

THE GLAD SURPRISE

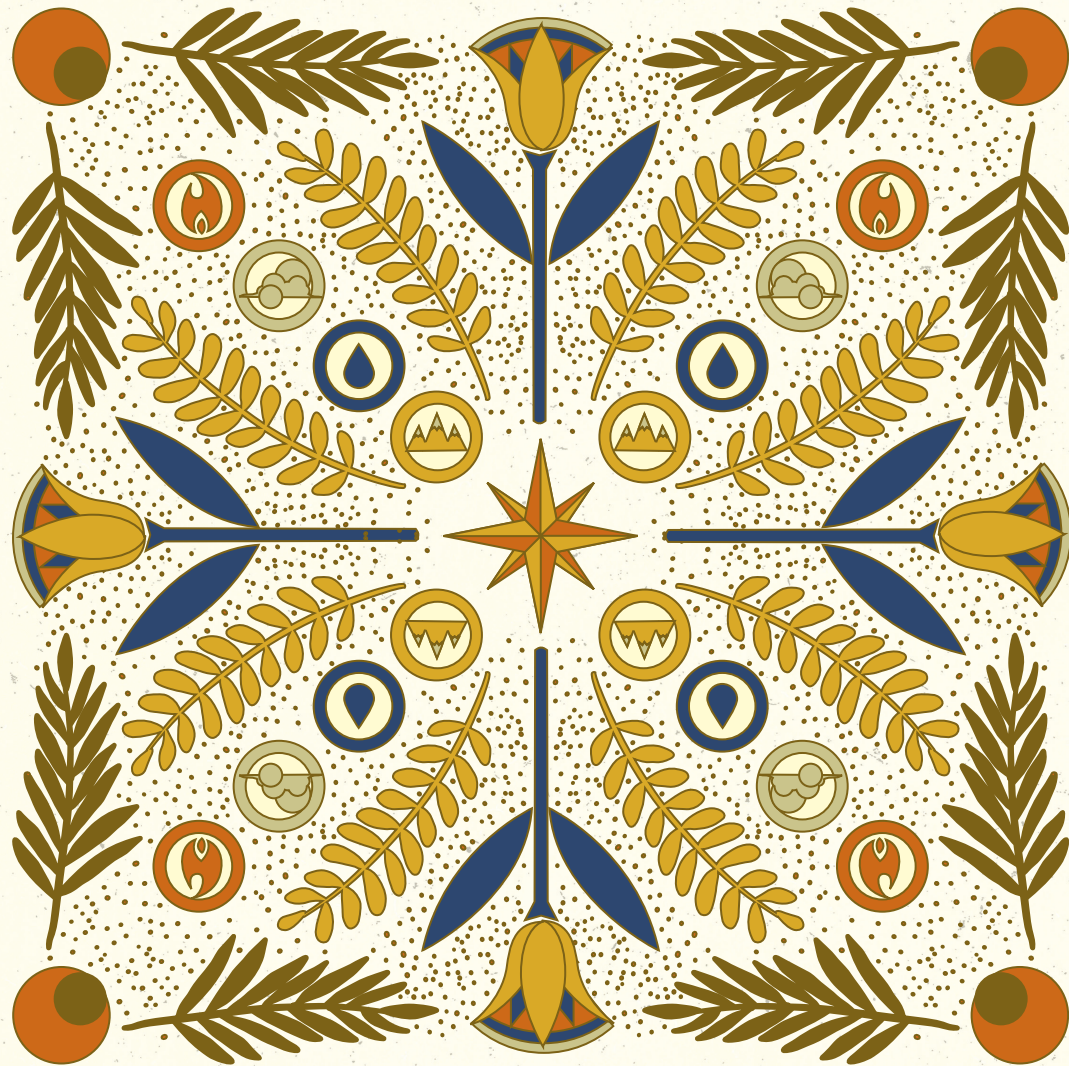


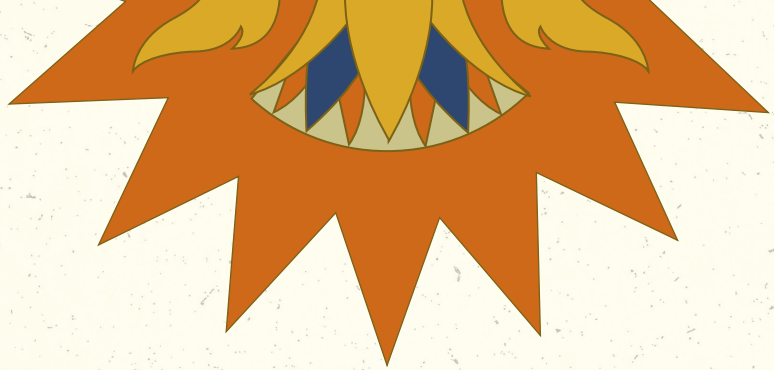
STEVE BELL



THE GLAD SUPRISE
STEVE BELL

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“Such is the glad surprise... It is the announcement that life cannot ultimately be conquered by death... that there is strength added when the labors increase, that multiplied peace matches multiplied trials, that life is bottomed by the glad surprise.”

HOWARD THURMAN (1899-1981)



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STEVE BELL / SIGNPOST MUSIC / 2024

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BONUS TRACK:

11. A REASON FOR IT ALL *(performed by Byron O'Donnell)*



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Darryl Neustaedter Barg - for the use of his 1939 Epiphone Olympic guitar on
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We have a wonderful board of advisors who wisely and prayerfully help Dave and me navigate the everchanging landscape of this business. Thank you Uli Chi, David Jennings, Ren Martins and Jim Richardson.

To everyone who worked on this project: production, performance, technical, design, photography, administration, and manufacturing. We're blessed to work you all. Thank you so much.

1. THE GLAD SURPRISE

MUSIC BY STEVE BELL AND MIKE JANZEN

LYRICS BY STEVE BELL, MALCOLM GUTE, JASON JOHNSON

Jesus of the Nazi gallows
Jesus of the lynching tree
Jesus of the Gazan rubble
Jesus of the refugee

Jesus of the queer beleaguered
Jesus of the hunted child
Jesus of the missing women
Native to the sacred wild

Oh, what love
Oh, what love

Jesus in the rolling waters
Spirit in the wind that blows
Pleased to hold “all things” together
Cosmic centre, mystic rose

Jesus with us from the cradle
Jesus with us through the grave
Jesus with a world against him
Ready, nonetheless, to save

Oh, what love

Jesus of the midnight struggle
Sweating blood to do love's will
Supple to the kiss of Judas
For his own betray him still

Jesus of the crucifixion
Darkness and despairing cries
Jesus of the great reversal
Jesus of the glad surprise

Oh, what love

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocals*

Mackenzie Friesen: *vocals*

Niall Cade: *tenor saxophone*

Brent Barkman: *keys, Hammond B3*

Mike Janzen: *piano*

Murray Pulver: *electric guitar, vocals*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums, percussion*

2. THE DIVINE IMAGE

MUSIC BY STEVE BELL

LYRICS ADAPTED BY STEVE BELL FROM
THE WILLIAM BLAKE POEM, "THE DIVINE IMAGE"

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
We pray in our distress
And to these virtues of delight
Return our thankfulness

For Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
Is God, our Father dear
In Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our Mother here

And Mercy has a human heart
And Pity, a human face
And Love, the human form divine
And Peace, the human dress

And everyone in every clime
That prays in their distress
Prays to the human form divine
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace

And all must love the human form
In every stripe and hue
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too

Yes, all must love the human form
In every strip and hue
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocals*

David Landreth: *Irish whistle*

Quintin Bart: *hurdy gurdy*

Brent Barkman: *keyboards*

Roy Salmond: *pump organ*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums*

Eric Darken: *percussion*

3. BUNNIES DON'T RUN

FOR JACKSON, NORA, VIVIAN AND ELLIS

LYRICS BY TIM HUFF

MUSIC BY BY STEVE BELL

Bunnies don't run—they hop, hop, hop
Ponies don't skip because they trot, trot, trot
When the birds fly high, the fish don't care
'Cause everyone's different, everywhere

Carrots don't smoosh—they crunch, crunch, crunch
Bananas only grow in a bunch, bunch, bunch
If the berries taste sweet, the beans don't care
'Cause everyone's different, everywhere

Oceans don't trickle—they roar, roar, roar
Waves roll into the shore, shore, shore
If the rivers run wild, the ponds don't care
'Cause everyone's different, everywhere.

If people were everywhere the same, same, same
That would be so sad, such a terrible shame
Love them all and say a prayer
For everyone different, here and there
For everyone different everywhere

Bunnies don't run—they hop, hop...
Ponies don't skip because they trot, trot...
Carrots don't smoosh—they crunch, crunch...
Bananas only grow in a beautiful bunch...
Oceans don't trickle—they roar, roar...
Waves roll into the shore, shore...
If people were everywhere the same, same, same
It would be so sad, such a terrible shame...

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocals*

Brent Barkman: *Hammond B3*

Murray Pulver: *electric guitar*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums*

Amy Knight: *hand claps*

Dave Zeglinski: *hand claps, cow bell*

4. ONE CAN HOPE

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY STEVE BELL

Some are born indigenou
Some are born a stranger
Some are born ambiguous
Yet born to be a neighbour
In the glad garden city of God
In the glad garden city of God

Some know mostly happiness
Others, only sorrow
Some fight the fight through weariness
With yearnings for the morrow
In the glad garden city of God
In the glad garden city of God

And oh, my soul
There is more going on than you know
Yes oh, my soul
One can hope

Some lives are lived contentedly
Some lives are lived in longing

Some bear another's night
By keeping vigil for their dawning
In the glad garden city of God
In the glad garden city of God

And oh, my soul
There is more going on than you know
Yes oh, my soul
One can hope

Some are born indigenou
Some are born a stranger
Some are born ambiguous
Yet born to be a neighbour

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocals*

Ashley Wiens: *vocals*

Murray Pulver: *electric guitar*

Brent Barkman: *Wurlitzer, Hammond B3*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums*

5. LOVERS IN A DANGEROUS TIME

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY BRUCE COCKBURN

PUBLISHED BY ROTTEN KIDDIES MUSIC

Don't the hours grow shorter as the days go by
You never get to stop and open your eyes
One day you're waiting for the sky to fall
Next, you're dazzled by the beauty of it all

Lovers in a dangerous time...

