

grounded on specific historical conditions, helps making sense of the evolution and changes within the Italian-American tradition. Her investigation into several instances of the “latent” mode provide convincing support for the interpretation of its connection with the multiple possibilities of negotiating an identity that opened up after WWII. *Italian American Cultural Fictions* will provide a precious reference point for further research on this controversial period of Italian-American cultural history, and scholars might want to follow De Lucia’s example of identifying narrative strands into disparate and seemingly non-narrative sources.

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Randall J. Stephens. *The Devil’s Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock ‘n’ Roll*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018. 337 pages.

Two films a couple of years apart encapsulate both the history of rock and roll, especially its roots, and what was best in the music in the 1970s. The film that primarily deals with the roots of rock is the popular cult film *The Blues Brothers* of 1980, which in the course of its humorous narrative frames rock and its roots between the Gospel number “The Old Landmark” performed by James Brown and the James Cleveland Choir and the eponymous Blues Brothers’ version of “Jailhouse Rock,” made famous by the King. The history is augmented with a number of classic blues and soul numbers by some the most outstanding artists of their respective musical modes. The other film is the landmark rockumentary *The Last Waltz of The Band*, brought to the screen in 1978 by that great rock fan Martin Scorsese, who had participated in making the now largely dated classic rockumentary *Woodstock*. *The Last Waltz*, on the other hand, showcases rock at its very best, making a strong case in the opinion of the reviewer that this popular music at its zenith could be called great art, which in that sense remains “forever young.”

What connects both films to the book under review is their take on the connection between rock and religion that Randall Stephens explores at length from a cultural history perspective. In the films we see and hear this history in a tangible fashion. In *The Last Waltz* quite pertinent is the rock-hymn “Forever Young,” performed on screen by a certain Nobel laureate to be who wrote it years before his overtly Christian album *Slow Train Coming* that was yet to come. More significantly, the film captures the inspired rendition of The Band’s classic “The Weight,” with the vocal support of the superlative Gospel group the Staples. The Gospel group did not have to depart from their métier to any great degree in their stirring contribution to this rock song’s performance, almost appropriating it from The Band, and demonstrating its debt to their spiritual music tradition. More directly related to Stephens’ study is the James Brown number referred to above, where the great soul artist reprises the “Devil destroying” routines—including “hard singing”: “shouting, keening, moaning, screaming, and exhortation” (Bayles 156)—of his musical mentor Ira Tucker, which in his career Brown had partially incorporated into his secular style. In other words, what both films largely prove in their own fashion is the first part of Stephens’ claim, that religion inspired rock. The book scrupulously charts the historical dynamics of

how the “Devil destroying” music played a role in inspiring what many American Christians felt was “the Devil’s music,” only to change their minds and give rise to the powerful trend of Christian rock.

Stephens’ version of the story begins through outlining the close connection between Southern Pentecostalism and a number of crucial initiators of rock and roll. Artists such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash all shared Pentecostal or similar Church of holiness roots. Elvis Presley, among others, acknowledged his religious background but claimed there were no connections between it and his music in religious terms. Stephens, by contrast, forcefully argues that the leap from dynamic sanctified music to rock ‘n’ roll was not that great. Consequently, “The culture of southern Pentecostalism helped give birth to the new genre of rock ‘n’ roll. That religious stream was one of many that fed into the larger river of rock ‘n’ roll, but it was an important tributary” (28). When the religious services of those Pentecostal churches are described it becomes quite evident their stylized presentation in *The Blues Brothers* is not that far off from how it was. In James Baldwin’s semiautobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, set in 1930s Harlem, the congregants of the protagonist’s family’s Pentecostal church “sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy” (qtd. on p. 32). James Brown has reported that the posts in the church he attended had to be padded so that congregants taken by the spirit would not inadvertently hurt themselves.

