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## Black Song, White Song: Salvation Through The Radio in The Apostle and Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?

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# Black Song, White Song: Salvation Through The Radio in *The Apostle* and *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*

## **Abstract**

*The Apostle* and *Oh Brother* narratives both move through the theological framework of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. It is not just the narrative and visual impact of these movies that have given them success. It is also the hermeneutical effect on the audience of the powerful music that hails from an authentic and uniquely American biblical apocalyptic tradition that gives the stories their optimism and hope. Because of the radio and the authentic folk musical traditions of the black and Appalachian communities, these songs of transformation have given the world American popular music. In both these movies, new life is realized through mass communication: the radio.

The profound effect of music on the human experience cannot be underestimated and music in film has profound effect of taking us into a story's imagination. A recent report in the Ottawa Citizen, July 2002, commented on a study done by Dr. Avram Goldstein of Stanford University in the United States. He analyzed the responses of more than 250 people and found that music gave 96 percent of the respondents greater 'thrills' than a scene in a movie, play, ballet or book.<sup>1</sup> By 'thrills', Dr. Goldstein meant that there is more ecstasy in music than there is in even sexual activity. The word ecstasy means 'ex' for 'outside' and 'stasis' for 'standing.' Music is in direct relation to the spiritual experience and has the power to leave one standing outside oneself. Songs implant themselves in the right brain and in fact, remarkably, even when there is severe left brain damage that wipes out most language skills (aphasia) many patients are still able to sing the words to songs they know well, although they cannot speak them.<sup>2</sup> Since songs are all around us through the mass media such as music videos, walkmans, Internet, radio, concerts and CDs stores, what does that mean for the spiritual imagination? And what is the relationship of music with the audiences of films? What kind of imagination is at work in music of films?

For consideration of these questions, the theological framework widely used by such theologians as Walter Brueggemann will aid the search for the answer. The framework of 'orientation, disorientation and new orientation' is well known and is

exemplified in Brueggemann's *'The Message of the Psalms,'* and used by many liberation theologians. My main focus is the theological relationship of biblical apocalyptic imagination on American popular culture. Two American films, *'The Apostle'* and *'Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?'* illustrate the impact of this imagination in American songs on the genre of these movies.

The Biblical story of orientation, disorientation and new orientation runs repeatedly throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The orientation is one of place, identity and promise. The disorientation is seen in the displacement of the persons or community through the experience of 'other'. This 'other' may be 'the world', historical, transcendent, social, and this experience may be individual or communal. The new orientation is not re-orientation. It is liberation through the 'other', a new beginning, transformation to new hope where there had been none, new relationships from broken ones. The story of Israel is one of having a place, Canaan, losing their place through exile to such places as Egypt and Babylon and regaining the new beginning through salvation through Yahweh. In all cases it was Yahweh who saved. For the children of Israel, the story is physical, historical and committed to memory. The schema is no less evident in the New Testament as seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>3</sup> For the Jewish experience the physical experience of history is their theology and this theology is evidenced in language and especially the Psalms. In Psalm 137 for example:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

The experience of other socially displaced peoples can also fit the schema of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. The song of a people is borne from suffering, exile and displacement.

The American historical experience was often understood as one of new beginnings and opportunity for peoples fleeing European oppression. This was indeed often the case for many. However it is my contention that for two groups in particular, America did not offer freedom but oppression and exploitation. One group is, obviously, the black slaves from Africa brought with them their rich legacy of music. The other group was originally from the British Isles; the isolated Appalachians also retained their Celtic heritage in music. At various times both groups were marginalized, exploited and powerless. It is when both these groups in their disposition of disorientation encountered an apocalyptic Protestant Christianity and intermingled their folk musical traditions together with the advent

of technology such as the phonograph and radio that American popular music was born. As Robert Duvall, the star of the *Apostle* noted in an interview about making the movie, 'You get below the Mason-Dixon line and you have some of the best music, culture, the two races, the literature, and it's so rich, so deeply rich in many things, so why not try to get it right if you're going to make a film of southern religion? That's what I wanted to do.'<sup>4</sup>