These fragile bodies of touch and taste
This fragrant skin, this hair like lace
Spirits open to the thrust of grace
Never a breath you can afford to waste

Lovers in a dangerous time...

When you're lovers in a dangerous time
Sometimes you're made to feel as if your love's a crime

Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight
You gotta kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight

Lovers in a dangerous time...

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, dobro, vocals*

Mackenzie Friesen: *vocals*

Quinton Bart: *hurdy gurdy*

Murray Pulver: *electric guitar*

Brent Barkman: *keys, Hammond B3, Wurlitzer, Celeste*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums*

6. A REASON FOR IT ALL

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY BYRON O'DONNELL

PUBLISHED BY BLUCILLE MUSIC

Though the trials of life
Are testing me tonight
I know there's a reason for it all
I'll be on my feet again
And I'll stand up and proclaim
That I know there's a reason for it all

I may struggle through the night
But some day there will be light
'Cause I know there's a reason for it all
And there's a better place to be
And someone to comfort me
Yes I know there's a reason for it all

I will rise above the storm
I'll be sheltered I'll be warm
Cause I know there's a reason for it all
And I know the day will come
When my troubles will be done
Cause I know there's a reason for it all

When my time on earth is through
And I've done all that I can do
Well, I'll know there's a reason for it all
And I will lay my burden down
I'll take one last look around
And I'll know there's a reason for it all

I will rise above the storm
I'll be sheltered I'll be warm
'Cause I know there's a reason for it all
And I know there will come a day
When my troubles fade away
'Cause I know there's a reason for it all

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitars, vocals*

Brent Barkman: *Hammond B3, Wurlitzer*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Denis Dufresne: *mandolin*

David Landreth: *vocals*

Joey Landreth: *vocals*

Roman Clark: *vocals*

Murray Pulver: *vocals*

7. THIS TOO. IS TRUE

MUSIC BY STEVE BELL

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar*

8. A LOVELY LONGED-FOR BLUE

MUSIC BY STEVE BELL

LYRICS BY MALCOLM GUiTE AND STEVE BELL

This is the day to leave the dark behind you
Take the adventure, step beyond the hearth
Shake off, at last, the shackles that confined you
And find the courage for the forward path
You yearned for freedom
Through the long night watches
The day has come
And you are free to choose
To set aside your still familiar crutches
To step into the lovely, longed-for blue

After the dimly burning wick of winter
That seemed to dull and darken everything
The Lenten sun shines clear beyond your shelter
Clean as sight itself while the reed-birds sing

As heaven bows
To kiss Creation's surface
As light surrounds
And glimmers on the dew
You pause to pray the holy saints preserve us
And step into the lovely, longed-for blue

Breathe deep and be renewed by what you're breathing
Kinned to the keen east wind and the cleansing air
As though the blue itself were blowing through you
As though you always knew you'd find it there.

For all you know
The aching of the ages
Awaits the blessed
Courage of the few
Who join the company of pilgrim sages
That step into the lovely, longed-for blue

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocal*

Erin Propp: *vocals*

Murray Pulver: *electric guitar*

Brent Barkman: *piano, Wurlitzer*

Joey Landreth: *Hammond C3*

Gilles Fournier: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums*

9. PENTECOST

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY MALCOLM GUIE AND STEVE BELL

Today we feel the winds beneath our wings
Today the hidden fountain flows and plays
Today the church draws breath at last and sings
As every flame becomes a tongue of praise

Today the promised Comforter comes flying
Today the fountain cleanses every stain
Today the breath of life comes to the dying
Today our Maker makes us new again

This is the feast of Fire, Air and Water
Poured out and breathed and kindled into earth
The earth herself awakens to her Maker
Translated...
Translated out of death and into birth

The right words come today in their right order
And every word spells freedom and release
Today the gospel crosses every border
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace

This is the feast of Fire, Air and Water
Poured out and breathed and kindled into earth
The earth herself awakens to her Maker
Translated...
Translated out of death and into birth

Today the lost are found in his translation
Uplifted by his fire-feathered dove
Whose mother-tongue is love in every nation
Whose mother-tongue in every land is love

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocals*

Heitha Forsyth: *vocals*

Jennifer Hanson: *vocals*

Murray Pulver: *electric and acoustic guitars*

Brent Barkman: *piano, Hammond B3*

Micah Bell: *bass*

Daniel Roy: *drums*

10. THIS DARK HOUR

LYRICS BY STEVE BELL & MALCOLM GUITTE

MUSIC BY STEVE BELL

When “church” becomes a “lordless power”

And so, it seems that all is lost
There still remains in this dark hour
The mystery of our Saviour’s cross.
For in that cross is dearly nestled
Hope eternal in disguise
By way of suffering-love he leads us
To God’s glorious and glad surprise

His way of suffering love is open
There for anyone to take
To stand in love with those who suffer
Suffer with them for his sake
Better that our church be powerless
Better that it cast away
All its claims to pomp and glory
Learn instead to fast and pray

Jesus did not cling to glory
All he had was emptied out
A living stream of love and goodness
For a world that casts him out

And should we learn the art of losing
Letting go and giving way
We might find beyond the darkness
A glad surprise on Easter Day

Steve Bell: *acoustic guitar, vocals*

Erin Propp: *vocals*

Quintin Bart: *hurdy gurdy*

Calum Stewart: *Irish flute*

Micah Bell: *bass*

II. A REASON FOR IT ALL

MUSIC AND LYRIC BY BYRON O'DONNELL

Byron O'Donnell: guitar, vocal

(Date and location of recording unknown. See lyrics on page 15)



INTRODUCTION

Such is the glad surprise... It is the announcement that life cannot ultimately be conquered by death... that there is strength added when the labors increase, that multiplied peace matches multiplied trials, that life is bottomed by the glad surprise.

—HOWARD THURMAN | *Meditations of the Heart*

You have in your hand my twenty-third album of music. However, I'm not sure this is a legitimate count, because some of my albums have been specialty projects. There are collections of previously recorded songs around a central theme. There are live albums, and unplugged remakes. There is my *Symphony Sessions* album which re-casts older songs in an orchestral setting. Do these each add a valid number to the count? I'm unaware of an industry standard that says one way or another.

If I only count albums with original recordings of new songs, then this is my seventeenth. And I'm only going on about all this because when my first album, *Comfort My People*, came out in 1989, it never occurred to me there would ever be a second. And so, just the fact that thirty-five years later I'm still releasing albums is somewhat of a glad surprise to me.

Therefore, before anything else is said, I want to express a deeply felt gratitude to

all of you for whom this music has mattered and still matters. Many of you come to concerts. Many still purchase CDs. Many support me and my team through donations and various acts of kindness that help sustain the level of output we've been enabled to maintain over the years.

Thank you so very much! It is my honour to write, record and perform for you. And if it all had ended yesterday, it would have been enough. But it didn't end yesterday, and here we are with a new collection of songs. In the following pages I'll reflect a bit on each one.

Back in 1993, when I wrote the song "Burning Ember," I quickly realized I had written a song that seemed to know more than I did. Whereas most songs have their origin in a past event or a present concern, "Burning Ember" seemed to come to me from my future. It clearly knew things I was yet to discover, almost like an unhurried guide or mentor that slows down, takes your hand, and kindly walks you forward. The mystery of that occurrence has held me in awe ever since.

Much of this new album feels that way to me. On the surface, each song has an obvious meaning. But as a whole, the project feels like there is as much below the surface as above. So, the coming pages will be for me a process of discovery as much as it is a report about a job done. Let me set up the context.

These days, with the immediate future looking as alarming as it does, I find my soul trying to see past the inevitable sufferings that widespread social disintegration coupled with the climate crisis might soon bring. Equally, I find myself unsatisfied with familiar, soothing platitudes so easily bandied about in an attempt to quell reasonable fears. Yet, I can't give up on the possibility of hope either.

But what does it mean to have hope? In his new book, *Love's Braided Dance* (Yale University Press, 2024), eco-theologian Norman Wirzba argues that authentic hope is inextricably tied to love. He suggests that because hope is a hard sell right now, the better question to ask might be, *What is it you are prepared to love?* The word "prepared" is critical here because hope is contingent on love's costly intention of well-being for the other. If we are *prepared* to love, then hope is possible.

Then, for the Christian in particular, because the resurrection of Jesus is so often trotted out as a trump card against an otherwise disappointing hand, I find myself asking, "Just what *in the world* does resurrection actually mean?" I hope you catch the irony in the question because I was raised in a theological framework where the resurrection of Jesus meant that hope lay in a promised escape from bodily life in this world. Christian faith, therefore, left little room for hope *here*... only hereafter.

However, if one is to take a theologian like N.T. Wright seriously, the resurrection of Jesus is not intended to signal the eventual rescue of a select few into God's other-worldly future. Rather, it heralds God's future kingdom, or realm, coming to us *in person* and making its home *among our mortal plains* (Revelation 21:3). In *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008), Wright suggests that it is misguided to assume it is the Christian mission to build the Kingdom of God on earth. Rather, it is for us to build *for* the coming Kingdom of God. Our hope lies in knowing that nothing done or made in love will ever be lost. Every song, quilt, friendship, recipe, novel, invention, act of kindness or justice... anything made and offered in love has a permanence and a place in God's future and serves as a deposit of hope in the present.

The title of this project, *The Glad Surprise*, came late in the game. This time last year I had a handful of songs with no unifying theme, and although an album doesn't need to have a unifying theme, it's always a little more interesting if it does. I had been reading a lot of N.T. Wright, Brad Jersak, Simone Weil and Walter Brueggemann, whose books infuse many of these songs. But a year ago, I stumbled on the Howard Thurman quote above. I was immediately shot through by what felt like a bolt of electricity, and I knew that "The Glad Surprise" would be the album's title, although I didn't have a hot clue why. I was only vaguely aware of who Thurman was: that he was a black theologian who grew up in the American South during the lynching years, who wrote in the Jim

Crow era, and whose writings provided the theological backbone for Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. I picked up his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and read it several times. That led to James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which somehow led to Reggie William's *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*. It was while reading William's book that the penny dropped. So many swirling thoughts suddenly came together and the core of this album's opening song, "The Glad Surprise," emerged unbidden. Days later, the album's closing song, "This Dark Hour," emerged similarly. It is curious to me that the album's book-end songs carry the title in the lyrics although they both came after the title was chosen and were the last songs of the collection to be written.

