

Joe Dolce

Biblical Imagery in Popular Music: Songwriting of the Creative Infidels

Why do songwriters like **Bob Dylan, Nick Cave, Leonard Cohen** and many others, who are either non-practicing Christians or Jews and in some cases declared atheists, make use of so much Judeo-Christian imagery in their songwriting?

I'm not talking about real believers. When actively practicing Christians and Jews write songs, they are testifying. I'm talking about the folks that do NOT go to church or synagogue and you might say pretty much do not practice exactly what they preach.

The use of religious metaphor is a handy way to try on the personae of the prophet. Everyone likes to believe they are *the chosen one* every now and then - an extension of the first/only child syndrome. Also the use of religious text and/or myth is an effective way to create the *illusion* of resonance in lyric writing. For instance:

*Jack and Jill went up the hill
to fetch a bucket of water*

isn't as deep sounding as

*Joseph Jack and Mary Jill Goeth up Golgotha Hill
to Fetch a Pail of Blood and Nail.*

A useful reason for turning to the Bible for imagery by infidel songsmiths is for simple shock-value: getting people's attention by a relatively risk-free flirting with the sacrilegious. I say risk-free because Kinky Friedman's, *They Ain't Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore*, is unlikely to raise death threats from either Jews or Christians whereas a truly controversial and dangerous song title like, *They Ain't Making Paedophiles Like Mohammed Anymore*, for instance, would definitely earn you a half dozen fatwas. (Heck, the local Iman will probably put me on the short list just for mentioning it.)

Writers don't mess with the Koran. Yet. But there was a time when Greeks, Romans, Christians and Jews could be stoned to death for taking the name of God in vain. Heresy is still alive and well in fundamentalist Islamic culture. The name of God may change but the fanatics stay the same.

I'm going to illustrate some of the religious imagery of Dylan, Cave and Cohen and look at a little of their backgrounds. I'll just reference fragments of the songs as you can find most of the full versions on the internet.

LEONARD COHEN

"I love Christ. I see Christianity as the world historic mission of certain ideas that the Jews developed. Christianity is a mighty movement, and that is the way those ideas penetrated the world. Christianity is the missionary arm of Judaism. As Maimonides said, 'we're all working for the world to come.'"

Christianity is the missionary arm of Judaism! Now there's an original thought. I suspect that Leonard Cohen, like so many other people who use Jesus to mouth Old Testament values, is writing his own personal Frankenscripture. His Prince of Peace and Non-violence obviously saw no conflict playing for the Israeli troops of Ariel Sharon for two weeks during the build-up to the Yom Kippur War.

Cohen was born to a middle-class Jewish family of Polish-Lithuanian ancestry in 1934 in Montreal, Quebec, which makes him 77. His father died when he was nine years old. Like many other Jews named Cohen, his family made a proud claim of descent from the Kohanim:

"I had a very Messianic childhood. I was told I was a descendant of Aaron, the high priest."

Kurt Cobain famously sang, "give me a Leonard Cohen afterworld so I can sigh eternally."

One woman friend in New York once said he was "a very complicated man. Complicated in a very grown-up way. I mean, he makes Dylan seem childish."

I hold this image of Leonard Cohen from an interview I read recently: lighting up a fresh cigarette before every sentence up at his Zen monastery retreat. A 77-year-old man seeking inner balance yet he still chain smokes. Isn't his Zen master supposed to hit him with the stick when he does this? What about starting with the obvious things first like tobacco addiction and then working your way up to the Monkey Lotus Posture?

God is Alive, Magic is Afoot -

"God is alive; Magic is afoot

God is alive; Magic is afoot

God is afoot; Magic is alive

Alive is afoot...Magic never died..."

(The complete and quite long version of this is my favourite Cohen piece taken from his book *Beautiful Losers*. But placing Magic and God in the same sentence would have earned Cohen a *Burn at the Stake Certificate* in medieval times.)

Suzanne -

"Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said *All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them*
But he himself was broken
Long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone."

