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You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don't drop it on your foot - throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose? -Edward Abbey (*Desert Solitaire*)

Hurray for our band of happy ragged folk Tellin' all the stories and fire-side jokes Living for the music, the love and the laughs, Hurray for the riff-raff!! -Casey Neill (*Hurray for the Riff-Raff*)

The challenge which closes Ed Abbey's introduction to *Desert Solitaire*, and its more recent echoes by activist folk singer Casey Neill, are celebrations of the attitudes of many contemporary environmental activists. Affirmations of this kind, which seem eager to topple all forms of conventional institutional legitimacy hardly seem to be the stuff of religious inquiry. Indeed, these voices seek to undermine what many in our culture would consider to be the bedrock of religious life and conviction.

However, the themes of nature and religion are consistently intertwined and woven in American culture, and debate over conceptions of and attitudes toward 'nature' often occur within a 'religious' context. I will examine the 'radical environmental' movement and its conceptions of nature religion through an analysis of its music. In so doing, I will examine conceptions of 'nature' and 'religion,' and how these relate to one another. Using the music and texts of activist songwriting, we can see how debates on 'nature' play out in American culture and also see how activist music functions as community-building ritual activity.

Central to this discussion are the terms 'nature' and 'religion.' Catherine Albanese has argued that since conceptions of nature and environment have played important roles in how participants in American cultures relate to reality, it makes sense to talk about *nature religion* in this culture (Albanese, 6). However, we as

scholars

of religion have an odd orientation to 'nature' as it relates to what we study as 'religion.' As Ronald Grimes points out, "Mircea Eliade...made much of the idea of sacred space and the symbolism of the center, the orienting place from which a people's sacred cosmos is generated." Even when scholars did look at space and place as important aspects of religion, they treated it "in ways that were largely metaphoric, having little to do with actual geography or the concrete complexities of the environment" (Grimes, 72). The study of religious life placed in the physical context of 'nature' is thus an obvious enterprise but an absent one, and music offers a useful index to the radical environmentalist nature religion.

The Musical Religious Activity of the Movement

The 'road shows' which activists undertake to raise consciousness about various issues and to build solidarity are an important means for disseminating the message of radical environmentalism. They aim both to gain supporters on the outside of the movement, and to bring new individuals inside the movement. But these interests spring from more than simply a political agenda; they are linked to a sense of spirituality. The road shows combine the practical environmental concerns of the movement with its spiritual orientation in expressive forms seen to mystically connect the two.

Expressive forms are also central to the various gatherings of activists that occur regularly, such as regional wilderness meetings, camps, trainings, and the larger national 'rendezvous.' Among activists, expressive and artistic forms in general and song in particular help reinforce activism and spirituality as well as cement the bond between activists and their community. While the often light-hearted character of these gatherings is reflected in the songs, rowdiness and joking occur in the context of an assumption that the gatherings are important on both a temporal and spiritual level. Although combined with other activist activities, music is central to the fulfillment of the purposes of these gatherings, and analysis of how the themes of radical environmentalism are woven into lyrics and music proves very interesting and provides insight into the ways in which the political and philosophical sides to the movement are presented in an artistic forum. Let us examine two particular themes of environmental activist music.

The 'Environmentatization Of The Everyday

This first type of song might at first listening seem to be deceptively frivolous and tenuously connected to the serious business of activism. These songs are playful, satirical, and humorous; they tend to deal with the activist life in contrast to the 'mainstream' life, and with 'actual' environmental issues in indirect ways. They also are significant in their placement of 'everyday' things, such as romance, travel, and humor, in the context of radical environmentalism. In so doing, they bring a sense of unity and 'normalcy' to the activist community; they address the commitment to environmental activism as an ideological and spiritual lifestyle choice, in addition to a political orientation or set of beliefs.

Folksinger/songwriter Danny Dolinger has several such songs, which, in spite of their jovial quality and clever lyrics, still manage to make clear his intense activism. This is evident in his song *If I Had A Dollar*, a love song by an activist trying to convince his lover to follow him in an economically trying but spiritually rewarding and morally correct life of activism:

We'll move on the highway and see the whole world my way
Eat out of the dumpsters outside the health food stores
We'll eat lots of fruits and berries that are just a little scary
Sleep beneath the bridges on the freeway of dreams.