And so, dear reader, what follows are among my first efforts to come to know the songs on this album not only as individual pieces but as a whole. Perhaps the best experience for you would be to listen to them several times before my thoughts rob you of your unique encounter with them. Perhaps, ten years from now, I will be somewhat embarrassed by what I'll write here. But that's okay. The older I get, the happier I am to move on from what I thought I once knew. In any case, I suspect that this album will be for me, in the arc of my career, what the volta is to the sonnet. That is, a subtle turn or shift of tone in the poem's closing lines that redirect the opening lines to a... well... *glad surprise*.



THE GLAD SURPRISE

*Jesus re-founds the world by identifying with all the sacrificed
Abels and none of the sacrificing Cains.*

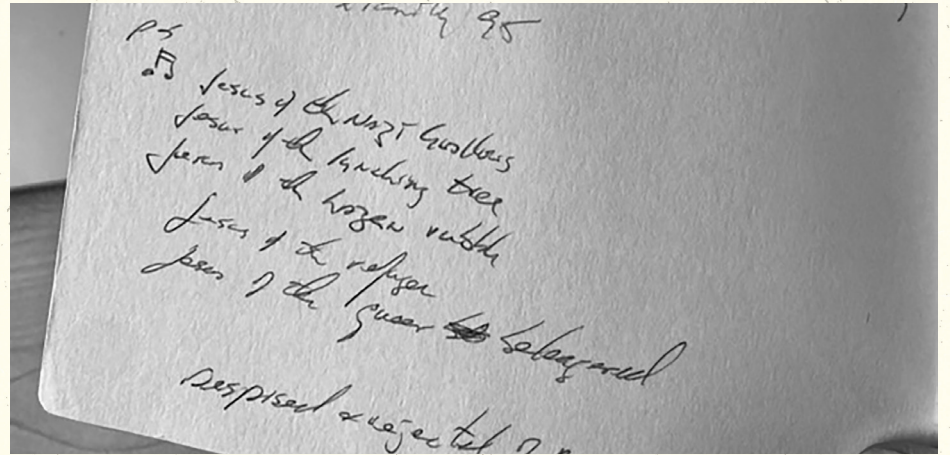
—BRIAN ZAHND | *The Wood Between the Worlds*

I was only five pages into Reggie L. Williams' book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* (Baylor University Press, 2014) when I suddenly turned to a blank page on the inside of the book's cover and wrote:

*Jesus of the Nazi gallows
Jesus of the lynching tree
Jesus of the Gazan rubble
Jesus of the refugee
Jesus of the queer beleaguered*

I left an empty space and then wrote,
Despised and rejected of men

The lines came almost involuntarily. They felt more like a cough that escaped suppression than a careful articulation of a thought or thoughts. I also placed a pair of music notes beside the lines, which, if you sifted through my bookshelf, you'd soon realize I place beside anything I think could be a potential song. However, I do



remember thinking, “Well... I can’t write *that* into a song... that would get me into all sorts of trouble.”

But there it was. For days, it felt like an annoying sliver in my finger... something I could mostly ignore, but that kept drawing my attention whenever there was a quiet moment.

Eventually, I opened the book again and stared at the front page. A melody started to form. And another line came:

Jesus of the hunted child

I thought of the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt—escaping Herod’s wicked pogrom intended to eliminate potential threats to his power, and I couldn’t help but feel the desperately anxious centuries of fleeing families whose only crime is that their very existence places moral limits on another’s unholy ambitions.

A few days later, in conversation with my co-worker, Jay Johnson, another line came:

*Jesus of the missing women
Native to the sacred wild*

Canadians will recognize the reference here to the dangerous and degrading attention/inattention that First Nations people suffer under our justice system. Before reading Williams’ book, I read Howard Thurman’s classic, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Beacon Press, 1976). Thurman’s work is widely regarded as the theological backbone of the civil rights movement. Indeed, he was a spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King Jr., and it is reported that King carried a copy of Thurman’s book wherever he went.

The central thesis of *Jesus and the Disinherited* is that the Cross of Christ reveals that God will ever be found beside and among those “with their backs against the wall.” For Thurman, this is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thurman’s Jesus reveals a divine humility that ultimately “can’t be humiliated” even though “too often the weight of the Christian

movement has been on the side of the strong and powerful, and against the weak and oppressed.”

To all this, one can only respond with an awe-filled doxology:

Oh! What love!

Enter Malcolm Guite

I sat on those first stanzas for several weeks with no idea how to complete the song until I finally did what I now often do under such circumstances: I sent the lyrics to my friend, the English poet Malcolm Guite. I hoped he might suggest where I could take the lyrics next. All I knew is that I wanted to end with the line, “Jesus of the glad surprise.”

A day later, I received an email back. Malcolm’s good instinct was to extend the repeated preposition “of” to include “in” and “with,” which opened the song to a deeper Christology:

*Jesus in the rolling waters
Jesus in the wind that blows
Pleased to hold “all things” together
Cosmic centre, mystic rose*

*Jesus with us from the cradle
Jesus with us through the grave
Jesus with a world against him
Ready nonetheless to save*

I couldn't help but recall a 12th century definition of God that challenges the false binary between the divine universal and the divine particular: *God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.* (The Book of the 24 Philosophers - uncertain authorship)

Malcolm's Jesus is, astonishingly, "in," "above," "with" and "ready."

Again... Oh! What love!

The closing stanzas return us to the Jesus of...

*Jesus of the midnight struggle
Sweating blood to do Love's will
Supple to the kiss of Judas
For his own betray him still*

*Jesus of the crucifixion
Darkness and despairing cries
Jesus of the great reversal
Jesus of the glad surprise*

Struggling, sweating, despairing, dying... reversing, gladdening, suppling, surprising!

Oh, what love, indeed!

About the Music:

In *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, Williams claims that a year spent in the pews of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church while studying at Union Theological Seminary was formative to Bonhoeffer's theology and his consequent resistance to German/Christian nationalism. That year (1930-31), writes Williams, "Bonhoeffer encountered the Christianity that animated the civil rights movement years before it occurred..."

Reading Williams, I suddenly remembered another child of the Harlem Renaissance theological tradition: jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. In his insightful book, *God's Mind in That Music: Theological Explorations Through the Music of John Coltrane* (Cascade Books, 2012), Jamie Howison explores Coltrane's celebrated recording, *A Love Supreme*. Re-reading Jamie's book sent me scrambling back to Coltrane's classic. To my delight, I soon realized that the signature four-note motif undergirding Coltrane's first movement fit perfectly with the music I had written for this song.

And so, my album begins with a nod to Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* in the opening bass notes, followed by an aching tenor sax played by Winnipeg's Niall Cade, followed by a set of lyrics that cascade out of a torrent of dark waters, but which eventuate in a glad surprise.



CHAPTER 2.

THE DIVINE IMAGE

*God of all wisdom,
What do I know
Of relics and crosses
Bread and wine?
But if these be channels
Of love divine,
How much more
Your glory might shine
In those who bear your image.*

—STEVE BELL | *Ancient Shards*, January 31, 2001 (unpublished)

I do not consider myself a poet. I am far more comfortable being known as a lyricist. Song lyricists can be *lesser poets* because they have the added benefit of melody which is a language of its own that can say things one can't always find words for. Although I've never spoken in tongues, I've often thought that melody is another form of that same gift: the ability to speak "with sighs and groanings too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

However, I do occasionally write a stand-alone poem, as in the long-forgotten

prayer poem above. I recently found it in a pile of papers, which I probably should have cleaned up some time ago. Its discovery was a bit of a glad surprise, as I was already looking for a way to begin thinking about this song inspired by William Blake's poem, "The Divine Image."

THE DIVINE IMAGE

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

I came to Blake, as I come to so many poets, via Malcolm Guite. In this case, Malcolm's brief essay "The Divine Image" found in the final chapter of his *Waiting on the Word: A Poem a Day for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany* (Canterbury Press, 2015). There, I read Blake's poem and Malcolm's reflections, and as so often happens, melody soon followed. This is typical: I read something, a melody follows almost involuntarily, and then I must go digging for the meaning behind what is begging to be sung.

A quick internet search about Blake reveals that many reasonably considered him to be either a heretic or a madman, or both. His paintings and poems often evoke a disquieting strangeness and apocalyptic heed. Yet, he penned this poem of profound Christian orthodoxy. In it, Blake's personification of mercy, pity, peace and love as "the human form divine" evokes the Incarnation of God in Jesus, but in a way that understands Jesus as the first fruits and fullness of a love-redeemed humanity. Therefore, writes Malcolm, "the consequence of recognizing 'the human form divine' in our prayers is that we must recognize and love it in our neighbours."

*For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face
And Love, the human form divine
And Peace, the human dress*

However, Blake was not naïve about the dark shadow the unredeemed human form can cast. In his celebrated poem, “Jerusalem,” he wrote about “these dark Satanic Mills” that ground to grist the poor of 18th century England, referring to its cruel factories that conferred abject misery on so many vulnerable children.

In a shorter shadow poem (entitled ‘A Divine Image’—as distinct from ‘The Divine Image’) Blake writes of a desecrated humanity forged in greed and selfhood:

*Cruelty has a human heart
And Jealousy a human face
Terror the human form divine
And secrecy the human dress*

In response, Malcolm writes, “...although cruelty, jealousy, terror and secrecy are ascribed to humanity, they are never ascribed to God.”

*For Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
Is God our Father dear*

I wrote this setting for Blake’s “The Divine Image” a couple of years ago while

America was having a debate about the ethics of separating and caging immigrant children whose parents were escaping violence and poverty in their home countries. It was also a time when the public denigration of “others” was being normalized by a national leader. I have deliberately placed the song second in sequence after “The Glad Surprise,” which was inspired by Howard Thurman’s insistence that God is always to be found with and among those “with their backs against the wall.” Blake would agree. In an online lecture on Blake, Malcolm insists that Blake had “extraordinary insight into the presence of the Divine in the outcast; in particular, the helpless and the child.”

For the sake of transparency, you should know that my adaptation of Blake’s poem makes a few changes. For example, Blake’s original poem reads,

*And all must love the human form
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell
There, God is dwelling, too.*

The modern ear will no-doubt object. To address this, and to open my setting to a broader inclusion, I changed the second line to “In every stripe and hue.”

