at the center of the message of transformation. The title emerges in the chorus, which sings "We've been fighting for the love of our lives."[38] The song mainly addresses the repeating theme of the Indigo Girls' music of the persistence of life, in spite of struggle, difference, or

[38] "Love of Our Lives," lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/loveofourlives.html. The song shifts to first-person singular in the second instance.

potential pain: "All around us things come apart. / Broken pieces. Broken hearts, / Fix me, oil me, match me with the next best thing." It relates to the desperation one feels at the prospect of losing the person one loves: "I beg you don't go. / … / I try to outthink you with an army of words, / I strategize / I am fighting for the love of my life."

We do get a sense that there is something deeper at work in the struggle of the song, perhaps a more abstract principle, hinted at in the lines: "Person to person, nation to nation / Heels dug in no communication. / While the time speaks of weathering." These lines give heed to a more universal struggle, one that must be worn down along the test of time. Saliers has remarked, as quoted above, and I will reprint here: "In time, the evolution of gay rights, for lack of a better term, will make us look back and wonder why there was such hatred and homophobia. But I sincerely doubt we will get to that point of understanding during my lifetime."[39] She repeats this sentiment later, around the time the album came out, following the defeat of California's Proposition 8:[40] "Prop 8 was a huge disappointment, a huge setback. I still can't believe how car behind we are in the evolution of human rights in terms of gay people."[41] With this perspective in the background of our hearing this song, it adds greater purpose and meaning to the words "fighting for the love of our lives." Additionally, the plural pronoun communicates a collective endeavor or struggle for collective rights or freedom to love. This collective

[39] "2000-12-19: Emily's Answers To Site Visitors Questions."

[40] Proposition 8, which was a piece of legislation defeated in the November 2008 elections in California. If it had passed, it would have amended California's constitution to allow gay marriages.

[41] Saliers, "An Interview with the Indigo Girls' Emily Saliers."

persistence is demonstrated in the closing lines: "After trying more, the hopeful ones still try. / How can we help it / When we're fighting for the love of our lives?"[42]

One of the primary issues Ray and Saliers have taken upon themselves that, on the surface, does not appear to affect them directly is environmentalism and energy policy, particularly as it relates to native and indigenous people's rights. Indeed, they have expressed a great deal of concern, in writing and in song, about both environmental causes and indigenous people. They helped found and have continued to work intimately with Honor the Earth, a native-led organization. Since 1993, Honor the Earth has addressed "the two primary needs of the Native environmental movement: the need to break the geographic and political isolation of Native communities and the need to increase financial resources for organizing and change."[43] The band has toured in support of this organization, and continues to inform their fans through email correspondence and website postings. The work with Honor the Earth is intimately related to their wider environmental concerns:

> It's a very hard time for environmental activism, but I trust our audience sees the connections. We have to move away from our dependence on non-renewable energy resources. The current energy paradigm seems to demand a military dominance over the world. . . . The laws we have set up to protect the earth and to protect our communities are being gutted by the Bush Administration. . . . But our good intentions certainly do have an agenda and that agenda is oil. . . . We have abandoned the world community.[44]

Though the issue of environmentalism, as it relates to native peoples, does not seem to directly affect either Ray or Saliers, Saliers has remarked on how the matter truly does feel personal: "It's hard to separate them [different issues]. . . . I'm reading about these

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[42] "Love of Our Lives," lyrics.

[43] "About Us | Honor the Earth," http://www.honorearth.org/about-us.

[44] "A Letter From Amy Ray April 8, 2003."

native communities and about personal lives and ways of life that are being so negatively impacted. It feels just as personal to me as anything else in my life. So I think our environmentalism with respect to native activism is probably our primary focus."[45] In addition to advocacy and education work through Honor the Earth, they have taken initiative in their career to affect environmental change: "We run our bus on biodiesel and we have all kinds of things on the rider specifying environmentally friendly products and requirements, we recycle everything locally, we do everything we can to make it as green a tour as possible."[46] Their environmental concern is, of course, not limited to its relation to indigenous peoples. They express concern about potential global oil crises, particularly in light of the recent oil spill in the Gulf Coast. In June 2010, before the oil spill, which lasted for three months, was finally contained, Emily wrote: "As oil spews into the Gulf of Mexico, in the worst fossil-fueled environmental disaster of our nation's history, we are experiencing a stain on our collective souls. Our fossil fuel-run energy paradigm is not sustainable, and we are literally killing ourselves over it."[47] Both Saliers and Ray clearly feel a moral responsibility for environmental issues and issues related to solidarity with and freedom for indigenous people groups. They have found their niche in the intersection between these two concerns.

The way these issues emerge in their songs, however, is often not in a clear overlap. There are examples of songs from their catalog that utilize nature-imagery as guiding metaphors, some of which have already been discussed ("World Falls", "The

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[45] Saliers, "Let it Be Me: An interview with the Indigo Girls' Emily Saliers."

[46] Saliers, "An Interview with the Indigo Girls' Emily Saliers."

[47] "Note from Emily June 16, 2010," accessed 9/16/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2010/2010-06-16-e.html.

Wood Song"). Their songs often blend the natural world with whatever else is operative in the lyrics. Other songs focus on the natural environment, in a sense romanticizing it, like the short and percussion-driven, "Bitterroot," from 2002's *Become You.* Likely using the national park in southwestern Montana of the same name as the backdrop, the song repeats the lines:

> Tonight I'll be sleeping on the mountain top,
> I've got a billion stars for my witness
> In the morning I'll go down and the sun comes up,
> I'll take a drink from the Bitter Root River.[48]

In between this chorus are call-and-answer phrases. The first asks: "Have you been lonely?" with the answer, "Yes I've been lonely." And the initial voice responds: "I've been lonely too." The second time the word "travelin'" replaces with word "lonely." Given the opening lines that repeat throughout the song, we are not given an indication that the singer is accompanied by another person. This song seems to be a song about communing with nature, and finding solace and solidarity with the mountain, stars, sun and river.

"Southland in the Springtime," from 1990's *Nomads Indians Saints,* offers a similar love song to the natural world, this time in the Indigo Girls' home context of the South. In *Watershed,* Emily talks about writing this song, after their first major label album. Following months on tour, away from home, and living out of suitcases, buses, and to-go meals, her response, which often happens for musicians after their first period of intensive recording and touring, was to write about the longing for home. This song reflects that longing for home in the environment of a Southern Spring: "there's

[48] "Bitterroot" *Become You* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/becomeyou.html#.

something 'bout the Southland in the springtime / Where the waters flow with confidence and reason."[49] The images of the southland that she longs for center on the scents and sounds, not least of which include the natural surroundings:

> In Georgia nights are softer than a whisper …
> With the farmland like a tapestry passed down through generations
> And the peach trees stitched across the land …
> And the smoke from the chimneys meets its maker in the sky
> With a song that winter wrote whose melody lingers.

The homesick theme of the song does include people and food, like "cider" and "boiled peanuts," but the song remains primarily a love-song to a favorite season in the South, marked by images of landscape and natural surroundings.

The Indigo Girls also tackle subjects related to indigenous peoples and immigration in their music. One of their most popular songs, "Shame on You," from 1997's *Shaming of the Sun,* celebrates indigenous cultures, and addresses immigration issues. The song is upbeat and festive in tone; it tells the story of the singer and her friends, who we are to understand are nonwhite, perhaps Latino, perhaps native American, or some combination of these groups. It begins explaining that her friends "wash the windows," perhaps illustrating the type of work persons of these groups often must do. She says to them: "let's put on some tunes sing along do little all day Go down to the riverside take off our shoes wash these sins away The river said la la la shame on you."[50] Then we get the first explicit mention of race in the song:

> I go down to Chicano city park cause it makes me feel so fine When the weeds go down you can see up close in the dead of the winter time But when the summer comes everything's in bloom and you wouldn't know it's there The white folks

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[49] "Southland in the Springtime," *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/nomadsindianssaints.html#.

[50] "Shame On You," *Shaming of the Sun* lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.indigogirls.com/discographyandlyrics/lyrics/shamingofthesun.html#.

> like to pretend it's not but their music's in the air you can hear them singing la la la shame on you You can feel them dancing…

There is a clear division in the town not only between labor, as alluded to in the first lines, but in space; the Chicanos have a separate park that for part of the year remains hidden behind the greenery, making it easier for the "white folk" to ignore their presence. The end of the song brings into even clearer focus the political discrimination at the heart of the song:

> Let's go road block trippin in the middle of the night up in Gainesville town There'll be blue lights flashin down the long dirt road when they ask me to step out They say we been looking for illegal immigrants can we check your car I say you know it's funny I think we were on the same boat back in 1694 I said oo la la shame on you.

Through this song, the Indigo Girls make a political statement about the heightened tension between (mostly) white Americans and immigrants, particularly those labeled "illegal" and "alien". The song illustrates that "white folk" can not actually claim the title "native," if we trace American history beyond the nation's founding. The song's title "Shame On You" begins as a lively statement against sadness, and moves to a harsher political critique of discriminating against people groups, and those in power deciding who belongs and who does not.

Off the same album, "Scooter Boys" also addresses indigenous people. It offers a meditation on history of injustice against native people, particularly those in South and Central America:

> Scooter boys and Argentineans Europe shed the blood of the Indian Here I sit in the land of plenty Crying about my own virginity Hey blue blood you're nothing new You see I come from privilege too A chapter in the book on the Americas You're just another colonial terrorist Scooter Boys and Argentineans Europe shed the blood of the Indian Here I sit in the land of plenty crying about my own virginity Way down south where the Maya reign Zapata reading poetry in his

> grave They said we're stealing from the best to feed the poor Well they need it more.[51]

The song seems to be a juxtaposition of righteous indignation and a feeling of impotence in the face of injustice and violence. It tells the story of a patterned history of violent colonization and pillaging native groups—Indians, Mayans, Zapatas—to provide for others. Native American (inclusive of north, central, and south) justice issues are clearly of central importance to the Indigo Girls. Ray and Saliers have spent time traveling and working among groups in Cuba and Chiapas; Ray feels a particular draw toward the Zapatista cause in Mexico. Although the group has spent their existence fighting land wars and struggling for political acceptance, she writes that they demonstrate to her hope: "Hope is symbolized by people in my community who have seen the worst but persevere and remain active participants…When I visit the Zapatistas in the jungle and they've built schools and communities—people who have suffered but rise about it and still love each other and love people."[52] Although this song does not resonate with hope, it begins in a place of critique, reflecting the Indigo Girls' perspective on colonization, which motivates them to find solidarity with indigenous people groups and advocate on behalf of them.