John Dixon in *Art and the Theological Imagination* laments that history only leaves behind physical art of a people to testify to their story and that the Western imagination has suppressed the Celtic-German heritage and that the West is currently in the grip of a Greek and Roman imagination.<sup>5</sup> I would suggest that this situation has been resolved to some extent. With the advent of the technology of the radio the Celtic and Afro-American heritage is alive and well in the world through the art of music; and in this case, popular music. The theological imagination that has produced American popular music started from a biblically apocalyptic and an exilic theology. By an apocalyptic theology I mean a worldview of the suffering community in the end times and a pessimistic view of the present.<sup>6</sup> For both the black and mountain communities the powerlessness and bondage of the present time will be overcome when God Himself intervenes either in the personal life of the believer or for the community. Liberation and salvation become almost synonymous. Protestant theology, in the main, discourages outward symbols

therefore the expression of the spirituality is in the music of the community using the highly visual book of Revelation and the stories of liberation. The theology is individualistic with an emphasis on the experience of conversion and salvation but also communal in worship and praise. The number of apocalyptic sects such as Seventh Day Adventist, Pre-millennium Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses that have arisen in the United States is testimony to the atmosphere of apocalypticism.

The film *The Apostle* is overtly Pentecostal Christian. Robert Duvall's production had to be financed privately since Hollywood was not interested in the subject. Duvall managed to put together an amazing film. The whole movie rides on music, but not music written for the film itself, but music that is the authentic product of a faith community. In this case, it has both black and white gospel genres. The second scene of the film the whole Christian faith story is unfolded within about four minutes of film. Euylyss Dewey Jr. or Sonny, the main character, and his mother arrive at the scene of an accident on the highway. While the police are waiting for the ambulances, Sonny walks over to where one of the vehicles lies with two seriously injured people inside. As he walks over he quotes from Ezekiel 16: 6<sup>7</sup> (The prophet Ezekiel has God saying "Live" to Jerusalem imaged as an abandoned newborn baby girl in her birth blood with the umbilical cord left to haemorrhage.) When Sonny arrives at the car, he asks the young male occupant if

he is ready to meet the Lord. The young man receives Jesus and is assured that he will be in heaven if that's what God willed in the situation. He says 'thank you' to Sonny. The young female who the audience was supposed to perceive as dead moves and holds her friend's hand. A police officer arrives and tells Sonny he's not supposed to be there and challenged the usefulness of his presence. Sonny moves away and sings to himself, 'Ain't no grave gonna keep my body down' a African American spiritual and 'Victory is Mine!' By the time he gets back to the car, he tells his mother, 'Mama, we made news in heaven this morning!' Driving away his mother rejoices and sings 'Far Side of Jordan'. In those few minutes, the narrative and the visual effect encompassed:

- Orientation of the covenant of God with his people,
- The disorientation of being separated from God in a crisis in death.

The new orientation of the assurance of God's love and eternal life for the believer, the resurrection of the dead and the gathering of the saints in heaven.

Throughout the whole scene music has testified to the narrative.

The theological framework again unfolds throughout the narrative of the movie. Sonny runs a successful church in Fort Worth, Texas. He loses his church to his wife (Pentecostal churches have a historical basis for their egalitarian ministries for both men and women), loses his wife to another man and is exiled

from his community by killing his wife's lover. He is disoriented from his previous life. Indeed the disorientation becomes evident even before he kills his wife's lover in his ranting at God. The relationship of Jesus and Sonny never waivers but Sonny does not understand whether it is God or the Devil who is responsible for the situation. Outside circumstances do not shake his relationship with God. While on the run he baptizes himself and gives himself a new name "The Apostle E.F." The word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent'. Sonny has transformed his situation from victim to enabler. He now becomes the medium for the theme of the movie; life from death. He starts a church that gives new life and hope to people of an area in Louisiana. In the background there is the echo of another displaced people, the Acadians or Cajuns of Louisiana. The distinctive zydeco music plays in the background while Sonny tries to phone home to Texas.