Some may have thought Blake a bit of a madman, but it’s a kind of madness that could save us from our present darkness. Malcolm claims Blake was simply a man “ahead of his time... and ahead of ours.” We would do well to catch up.

CHAPTER 3.

BUNNIES DON'T RUN

FOR JACKSON, NORA, VIVIAN AND ELLIS

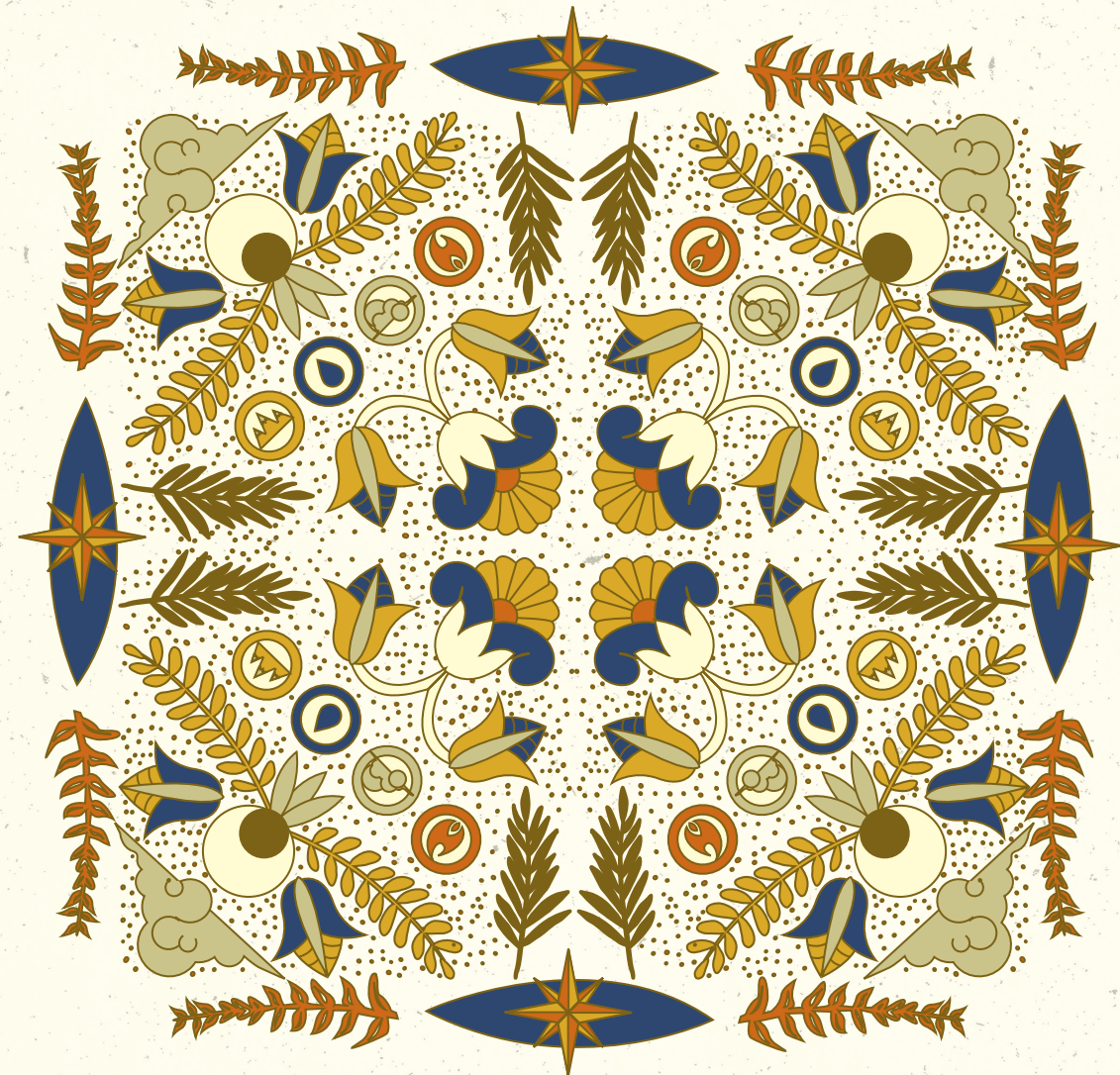
We must know that for all to be alike is the death of life in all, and yet perceive the harmony that transcends diversities and in which diversity finds its richness and significance.

—HOWARD THURMAN | *The Search for Common Ground:
An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community*

S ometime early in 2023, my old friend, author/illustrator and grandfather, Tim Huff (a.k.a. Pop Pop), started sending me a string of nursery rhymes he was writing for a children's book called *Pop Pop's Nursery Rhyme Parade*, which has since been published by Castle Quay Books (Spring 2024).

I'm always intrigued by what Tim sets his pen to, but since my grandkids call me Pop Pop as well, these poems grabbed my attention in a way they might not have otherwise. And because Tim had his sights on his grandson as he wrote, I was curious what kinds of things another grandparent thought good to write for their child's child.

Pop Pop's Nursery Rhyme Parade is a delightful and touching collection of poems.



Some are outright silly for silliness' sake. Others acknowledge the various fears and frustrations that kids everywhere need to learn to navigate. Some encourage virtue, and some celebrate the tender relationships necessary for human flourishing. In the book's introduction, Tim confesses that while writing it, he felt an "overwhelming ache for ideas, words, and phrases filled with innocence, gentleness, and joy – at a time when they seem all too rare."

The day "Bunnies" arrived in my inbox, I just happened to have a bit of time on my hands. As I read the poem, something in the rhythm and rhyme scheme caught my attention, and melody started to form. I grabbed my guitar, and soon I had a song. As I'm not a children's entertainer, I initially didn't take the song all that seriously. But it did occur to me that Tim would get a kick out of hearing his poem set to music, so I quickly recorded it on my phone and sent it back. Tim's response was immediate and enthusiastic, asking if he could use the song in his book launch. Hence, the first version of the song was recorded for Tim's project. But, of course, I played it for my own grandkids who immediately loved it, so when it came time to record this album, I thought I could maybe throw it on as a bonus track and dedicate it to them.

However, as I started thinking about a song sequence for the album, it suddenly dawned on me that "Bunnies" was not meant to be an afterthought bonus track. In fact, with its simple celebration of difference and diversity, it fit rather snugly

between "The Divine Image" and "One Can Hope."

I don't need to elaborate on the song's message, for that is evident enough. But let me indulge in a quick story:

It won't surprise anyone who has been to my concerts or listened to my albums to learn that since I was a teenager, I've wanted to be just like Bruce Cockburn. I've wanted to write like him. I've wanted to play like him. And I've lamented that because my singing voice has an unsurpressable sweetness to it, I will never sound like him. But I've certainly tried.

Shortly after my first album came out in 1989, I found myself doing a gig at Jesus People USA in Chicago. Some of you will recall the legendary blues/rock band that came out of JPUSA called Rez Band, led by the great Glen Kaiser. I didn't expect Glen to show up to my little concert, but he did, and I was terribly nervous. After the concert Glen was very encouraging. The only practical criticism he offered was that I could talk a lot slower, and perhaps play my songs a little slower—something my wife Nanci has been telling me for years. "Slow down," he said, "and trust the gift!"

Then he asked an unexpected question. "Just how much do you love Bruce Cockburn?"

I was surprised by the question because I don't remember doing any Cockburn songs that night.

"Is it that obvious?" I asked.

He nodded.

Then came words that somewhat changed the course of my career.

"It's lovely and appropriate to pay homage to your hero in your craft," he said, "but it would be a shame if Steve Bell never showed up to one of your concerts."

The words hit me with a force I can still feel in my chest, as if God was speaking to me directly: "I made you different. And it is good. *Trust the gift.*"

According to Google, there are approximately 400,000 types of flowering plants across the globe. Of just one of those species, the daisy, there are over 20,000 varieties. Of the billions of daisies currently in bloom, each one is unique from the other, even if that uniqueness is perceptible only through a microscope. Surely this tells us that the "Universe Maker" delights in difference and diversity—and so should we. But let us not forget, as Howard Thurman insists, it is a difference that finds its richest significance in the *harmony that transcends diversities*.

I altered Tim's poem only slightly to turn it into a song. You can read the original poem below and you can find the book (and Tim's many others) at

www.compassionseries.com

BUNNIES DON'T RUN

BY TIM HUFF

Bunnies don't run

They hop, hop, hop.

Ponies don't skip.

They trot, trot, trot.

When birds fly high, the fish don't care
'Cause everyone's different, everywhere.

Carrots don't smooch.

They crunch, crunch, crunch.

Bananas only grow in a bunch, bunch, bunch.
If the berries taste sweet, the beans don't care.
'Cause everyone's different, everywhere.

Oceans don't trickle.

They roar, roar, roar.

Waves roll into the shore, shore, shore.
If the rivers run wild, the ponds don't care.
'Cause everyone's different, everywhere.

If people were all the same, same, same
That would be such a shame, shame, shame.

Love them all and say a prayer
For everyone different, everywhere.

CHAPTER 4.

ONE CAN HOPE

Love is the power that when activated in us guides our minds, hearts, and hands so that hope is not only kindled, but catches fire.

—NORMAN WIRZBA | *Love's Braided Dance: Hope in a Time of Crisis*

I doubt anyone would easily guess the inspiration of this song by simply reading the lyrics. I am somewhat surprised by how they came about myself. The listener quickly encounters the words *indigenous*, *stranger*, and *ambiguous* and will reasonably assume there is an intentional First Nations/Settler/Métis reconciliation theme behind the lyric:

*Some are born indigenous
Some are born a stranger
Some are born ambiguous
Yet born to be a neighbour
In the glad garden-city of God*

However, the song surprisingly germinated in a conversation with a friend about how we as a society are struggling to understand the current and often bewildering push-back against the traditional binary understanding of gender, sex and identity. This, by the way, wasn't a purposefully theological conversation; my friend would



certainly not call himself a Christian.

At one point, in a gesture of frustration, my friend threw his hands in the air and said, “I don’t care who you sleep with, but let’s face it, there are males and there are females... and *that’s that*.”

Well... I differ significantly from both parts of that statement because, in the first place, I actually *do* care who people sleep with. And in the second, gender, we’re discovering, isn’t biologically the simple binary we previously understood it to be.