A song from several years later, from 2009's *Poseidon and the Bitter Bug,* "Salty South" briefly touches on land struggles in the United States. Because it is where both Saliers and Ray consider home, the American South features prominently throughout the Indigo Girls' catalog, as we have already seem, and here it is the context for their critique once again. The song begins with the verse:

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[51] "Scooter Boys," *Shaming of the Sun* lyrics.

[52] Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, "Indigo Girls Interview," interview by Zach Kincaid, online, September 29, 2009, http://www.matthewshouse.net/2009/09/indigo-girls-interview.html.

Mister pull up a chair
I got time for tears
Tell me all the stories that you never did
Of the salty south
The Seminoles held out
While Geronimo died in a lonely jail
A thousand tides, and
A thousand waves
Takin' it all away.[53]

The singer is sitting with an older man who will tell her stories of the south, history that long outlives him. We get a sense of her own perspective on the history, more specifically this stories that likely go untold, in the verse:

Drain that land For a better plan
Sugarcane and the civil man
But now the ringin' dead them pines
Planted in that time
We gonna keep on killin' till they get it right.

Here the upsetting history of raping the land and killing the people who were native to the South (specifically) is juxtaposed with the romanticized re-telling of the South's history. While the older generation tell these stories, the unseemly history falls victim to "A thousand tides, and / A thousand waves / Takin' it all away."

The title track to the 2002 album, *Become You,* also tackles this Southern-based burden of history, tied particularly to the land. This song confronts the struggle of the southerner facing her land's own troubled history, and wanting to distance herself from the injustices of the past, indicated initially as she sings: "Our southern blood, my heresy, damn that ol' confederacy."[54] The song also offers an apology to those who have been (and continue to be) victim to the South's history:

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[53] "Salty South," lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.metrolyrics.com/salty-south-lyrics-indigo-girls.html.

[54] "Become You," *Become You* lyrics.

I'm sorry for what you have learned,
when you feel the tables turn.
To run so hard in your race,
now you find who set the pace.
The landed aristocracy
exploiting all your enmity.
All your daddies fought in vain, leave you with the mark of Cain.

Here we get a sense of the ways that the 'sins of the fathers,' so to speak, continue to affect the sons and daughters for generations. The mark of Cain is a biblical allusion to Genesis 4, when Cain kills his brother Abel (the mythological first murder), and receives this curse from God: "Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."[55] Despite Cain's protestations, God continues to "put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him."[56] Therefore, the curse for the murderer is that he must continue to suffer the curse his own sin brought upon him. By calling upon this biblical symbol, "Become You," illustrates the sin of the white colonizers and slaveholders who killed their own brothers—the natives, and the African slaves. The resulting curse was that the blood continues to cry out in the southern land, and future generations continue to feel the effects of this tainted history. These effects are demonstrated in the following verse:

The center holds, so they say.
It never held too well for me.
I won't stop short for common ground
that vilifies the trodden down.
The center held the bonded slave
for the sake of industry.
The center held the bloody hand
of the executioner man.

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[55] Genesis 4.10b-11, NRSV

[56] Genesis 4.15b, NRSV.

The "center," represents those in authority or in power who determine the 'norms,' or policies, and use those things as an excuse to perpetrate violence, discrimination and dehumanization; for the sake of profit and 'industry,' those in power excused execution, in the form of slavery.

The song "Cedar Tree" from 1992's *Rites of Passage,* is fairly short on words, but uses an image from nature to symbolize strength and redemption:

> you dug a well you dug it deep for every wife you buried you planted a cedar tree…I stand where you stood I stand for the bad or good I am green you are wood…I dig a well I dig it deep and for my only love I plat a cedar tree.[57]

The song seems to be about memory, remembering those dead and gone, though it is mysterious how those have died. The cedar tree stands for memory. Biblically speaking, the cedar tree is a symbol of strength, so the tree could be interpreted as a symbol of hope for redemption and strength in honor, as well as memory, of those who have died.

Though it is often an implicit concern in their writings, both Saliers and Ray are vehemently anti-war and anti-violence, advocating for peace, and political policy that focuses on peace-making. They adamantly criticize any domestic or international policy that they feel breeds and feeds the imperial and/or militaristic mindset. The song "Pendulum Swinger," as discussed above is one example of this. Though most often expressed through their music, building peace and resisting violence remains central to their understanding of justice. In 2006, Saliers visited Fort Benning, Georgia to protest the School of the Americas located there. Her reflection on that experience offers a poignant insight into her understanding of peace and justice:

> I attended the School of Americas' protest on November 19th… The weather was cold and crisp and, once again the gathering was an inspiring group of thousands

[57] "Cedar Tree," *Rites of Passage* lyrics.

> and thousands from all over who came to sing, to pray, to remember, and to shut down this school at Ft. Benning that teaches torture, death, and destruction. One of the most powerful things about this protest gathering is the wide variety of groups and people who attend, not only to protest, but to actually sing the names of those who have been tortured, murdered or disappeared in Latin America. There are atheists and anarchists and agnostics and socialists, communists, capitalists and Christians and Jews from different congregations and synagogues. There are people from all walks of faith. There are community groups, grandmothers, and individuals that claim no affiliation but that a member of the human family, concerned about all of our brothers and sisters. When such diverse groups of people and individuals come together—groups that might, for lack of understanding be at odds with each other—to unite in a common cause, I truly feel in my bones that the world can change for the better. That we can lay down our weapons and engage in dialogue and promote peace through a desire to see human dignity full recognized. Through our activism we embrace the sacredness of life.[58]

As for most Americans, September 11, 2001, served as a watershed moment for Ray and Saliers. Instead of responding with fear or seeking vengeance, as reflected in their music, they responded with an even deeper desire for peace: "9/11 brought issues closer to home. For me emotionally it was a stronger response to violence and a more impassioned prayer for peace and just a stronger belief that we all take part in what we all do in the world. Like the large dysfunctional communities and nations. So I feel stronger about working for peace."[59]

One of the most poignant songs related to issues of warfare is "Our Deliverance," from the 2002 album, *Become You.* The song remains important to the Indigo Girls, as Saliers reflects: "We've been playing 'Our Deliverance' live a lot and wanting peace and bringing everyone closer together….that song is very poignant to me."[60] The song begins by describing a sense of loss and confusion, and offers a glimmer of hope for

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[58] "News from Emily 12.05.06."

[59] "Web chat with Amy and Emily (Transcript)" 11 March 2002, http://www.indigogirls.com/correspondence/2002/2002-03-11-ae.html accessed, 9/16/2010.

[60] Ibid.

"deliverance." The song begins with a prescient description, using landscape as a founding image for the coming critique:

> Now we can say that nothing's lost and only change brings round the prophecy
> Where now it's melting, the solid frost was once a veil on greener landscapes we would see
> Beneath my surface the water's heating
> And steam comes up and out the tears you see me shine.[61]

The song begins on a personal note before it broadens the scope to a cultural and political level: "For every pleasure exacts its pain / How you hurt me how you were good to me / Beneath my window a mournful train that makes me smile at my bad poetry." Here the initial perspective of loss and introspection seems focused on a lost relationship. With the first chorus, we begin to move outward:

> We may be looking for our deliverance but it has already been sent
> It's in the night fall when the light falls
> And what you've seen isn't there anymore
> It's in our blind trust that love will find us
> Just like it has before.

Here the 'deliverance' is universal and centers, as we have seen before in Indigo Girls songs, on love. Then the song moves toward a political and military focus, as the perspective shifts broader:

> They're sending soldiers to distant places
> X's and O's on someone's drawing board
> Like green and plastic but with human faces
> And they want to tell you it's a merciful sword.

Though this song was written, and the album released prior to the start of the Iraq war in March 2003, the United States' troops were already waging war in Afghanistan, the rhetoric of "war on terror" was rife during Bush's years in office, and the U.S. already had a history prior to George W. Bush's foreign policy, of invading other countries under

[61] "Our Deliverance," *Become You* lyrics.

the 'merciful' guise of liberty, democracy, and stability. Ray critiques these motivations: "Just as we promised a new life of democracy and Christianity to the Native Americans, we are promising a new democracy to the Middle East. I am the first one to say that this analogy can only go so far. After all Saddam Hussein is no upstanding Native American leader. . . .But our good intentions certainly do have an agenda and that agenda is oil."[62] Though these reflections are offered in the context of environmental policy, it still echoes the critique present in the song that follows:

> But with all the blood newly dried in the desert
> Can we not fertilize the land with something else
> There is no nation by God exempted
> Lay down your weapons and love your neighbor as yourself.

The critique is not based on policy or politics, but rather is couched in terms of religion, hinting at the words of scripture to "Love your neighbor as yourself,"[63] and Jesus' admonition to Peter to "put your sword back."[64] The song ends, with words of cautious hope, resting on faith and love: "It's through our blind trust that love will find us / Just like it has before."[65]

Two other examples of songs that address issues of political war and violence include "Everything in Its Own Time," from *Shaming of the Sun,* and "Tether," from *All that We Let In.* The latter is an anthemic plea to "true believers" for unity and understanding. Comparable to "Become You," the song relates a struggle with a tattered

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[62] "Letter from Amy Ray," April 2003.

[63] Leviticus 19.18, Mark 12.31, NRSV.

[64] John 18.11, NRSV.

[65] "Our Deliverance," lyrics.

(to say the least) past. It opens with a clear reference to abolition of slavery, indicating a further struggle with a Southern history:

> Whatever it was, it wasn't manumission
> To spill the blood, to pull the weed
> You can bury the past, but it's a mausoleum
> With the ghost of a fist that won't let us be.[66]

The persistent question, hoping for unity or reconciliation of some sort, is then voiced: "Can we bring it together, / Can we call from the mountain to the valley below? Can we make it better, Do we tether the hawk, do we tether the dove?" The song hopes for a better future, but looking to a past that seems to have not been dealt with, but rather swept under the proverbial rug, does not rest optimistically. The song title emerges referencing "hawks" and "doves," the classic caricatured contrast between those who would wage war (the hawks) and those who seek peace (the doves). The singer retells a conversation:

> I kicked up the dirt, and I said to my neighbor
> "We keep making it worse, we keep getting it wrong"
> He tucked in his shirt, he stood a little bit straighter,
> He said, "We need a few less words dear, we need a few more guns."

The struggle at the heart of the song is made manifest in this conversation; the singer expresses concern for the society around her, and her neighbor answers by suggesting further violence.

In response, she expresses doubt: "But will it bring us together?" The rhythm and key of the song shift, as the vocals belt out: "Enduring love / Why so much and so strong, beyond this short existence? / So don't be still," here shifting to the plea for others to join in. The shift here calls on a higher ideal, "enduring love," which is something the Indigo

[66] "Tether," lyrics, accessed 9/15/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/tether.html.