The radio station is pivotal to the movie; it is the medium through which people hear both Sonny preaching and also the gospel music both ultimately responsible for filling the little church. Through mass communication the mission is accomplished. The radio has a remarkable knack of hiding race and since the music traditions in gospel music are mixed and Sonny preaches like a 'black', the church attracts both peoples. The racial integration of church spawns objection by one of the characters is eventually won over to the gospel and included in the community of faith. Robert Duvall in writing the script, showed tremendous insight

to the Christian themes and doesn't even save his character. The radio is also the medium by which Sonny is traced by the police after his wife hears him. Sonny must meet the consequences of the earthly law. The new orientation is now for the little church. Through Sonny and the radio there is life where none was supposed to exist. The last scene shows him on a 'chain gang' again sharing his message of Jesus to the fellow prisoners through song. The medium for the message continues.

The film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* Follows the same distinctive American flow through the framework, albeit with a much more humorous and frenetic pace. We do not see the hero's orientation with home and family at the beginning as the movie opens in the state of disorientation; Ulysses Everett (from the Gk Odysseus 'to hate') McGill is criminal on a chain gang in the Depression of the 1930's. In this film, the hero is the subject of the transformation and new orientation. He wants to go home to stop the marriage of his ex-wife Penny. He has to escape with two fellow prisoners who he has promised a share of a treasure. Pete and Delmar are portrayed as country bumpkins and McGill on the other hand fancies himself as a rational man, not given to religion. This movie is hugely dependent on the music. Indeed for the producers it was the Southern music that inspired the movie. Again as with the Apostle many of the songs are predominantly from a Christian apocalyptic tradition; Angel Band, I'll Fly Away, Down To The River To Pray. The producer, director team of the Coen Brothers also deliberately

based the movie as a continuation of the 1941 movie Sullivan's Travels. The film avoids using the term 'Jesus' even in the baptism scene, but it has many biblical themes throughout the journey of the threesome, e.g. the baptism of Pete and Demar and the black blind prophet promising salvation. The threesome is over and against the worldly forces that conspire against the mission of getting home or to the treasure. The disorientation of the hero is revealed in comic scenes of ludicrous proportion. As with the Apostle the radio becomes a means to salvation. McGill thinks of a way to make money by recording a song at the local radio station. The producer in the radio station is blind and can't make up his mind whether he wants black music or white music. McGill's group now includes a young black man who has sold his soul to the devil for the ability to play the guitar, they decide to be any colour the producer wants. As the 'Soggy Bottom Boys', they record the song 'I Am A Man Of Constant Sorrow' a 1913 farewell song of hardship that becomes a hit and eventually the means for their deliverance. The old worldview of the bigoted gubernatorial candidate's biggest complaint about McGill's group is that 'They's integrated!' Normally, they would have all been recaptured and sentenced to death or life imprisonment but they are redeemed on the radio with a pardon from the incumbent Governor of Mississippi. The radio and mass communication has saved them. Instead of death they receive freedom. However while McGill tries to recover his wife's wedding ring from the old homestead, the group encounters the devil again who says he has not heard of their pardon because he doesn't have a radio.

As they pray to God to get them out of their imminent execution a flood saves them. The reality of almost drowning gives them life. The symbols are overtly biblical, and there are even echoes of Revelation 12 as the earth acts on God's behalf to rescue those who have already been redeemed, McGill and his friends are delivered once again. The movie ends with McGill and his wife re-united with his seven daughters and the blind prophet singing 'Angel Band,' a song about death and resurrection, inferring that the ultimate end will be in heaven.