However, virtually the same environment that bred the first generation of rock and rollers also produced some of the strongest criticisms of the new musical form. Symbolic of the close proximity from rocker to condemnation is the family relationship between Jerry Lee Lewis and Pentecostal televangelist Jimmy Lee Swaggart, who even used his musical cousin as an illustration and “a stern warning to youngsters and their parents” (2). This war for the souls of the nation’s youth, as Stephens presents it, had its ups and downs. At the onset of the ’60s rock’s initial fervor seemed to have dissipated, ostensibly providing relief for its critics. The King had been drafted into armed service, Buddy Holly and others died in tragic accidents, some artists, like Little Richard, even returned to the ministry. But this was just a lull in the storm as the Beatles and their music rose and John Lennon made his unwieldy statement about the band being more popular than Jesus, which set the fires ablaze again in conservative Christian hearts. Nevertheless, the spiritual striving of the hippy generation eventually fell flat and many of the disaffected youth returned to Jesus in the end. This was by no means stepping into the same river twice, however, and the religious expression of the new generation hardly resembled that of their elders. A symbolic turning point was the Dallas Expo ’72 festival—so close on the heels of Woodstock—which attracted two hundred thousand youth. From there Christian rock would steadily develop into a multi-million dollar industry by the next decade, and would garner a billion dollars a year by the late 1990s.

This synopsis hardly does justice to the rich story Stephens relates. He deftly plots the account against the political and cultural background of the represented time span and fills it with vivid detail and stimulating insights. The author sees the roots of the Pentecostal appropriation of the culture of the times together with the later appropriation of rock by Christians stemming from the dynamics of outsider religious movements and their flexibility. He gives the example of William Booth, the founder of the similarly

non-mainstream Salvation Army in Britain in the nineteenth century, who states: “The music of the Army is not, as a rule, original. We seize upon the strains that have already caught the ear of the masses, we load them with our one great theme—salvation—and so we make the very enemy help us fill the air with our Saviour’s fame” (12).

Such a tactic is hardly new in the history of Christianity. Pope Gregory famously instructed the bishop Augustine in his efforts to convert the Anglo Saxons to remove the idols from the pagan temples but to save the edifices themselves where people had been gathering and sprinkle them with holy water. Even Saint Paul himself had claimed he was willing to be all things to all people if it would bring them to Christ. Acculturation has been a particular forte of the Catholic imagination (Greeley)—one of the reasons for the widely differing religious traditions in Catholic countries—but it is not restricted to one branch of Christianity and Stephens’ account demonstrates this: his portrait of the Pentecostals is particularly engaging. That this process produced tension within Christianity is also not new; the trouble the Jesuits had in gaining official acceptance for their efforts to use far reaching acculturation in their missionary effort in the Orient serves as a prime example. The more recent instantiation of these dynamics documented in *The Devil’s Music* further proves their deep hold in the religion.

Stephens notes a particular phenomenon accompanying the rise of Christian rock that begs further examination. Although the rise of Christian rock as a separate branch in the entertainment industry is important cultural history, what is quite significant is the engagement of major rock artists such as Van Morrison or Bob Dylan with the form for at least a part of their career. Even the Beatles touched upon it with the deeply moving “Let It Be”: one of their most memorable songs before they broke up. This phenomenon is worth probing deeper.

It is well known that religion has inspired much of the great art over the millennia. Why then should it not have influenced rock to some degree? Certainly the extent and depth of the influence is worth a fuller investigation, and not just through its more overt expression for which Stephens lays a sound groundwork. Where should one begin such a query? One of the vocalists from the Staples gives a hint at the very end of “The Weight” sequence of *The Last Waltz*. Deeply moved by the effort and its poignant result she exclaims: “Beautiful!” Would it be too much to claim that what the singer intuitively felt is that in this song Gospel music met rock at the transcendentals: truth, beauty and the good? Perhaps, but it is hard to think of a more appropriate appraisal of the music than through its affinity to this currently overlooked if not forgotten quality. And where you have the transcendentals, the Transcendent cannot be that far away.

Works Cited

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