Girls (particularly Emily) have emphasized in their words—both in music and otherwise—the centrality of love to lead to genuine transformation, whether it be interpersonal, political or social. The cause here is given eternal significance: "Cause we may flicker and fade, / But we never will be through with this," thereby insisting that the causes of hope, peace, and love are eternal battles, enduring long-past our "short existence." She continues to argue that the fight is not futile or lost:

> I see this world battered but not broken
> There's a fallow heart, it's waiting on a sowing hand
> You can grow what you want, But one day it's gonna rise up
> So plant what you need to make a better stand.

Therefore, not only is the work to make the world better not over, but it requires other people. The plea concludes with this:

> And we'll bring it together …
> Let go of the hawk, we let go of the dove.
> I sing to you, all you true believers
> With the strength to see this and not be still.
> I'm telling you now, find the hope that feeds you,
> Don't let 'em bleed you of your will.

The call at the end to "true believers," is the most significant piece here because it trusts and relies on a critical mass of others who believe in the power of love and the potential for all those of like mind to join them in tethering the hawks of war, be fed by hope, in order to let "enduring love" change the course of things.

"Everything in Its Own Time" takes an abstracted tone, the singer speaking to someone with the lyrics taking the pattern: "Remember everything I told you…"[67] thereby taking on the voice of a parent, perhaps, or some other voice of teaching or authority. Though the song opens with the instruction to "remember" and repeats this a

[67] "Everything in Its Own Time," *Shaming of the Sun* lyrics.

few times, we are not yet clued in to what has been told and taught. The singer says: "Remember everything I told you, keep it in your heart like a stone And when the winds have blown the winds have blown things round and back again what was once your pain will be your home." So, here is an indication that something is not right, and there is a need to remember words of instruction or wisdom. We hear some observation to give us insight as to what this might be: "All around the table the white-haired men have gathered Spilling their sons' blood like table wine Remember everything in its own time … Boys around the table mapping out their strategies Kings all of mountains one day dust." The central critique here rests on those plotting and planning war, particularly those sending others to fight the wars they strategize.

The song plays with titles, saying that the men are planning the wars in which their own sons will die, perhaps not necessarily their literal sons, but using the relational terms to illustrate the intrinsic kinship of all human beings that remains central to the Indigo Girls' theology and philosophy. Then their use of "Boys" and "Kings" reveals a deeper critique about the transiency of the people and their plans. By first using "men", and then juxtaposing that with "boys around the table", the song demonstrates the parallel between boys playing war games, and men plotting real war. It should be observed, too, the hint towards Eucharistic imagery of the sons' blood spilling, "Like table wine," likely an intentional illustration of the sacrifice and, perhaps, atonement in their deaths.

Following this observation we hear what it is that the singer has been told: "A lesson learned a loving God and things in their own time In nothing more do I trust We own nothing, nothing is ours Not even love so fierce it burns like baby stars But this poverty is our greatest gift The weightlessness of us as things around begin to shift." The

lesson here rings of the words from the wisdom-teacher from Ecclesiastes, instructing on the fleetingness of time and relationship, particularly within the realm of our own temporal lives and the eternal God. The title of the song itself connects to the best-known passage from Ecclesiastes, which insists, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."[68] The words in the song point to the passing quality of even war and violence, and yet the eternality of a "loving God,"[69] which echoes further the words from Ecclesiastes: "Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work."[70] The song, in critiquing a culture of violence, where those who sit around tables plan war, like boys playing games, in essence serves as a reminder of the temporality of all the power we seek ("Kings of all mountains one day dust"), the possessions we seek to collect ("We own nothing, nothing is ours"), even our pain ("What was once your pain will be your home"); what the singer does know is the truth of "a loving God," and that is antidote enough to the brokenness elsewhere observed.

Ultimately, all of their advocacy and activism, the issues towards which Ray and Saliers have worked, have roots in their shared belief in justice, freedom, equality and love. They remain driven by love, which works out in their public work towards political and social issues. Because of their core understanding of the equality of human beings—often phrased in terms of the 'human family'—and the necessity for equality in all forms,

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[68] Ecclesiastes 3.1, NRSV

[69] "Everything in Its Own Time," lyrics.

[70] Ecclesiastes 3.16-17, NRSV

they find themselves advocating on behalf of people like themselves (i.e. female, homosexual), and those different from them (i.e. immigrants, indigenous people, the poor). Their music and activist work is tied together in a belief of solidarity with other human beings, which is itself a theological belief, particularly in light of liberation theologies and other contextual theologies. Emily reflects on this: "The way in and the way out is through a human being…We have a human need for each other—to find our respite and refuge and rest. There's a codependency."[71]

It is through their music that the Indigo Girls build upon this theological idea of community-building and solidarity-forming, in order to tell the stories, to relate the authentic experience of human struggle and reconciliation, of human love and pain. Further, they work outward, convicted that their music and songwriting is an avenue to speak truth to power. All of this serves as theological reflection worked out in public and vocal forms of prophetic denunciation and proclamation. In ways beyond what has already been discussed, their songs take on this prophetic tone of denunciation—speaking against oppression, inequality and injustice. Moreover, their music does not remain complacent in the critique; through their songwriting they participate in prophetic proclamation—envisioning alternative ways of being, contributing to the collective imagination of contexts of equality, peace, and human freedom.

The song "Money Made You Mean," from *Despite Our Differences,* takes on economic injustice in its biting criticism of how money changes people and priorities. The song takes on the culture of cultivated need and greed that seems to take hold in

[71] Ray and Saliers, "Indigo Girls Interview."

acquisition-driven economy. The title comes from the criticism that money and the drive to have more can turn people mean. The first two verses accuse and then ask:

> So money made you mean
> And that's not how it's supposed to be.
> You're ready to challenge and defend,
> Yeah, but for all the wrong reasons.
> How much do we really need?
> A question, if you have to ask
> Just means what it means—
> The question that says everything.[72]

The "meanness" caused by money, here is related to selfishness; the singer accuses that the person will "challenge and defend," but not noble causes, rather likely the right and ability to preserve what (s)he has. The question at the heart is a matter of need, but the singer is clearly not impressed with the question, emphasizing:

> You could keep it all or give it away
> But where did it come form in the first place?
> Robbing Peter to pay me, and I'll just be
> Giving it back to Peter to feel free.

The critique here goes much deeper than the possession of money, but the system perpetuated by money changing hands, without actually fixing a broken system, and in turn this system creates greedy, mean purveyors of wealth. What is the answer, then? Amy Ray suggests that, although money often does create perceived needs, and spreads greed, she does not feel that money itself is the problem: "money is a tool that can also do good. In the song, I'm asking that questions about myself in a cynical sort of way. As an activist, you can do good with it, but that still drives you to want more money and that drive can take over the good."[73] The song, then, is as much a self-critique is at is focused

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[72] "Money Made You Mean," lyrics accessed 9/15/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/moneymadeyoumean.html.

[73] Ray and Saliers, "Indigo Girls Interview."

externally, serving as a reminder of the danger of accruing wealth, and getting caught up in a system that encourages consumption and individual gain. Instead, Ray and Saliers focus on their message of relationship, solidarity, and sharing.

"Leeds" from *Shaming of the Sun,* confronts political ignorance and blindness to social and cultural violence and injustice. The song sets up an image of churches along the skyline, though the religious icon serves as a symbol of silence and impotency. The sun is setting, and the sky is allowing the darkness to set in, and as that happens, "the steeples pierce the skylight till the last of it bleeds."[74] The description is significant in the parallel it sets up: violence, juxtaposed with religious imagery, made even more poignant, as the steeple is a cross, which is the instrument upon which Jesus bled and died. The perspective of this song is the singer in a hotel room looking out her window. She describes herself as "Well fed and halfway drunk," and then seems fixated and anxiety-ridden, the nightly news serving epitomizing the sources of her anxiety and stress: "Sixteen black churches burning on the TV all the way from Texas to Tennessee a politician locks my eye and says to me there is no crisis here there's no conspiracy." Here she levels a critique against the meaningless violence, and the political impotency or even conspiratorial cover-up of the reality of violence. She takes all of this personally, allowing it to affect her internally. Her emotional state is anxious, describing her reaction as: "this madness is in me spinning like a top on a bed of anxiety over a deep dark drop down into nothingness."

There is plenty of evidence from the Indigo Girls catalog of songs written not just to critique, but to inspire, to motivate, to urge listeners to also act, to work for change,

[74] "Leeds," *Shaming of the Sun* lyrics.

equality and justice. From *Come on Now Social,* "Go" is a song true to its rock-and-roll roots, acoustically-speaking. The song opens the album, and wastes no time getting to the point, describing her own genealogy of protest and oppression:

> Through the dustbowl
> Through the debt
> Grandma was a suffragette
> Blacklisted for her publication
> Blacklisted for my generation
> Go go go.[75]

Here, the song sets up a history of inequality and discrimination, in referring to suffragettes within her own lineage, those who fought, argued, and worked for the enfranchisement of women. The song links this history to her own situation, implying that current generations are not divorced from history; in fact, by saying that her grandmother was blacklisted for "[her] generation," she signifies that the persecution her grandmother's generation faced was for the sake of their peers and all future generations. The song then shifts focus, provoking others to "go go go," working for similarly-minded goals:

> Raise your hands
> Raise your hands high
> Don't take a seat
> Don't stand aside
> This time don't assume anything
> Just go go go
> Feed the fire
> Feed the flame
> I know you kids can stand the rain
> I know the kids are still upsetters
> Cause rock is cool but the struggle is better
> Go go go….
> Did they tell you it was set in stone
> That you'd end up alone
> Use your years to psyche you out

[75] "Go," *Come On Now Social* lyrics.

You're too old to care
You're too young to count

The remaining verses here are a struggle and invective against apathy. The song encourages listeners to act similarly to previous generations when confronted with messages and systems of inequality and injustice. The lyrics here speak out against the information often communicated by those comfortably in power, or those who might stand to lose if significant populations "Don't take a seat" or "stand aside." The song unswervingly denounces implications that one is "too old" or "too young" to matter or to effect change. It also grapples with arguments against change that rely on "it's always been done that way," when it asks "Did they tell you it was set in stone," and by following up with "That you'd end up alone," relates to the idea that in speaking out against injustice or oppression one might be left to speak alone, which fosters fear by keeping people silent. The song itself serves a dual purpose: to remind listeners of a history of social change that is, in fact personal (made clear by connecting it to the singer's family), and to motivate listeners towards similar action, boldly unafraid of consequences.

