

Southern Rail's gospel music for the journey

I listen to these songs with a longing for the unshakeable faith they express.

by [Richard Higgins](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



Bluegrass band Southern Rail performing in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire. Photo by Ken Tibert.

On most days, my theological views line up with those of God's frozen people—genteel, East Coast liberal Protestants who have a healthy skepticism toward the Bible and don't clap in church. The other days are when I visit an adult child of mine trying to recover from addiction in a city two hours away. I get on the highway, pop in a CD, and pretty soon I'm shaken to the brake pedal with a God-

praising, dashboard-banging, hallelujah-singing faith.

I go to Gloryland with some of Christianity's least likely apologists: Southern Rail, a Massachusetts bluegrass band formed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology 40 years ago, whose members are not particularly religious. It nevertheless plays Bible-based songs to wake Lazarus from the dead. Southern Rail's uplifting, banjo-picking gospel music disarms my skeptical, smart-aleck, Harvard Divinity School theology, fortifies my hope on my mission of love, and gives sight to a man long blind to this tradition—me.

I'm sure I wouldn't listen if it was a "Christian group." But Southern Rail isn't out to convert anyone. It's just devoted to bluegrass music, which happens to be marinated in hard-core Bible Belt Christianity. So they sing a lot of gospel songs about trains, trucks, coal mines, love, money, and Jesus.

In the lyrics, I hear familiar expressions of orthodox Christian belief that, taken as abstract propositions, I long ago wrote off. But as rendered by Southern Rail, I hear them anew. I don't think, for example, that our immortal souls reunite in heaven with loved ones who have gone before. A song about riding the train to glory voices that hope with such earnest fervor and joy, however, that I think about some indefinable union with God in this life, which does seem real. Passengers on that train leave behind all pain and sorrow, but they must forsake all earthly gain, "for the baggage car will not be taken." Am I too attached to the baggage of my life for that ride? No, save me a seat on board! I can't buy a ticket because only faith can make my "reservation to that sweet destination"? I nod yes at that, wonder if my own faith is up to it, and turn up the volume because a Wal-Mart truck is going by.

In another song, the metaphor switches: this one holds that we can't ride to heaven.

You got to walk your way to heaven on the road to the other side.
On the road that leads to glory, where the gates are open wide.
It's a long and uphill struggle but the Lord's right by your side.
You got to walk your way to heaven—you gotta to walk 'cause you can't ride.

Here too, the lyrics yield a truth beyond the literal: only small steps every day will get us there. The secular iteration might be that you can't take Uber to the destination of a lifetime. But for me, the homespun yet resonant Christian

imagery—the gates and road to glory, the Lord by our side—proclaims that more powerfully.

I do not own a large bluegrass collection—just four Southern Rail CDs. I listen to them, binge style, whenever I go to see my daughter. Every mile I drive I am aware that she has known more suffering than any young person should. In the argot of the music, she became lost and is seeking a way. I listen with a full heart and a longing for the unshakable faith the songs express, the faith of people who know the straight and narrow way to a resurrected life. I resist the hope at first, but finally the music touches the unforgettable promise that, all evidence to the contrary, God will protect my daughter, lead her not into temptation, and deliver her from evil.

Jim Muller, the guitarist and lead singer, and Sharon Horovitch, who plays upright bass, started Southern Rail in 1978 while graduate students at MIT. Rounded out today by Rich Stillman on banjo and John Tibert on mandolin, the group plays traditional and progressive bluegrass and does bluegrass covers of country, pop, and rock songs. About a quarter of its repertoire is gospel. The band plays in liberal Protestant worship services and has performed at Christian music festivals, but the musicians all come from different faith backgrounds. All are moral and humanistic, says Muller, but none is a churchgoer or especially religious.

“We pick gospel material with a universal message that’s inclusive, not divisive,” said Horovitch, who is Jewish and grew up in Montreal, far from Kentucky’s blue hills.

The songs touch me because they aren’t sermons. They are cries of lament and praise.

“I’m a musician, not a minister,” Muller tells me at a church coffeehouse concert in Massachusetts. “Music is my ministry.” Raised Catholic, Muller long ago decided that “church participation tended to make me a worse person,” so he chose his own religious path. “I hold to some Christian ideals, but I don’t know if I could claim to be a Christian.” He said he tries to follow certain messages in the Bible that ring true—like loving others and not hiding one’s talents. “God will decide if I’ve succeeded. In the meantime I just do the best I can.”

And his theology? “I used to say I was a pantheist, that I see God in most everything, but then I heard that ‘pantheist’ is actually more specific and that I fall under a different term, but I don’t remember what it is and confess I don’t worry about it.” He pauses. “Gosh, this is the most I’ve discussed my beliefs with anyone in the last

30 years.”

The gospel songs touch me because they are precisely that. They are songs, not sermons, about life’s pains and sorrows, such as the loss of loved ones, too much work, too little work, drink, worries about bills—and also about its joys, the good things that happen, family, the love of God and hope of being risen. They are truly American psalms, cries of lament and praise from hardscrabble rural corners of our country. They are set not to harp or lute, like the songs of David, but to banjo, fiddle, or mandolin. The fact that Southern Rail isn’t proselytizing makes the beauty and earnest faith in them more palpable.

Maybe it’s the break from routine or the time to think, but the music directs my thoughts to the gold of what matters, the big things, like the hard fact that we are mortal. Which prompts the thought, as I zip along the interstate, that I had better be ready for “Some Glad Morning” when “We Shall Rise” and “There Will Be Singing” as I cross the “River of Jordan” and either “Walk [My] Way to Heaven” or board that train to “Gloryland.”

As I hurtle along, one song asks if I know where I’m going. It speaks to anyone, of any faith, who pauses for a minute’s reflection on the larger arc of our lives.

Do you know, my friend, where you’re going?
Have you heard that word from on high?
Will you reap those seeds that you’re sowing
When you’re called to your home by and by?

“The Only Bible” is another favorite. It applies a practical, rather than exegetical, lens to the Bible, asking those who read it if they are walking the talk, as it is known in Alcoholics Anonymous. I’m a churchgoing person of faith who writes about religion professionally, but the songs get me thinking: Has that changed the way I live?

And given the circumstances, one verse always challenges and chokes me up:

There’s someone in your family who sees you every day,
One who may be searching for the straight and narrow way.
They’re watching you to see if your beliefs are really true
And to see how much the Savior’s living in the heart of you.

“Everything we do” and say should reflect the Bible’s lead, goes the chorus, because “you may be the only Bible someone ever reads.”

The ballad “Mary Did You Know,” a modern Christian classic by Mark Lowry, breaks me down, in a good way, because it haunts me with the thought that it may all be true after all. Did Mary know her baby will “one day walk on water,” will “save our sons and daughters?” That he “has come to make you new,” that the child she has delivered “will soon deliver you”?

Did Mary know her baby boy “has walked where angels trod?” The next line stirs memories of a little baby I held many years ago: “And when you kiss your little baby, you’ve kissed the face of God.” My view of the road can get a little blurry at that point, but I step on the gas. I’m thankful that, today at least, I know where I’m going.

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