Firstly, in a world inescapably populated by “interdividuals” (René Girard’s term) it affects all of us what all of us do. And it seems quite evident to me that the gift of sexual energy is both wonderful *and* fearful—generative and destructive; not unlike the fire in your backyard firepit. It can be lovely to sit around at night, but if you don’t respect its nature and power, it can suddenly overwhelm its boundary and burn down the neighborhood, destroying everything and everyone you love.

As a Christian, I believe that God’s longing for creation is one of flourishing-in-communion. Boundaries (ethics) around sex are to ensure relationships are “free of promiscuity, exploitation and abusiveness” and are marked by “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection, respect... and the holy love that enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.” (*The Gospel vs. Scripture? Biblical Theology and the Debate about Rites of Blessing: An Interview with Walter Brueggemann.*)

In the second place, we’re slowly learning that gender is a very complicated matter indeed; hardly the “That settles it!” binary that most of us are comfortable with.

My friend’s outburst sent me back to an online lecture I watched a few years ago titled, “From Stranger to Neighbor: Intersex Persons and the Church.” In it, Christian sociologist, Dr. Valerie Hiebert, unpacks the biological reality of intersex people who make up just under two percent of the human population (roughly the same percentage of the population that has red hair). These are people born with physical, gonadal, or chromosomal sexual features that are a combination of male and female. That is, people who are *born* “ambiguous” at either the cellular, chromosomal or anatomical level, or various combinations there-of.

Valerie’s lecture, later revised with colleague Dennis Hiebert for Mathew S. Vos’s book, *Strangers and Scapegoats: Extending God’s Welcome to Those on the Margins* (Baker Academic, 2024), goes on to unpack the tragic lives of those born into a world of shame and alienation based on their created reality. It’s a bit of a tough read as she recounts several heart-wrenching stories of people whose bodies have been systematically pathologized and rejected by a culture with an enduring aversion to difference.

In a homily recently preached in Winnipeg by theologian Graham McFarlane of St. Margaret’s Anglican Church, a beloved passage from the Psalms was considered:

“I am fearfully and wonderfully made... this I know full well.” (Psalm 139:14,15)

Graham recounts the beginning of his own conversion to the Christian faith when he was first struck by the staggering beauty, intent and order of a single forest leaf. Psalm 139 connected for him the wonders of the external created order on display in the leaf with his own “innermost parts (knitted in the utmost depths)” being fashioned by the same loving intention.

Are we obligated to assume there are those for whom this is not true based on an accident of birth? And if so, whose accident?

Here I’ll note that Valerie’s paper is directed to a church whose mandate it is to transform the stranger into neighbour by acts of profound, and even costly welcome. It’s not hard to look back on our scriptures to see that the very idea of “the stranger” is a social construct antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.

Now, back to the opening lyric. You might now see that by *indigenous*, I meant those who are at home in their own bodies. By *stranger* I meant those who know they are not. And by *ambiguous* I meant those who don’t necessarily know where home is because they’ve been taught that who they really are can’t possibly be who they really are.

Valerie Hiebert believes the church has a moral obligation to *neighbour the stranger* (my term). “Can we anticipate heaven on earth,” she asks, “as we are called to

do, by changing ourselves into a more hospitable and safe community?” In other words, can we imagine a glad garden-city where each knows *full well*, both in their spirit and in their experience of welcome and belonging, that they are fearfully and wonderfully made?

At the very least, I believe we can hope. And let’s not demote hope to an inert or passive wish. Rather, hope is a demonstration of *love* sustained by the glad intuition that there is more going on than we know.

Aside: I wrote this song a few days after the death of the legendary Canadian singer/songwriter Gordon Lightfoot. I like to think the first few lines of melody are kin to something he might have written. Whether or not they achieve a likeness, they are intended to be a subtle homage in any case.



LOVERS IN A DANGEROUS TIME

Love is not consolation. It is light. Human existence is so fragile a thing and exposed to such dangers that I cannot love without trembling.

—SIMONE WEIL | *Gravity and Grace*

Over the course of my solo career, I've recorded sixteen covers of Bruce Cockburn songs. "Lovers" will be my seventeenth and I already have my eye on a song from Bruce's latest release "Oh Sun, Oh Moon." It's a song called "Orders."

Each verse of "Orders" offers a catalogue of saints and sinners, from the just, the merciful, and the cruel, to "the stumbling well-intentioned fool." And each verse ends with the line:

Our orders said to love them all

It is remarkable to me that the same person who for so long has written with angry, protesting fists in the air (i.e. "If I had a rocket launcher...") can yet write so forcefully, sometimes delicately, and always affectingly about love. Perhaps the very source of his much-celebrated songs of outrage is the agony of a love-soaked poet

who feels in his bones the needless tragedy of every loveless deed.

I started playing around with “Lovers” in the winter of 2022... right around the time Russia invaded Ukraine. I can no longer remember what came first, my interest in the song, or the invasion. But it was not lost on me how pertinent this 40 year-old song was to the current situation. As my rendition was developing, Malcolm Guite encouraged me to dedicate the song to the President and First Lady of Ukraine if ever I performed it. Which I did.

“Lovers” was first written and recorded in 1984 under the shadow of the Cold War. The song contrasts the anticipatory gloom of pending war:

One minute you're waiting for the sky to fall

...with the astonishing wonders of creation:

Next you're dazzled by the beauty of it all

...and the enchanted bliss of young, innocent love:

These fragile bodies of touch and taste

This fragrant skin, this hair like lace

Spirits open to the thrust of grace

Never a breath you can afford to waste

Reportedly, Bruce had his young teenage daughter in mind and the endearing, lovely romances beginning to roll like waves through her group of friends oblivious

to the threat of global destabilization.

And then comes the last stanza with those great lines:

Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight

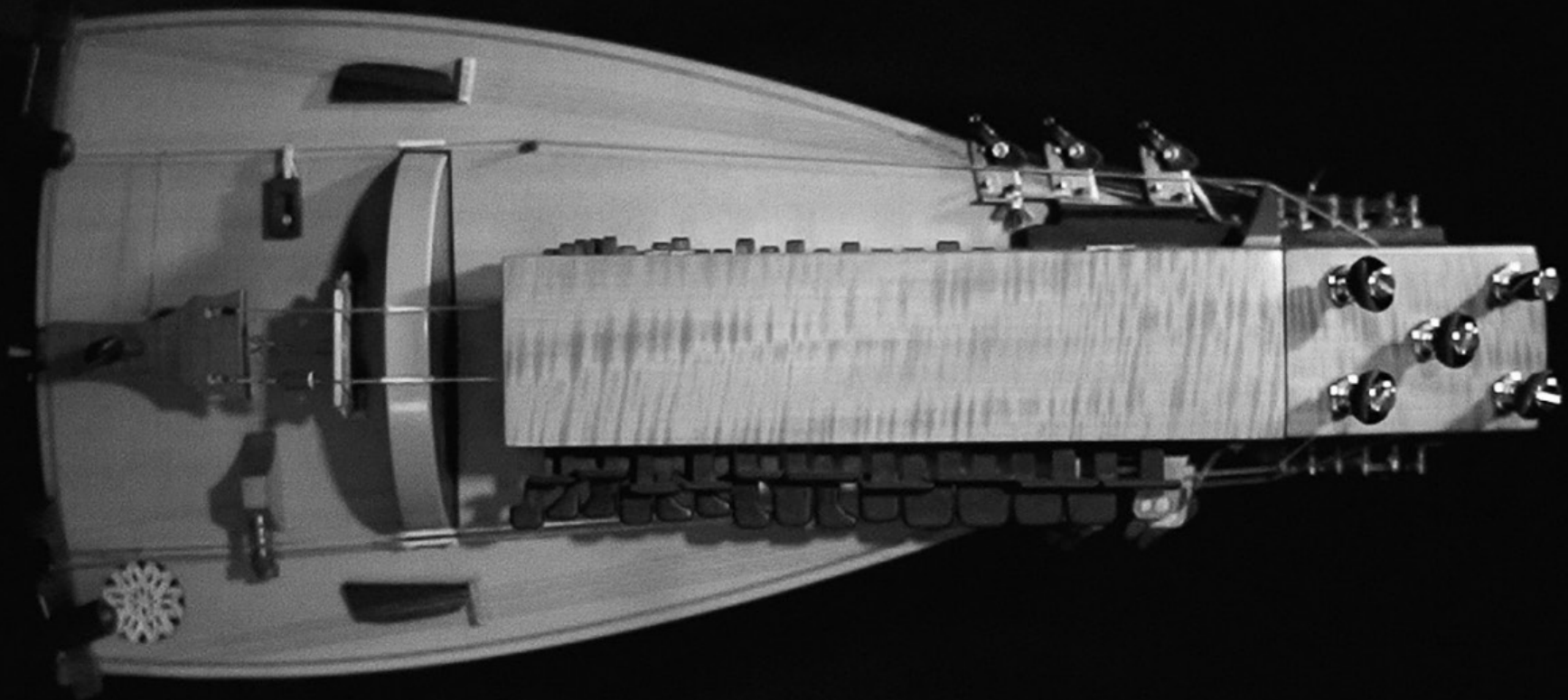
You gotta kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight

Pretty much every songwriter I know wishes they had written those lines.

Notice here the burgeoning swell of familiar outrage. But the lyric is consistent with the best wisdom about the nature of evil. Flesh and blood are not our enemy, but rather, darkness itself and the icy grip it has on so many hapless souls.

I'm not sure the world needs another version of this much covered song. But I like to think mine brings a little something new to the table. My father used to say that if you get tired of the paintings in your living room, don't change the paintings, change the frames... and you'll see something new.

Aside: While listening to my version you will notice that it opens with a gritty drone note followed by a strange clacking instrument that sounds like it may pre-date the bagpipes. What you're hearing is a medieval instrument called the hurdy-gurdy. I first heard it on a friend's album produced here in Winnipeg and performed by a local musician named Quintin Bart. I instantly hoped we could find a place for it on this project and I'm delighted we did. You can hear this curious instrument on this, as well as on the closing song, “This Dark Hour.”



HURDY GURDY



CHAPTER 6.