Amy Ray has also enjoyed a fairly successful solo career, and while I dare not try to incorporate all songs from her three albums into this conversation, one song seems too poignant to ignore. Off her solo album, *Prom,* released in 2005, "Let It Ring" is a fast-driving song cheering-on those who speak up for causes of justice and equality, and also indicting those who perpetuate hate. The song opens with lines addressed to this latter group:

When you march stand up straight.
When you fill the world with hate
Step in time with your kind and

Let it ring
When you speak against me
Would you bring your family
Say it loud pass it down and
Let it ring[76]

The lyrics here offer a clear parallel to the prophetic speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., particularly in his "I Have a Dream Speech," wherein he repeats "Let freedom ring," several times.[77] In the language, Ray sets up a denunciation of those who speak against her, and those who enable hate-fueled contexts. She asks, though, that in doing so that they be open about it, including even their families; the indictment takes on a religious tone, proposing to speak from their perspective: "Let it ring to Jesus 'cause he sure'd be proud of you / You made fear an institution and it got the best of you / Let it ring in the name of the one that set you free." The chorus picks up on the religious overlap in hate speech, particularly against homosexuality in America.[78] She then uses the pattern from the first verses and chorus to explain herself:

As I wander through this valley
In the shadow of my doubting
I will not be discounted
So let it ring
You can cite the need for wars
Call us infidels or whores
Either way we'll be your neighbor
So let it ring

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[76] "Let it Ring," lyrics, accessed 12/21/10. http://www.daemonrecords.com/amy/lyrics.html.

[77] Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," delivered 28 August 1963, http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/mlkdream.html, accessed 1/18/11.

[78] Following the defeat of Proposition 8 in California, many accused the Church of Latter-Day Saints (whose population is largely concentrated in Utah) of conspiring and channeling money toward the campaign against the legislation. Likewise, Westboro Baptist Church, in Kansas, is notorious for their outspoken anti-gay stance, which is manifest in protesting in various situations with signs that read "God Hates Fags." It is well-documented that a significant bloc against homosexuality (gay marriage, repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell, homosexuality as an acceptable 'lifestyle'), are religious, particularly Evangelical Christian.

Thus, the religious motivation and justification are on her side. She alludes to the twenty-third psalm, which is often used to remind people of God's presence, particularly in times of loss and fear. She responds to the "haters" by claiming that she and others like her remain their "neighbor," regardless of their continued efforts to squash them.[79] The use of the word 'neighbor' here is significant, as it continues the religious themes in the song. After all, Jesus instructed his followers that the second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself," repeating the words from Leviticus that commanded the same thing.[80] The song, therefore, turns the religion of those who perpetuate hate and war back on them, illustrating that they are not exactly following the commands of Jesus, whom they claim is on their side. The song concludes bolstering up those who work for freedom, justice and equality: "And the strife will make me stronger / As my maker leads me onward," claiming righteousness for their side too:

> I'm gonna let it ring to Jesus
> Cause I know he loves me too
> And I get down on my knees and I pray the same as you
> Let it ring, let it ring
> 'Cause one day we'll all be free
> Let it ring

Here she is claiming the same justification, but following the previous lines, we get the sense that she believes her cause is the true cause of righteousness, in its understanding of 'neighbor,' and proclaiming equality—both on earth, and before God—and claiming an ultimate freedom for all.

Another song that would be an oversight to ignore is not part of the Indigo Girls' catalog, strictly speaking, but is a collaboration with the pop-rock singer Pink. Though

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[79] See also, Romans 12.20-21.

[80] Matthew 19.19, NRSV, C.f. Leviticus 19.18

they did not write the words, they performed with her on the song, "Dear Mr. President," which is on Pink's fourth album, *I'm Not Dead,* and was written by Pink (Alecia Moore) and Billy Mann. Pink describes the song as an open letter to President George W. Bush. The song is significant in the context of the discussion of the Indigo Girls because it fits in the content of the rest of the commentary offered by the prophetic and political songs from the Indigo Girls. The song invites the President to join the singer(s) on a walk, and the bulk of the lyrics are questions she would like to ask President Bush, if given the chance (though she acquiesces at the end of the song: "Dear Mr. President, you'd never take a walk with me, would you?"[81]):

> What do you feel when you see all the homeless on the street?
> Who do you pray for at night before you go to sleep?
> What do you feel when you look in the mirror? Are you proud?
> How do you sleep while the rest of us cry?
> How do you dream when a mother has no chance to say goodbye?
> How do you walk with your head held high?
> Can you even look me in the eye? And tell me why?

The first series of questions carries an implicit critique of the President and his tenure, though also marked by a latent desire to understand genuinely his thoughts, motivations and decision-making. The assumption built into questions like "How do you sleep…?" is that President Bush is lacking in emotion or care for the 'less fortunate'—the homeless, the families of those killed (though it remains ambiguous by what means—homicide, military service, failing health).

The questions that follow take on a more personal tone, and the stronger criticism emerges. They ask: "Were you a lonely boy?" as if to imply that there is something

[81] "Dear Mr. President," lyrics, accessed 12/22/10. http://www.pinkspage.com/us/music/i039m-not-dead/dear-mr-president-featuring-indigo-girls.

deeper and emotional at the heart of the President's bad leadership. The questions reveal criticism of specific Bush-era policies:

> How can you say, no child is left behind?
> We're not dumb and we're not blind
> (We're not blind)
> They're all sitting in your cells while you pave the road to hell
> What kind of father would take his own daughter's rights away?
> And what kind of father might hate his own daughter if she were gay?
> I can only imagine what the first lady has to say
> You've come a long way from whiskey and cocaine ….
> Let me tell you 'bout hard work
> Minimum wage with a baby on the way
> Let me tell you 'bout hard work
> Rebuilding your house after the bombs took them away
> Let me tell you 'bout hard work
> Building a bed out of a cardboard box
> Let me tell you 'bout hard work, hard work, hard work
> You don't know nothin' 'bout hard work, hard work, hard work

The second half of the song levels harsh words against the specific No Child Left Behind educational policy, and other more implicit Bush Administration stances—including anti-gay, and the waging of two wars. It even references Bush's repetition of the phrase "hard work,"[82] turning his use on its head, focusing on American citizens who have low-paying jobs, or no homes, and earnestly work to make ends meet, only to be foiled by the system. This song stands within a greater prophetic-protest tradition, and although neither Saliers nor Ray had a direct hand in its writing credits, they loaned their time and talents to the project. Ultimately all of these songs, and in substance and style, work toward their desire for justice and truth—freedom from oppression, which they believe music has a unique power to confront.

[82] During one of the debates between George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry for the 2004 presidential campaign, President Bush made several references to his "hard work" particularly in reference to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: "It is hard work. It is hard work to go from a tyranny to a democracy. It's hard work to go from a place where people get their hands cut off, or executed, to a place where people are free." See transcript at: www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/politics/debatereferee/debate_0930.html, accessed 12/29/10.

The prophetic content and effect of the Indigo Girls music reaches beyond the critical. As discussed in previous chapters, the prophetic witness critiques and denounces, but even more significantly, communicates a proclamation, emerging from the imagination of what *could be*. The prophetic imagination proclaims what is possible, dwelling in the future potential of equality, justice, freedom and peace. The Indigo Girls' music is deeply prophetic in this sense, speaking to hope and freedom, and embracing one's responsibility for bringing about change with and among fellow members of the human family. One common theme through these songs of proclamation is the personal responsibility in working to change and improve the world. Their criticism never remains a mere critique; they consistently balance the denunciation with what Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination—the vision of a future alternative—and that future relies on Saliers and Ray and people like them to work for justice, peace and equality.

One clear example comes from *Nomads Indians Saints.* "Hammer and a Nail" is about getting to work to create and reveal something beautiful in what remains. The transformation at the heart of the song is about the world around the singer, but also about the inner work of transformation of the singer herself:

> A dark abyss of an emptiness
> Standing on the edge of a drowning blue.
> I look behind my ears for the green
> Even my sweat smells clean
> Glare off the white hurts my eyes
> Gotta get out of bed and get a hammer and a nail
> Learn how to use my hands, not just my head.[83]

[83] "Hammer and a Nail" *Nomads Indians Saints* lyrics.

She stresses here the beginning of external transformation is in the internal awareness of one's own place in the world, and the importance of taking initiative and action—using both one's hands and one's head. To a certain degree, this starting point calls to mind the New Testament words from James: "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."[84] There is the implicit idea that philosophizing about change, or believing the world should be a certain way is not enough; rather, one must take part in working for transformation. The song ends with words that elaborate on these ideas:

> I had a lot of good intentions
> Sit around for fifty years and then collect a pension,
> Started seeing the road to hell and just where it starts.
> But my life is more than a vision
> The sweetest part is acting after making a decision
> I started seeing the whole as a sum of its parts.
> My life is part of the global life
> I'd found myself becoming more immobile
> When I'd think a little girl in the world can't do anything.
> A distant nation my community
> A street person my responsibility
> If I have a care in the world I have a gift to bring.

Here she admits that it is tempting to remain selfish, put in the requisite years at a job and then retire comfortably; or it is tempting to give into the debilitating and overwhelming idea that one person cannot affect any change. These lines, though, reiterate the theological idea of solidarity throughout the Indigo Girls canon, phrased in terms of belonging to one another, being responsibility for other people, and being but one member of the larger human family. Hence, it is up to each of us as individuals to pool our resources, our gifts, and contribute and work for the change and betterment of those around us—our "community" and our "responsibility."

[84] James 2.14ff. NRSV

"Let it Be Me," from *Rites of Passage,* is also about the motivation to take on the work of change, in a sense, echoing the famous quote from Gandhi, charging to "Be the change you wish to see in the world." The change wished for at the core of this song is for peace, the chorus is the most telling in its urge for peaceful transformation: "let it be me (this is not a fighting song) let it be me (not a wrong for a wrong) let it be me, if the world is night shine my life like a light."[85] The song also echoes slightly the children's spiritual "This Little Light of Mine," in its expressed desire to bring light to the world. The opening verse emphasizes the belief in solidarity and connectedness across all kinds of borders:

> sticks and stones battle zones a single light bulb on a single thread for the black sirens wail history fails rose-colored glass begins to age and crack while the politicians shadowbox the power ring in an endless split decision never solve anything from a neighbor's distant land I heard the strain of the common man

The song begins here acknowledging the felt-despair when observing the impotency of politicians, that never seem to actually work for significant change of any sort. However, the singer feels a kinship with all those across the world, who echo the same sentiment to "let it be me." The second verse continues to reiterate the 'common humanity' theme and the significant personal responsibility:

> Well the world seems spent and the president has no good idea who the masses are well I'm one of them and I'm among friends trying to see beyond the fences of our own backyard I've seen the kingdoms blow like ashes in the winds of change but the power of truth is the fuel for the flame so the darker the ages get there's a stronger beacon yet

There is the continued critique of political systems and symbols, claiming here that the authority figures are, in truth, out of touch with the "common masses", of which the singer claims to be part. The most important message in all of this is the contrast set up

[85] "Let It Be Me," *Rites of Passage* lyrics.

between lightness and dark, and here the song calls on the strongest power of truth to reach beyond and shine through the darkness of ignorance, impotence and lack of political will to change things. The true power of this truth is in the common masses who will rise up with the song of empowering "let it be me."