Dolinger's sense of humor is also evidenced in *Hillbilly Hippie*, a hilarious song that juxtaposes '60s folk and country-flavored sounds with a silly but still not altogether unrealistic pairing of rural 'red-neck' culture with 'new-age' religious sensibilities:

I think of Jesus and the Buddha and the pyramids and such
And that cowboy kind of wisdom that I've come to love so much
So I put on some Grateful Dead and have another beer
I start to seeing auras and the answer comes quite clear.
I'll be a hillbilly hippy and a new-age redneck

And if you don't dig my karma, well, I just don't give a heck
I'll carry a crystal and a pistol in my pocket just for luck
And put a 'Peace Through Music' sticker on the back of my pick-up truck.

In both songs, Dolinger is able to convey a sense of what it means, practically, to be an activist. That is, to have an unpredictable life on the road that still seems more satisfying than the 'straight' alternative, and to juggle (sometimes ridiculously) a patchwork of ideologies and lifestyles in support of one's convictions.

Pagan Environmentalism

While the movement is not formally tied to any institutional religion, there is frequent overlap between the activist community and the Pagan community. The spiritual perspectives that can be called 'pagan' in the movement are varied; sometimes Wiccan practitioners take leadership roles at EarthFirst! gatherings, but in many less formal ways, 'pagan' elements are also well represented. Bron Taylor asserts that "most of those involved with the 'deep ecology' and 'radical environmental' movements can be called pagan environmentalists; they generally use these self-referents interchangeably, whether they find their primary spiritual home in Native American spirituality, neopaganism, Taoism, Buddhism, or some other nature-based spirituality. All such traditions are believed to express deep ecological sentiments" (Taylor 1995, 99). The threads of these traditions are woven together by activists in innovative ways, juxtaposing disparate elements and creating a bricolage of previously unassociated elements. A masterful example of such a song is Casey Neill's *May Day*:

Welcome in the wondrous Spring, and the oncoming Summer
The festival of Beltane, and the nectar of the lovers
It's the holiday of pagans, and the holiday of labor
And we merry meet at the mountain side, and praise the Creator, praise the Creator!
May Day! May Day at last! May Day! May Day at Last!
Hearken the future, remember the past,
So pass the jug of wine, pass the honey mead
Pass the pipe around again, petals snow from the cherry trees
And we consecrate this season on this eve with our own sweet copulation
The joy we share together here will smash the state of the nation!

The song begins with a quiet, slow section, reminiscent of 1960's folk song, which it soon blends with quicker, rowdier elements, blending in more modern energy with the modes of a traditional Irish reel. These subtle but effective musical juxtapositions are mirrored by the ideological ones; activist themes are placed beside pagan ones ("It's the holiday of pagans, and the holiday of labor"), and Casey claims that their pagan and activist rejoicing will "smash the state of the nation."

As we have seen, activist song and music occupies several important roles. First, it serves the vitally important role of community building. The playful interpolation of seemingly disparate ideas, traditions, and aspects of life is part and parcel of expressive and religious life in the movement. Through this process of creative juxtaposition, disparate parts of a difficult activist life are sewn together to make this sort of life cohesive and possible for participants. The 'ordinary' parts of life are drawn into the activist world, and the activist world is made 'ordinary' for those living it. Closely related to this notion of music being a community-forming activity is the notion that music occupies a central place in ritual activity. The road shows and wilderness gatherings serve a religious function in concretizing spiritual ideals of the community, and connecting them to play, humor, and art. The freedom and innovation in the music reflect and are a product of the movement's critique of capitalism and power structures. Further, the musicians understand their music to be their activism and their central contribution to their community. The lyrics, sounds, and forms of the music itself support these conclusions: they pull together disparate forms and styles, and they playfully enact the beliefs, concerns, and passions of the activist community that generates them.

Resources

Discography

Dolinger, Danny. *Rome Wasn't Burnt In A Day*.

Hoyt, Robert. *Dumpster Diving Across America*.

_____. *Just As American As You.*

Hull, Timothy. *Brambleland.*

Lyons, Dana. *Cows With Guns.*

Neill, Casey. *Casey Neill.*

_____. *Scree.*

Websites

[Casey Neill Trio Home page](#) .

[The Official Danny Dolinger Homestead](#) .

[We're All Travelers Here](#) (Timothy Hull Web page).

[Dana Lyons Web page](#) .

[EarthFirst! Media Center](#) .

[Hayduke Rocks! EF! Media and Action Network](#) .

References

Albanese, Catherine. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Grimes, Ronald L. *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1982.

Taylor, Bron. "Resacrilizing Earth." *American Sacred Space*. David Chidester and Edward L. Linenthal, Eds. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995.