Suzanne was the first way most of us were introduced to the writing of Leonard Cohen.

Hallelujah -

" Now I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord . . . "
"You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name . . . "
"I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah . . . "

Some others:

That Don't Make It Junk -

"I know that I'm forgiven, but I don't know how I know."

Here It Is -

"Here is your cross, your nails and your hill;
and here is your love, that lists where it will."

By The Rivers Dark -

"And I did forget my holy song:
and I had no strength In Babylon."

The Land Of Plenty -

"For the Christ who has not risen, from the caverns of the heart
for the innermost decision, that we cannot but obey -
for what's left of our religion, I lift my voice and pray . ."

NICK CAVE

When asked if he had any interest in other religions, or in a broader, non-religious spirituality, Nick replied: "Oh, a passing, skeptical kind of interest. I'm a hammer-and-nails kind of guy."

Nick Cave was born in 1957 in Victoria, Australia, making him 54. He was raised as an Anglican and sang in the boys choir at Wangaratta Cathedral. Later in his education he sang in the school choir at Melbourne's Caulfield Grammar School.

"Nick Cave enjoys a love-hate relationship with a bona fide, fire-and-brimstone Old Testament God; in his music, he praises God, yet twists like a broken marionette under God's wrath. Nick Cave's God is not ambivalent, nor is he kind. This is a God who is waiting around the corner to trip you, who delights in his cruel plan, and whose meddling with justice and revenge cannot be fathomed by a mere mortal man." LJ Lindhurst

I still remember the first time I heard *Big Jesus Trash Can* off the first **BirthDay Party** album. The engineer that produced the record stuck contact microphones onto pieces of roofing tin and placed them in front of the speakers of the guitar amps for more grunt. The tortured sound just jumped off that disc:

Big Jesus Trash Can -

" Big Jesus soulmates Trash Can
fucking rotten business this
bot feet in the bad-boot
siff in the crypt, babay, like a rock
rock-rock-rock
Big-Jesus soul-mates Trash-Can
pumped me fulla Trash at least it smelt like Trash
wears a suit of Gold (got greasy hair)
but God gave me sex appeal
well-well-well-rock
he drives a trash can
he's comin to my town."

Nick Cave probably has more Biblical references per square inch than any other non-practicing Christian writer out there. Here're just a few:

Up Jumped the Devil -

" I was born on the day
That my poor mother died
I was cut from her belly
With a Stanley knife
My daddy did a jig
With the drunk midwife
Who's that younder all in flames
Dragging behind him a sack of chains
Who's that younder all in flames
Up jumped the Devil and he staked his claim. "

The Mercy Seat * -

"How Christ was born into a manger
And like some ragged stranger
Died upon the cross
And might I say it seems so fitting in its way
He was a carpenter by trade
Or at least that's what I'm told
Like my good hand I
tattooed E.V.I.L. across its brother's fist
That filthy five! They did nothing to challenge or resist.
In Heaven His throne is made of gold
The ark of his Testament is stowed
A throne from which I'm told
All history does unfold.
Down here it's made of wood and wire
And my body is on fire
And God is never far away.
Into the mercy seat I climb
My head is shaved, my head is wired . . "

ie. * the Electric Chair. Johnny Cash recorded this.

Red Right Hand -

" You'll see him in your nightmares, you'll see him in your dreams
He'll appear out of no where but he aint what he seems
You'll see him in your head, on the TV screen
And hey buddy, I'm warning you to turn it off
He's a ghost, he's a god, he's a man, he's a guru
You're one microscopic cog in his catastrophic plan

designed and directed by his Red Right Hand."

Fable of the Brown Ape -

"Farmer Emmerich went into his barn
And found a cow suckling a serpent
And a brown ape clanking a heavy chain
Said Farmer Emmerich to the ape
Never ask me to come into this barn again."