From the 2004 album, *All that We Let In,* "Perfect World" offers a clear example of the imaginative quality, instructive in its vision of an alternative world. The song speaks to the potential and promise of each person's role and ability to contribute to changing the world. The opening lines declare:

> We get to be a ripple in the water
> We get to be a rock that's thrown
> We get to be a boy on the bridge
> Standing over the reservoir,[86]

all of which indicate the edge of something changing, though it is ambiguous as to the resulting impact of the ripples, rock, or the brink of the reservoir. Any of these things could serve destructive means, or they could result in positive change. The song carries this message of our positive and negative effects in the world around us. The first chorus sings (and the other choruses follow similar patterns with subtle word shifts):

> We're floating we're swimming
> And at this moment we are forgetting
> What we caused what it takes
> The one perfect world when we look the other way.

The lines of the chorus speak to our role—both individually and collectively—in shaping the world around us. The forgetting (and "denying" in the second chorus) of our role in creating and changing the world around us is detrimental on two levels: we forget that we

[86] "Perfect World," lyrics, accessed 9/16/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/perfectworld.html.

have great power to destroy and damage the earth, each other, our relationships, and we also forget that we have great power to change the world for the better.

As the song reaches its resolution, it offers no resolution at all, but leaves the listener with a plea, phrased as a question: "Can we learn to live another way / Perfect world…can we learn to live another way." The song urges listeners to deny numbness of the previous lines, the conscious ignorance of turning away from our responsibility for how the world is, and to embrace the possibility of living another way, leaving us with the reminder that we "get to be a ripple in the water."

The title track to the same album is also visionary in its acceptance of all that has been, declaring "We're better off for all that we let in." "All that We Let In" reminds us of the transforming power of pain and struggle in order to come out stronger and better on the other side. The song speaks to the spiritual angle of struggling in a world accompanied by pain and death, repeating the phrase "we're better off for all that we let in."[87] The song speaks to the common fear of the finality of death:

> Lost friends and loved ones much too young
> So much promises and work left undone
> When all that guards us is a single center line
> And the brutal crossing over when it's time

The sentiment here refers to the reality and tragedy of people dying too soon; the transition seems to sudden and yet plumbs the depths of mystery. The chorus describes the mystery of life with these statements: "I don't know where it all begins / … / And I don't know where it all will end," before reiterating, "We're better off for all that we let in." The song blends images of everyday life and bigger symbols of power, control, and

[87] "All that We Let In," lyrics, accessed 9/16/10. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/allthatweletin.html.

change. The middle verses take on the sources of power we so often take for granted, waxing hopeful that there will come a reversal of power:

> One day those toughies will be withered up and bent
> The father, son, the holy warriors and the president
> With glory days of put up dukes for all the world to see
> Beaten into submission in the name of the free
> We're in an evolution I have heard it said
> Everyone's so busy now but do we move ahead?
> The planets hurtling and atoms splitting
> And a sweater for your love you sit there knitting.

These verses offer an assurance that systems of power are only temporary, and can be usurped for more righteous causes ("in the name of the free"), here illustrated with a play on Christian Trinitarian language. All of this potential change is put into a perspective of our small beings when juxtaposed with the planetary movement that moves the universe forward. These overwhelming images set up an interesting contrast to the everyday image of one's personal relationship.

These contrasts continue, as the singer observes "crosses on the side of the road," evidence of tragic deaths, though as ordinary as a daily commute, and she muses: "They make me grateful I can go this far." The song continues its philosophical tone, grand observations made plain against life's ordinariness:

> Kat writes a poem and she sticks it on my truck
> We don't believe in war, and we don't believe in luck ….
> I passed the cemetery, walk my dog down there
> I read the names in stone and say a silent prayer
> When I get home you're cooking supper on the stove
> And the greatest gift of life is to know love.

These final verses (the chorus repeats once more) offer a profound insight into the struggle between hoping for grand gestures of change—the overturning of power structures—and the simplicity and importance of love. The song reflects a belief that it is

necessary to have an awareness of the struggle and mortality intrinsic to our humanity, but the equal importance of feeling grateful and finding home in the warmth of love.

In 2010, the Indigo Girls released their first holiday album. Two of the songs they included on *Holly Happy Days* rely explicitly on spiritual and religious images to communicate their prophetic message. Though they did not write "Peace Child,"[88] the lyrics and tone of the song fit in the larger scheme of this chapter. Because they included it, we can assume they feel some affinity with the message of the song. The song is addressed to the Christ child (dubbed the "peace child"). The song is a meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation, illustrating the simultaneous chaos and beauty into which Jesus was born, or would be born, regardless of time or place:

> Peace Child,
> in the sleep of the night,
> in the dark before light
> you come,
> in the silence of stars,
> in the violence of wars--
> Savior, your name.
>
> Peace Child,
> to the road and the storm,
> to the gun and the bomb
> you come,
> through the hate and the hurt,
> through the hunger and dirt--
> bearing a dream.[89]

The words and music sing like a love song, though clearly theological, calling the child "Savior." A theology of Incarnation permeates these lyrics, noting that the child, the "savior" comes "in" and "to," and perhaps most significantly, "through." The final line

[88] "Peace Child" is a New Zealand traditional song, arranged by Emily's father Don Saliers for the album.

[89] "Peace Child," lyrics, accessed 12/30/10. http://www.metrolyrics.com/peace-child-lyrics-indigo-girls.html.

in the second verse corresponds to the necessity of the imagination in speaking (and existing) prophetically. This child does not come in, to and through all these things bearing a 'sword', or a 'revolution', or even a 'message;' rather the child comes "bearing a dream." The third and final verse reveals the substance and nature of the 'dream' that is part of the coming of the peace child:

> Peace Child,
> to our dark and our sleep,
> to the conflict we reap,
> now come—
> be your dream born alive,
> held in hope, wrapped in love:
> God's true shalom.

The peace child's dream has as its root hope, and love, and is "God's true shalom," peace, justice, and freedom that is wholly spiritual and theological. This is not the peace of nations, but only the peace that can be called divine and has God as its source.

A second example from the holiday album, "Your Holiday Song" is about peace and unity, belonging and healing. The singers address children, encouraging them to "Gather round" and "make your joyful noise."[90] The message of the song is about inclusivity, again stressing the common Indigo Girls message of kinship and solidarity with the entire human family:

> It's your holiday song
> No one more true or right or wrong
> When our faith calls our name
> Someone else's does the same
> Hallelujah! Thank you.

The chorus here stresses unity over diversity of religions, which seems to diminish the significance of differences, not in any effort to be syncretic or do away with differences,

[90] "Your Holiday Song," lyrics, accessed 12/30/10. http://www.metrolyrics.com/your-holiday-song-lyrics-indigo-girls.html.

but to find ways to unite in spite of them. The final verse of the song explains why this is important and beneficial:

> For every voice lifted in song
> The sacred place we all belong
> A chance to heal a broken world
> with every voice in every song
> of every boy and every girl!

The message here is that sacredness permeates all the *forms* of religion whether it be "church bells," "silence," "goodwill," or "the feast after the fast." If we are able to work together, and sing together regardless of our uniquenesses we can unite in a vision of healing and unity. This song speaks consistently with the Indigo Girls greater message of peace and unity. They are quick to acknowledge the sacredness of life, but are quick to resist the temptation to allow our *forms* (the fasting, or praying, or singing, or meditating) to divide us. Instead, these ought to be avenues of unity and healing.

Conclusion

The overall emphasis of this chapter has been the specific prophetic nature of the Indigo Girls work—both through their music and their activism—which they posit are intertwined pieces of the same calling. Although they have spent far fewer words articulating it in the same ways as Over the Rhine, this prophetic content and form are manifest from clearly theological understandings of humanity, justice, equality, and solidarity. The theological reflection of the songs primarily discussed in the first section reveals their theological bent toward solidarity, compassion and justice, revealed in the ways they discuss relationships, maturation, and searching for forms of truth. In the same way that James McClendon emphasizes narrative as the starting point for theological reflection—we tell our stories, and hear other people stories; our stories are themselves

theological—many of the Indigo Girls songs begin in narrative. They relate their own stories so that others may feel some sense of solidarity through them, or that they might heal alienation or loneliness. Further, Gutierrez and other liberation theologians call on narrative as a form of theological liberation that works to upend power differences; we ought to tell stories of the voiceless and powerless—the oppressed—in order to give voice to their experience and their stories. This is, in fact, the least we can do, because, when possible, we ought to allow them to speak for themselves. Giving voice to the voiceless, offering an audience to otherwise silenced or oppressed *others,* making these *others* part of their own story, is something the Indigo Girls have made part of their entire work, and is itself deeply theological and prophetic.

On a more basic and personal level, their work in music, in creating and sharing music, lends itself to the greater human work of forming and affecting identity. Part of the work of prophetic denunciation and proclamation comes in the work of transformation, in envisioning alternative ways of being, or even an alternative world (as seen in songs such as "Perfect World"). This transformative and imaginative work also has significant impact within the lives of their audiences. In *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live,* Emily Saliers reflects on the transformative power of music for individuals:

> Living with music over the course of many years is something like living in a certain part of the country: it plays a strong role in how you become you….music plays a much bigger role in your becoming who you are than many people realize….music has been crucial to finding personal identity and discovering the communities to which we belong….a strong and positive force in discovering who we are and yet may become.[91]

[91] Don E. Saliers and Emily Saliers, A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice, 1st ed., The practices of faith series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 76.

The power of their music, particularly when played and shared lived before an audience, is something Saliers compares "to music and to contemplative prayer alike."[92] Moreover, their music is powerful in the ways it affects and motivates audience. Through their music they connect with their audiences and, hopefully, motivate them toward some of the same kind of work they feel defines them to such a large degree; it is these forms of prophetic witness that seeks to motivate others to work together for collective change that is particularly comparable to ways that religion seeks to transform both individuals and collectivities.