As exiles McGill and Sonny have both encountered a situation that would have in all ordinary circumstances meant death and the end of hope. Instead, by happenstance or mission they are the means of new life and liberation for others. Sonny despite murder begins a church through the radio, McGill through selfishness and his friends' greed manages to save the young black man Tommy Johnson from death, expose a racist political candidate, kill a monster, resist temptation and secure salvation also through the radio. Both have managed to bring life where there was death. As Thomas Raitt sums up the point well in his book, *A Theology of Exile*:

Exiled people are attractive to God ... They are forced to be mobile, travel light, to stand naked before God. They have no enduring worldly roots, no enduring worldly security. They are vulnerable. When God come to these exiles, he is perceived in his Godness. With them he has an open ended future ... They are a good risk. He gives them the transforming power of his Spirit; he heals their broken and depleted humanity ... Exile is the cradle for

theodicy and eschatology, death and resurrection, a trusting end and a new beginning.<sup>8</sup>

Burton Mack in his book *A Myth of Innocence* stated that American popular culture and Christian mythology have intertwined to produce a strong, secular sense of identity. Every achievement was God's continuing affirmation that a divine appointment was being fulfilled. Trial, exodus and redemption had already been accomplished. However in the last forty years this innocence has been lost by the recognition of events. Mack asserts that the fact that U.S. is unwilling to join the human race of lost innocence and to settle for less than the Kingdom of God, an apocalyptic mentality is again in evidence.<sup>9</sup>

I would agree that there is a Christian apocalyptic spirituality within American culture, but I would assert that there are two parallel streams. There is a Hollywood mass media and mistaken understanding of apocalypticism as human salvation through human intervention and there is the actual Judeo-Christian understanding.<sup>10</sup> They are not compatible. Hollywood throughout recent years produced films alien to the spiritual consciousness of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition. The fact that *The Apostle* was an independent film is testimony to this fact. The Hollywood Armageddon as a battle between good and evil does not even exist biblically and does not appear in the songs and hymns of the theology:

And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon.

And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done! Rev. 16: 15, 16 (KJV)

There is no dualism in Christian apocalypticism: God is in charge; 'It is done'. The main theme of an apocalyptic understanding is theodicy or justice of God in the face of historic evil. In these movies the historic evil is illustrated as individual and social, i.e. Sonny and McGill personally, and collectively in the Depression and the race issue. Rather than escapist, liberation/salvation is real to the characters. Recognition of the 'world' and as a place of disorientation, speaks to a psychological and spiritual reality of relationships, experience, mortality, history and the capacity of human imagination to think of a future with hope. The use of these songs has a hermeneutic effect on the audience. One doesn't have to even be a Christian or an American to encounter the struggle within them. The *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* CD has gone platinum in sales not just because the American audience rediscovered this art, but also internationally, these folk songs of transformation are now active in the imagination of the western world just as they were in the social struggles of America in the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Through two flawed characters in miserable circumstances, these two films have

spoken positively about hope, renewal, new orientation and reconciliation in the face of evil through a unique American genre.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Face the Music: Songs beat sex', *Ottawa Citizen*, July 16, 2002. P. A13.

<sup>2</sup> Jourdain, Robert, *Music, The Brain and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination*. Wm Morrow & Co., Inc. New York, 1997 p. 274-275.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms*. Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 10 - 13.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Apostle: An Interview with Robert Duvall' by Bill Blizek and Ronald Burke, *Journal of Religion & Film*. Vol. 2, No. 1 April 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Dixon, John W. *Art And The Theological Imagination*, New York, Seabury Press, 1978 p. 78

<sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Theology*, Edited by A. Richardson & John Bowden, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia. 1983. p.29

<sup>7</sup> 'And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.' (KJV)

<sup>8</sup> Raitt, Thomas M. *A Theology of Exile*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977 p. 299-300.

<sup>9</sup> Mack, Burton L. *A Myth of Innocence*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1988 p. 369 - 370

<sup>10</sup> *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Edited by J. Martin & Conrad Ostwalt Jr. Boulder, Westview Press, 1995 p. 62.

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