BOB DYLAN

" I went to Bible school at an extension of this church out in the Valley in Reseda, California. It was affiliated with the church, but I'm not a believer in that born-again type thing. . . . it's the people who live under tyranny and oppression, the plain, simple people, that count, like the multitude of sheep. They'll see that God is coming. Somebody representing Him will be on the scene. Not some crackpot lawyer or politician with the mark of the beast, but somebody who makes them feel holy. . . . people are going to be running to find out about God, and who are they going to run to? They're gonna run to the Jews, 'cause the Jews wrote the book, and you know what? The Jews ain't gonna know. They're too busy in the fur business and in the pawnshops and in sending their kids to some atheist school. They're too busy doing all that stuff to know. People who believe in the coming of the Messiah live their lives right now as if he was here. That's my idea of it, anyway. I know people are going to say to themselves, "What the fuck is this guy talking about?" But it's all there in black and white, the written and unwritten word. I don't have to defend this. The scriptures back me up. I didn't ask to know this stuff. It just came to me at different times from experiences throughout my life."

Here are a few lyric examples from Father Bob's extensive earthly Canon:

Property of Jesus -

"He's the property of Jesus, resent him to the bone
you got something better, you've got a heart of stone.'

Ye Shall Be Changed

"Ye shall be changed, ye shall be changed
In a twinkling of an eye, when the last trumpet blows
The dead will arise and burst out of your cloths
And ye shall be changed."

Shades of *The Rapture*.

When He Returns -

"Of every earthly plan that be known to man, he is unconcerned,
he's got plans of his own to set up his throne, when he returns."

Gotta Serve Somebody -

" But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
you're gonna have to serve somebody,
well, it may be the devil or it may be the lord
but you're gonna have to serve somebody. "

God Knows -

" God knows there's a purpose, God knows there's a chance,
God knows you can rise above the darkest hour of any circumstance."

Father Of Night -

" Father of grain, father of wheat, Father of cold and father of heat,
Father of air and father of trees, who dwells in our hearts and our
memories,
Father of minutes, father of days, Father of whom we most solemnly
praise."

Tryin' to Get to Heaven -

" Everyday your memory goes dimmer,
It doesn't haunt me like it did before.
I've been walkin' through the middle of nowhere,
Tryin' to get to heaven before they close the door."

Someone asked me last week, *Joe, do you even believe in God?*

Is that a multiple choice? It's like asking somebody, *do you believe in Sky?*

Of course, I believe in Sky - and I believe in God. But Belief is really the wrong word here. Perceive is more accurate. Each of us perceives spirituality differently. Even Jews and Christians. John Stoltenberg once said that there are as many different Bibles as people. We each pick and choose our personal canon and ignore the rest. The King James Version alone had over 100,000 translation errors. Some profound ones, too, like: *The Kingdom of God is within you. . .* which more accurately should have been rendered: *The Kingdom of God is among you.* An emphasis on community over self-discovery.

Every astronomer maps out a different patch of the infinite cosmos. There is no once-and-for-all definitive Book of Sky. Or final installment of

the Book of God. Nor will there ever be. Today's myths were yesterday's religions. But don't knock myth. Myths are the true indestructible library of the spirit.

Jean Cocteau said, in the liner notes to his film *Orpheus*:

“ Myth is like a key that opens even the most unsympathetic soul to writing. I have always preferred myth to history because history consists of truths which in the end turn into lies, while myth consists of lies which finally turn into truths.”

Our major significant religious paradigm is grafted deep into our psyche during our early childhood years, depending on whatever belief system our parents and teachers taught us. Kids from Catholic families, who go to Catholic churches and attend Catholic schools, receive a stainless steel Catholic cookie cutter template. Same with Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Scientologists. This template is as much a part of us as our sex or the colour of our skin. Of course, as we grow into independent thinkers, and develop away from herd mentality, we can re-train ourselves not to judge people by skin-colour, sexual preferences or religious beliefs. We can, in fact, change ourselves completely. But our original religious etching always stays in place. We never forget our first Spiritual Lover. And like an archaeological dig, Higher Education is stacked layer upon layer, over time, but the echo of the church bell, the cantor or the chanting Iman can always be heard.

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