The work of the Indigo Girls remains deeply theological, in a way that is different from the introspective, poetic music and lyrics of, say, Over the Rhine. That they emphasize their activism and political, economic, and social change, is but their piece of the puzzle in identifying their work as musicians as both theological and prophetic. Although the Indigo Girls remain abstract in their naming of 'religious specifics,' as has been demonstrated, their music can be read and heard in the context of theological reflection, and offering prophetic critique and proclamation rooted in the biblical tradition of toppling systems of inequality, injustice, and inhumanity.

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[92] Ibid.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The image of God in humanity is the image of the creator, the creative spirit, the capacity for imagination. The image of God is manifest in our ability to understand, appreciate, and reflect on the beauty of God in creation, and in our own imaginations and abilities to create. Therefore, the spirit of imagination, beauty, and creativity is intrinsic to the fullness of a life of faith. The theological aesthetic that is the framework for this project is three-fold. First, I maintain that art is a boon to a life of faith. Art and creativity are significant not just for personal spirituality or meditation; in addition art and creativity allow for and create a space for genuine theological reflection and meaning.

Secondly, the same arguments that are made about art in general can be applied to forms of popular culture. The second chapter outlined the nuances between understandings of what is popular. Not all forms of popular culture ought to be embraced as theological significant, or even morally good; yet, simply being popular or widespread does not deny the potential for genuine meaning or goodness. What is asserted is that popular culture *can be* and often *is* meaning-making and identity-forming. As one example, film critic Nathan Rabin's memoir *The Big Rewind,* uses pieces of popular culture as milestones to tell about his childhood and adolescence. He introduces the book by saying: "It's about my life and the way music, books, films, television,…shaped and molded me, along with countless other members of my generation…a demographic for

whom pop culture references constitute an invaluable common cultural currency."[1] Through his rather troubled childhood and adolescent, he relates how "pop culture was a life-affirming form of escape," and how it "helped me survive my lifelong battle with depression," and in which "I found my lasting family."[2] It goes without saying that Rabin is not alone in finding meaning and purpose in outlets of popular culture.

Third, I identify the theological significance of popular culture in terms of a space for theological reflection and an element of prophetic witness. The implicit assumption that anything dubbed "Christian" maintains theological depth, and creations lacking that distinction are therefore 'secular,' or 'profane,' thus lacking any moral good or theological import, is false, and a distinction I hope this project serves in dissolving. As Frank Bruch Brown has argued: "A case could be made that, ever since the early nineteenth century, if not before, much of the finest art and music of spiritual and theological import—whether popular or highly cultivated—has been created without the Church's blessing or, indeed, the Church's knowledge."[3]

As asserted in the third chapter, the theological and prophetic tasks are linked—one flowing from the other. Genuine theological reflection must result in an outward and public response. Often, as Gutierrez would argue, theological reflection is secondary, a second-order articulation, on what we are already doing (praxis), what we already *know* to be true from lived experience. Theological reflection connects to the truth of one's lived experience, and speaks honestly about the human story; out of that experience,

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[1] Nathan Rabin, *The Big Rewind: A Memoir Brought to You by Pop Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Scribner, 2009), xv.

[2] Ibid., xv-xvii.

[3] Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 232.

voices of prophetic witness speak truth to power, out of and in solidarity with lived experiences. The case study chapters used Over the Rhine and the Indigo Girls as examples of how both theological reflection and prophetic witness are linked and manifest in forms of popular culture. The two examples serve as 'ideal cases,' offering breadth and depth of both long careers and prolific material to explore these themes at length.

Thus, the case has been made that popular culture, as it is consonant with artistic, creative expression, serves as a location for both theological reflection and prophetic witness on its own terms. Moreover, the participatory nature of popular culture as forms of consumption, relies on an audience to buy, watch, attend, interact with music, film, television, etc., and thus is able to *create* a space for others to participate in these tasks. By identifying the theological as lived, narrative, and contextual, I have sought to democratize the potential for theological reflection and the resulting prophetic witness.

Areas for Further Research

Although much has been written in the foregoing pages, more can be said about further areas of research. The audience piece of the text-artist-audience could be developed more fully through interviews, surveys, and analysis of fan-generated material (discussion boards, forums, letters, etc.). In addition, the foundation set forth in these chapters for a theological aesthetics, and the pastoral and theological implications, leaves open wide the door for further exploration of other musicians—across time and genre. Likewise, because the frameworks are intentionally broad, they ought not only be applied to popular music. The terms are set up that creativity can stretch across art forms and cultural forms, such that these pop cultural theological aesthetics can be applied to all

forms of culture—television shows, film (though this is an area that has already begun to be plumbed with great theological depth and grace), advertising, video games, social networking, etc. This latter element—social networking—will prove to be a significant cultural meaning-maker. Attention must be paid to the ways social networks—like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—are used to communicate, to share information, and to exchange art forms. Indeed we already see posturing regarding how these forms and forums contribute to the outbreak of Middle East revolutions. These technologies are moving targets in a sense, as they are changing faster than our thumbs can move over our touch-screen smart-phones. Our socially-networked interactions will no doubt be fascinating factors to existing cultural and creative products, in addition to the ways these forums are themselves serving to create meaning.

Each of the artists could be developed into separate book-length projects, highlighting the theological content and significance of their musical catalogs. In order to develop these additionally, greater attention would be paid to the fan reception, and critical embrace, though lacking a good deal of this in print, would be aided by in-depth conversations and interviews. Likewise, having the opportunity to interview each of the artists would greatly enhance the argument, not only shedding light both on this project, but perhaps offer them an opportunity for self-reflection.

Pastoral Functions of Theological Reflection and Prophetic Witness

Perhaps the primary role of a pastor is in witnessing to the life of Christian faith, which means proclaiming grace, redemption, and love in the face of darkness, fear, and despair. In order to do this, pastors must meet people where they are and understand others on their own terms first. To speak the truth about redemption and reconciliation,

we must be willing and able to speak the truth about brokenness and suffering. The musicians already discussed serve as examples of how popular culture can be read with an ear inclined to this truth-telling. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from these artists about how to speak honestly about the human condition and the human experience. Only when we are able to acknowledge and find solidarity with the depths of human pain, suffering, and alienation, can we understand the profound depth of grace, liberation, and love that can redeem us.

If there is one thing—one idea—I wish for contemporary pastors and theologians to take away from this project it is that popular culture *can be* and often *is* life-giving for its consumers. Even if it is not life-giving in the same form as a life of religious faith, we cannot deny that culture, by its very definition is both defined by, and defines members of society. Simply claiming a specific faith tradition does not insulate us from its effects. We create culture, and it, in turn, creates us.[4] The exponential rise and diversity of popular cultural forms in the last century have only made us immune, or desensitized, to an awareness of the ways our worldviews, meanings, and interpretations of morality, ethics, virtue are informed by the culture we consume—books, news, music, film, television. The attempt to dissolve the division between sacred and secular is twofold: we are aware of the ways that culture shapes meaning, in both positive and negative ways, and we allow greater opportunity to connect to and understand the divine. If we take seriously the theological implications of the Incarnation, then we can expect an encounter with the living God in all facets of our life, not just within the walls (both literal and metaphorical) of the Christian Church.

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[4] Peter L. Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin P, 1967).

In a sense, the barrier that has been drawn—mostly as a result of the Enlightenment—between what is sacred and what is secular, is false. The church is to minister to the whole person, and the same person who goes to a concert, or a movie, or paints on a canvas on Saturday does not morph into a different person when she enters a church service on Sunday. We must break down these competing spheres in order to understand and confront real people struggling in a world constantly pushing towards despair and violence. Don and Emily Saliers articulate this nicely in their Introduction:

> …music can evoke the divine and not necessarily mention God all the time. Not all music with religious import needs to be explicitly liturgical…addressed to God…At the same time, any music that explores human life in all its range of extremity and ordinariness can evoke the presence (or absence) of God. Music that moves toward the good, the true, the just, and the beautiful often brings a sense of transcendence to hearers…Some nonchurch music that truly expresses the heart's torment, the soul's lament, or the ecstatic joy we experience within the beauty of creation may be more religious than hymns with poor theology sung without conviction.[5]

What is perhaps unnerving about this challenge—and it *is* a challenge—is that it insists on permeable walls of the Church, and on a Church that does not identify itself by resisting the outside world. The challenge also implies that the Church itself might be changed by the world. Referring to Tillich and Tracy, the world has something to say to the Church, in understanding its mission and purpose. This is not necessarily a challenge to the Church's core identity, but in how it understands its role and function within a particular time and place. Jon Michael Spencer explains that we ought to pay attention to "the creators and consumers of popular music in order to discern how this vast segment of culture perceives the great mysteries that myths address and how these ultimate concerns figure into the worldview that in turn formulates the character of the secular

[5] Don E. Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, 1st ed., The practices of faith series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 165.

world."[6] Hence, popular culture can tell us something about the concerns and character of the outside world. However, this is not all; Spencer concurs that there is also a depth of reflection possible: "although the popular music consumed by the secular may have no orthodox theology, it may be that, in addressing some of the concerns listeners believe are ultimate, it awakens the latent theologies within them."[7]

Therefore, the pastoral implications are many. Certainly, there are potential ways that popular culture can be implemented within the life of worship, education and discipleship of the institutional church. Allowing persons of faith to bring their culture into church, so to speak, encourages them to bring their faith into their culture. Further, part of the task of the minister is to shepherd persons in the life of faith, guiding them with questions, wisdom, and grace. The implications of art and popular culture being theologically significant mean that part of the pastoral task is guiding people in understanding and interpreting these forms of culture. In a culture where we are all absorbed in DVRs, 24-hour news cycles, earbuds, "liking" links, and 140-character "tweets", etc., popular culture inevitable creates and shapes meaning in people's lives. We must assume this meaning has theological and prophetic implications. Churches, theologians, pastors, must rifle through the masses of culture to help others 'read' these elements. In a sense, we must develop, too, a theology of discernment to guide ourselves in consuming, interpreting and utilizing these cultural sources.

Likewise, I hold that paying attention to forms of popular culture can reawaken the Church to the prophetic spirit already and always at work in the world. When these

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[6] Jon Michael Spencer, *Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology*, Contributions to the study of music and dance no. 23 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 12.

[7] Ibid., 38.

forms of culture serve to challenge the status quo and systems of injustice and oppression, they remind us of our own call to speak out for the voiceless and care for the outcast and downtrodden. Any institution risks falling into complacency; the institutional church is no exception. Artists can call us back to our identity in the already-but-not-yet work towards the Kingdom of God. As artists work in the same kind of imaginative spirit as the prophets, so too they remind us of our own call to imagination—imagining the way things *could* and *ought* be in the Kingdom of God. These things ought to provoke us toward a theology and an ecclesiology that puts creativity and imagination at a place of priority.