A REASON FOR IT ALL

*I know that the day will come
When my troubles will be done
And I'll know there's a reason for it all*

—BYRON O'DONNELL (1949-2023)

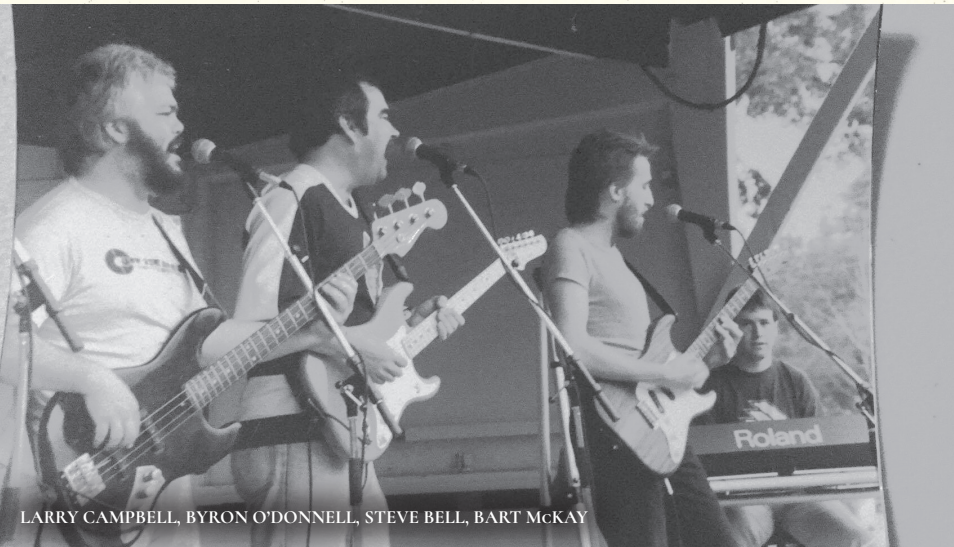
If you've followed my music over the years, you may recognize the name Byron O'Donnell. Byron sang background vocals on my first album, *Comfort My People*, in 1989. He also co-wrote one of the songs, "The Lord Has Done Great Things," with Larry Campbell and me. I've since recorded several of Byron's songs on subsequent projects, including: "He Will Know" (*Devotion*, 2008) and "The Greatest Gift" (*Kindness*, 2010).

Larry introduced me to Byron in the mid-80's. I had just quit a prominent local band, was a little burnt out, and was looking for a pick-up gig to help pay bills until I could figure out what to do next. Byron was a local country music legend and needed a guitar player who could sing, so I agreed to a few dates even though I knew almost nothing about country music and was, objectively, inadequate as a country guitar player—a fact that several music reviewers made sure to point out. What started as a commitment to a few gigs turned out to be several years in Byron's band.

THE GLAD SUPRISE

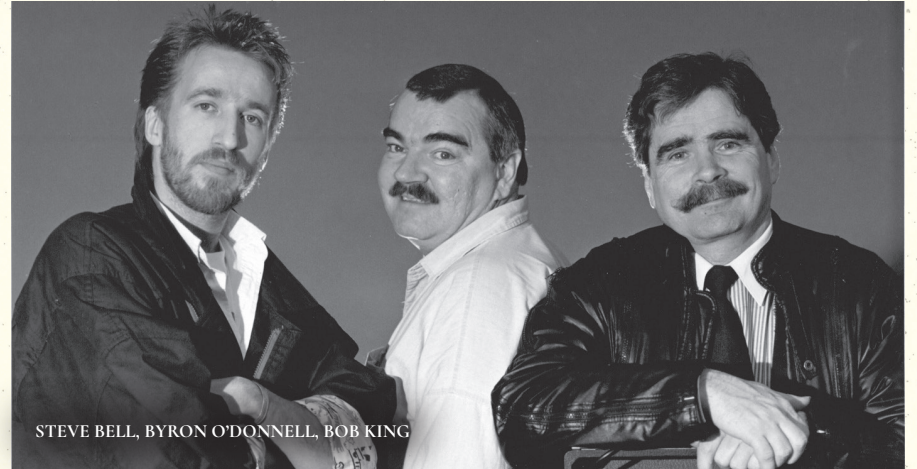
Simultaneously, Byron and I also formed a trio under Bob King (writer of the song “Sandwiches,” made famous by the beloved children’s entertainer Fred Penner). The Bob King Trio was more known for its hilarity than musicality, but both bands gave me a lovely place to hide out as a side man for a couple of years as I was otherwise rather aimless about my future as a musician.

Sometime around 1987, Byron, Larry and I read an article about the American songwriter Randy Newman, who reportedly went to an office every day, Monday



LARRY CAMPBELL, BYRON O'DONNELL, STEVE BELL, BART MCKAY

THE GLAD SUPRISE



STEVE BELL, BYRON O'DONNELL, BOB KING

to Friday, to write songs. In other words, he took his craft seriously as a job and organized his life around it. This seemed odd to me as I had only experienced writing as something that happens to you—usually late at night—when feeling either blue or melancholic. It simply never occurred to me that songwriting was a discipline or a trade that one showed up to on a daily basis. However, we were convinced by the article, and the three of us rented a frumpy, three-room office over a retail space at the corner of Notre Dame and Arlington in Winnipeg. We modestly called our space “*The Hit Pit*.”

For the next year or so, we would show up most days at 9 A.M. with a commitment to writing a song each day. It didn’t matter if the music was good or bad as long as

something resembling a song was written. Sometimes we stayed in our individual rooms and wrote alone, and other times we collaborated. But it was at The Hit Pit, watching him work, day after day, that I realized the genius of Byron O'Donnell. In the same time that I would write a line or two, Byron would write three sets of lyrics for a single song and then casually toss away the two that didn't prove best. His chord progressions were deliberately simple, and his melodies were always memorable. I, in contrast, tried to be complex and artsy. In the end, most of the songs I wrote that year have been appropriately forgotten, although I can still sing many of Byron's songs.

That was a profound year for me, watching a master at his craft. Eventually, we had to let The Hit Pit go—primarily for economic reasons. But there's no doubt that that year with Larry and Byron tilled the soil for a sudden burst of songs that became *Comfort My People* (1989), *Deep Calls to Deep* (1992) and *Burning Ember* (1994).

We three remained loyal friends. Larry continued writing, playing, and producing music for several years, then went on to work with at-risk youth before retiring to a part-time job as worship coordinator at our church and an informal mentor to many, including myself.

Byron's story is complicated, sad, and, to some degree, a bit of a glad surprise. Byron had the combination of a wounded past and a lust for life, which manifested in crippling addictions, health problems and a string of broken relationships. He spent

his last decade as a recluse in Dryden, Ontario. Yet, he continued to write songs and post home versions on YouTube. He managed to get control of his worst addictions, but by that point, his health was broken, and he just didn't seem to have the fight to start out again.

In his last years, Byron had several profound experiences of the presence of Christ, and he would often talk to me about his deep faith in a God who knew and loved him. He would track my travels and let me know he was praying for me. Every time I put out a new album, I'd get a phone call with glowing words of encouragement. He seemed genuinely proud of me.

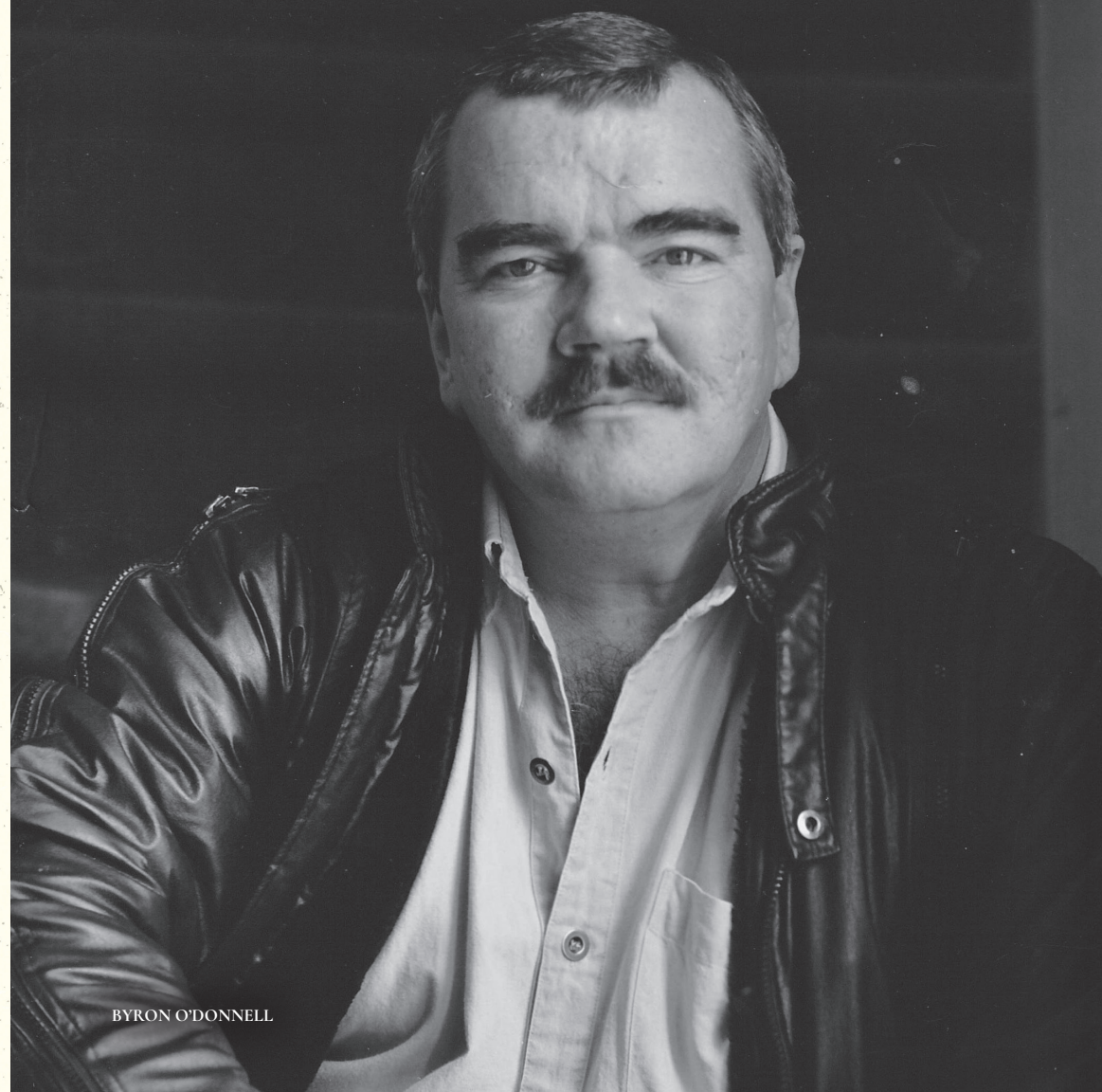
The last time I saw Byron was just a few months before he passed away. Dave (my manager) and I were passing through Dryden on our way to Thunder Bay for a concert, and we stopped for a quick visit. It was clear that something was wrong, as Byron was having cognitive difficulties (caused by a tumour that ended up taking his life). When he was finally hospitalized, he, being a natural charmer, spent his last days surrounded by doting nurses, a faithful friend, Betty-Lou, and his beloved son, William, and daughter-in-law, Anna. When I last spoke to him on the phone, Byron seemed ready and at peace. He came from goodness and was returning to goodness... he knew that full well.