Another pastoral implication is in the necessity of recognizing the power of telling a story as a theological act. As McClendon notes, all biography is theological; therefore both *hearing* and *telling* stories is a deeply theological act. In this way we learn more about ourselves and each other, developing greater compassion and capacity for solidarity with others' experiences. Andrew Greeley echoes this in his discussion of the sacrament of grace, where popular culture is critically important. He calls the sacrament of grace the real experience of grace in human experience, which assumes "that experiences, images, and stories of God are to be found in popular culture and indeed that these experiences, images, and stories provide a wealth of material of immediate practical use in catechetics and homiletics."[8] He argues that human experience is at the heart of both culture and religion, and therefore we cannot extract religious experience or interpretation from 'other' experiences. Religious language and conversation is essentially about telling a story, and resonating with others' stories, therefore "religion becomes a communal

[8] Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago, Ill: Thomas More Press, 1988), 18.

event when a person is able to link his [or her] own grace experience with the overarching experience of this religious tradition."[9] Thus, as we are able to, and do perceive grace in so-called secular forms, particularly the imagination and popular culture, and the church ought to take these experiences and "rearticulate, refine, re-collect, and re-present [them] and thus to deepen and enrich and challenge them by integrating them into the [Christian] Community."[10]

After examining ways that theologians, biblical interpreters and other writers have understood culture, as well as taking a brief look at ways that culture is interpreted in the broader realm of academic study, I hope to have put forth a reconstructed attempt at a theological aesthetics, one that is grounded in the tradition of human life, thought, and experience, as interpreted through a Christian lens, and one that also takes seriously biblical interpretation. It is important to understand the theories and perspective on popular culture in order to make a case for what elements of culture are helpful, genuine, and open representations of human life, struggle, and hope, particularly in relation to understanding and awareness of the divine. The questions up to this point have largely originated in and remained outside of "the Church," meaning, outside of any official religious institution or "orthodoxy," but rather, recognizing that all persons are created by God, and religious institutions are, for all intents and purposes, created by persons, that genuine theological reflection can and does occur outside of any institutionally-sanctioned outlet, or any sort of sanitized subculture.

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[9] Ibid., 68.

[10] Ibid., 75-6.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

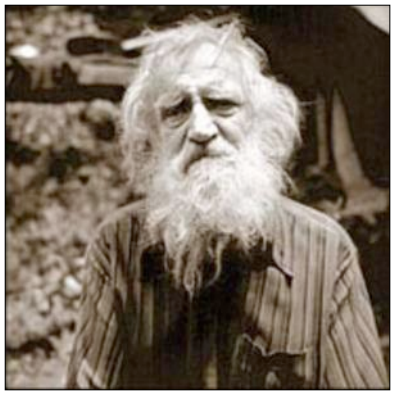
Over the Rhine Discography

Till We Have Faces (1991)

1. Eyes Wide Open
2. Someday
3. Like a Radio
4. Iron Curtain
5. Cast Me Away
6. And Can It Be
7. Gentle Wounds
8. L.A.R. Reprise
9. If I'm Drowning
10. Sea and Sky
11. Fly Dance
12. Paul and Virginia
13. Ubiquitous Hands
14. The Genius of Water

Patience (1992)

1. Jacksie
2. I've Been Slipping
3. How Does It Feel (To Be On My Mind)
4. HIDF (Reprise)
5. Sister (4:29)
6. Ils Est Dans Mon Poche
7. Flanders Fields
8. Little Genius
9. Lullabye
10. Circle of Quiet
11. I Painted My Name
12. Rhapsodie
13. Grey Monologue



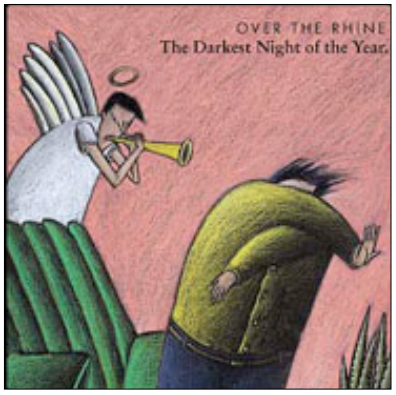
Eve (1994)

1. Happy With Myself?
2. Within Without
3. Should
4. Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander
5. Melancholy Room
6. Sleep Baby Jane
7. Daddy Untwisted
8. Birds
9. June
10. My Love is a Fever
11. Falling (Death of a Tree)

Good Dog Bad Dog (Independent) (1996)

1. Latter Days
2. All I Need is Everything
3. Etcetera Whatever
4. I Will Not Eat the Darkness
5. Faithfully Dangerous
6. The Seahorse
7. Everyman's Daughter
8. A Gospel Number
9. Poughkeepsie
10. Willoughby
11. Jack's Valentine
12. Happy To Be So
13. Go Down Easy

The Darkest Night of the Year (1996)



1. The First Noel
2. Silent Night
3. It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
4. Greensleeves
5. Little Town of Bethlehem
6. Coal Train
7. Thank You My Angel
8. Mary's Waltz
9. Up North Here Where the Stars…1945
10. Silent Night (duet)
11. Come, O Come Emmanuel
12. Amelia's Last
13. A Little Lower than the Angels

Besides (1997)

1. The People Here are Not Shy
2. Hej (I Do)
3. My Love is a Fever (Live)
4. Within Without (rough mix)
5. (An American Deejay)
6. Last Night
7. Murder
8. Dead Weight
9. Bothered
10. All I Need is Everything (chamber music mix)
11. Lucy
12. Miles
13. (Polish Deejay)
14. If I'm Drowning (Live)

Amateur Shortwave Radio (1999)

1. Like a Radio
2. Ruby Tuesday (Rolling Stones Cover)
3. Mary's Waltz
4. Blackbird (Beatles Cover)
5. Moth
6. Jack's Valentine
7. Circle of Quiet
8. Anyway
9. My Love is a Fever
10. I Will Remember

Good Dog Bad Dog (Virgin—Back Porch Re-release) (2000)

1. Latter Days
2. All I Need is Everything
3. Etcetera Whatever
4. I Will Not Eat the Darkness
5. Faithfully Dangerous
6. The Seahorse
7. Everyman's Daughter
8. Poughkeepsie
9. Willoughby
10. It's Never Quite What it Seems
11. Happy To Be So
12. Go Down Easy

Films for Radio (2001)

1. The World Can Wait
2. If Nothing Else
3. Give Me Strength
4. Fairpoint Diary
5. I Radio Heaven
6. Little Blue River/In the Garden
7. Goodbye (This is Not Goodbye)
8. Whatever You Say
9. The Body is a Stairway of Skin
10. Moth
11. When I Go

The Cutting Room Floor (2002)

1. Spinning
2. Toledo
3. If Nothing Else (Beatbox Mix)
4. Toledo (Instrumental)
5. Green-Clouded Swallowtail (Version 1.0)
6. I Let It Go
7. Give Me Strength (Acoustic)
8. I Radio Heaven (Original Demo)
9. Goodbye Strings
10. Fairpoint Diary (Original Demo)
11. It's Never Quite What It Seems (Nashville)
12. Happy and Free
13. Helpless (Live)

OHIO (2003)

Disc One:

1. B.P.D.
2. What I'll Remember Most
3. Show Me
4. Jesus In New Orleans
5. Ohio
6. Suitcase
7. Anything At All
8. Professional Daydreamer
9. Lifelong Fling
10. Changes Come

Disc Two:

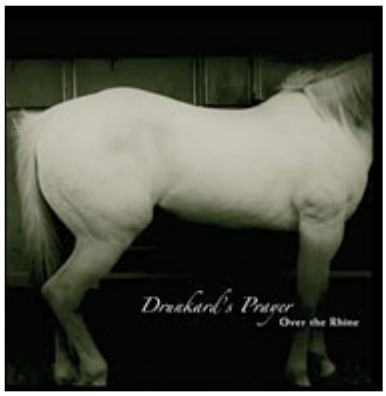
1. Long Lost Brother
2. She
3. Nobody Number One
4. Cruel and Pretty

5. Remind Us
6. How Long Have You Been Stoned
7. When You Say Love
8. Fool
9. Hometown Boy
10. Bothered
11. Idea #21 (Not Too Late)

Changes Come (2004)

1. Spinning
2. Show Me
3. She
4. Nobody #1
5. Suitcase
6. Lifelong Sunshine
7. Ohio
8. All I Need Is Everything
9. The World Can Wait
10. When I Go
11. B.P.D.
12. Cruel and Pretty
13. Changes Come

Drunkard's Prayer (2005)



1. I Want You To Be My Love
2. Born
3. Drunkard's Prayer
4. Bluer
5. Spark
6. Hush Now (Stella's Tarantella)
7. Lookin' Forward
8. Little Did I Know
9. Who Will Guard The Door
10. Firefly
11. My Funny Valentine (Rodgers and Hart)

Live from Nowhere, Volume 1 (2006)

1. Faithfully Dangerous
2. Spark
3. Born
4. Lookin' Forward
5. Drunkard's Prayer
6. White Horse
7. Etcetera Whatever
8. Fever
9. Son of a Preacher Man (Dusty Springfield cover)

10. Moondance (Van Morrison cover)
11. My Love is a Fever Again
12. Paper Moon

Discount Fireworks (2007)

1. Last Night On Earth Again
2. If Nothing Else
3. Suitcase
4. Give Me Strength
5. Latter Days
6. The World Can Wait
7. Show Me
8. Born
9. All I Need Is Everything
10. Ohio
11. Sleep Baby Jane
12. How Does It Feel? (To Be On My Mind)
13. Lookin' Forward (Live)
14. Within Without
15. Like A Radio

Live from Nowhere, Volume 2 (2007)

1. I Want You To Be My Love
2. Fever
3. Failed Christian (Ash Wednesday Mix)
4. Long Lost Brother
5. Everybody Wants To Feel Like You
6. Jesus In New Orleans
7. Anything At All
8. North Pole Man
9. Little Did I Know
10. Orphan Girl (Gillian Welch cover)
11. Baby It's Cold Outside (Frank Loesser)
12. Hush Now (Tipsy Gypsy Mix)
13. OtR: Off the Rails

Snow Angels (2007)

1. All I Ever Get For Christmas Is Blue
2. Darlin' (Christmas Is Coming)
3. White Horse
4. Little Town
5. New Redemption Song
6. Goodbye Charles
7. Snowed In With You
8. North Pole Man
9. Here It Is

10. One Olive Jingle
11. Snow Angel
12. We're Gonna Pull Through

The Trumpet Child (2007)

1. I Don't Wanna Waste Your Time
2. Trouble
3. I'm On A Roll
4. Nothing Is Innocent
5. The Trumpet Child
6. Entertaining Thoughts
7. Who'm I Kiddin' But Me
8. Let's Spend The Day In Bed
9. Desperate For Love
10. Don't Wait For Tom
11. If A Song Could Be President

Live from Nowhere, Volume 3 (2008)

1. Motherless Child (trad. Spiritual)
2. Angel Band (trad. Gospel)
3. Hush Now (with Fantasia Cadenza)
4. Trouble
5. Nothing Is Innocent
6. I'm On A Roll
7. Don't Wait For Tom
8. Drunkard's Prayer
9. Who'm I Kiddin' But Me
10. Northpole Man
11. Snow Angel
12. Latter Days

Live from Nowhere, Volume 4 (2009)

Disc One
1. Eyes Wide Open
2. How Does It Feel (To Be On My Mind)
3. HDIF Reprise
4. Within Without
5. Like A Radio
6. Conjectures Of A Guilty Bystander
7. June
8. Circle Of Quiet
9. Daddy Untwisted

Disc Two
1. Paul And Virginia
2. Poughkeepsie

3. Faithfully Dangerous
4. A Gospel Number
5. All I Need Is Everything
6. If I'm Drowning
7. I Painted My Name
8. Latter Days

The Long Surrender (2011)
1. The Laugh Of Recognition
2. Sharpest Blade
3. Rave On
4. Soon
5. Undamned
6. Infamous Love Song
7. Only God Can Save Us Now
8. Oh Yeah By The Way
9. The King Knows How
10. There's A Bluebird In My Heart
11. Days Like This
12. All My Favorite People
13. Unspoken

APPENDIX B

Indigo Girls Discography

Early 45 (1985)
1. Crazy Game
2. Soon Be To Nothing

Indigo Girls (EP) (1985)
1. Land of Canaan
2. Lifeblood
3. History of Us
4. Never Stop
5. Cold as Ice
6. Finlandia

Strange Fire (1987 Independent Release)
1. Make It Easier
2. Walk Away
3. Crazy Game
4. I Don't Wanna Know
5. You Left it Up to Me
6. Hey Jesus
7. Strange Fire
8. High Horse
9. Left Me a Fool
10. Land of Canaan
11. Blood and Fire

Strange Fire (1989 Epic Records Release)
1. Strange Fire
2. Crazy Game
3. Left Me a Fool
4. I Don't Wanna Know
5. Hey Jesus
6. Get Together
7. Walk Away
8. Make It Easier
9. You Left It Up to Me

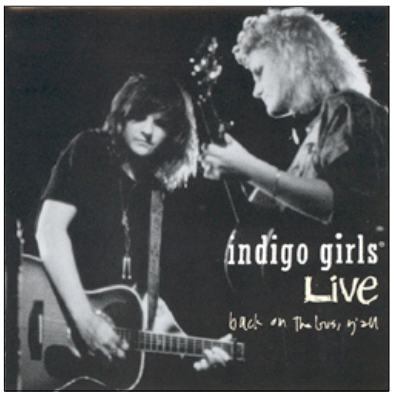
Indigo Girls (1989)

1. Closer to Fine
2. Secure Yourself
3. Kid Fears
4. Prince of Darkness
5. Blood and Fire
6. Tried to be True
7. Love's Recovery
8. Land of Canaan
9. Center Stage
10. History of Us

Nomads Indians Saints (1990)

1. Hammer And A Nail
2. Welcome Me
3. World Falls
4. Southland in the Springtime
5. 123
6. Keeper of My Heart
7. Watershed
8. Hand Me Downs
9. You And Me of the 10,000 Wars
10. Pushing the Needle Too Far
11. The Girl With The Weight Of The World In Her Hands

Back on the Bus Y'all (1991)



1. 123
2. Tried to Be True
3. You and Me of the 10,000 Wars
4. Prince of Darkness
5. Kid Fears
6. Left Me a Fool
7. All Along the Watchtower
8. 123 (Studio Version)

Rites of Passage (1992)

1. Three Hits
2. Galileo
3. Ghost
4. Joking
5. Jonas And Ezekiel
6. Love Will Come to You
7. Romeo and Juliet
8. Virginia Woolf
9. Chickenman
10. Airplane

11. Nashville
12. Let It Be Me
13. Cedar Tree

Swamp Ophelia (1994)

1. Fugitive
2. Least Complicated
3. Language or the Kiss
4. Reunion
5. Power of Two
6. Touch Me fall
7. The Wood Song
8. Mystery
9. Dead Man's Hill
10. Fare Thee Well
11. This Train Revised

1200 Curfews (1995)

Disc One

1. Joking
2. Least Complicated
3. Thin Line
4. River (Joni Mitchell Cover)
5. Strange Fire
6. Power of Two
7. Pushing the Needle Too Far
8. Virginia Woolf
9. Jonas and Ezekiel
10. Tangled Up in Blue (Bob Dylan Cover)
11. World Falls
12. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee
13. Ghost
14. Dead Man's Hill

Disc Two

1. I Don't Wanna Know
2. Galileo
3. Down By the River (Neil Young Cover)
4. Love's Recovery
5. Land of Canaan
6. Myster
7. This Train Revised
8. Back Together Again
9. Language or the Kiss
10. Chickenman
11. Midnight Train to Georgia (Gladys Knight Cover)

12. Closer to Fine
13. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee
14. Go Go Go

Shaming of the Sun (1997)

1. Shame On You
2. Get Out the Map
3. Shed Your Skin
4. It's Alright
5. Caramia
6. Don't Give That Girl a Gun
7. Leeds
8. Scooter Boys
9. Everything in Its Own Time
10. Cut It Out
11. Burn All the Letters
12. Hey Kind Friend

Come on Now Social (1999)

1. Go
2. Soon Be to Nothing
3. Gone Again
4. Trouble
5. Sister
6. Peace Tonight
7. Oziline
8. We Are Together
9. Cold Beer and Remote Control
10. Compromise
11. Andy
12. Fay Tucker

Retrospective (2000)

1. Strange Fire
2. Closer to Fine
3. Kid Fears
4. Watershed
5. Three Hits
6. Galileo
7. Ghost
8. Reunion
9. Power of Two
10. Least Complicated
11. Shame On You
12. Get Out the Map
13. Go

14. Trouble
15. Devotion
16. Leaving

Become You (2002)

1. Moment of Forgiveness
2. Deconstruction
3. Become You
4. You've Got to show
5. Yield
6. Collecting You
7. Hope Alone
8. Bitterroot
9. Our Deliverance
10. Starkville
11. She's Saving Me
12. Nuevas Señoritas

All that We Let In (2004)

1. Fill It Up Again
2. Heartache for Everyone
3. Free In You
4. Perfect World
5. All That We Let In
6. Tether
7. Come On Home
8. Dairy Queen
9. Something Real
10. Cordova
11. Rise Up

Rarities (2005)

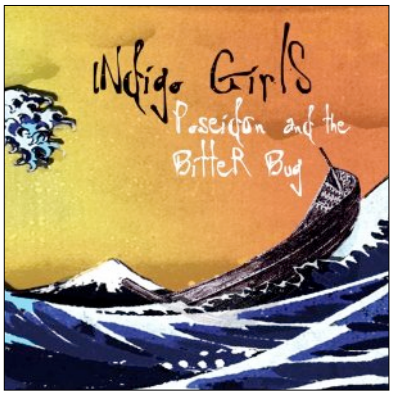
1. Clampdown (The Clash Cover)
2. I Don't Wanna Talk About It
3. Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters (Elton John cover)
4. Let Me Go Easy
5. Winthrop
6. Free of Hope
7. Shed Your Skin (Tom Morello Remix)
8. Never Stop (1986 EP version)
9. Ghost (Demo version)
10. Uncle John's Band (Grateful Dead cover)
11. I'll Give You My Skin (feat. Michael Stipe of REM)
12. Free In You (Dave Cooley remix)
13. Point Hope
14. Ramblin' Round (Woody Guthrie Cover)

15. Cold As Ice
16. Walk Your Valley
17. It Won't Take Long
18. Finlandia

Despite Our Differences (2006)

1. Pendulum Swinger
2. Little Perennials
3. I Believe in Love
4. Three County Highway
5. Run
6. Rock and Roll Heaven's Gate
7. Lay My Head Down
8. Money Made You Mean
9. Fly Away
10. Dirt and Dead Ends
11. All the Way
12. They Won't Have Me
13. Last Tears

Poseidon and the Bitter Bug (2009)



1. Digging for Your Dream
2. Sugar Tongue
3. Love of Our Lives
4. Driver Education
5. I'll Change
6. Second Time Around
7. What Are You Like?
8. Ghost of the Gang
9. Fleet of Hope
10. True Romantic

Deluxe Version bonus tracks (Acoustic Versions)

1. Ghost of the Gang
2. I'll Change
3. Sugar Tongue
4. Love of Our Lives
5. Salty South
6. Digging for Your Dream
7. Second Time Around
8. What Are You Like?
9. Driver Education
10. Fleet of Hope
11. True Romantic

Staring Down the Brilliant Dream (2010)

Disc One

1. Heartache For Everyone
2. Closer to Fine
3. Go
4. Come on Home
5. Devotion
6. Cold Beer and Remote Control
7. Moment of Forgiveness
8. Fill it Up Again
9. Sugar Tongue
10. Fly Away
11. Oziline
12. Don't Think Twice, It's All Right (Bob Dylan Cover)
13. Kid Fears
14. Watershed
15. Shame On You

Disc Two

1. Get Out the Map
2. Salty South
3. The Wood Song
4. Three County Highway
5. Digging for Your Dream
6. Rock and Roll Heaven's Gate
7. I Believe in Love
8. Fugitive
9. Cordova
10. What Are You Like?
11. Second Time Around
12. Love of Our Lives
13. Become You
14. Prince of Darkness
15. Tether
16. Wild Horses (Rolling Stones Cover)

Holly Happy Days (2010)

1. I Feel the Christmas Spirit
2. It Really Is (A Wonderful Life)
3. Holly Night
4. Your Holiday Song
5. I'll Be Home for Christmas
6. Mistletoe
7. Peace Child
8. The Wonder Song
9. In the Bleak Midwinter
10. Happy Joyous Hanukkah
11. Angels We Have Heard on High
12. There's Still My Joy

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