Knowing something of his sorrows and regrets, I felt happy that his troubles were done, as his song anticipates. But I do miss his friendship, his huge laugh, his

THE GLAD SUPRISE

stunning wit, his gorgeous songs, and his tender encouragements.

Of the many songs I could have recorded as a memorial, “A Reason for It All” seems the most appropriate. It’s a song Byron sent to my assistant, Faye Hall, to use at her late husband’s funeral just a few months before his own death; otherwise I might never have known it existed. You can hear it in Byron’s own voice as a bonus track at the end of this album.



BYRON O'DONNELL



CHAPTER 7.

THIS TOO, IS TRUE

God sent you this truth through the pen that found itself in my hand.

—SIMONE WEIL | *Awaiting God*

Not every song has to have a story or deep meaning to be legitimate. This one sure didn't start off that way, but by the time it unfolded, there was a bit of unexpected meaning and story attached to it, so here we go...

For some time, I've wanted to create a series of online masterclasses that teach my brand of fingerstyle guitar using the instrumental pieces I've written over the years. There are a lot of guitar players out there who are much better than I, but we all have a unique approach worth documenting for the sake of the next generation of players. In addition, I wanted to give my instrumental pieces a voice of their own, separate from my sung songs. So, last year, I launched two projects:

The first is a CD called *No Words: The Guitar Instrumentals of Steve Bell (1995-2023)*. *No Words* collects all the instrumentals that have been scattered throughout

my other albums over the years, including this one, which hadn't appeared in a regular collection of songs until now.

The second project is an online masterclass series that we launched at the same time, snappily titled *The Steve Bell Guitar Masterclass*. If you check it out, you'll find a multi-camera-angle series of lessons that teach the songs I've written and, more importantly, some of the techniques that are somewhat unique to my playing.

The song "This Too, Is True" didn't start off as a fully realized song. I initially developed it as an eight-bar exercise to demonstrate a right-hand thumb technique you'll often hear in my songs. But after I developed the exercise, I realized that it could be a song, so I fleshed it out until it became what it now is.

That's the story. Here's the meaning part.

I wrote the song near the tail end of the Covid lockdown when I was particularly low. I managed the first year of Covid rather well I thought. But I sunk into a bit of a pit in the second. It wasn't so much the sickness of Covid that caused me to despair, as much as the sickness of non-cooperation and mean-spiritedness that surfaced as a result. I just wasn't prepared for what came out of people, many of whom I knew and loved.

But this song emerged as described. Its pace was quick, and its tone was lighthearted and bouncy—pretty much the opposite of how I felt. Yet, it needed a name... and the name needed be appropriate to the song, not my emotional state.

One day, I was sitting down by the river near our home. I was letting the flow of the water carry away my worries. As I sat there, I realized that even though the days were dark, I was still capable of delight, even if its source was a tiny periwinkle flower poking out of the riverbank weeds. I had to admit that my granddaughter's laugh could still distract me from weightier matters. I could still delight in a good burger and ale. The beauty of my wife's smile could still catch my breath.

On his 2003 album release, *You've Never Seen Everything*, Cockburn has a song called "Don't Forget About Delight."

*Amid the rumours and the expectations
and all the stories dreamt and lived
Amid the clangour and the dislocation
and things to fear and to forgive*

*Don't forget
about delight*

And then:

*Spring birds peck among the pressed-down grasses
Clouds like zeppelins cross the sky
Anger drips and pools, and then it passes
And I say a prayer that I*

*Don't forget
about delight*

With the song ringing in my ears, I realized that delight, especially “amid the clangour and the dislocation,” is a vital virtue and a protest. It’s a commitment to a final word after the current one.

Suddenly I could gather up all these mini delights into a golden orb, hold it aloft and say, with a measure of joy, “This too, is true!”

If it is okay to appropriate Simone Weil’s words, let me say this in closing:

God sent you this truth through the guitar that found itself in my hand.

You can check out my fingerstyle guitar masterclass series at
www.stevebellguitar.com



CHAPTER 8.

A LOVELY LONGED-FOR BLUE

*Breathe deep and be renewed by every breath,
Kinned to the keen east wind and cleansing air,
As though the blue itself were blowing through you.*

—MALCOLM GUTE | *excerpt from First Steps, Brancaster*

This is one of nine Malcolm Gute poems that I've adapted and set to music. We've written others together as well, usually occasioned by me getting stuck on a song lyric and inviting Malcolm to help unlock and finish what I've started. "The Glad Surprise" and "This Dark Hour" in this collection are examples of that. Only "A Big Mistake," from my *Pilgrimage* album represents a co-write where we started with a blank slate.

It occurs to me that gathering all our collaborations onto one album with an accompanying book of reflections may be a worthy project. It would be nice to hear them all together.

"A Lovely Longed-for Blue" is adapted from a poem by Malcolm called "First Steps, Brancaster." It first appeared in his collection, *A Word in the Wilderness: A Poem a Day for Lent and Easter* (Canterbury Press, 2014). Malcolm wrote it on a post-Easter break on the North Norfolk coast near Brancaster, England. The poem celebrates his first outdoor walk having just had a cast removed from a leg badly broken a few months prior. It wasn't a very long walk, he reports, and it wasn't pain-free, but it was a breakthrough of sorts, as his poem records:

FIRST STEPS. BRANCASTER

BY MALCOLM GUTE

This is the day to leave the dark behind you
Take the adventure, step beyond the hearth,
Shake off at last the shackles that confined you,
And find the courage for the forward path.
You yearned for freedom through the long night watches,
The day has come and you are free to choose,
Now is your time and season.
Companioned still by your familiar crutches,
And leaning on the props you hope to lose,
You step outside and widen your horizon.

After the dimly burning wick of winter
That seemed to dull and darken everything
The April sun shines clear beyond your shelter

And clean as sight itself. The reed-birds sing,
 As heaven reaches down to touch the earth
 And circle her, revealing everywhere
 A lovely, longed-for blue.
 Breathe deep and be renewed by every breath,
 Kinned to the keen east wind and cleansing air,
 As though the blue itself were blowing through you.

You keep the coastal path where edge meets edge,
 The sea and salt marsh touching in North Norfolk,
 Reed cutters cuttings, patterned in the sedge,
 Open and ease the way that you will walk,
 Unbroken reeds still wave their feathered fronds
 Through which you glimpse the long line of the sea
 And hear its healing voice.
 Tentative steps begin to break your bonds,
 You push on through the pain that sets you free,
 Towards the day when broken bones rejoice.

I first encountered “First Steps” during the last gasps of the Covid lockdown: that endless, “dimly burning wick of winter that seemed to dull and darken everything.” And so, the promise of one’s breath being renewed and “kinned to the keen east wind and the cleansing air” evoked a tearful longing I couldn’t have imagined only two years earlier.

About his own experience, Malcolm writes:

The lines that came first—
*Kinned to the keen east wind and cleansing air,
 As though the blue itself were blowing through you.*

—came spontaneously as an expression of how that deep blue, keen air and wide horizon, after months of confinement, seemed somehow to change and expand my inward self. The walk itself was brief and painful, pushing myself with each step and leaning still on my crutches, but somehow also transformative. The experience it describes seems to correspond with a real experience on most people’s spiritual journey, a moment when vision is renewed; new possibilities become apparent even though we are still hobbled by our brokenness. That renewal is what gives us the courage to ‘push on through the pain’ in a strange and paradoxical combination of effort, grace and freedom.

My adaptation of Malcolm’s poem leaves out the North Norfolk landscape that is unfamiliar to me. It connects the cautious first steps of the still-tender wounded to the courage of the “pilgrim sages” whose journeys “widen our horizons” and carry the renewing breath of God wherever they go. I hope it retains the cleansing grace and expansive freedom of a vast, blue sky, which, for a prairie boy like me, is wonderfully familiar, and always soul-stirring.



PENTECOST

The Spirit is the power of heaven come to earth, or to put it another way, the Spirit is the power that enables surprised earthlings to share in the life of heaven.

—N.T. WRIGHT | *excerpt from sermon, "The Power of Heaven Let Loose on Earth."*

In the spring of 2022, Malcolm and I spent a few retreat days together at my manager's cabin at Victoria Beach, about ninety minutes north of Winnipeg. We were preparing to teach a five-day course at Regent College in Vancouver on the tradition of the Church calendar year. From there, we were to go to Seattle for a string of events, culminating in a Sunday morning where Malcolm was to preach, and I was to sing. It just so happened that the Sunday was to be Pentecost Sunday. On the last day of our cabin retreat, we turned our attention to what we might do for that morning.

Pentecost Sunday, of course, recalls the biblical story of a huddled community of Jesus followers, some fifty days after the Roman Empire had brutally executed their leader in a merciless attempt to crush what were perceived as being their nationalistic hopes and aspirations. Adding bewilderment to bereavement, Jesus had been seen alive since, bearing the scars of his fatal wounds; still very much human... embodied... but with a very different relationship to time and space.

Jesus' instructions to his friends were counterintuitive. One's instincts would be to flee further Imperial terrors, but he told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promised Holy Spirit. Whatever that meant...

The day came when suddenly, as N.T. Wright puts it, *the flame leapt out of the fireplace and set the whole house on fire*. The rag-tag group of defeated followers were suddenly overcome by the sound of a rushing wind, engulfed in "tongues of fire," and flooded by a fountain of explosive joy which compelled them to leave their hiding place and spill out into the streets with the message that God's re-creation had indeed begun. "What the creator God has done in Jesus Christ, and supremely in his resurrection, is what he intends to do for the whole world—meaning, by world, the entire cosmos with all its history." (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, HarperOne, 2008)

The New Testament book of Acts records that the disciples were in Jerusalem at the time, and that the city was filled with visitors from "every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). The miracle of the story is that everyone who heard their message, heard it in their own native tongue.

"Do you have a song for Pentecost?" Malcolm asked.

"Oddly, no," I responded, suddenly realizing the hole in my body of songs

around the church calendar.

"Well then, we should write something," Malcolm suggested.

Malcolm had previously written a sonnet for Pentecost that had appeared in his collection, *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Canterbury Press, 2012). He read it to me to see if it would inspire any ideas, and almost immediately, I knew the repeating chorus should be:

*This is the feast of Fire, Air and Water,
Poured out and breathed, and kindled into Earth.
The Earth herself awakens to her maker,
Translated out of death and into birth.*

The four elements (fire, water, air, and earth) show up a lot in Malcolm's poetry. He is endlessly fascinated by the elements that make up the ancient world's view of the cosmos, which are deeply symbolic of our souls as well. In a blog reflecting on their presence in this poem, Malcolm writes:

I have been reflecting on the traditional 'four elements' of earth, air, water, and fire... how each of them expresses and embodies different aspects of the Gospel and of God's goodness, as though the four elements were, in their own way, another four evangelists. In that context, I was very struck by the way Scripture expresses the presence of the Holy Spirit through the three most dynamic of the four elements: the air (a mighty rushing wind,

but also the breath of the Spirit), water (the waters of baptism, the river of life, the fountain springing up to eternal life promised by Jesus), and of course fire, the tongues of flame at Pentecost. But where is the fourth, I wondered? Where is Earth? And then I realized that we ourselves are earth, the ‘Adam’ made of the red clay, and we become living beings, fully alive, when the Holy Spirit, clothed in the three other elements, comes upon us and becomes a part of who we are.

At Pentecost, claims the poem, “the Earth herself awakens to her maker”—supplied by the fountain of life, kindled by the divine spark, and animated by the very breath of God.

For Malcolm, the fact that God allows his good news to be heard in every language—not reserved for some special privileged language or culture—is a part of the very content of the Gospel that “crosses every border,” that translates death into birth, and whose mother-tongue, in every land, is love.

Here’s Malcolm’s original poem:

PENTECOST

BY MALCOLM GUIE

Today, we feel the wind beneath our wings,
Today, the hidden fountain flows and plays,
Today, the church draws breath at last and sings,
As every flame becomes a tongue of praise.
This is the feast of Fire, Air, and Water,
Poured out and breathed and kindled into Earth.
The Earth herself awakens to her maker,
Translated out of death to birth.
The right words come today in their right order
And every word spells freedom and release.
Today the gospel crosses every border,
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace
Today the lost are found in His translation
Whose mother tongue is love, in every nation.

Aside: This is the lyric that inspired the design of the album’s cover. Designer, Roberta Landreth, picked up on the dynamism of the four elements and incorporated them into the gorgeous emblem you see on the front cover. She then reconfigured the elements of the front cover to create the various tapestries you see throughout the book design.

THE GLAD SURPRISE

In an email to me, Roberta wrote, “I created these digital tapestries to show that with the same elements we can create an infinite world of beautiful combinations. It is subtle in some but because there are four corners each tapestry also creates a cross shape.”

I must say, I get as much delight from what she does with my projects as I do from what the various musicians bring to the songs.

As much as I can appreciate the convenience of digital platforms for listening to music, what I love about “the album” (CD or LP)—from the songs to the song sequence, to the artwork and design elements—is that the physical format allows for a rich, layered, and tactile expression that individual songs on a playlist simply cannot.

If you’re reading this, then you have “the album.” And that makes me happy.



THIS DARK HOUR

The Church is given the power of co-suffering love, not co-regency with Caesar.

—BRIAN ZAHND | *The Wood Between the Worlds*

I've been staring blankly at my computer screen for far too long, hoping for a subtle way to begin to talk about this song. Emily Dickinson wrote, "Tell the truth, but tell it slant." However, nothing "slant" is coming, so I'm going to have to start head-on:

"This Dark Hour" emerges out of my increasing alarm at the growth of Christian Nationalism in North America. One can go down a rabbit hole looking for a definition of what it is, but my observation is that Christian Nationalism is the belief that Christians should enjoy outsized privilege in the public square and in the shaping of the public policy of a nation. It is aligned with radical right-wing ideology and is comfortable with authoritarian rule. Christian Nationalism admits to no qualms with the use of violence to assure its dominance and casts Jesus as an avenging Braveheart figure with his blood-soaked sword held high rather than the incarnation of God whom Jesus reveals to be a communion of "self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love." (Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God*, Plain Truth Ministries Press, 2015)

Of course, the problem is that Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples, not nations. And he was clear, by his teachings and example, that his "Lordship" or "reign" (both problematic words to the modern ear) reveals cruciform love, not conquest, to be the very power and glory of God.

I can't remember exactly what I was reading when this song emerged, but it was something by Karl Barth in which he referred to the "lordless powers." I felt a quickening in my spirit, and wrote this stanza:

*When church becomes a "lordless power"
And so it seems that all is lost
There still remains in this dark hour
The mystery of our Saviour's cross
For in that cross is dearly nestled
Hope eternal in disguise
By way of suffering love he leads us
To God's glorious and glad surprise*

Here we come full circle... back to "The Glad Surprise," which opens the album. And like the opening song, I sat on this lyric for a month or two with no idea where to take it until I sent a "please help" email to Malcolm, who responded brilliantly with:

*His way of suffering love is open
There for anyone to take*

*To stand in love with those who suffer
Suffer with them for his sake
Better that our church be powerless
Better that it cast away
All its claims to pomp and glory
Learn instead to fast and pray*

*Jesus did not cling to glory
All he had was emptied out
A living stream of love and goodness
For a world that casts Him out
And should we learn the art of losing
Letting go and giving way
We might find beyond the darkness
A glad surprise on Easter Day*

I don't think much else needs to be said, so I'll give the final words to one of my mentors (whom I've never met):

Religion must not only not be totalitarian but should limit itself strictly to the plane of supernatural love that is alone fitting to it. If it did, it would penetrate everything.

—SIMONE WEIL | *Awaiting God*



CHAPTER 11.

BYRON O'DONNELL: IN HIS OWN VOICE (BONUS TRACK)

When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river-side, into which as he went; he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?' And as he went down deeper, he said, 'Grave, where is thy victory?' So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

— JOHN BUNYAN | *A Pilgrim's Progress*

Although I don't know where it fits chronologically in his huge corpus of songs, "A Reason For It All" is the last new song of Byron's that I heard before his death in 2023. Pretty much the minute I heard it I knew I wanted to record it. At the time, however, I didn't know Byron would soon pass away and never get to hear my rendition.

When I started to record my own version, I kept reverting to Byron's and lamented I couldn't quite capture his magic on the song. It suddenly occurred to me I could just let you hear it in his own voice. Byron's son, William, was gracious to let us include it here.

So, to close this album off, I'm delighted to share my buddy Byron singing and playing his own song.

Rest in peace Byron. Thank you so much, for so much.

xo





IN CLOSING...

The core of this album was recorded February 26th and 27th of this year. We crammed Daniel Roy (drums), Gilles Fournier (bass), Murray Pulver (guitar, producer), Brent Barkman (keys), and me into our tiny studio with Dave Zeglinski behind the console. One by one, I played the songs for the guys, and then, with little direction from Murray or me, we just started to play. Much of what you hear (arrangements and bed tracks) was conceived as a group and recorded within an hour or so of the guys hearing the songs for the first time. The bells and whistles (specialty instruments, background vocals, extra keyboards, etc.) were recorded in the following weeks and months. Each musician was chosen for the uniqueness they would bring to the track, and each delivered in spades. In the end, I got an album far richer than what I could have imagined. I couldn't be more grateful. And my respect for each contributor is immense.

The album artwork came together similarly. I've learned, with designer Roberta Landreth not to over-direct. It's best to drop off the songs, have a quick discussion, and then walk away. Her instincts always bring surprising new layers to the music and deepen the experience of the project.

You'll have noticed from the preceding chapters that I read a fair bit. So many of my songs are sparked by something I've read that corresponds to something going on for me at the time. I've never had a spiritual director in the typical sense, but the many thoughtful authors I read (both living and deceased) serve me well in that capacity.

And then there's Malcolm Guite, whose poetry continues to inspire new songs and on whom I've come to rely on to complete the ones I can't seem to wrap up. When I met him in 2011, I felt relatively dry and was wondering if it was time to start wrapping up my career. But not so. Malcolm's artistry and friendship have injected new vigor into my spirit and imagination.

Dave Zeglinski, my manager of over thirty years, and Murray Pulver, who has produced my last several albums, are a dream to work with—no stress, no egos, and enormous talent. I have so much respect for them both.

My team at Signpost (Faye Hall, Amy Knight, and Jason Johnson) are so much more than dedicated and gifted employees. Over the years they have

THE GLAD SURPRISE

each become cherished friends with whom I'm blessed to share this part of my life and work.

Before closing, I tenderly tip my hat to my wife of forty-three years, Nanci. For decades, in addition to pursuing her own vocations, she has created a wonderful home to go out from and to come back to. When we were first married, we committed to, and even looked forward to growing old together. Well, here we are—not quite there yet, but so much closer to our goal. And it's been good—so very good!

Finally, thank you for reading and listening. I assume I'll see many of *you* on the road this next year, and I look forward to that. I began by mentioning that this is my twenty-third album release. I know there will not be another twenty-three, but perhaps another one or two yet. And I look forward to that as well. Peace to you and yours,

Steve Bell

July 19, 2024 | Winnipeg MB, Treaty One Territory, Canada



BRENT BARKMAN, DANIEL ROY, DAVE ZEGLINSKI, STEVE BELL, MURRAY PULVER, GILLES FOURNIER



STEVE BELL , BRENT BARKMAN | *No Fun Club*

THE GLAD SURPRISE



DAVE ZEGLINSKI, STEVE BELL | *No Fun Club*



BRENT BARKMAN | *No Fun Club*



GILLES FOURNIER, DANIEL ROY | *No Fun Club*

THE GLAD SUPRISE



RILEY HILL | *No Fun Club*



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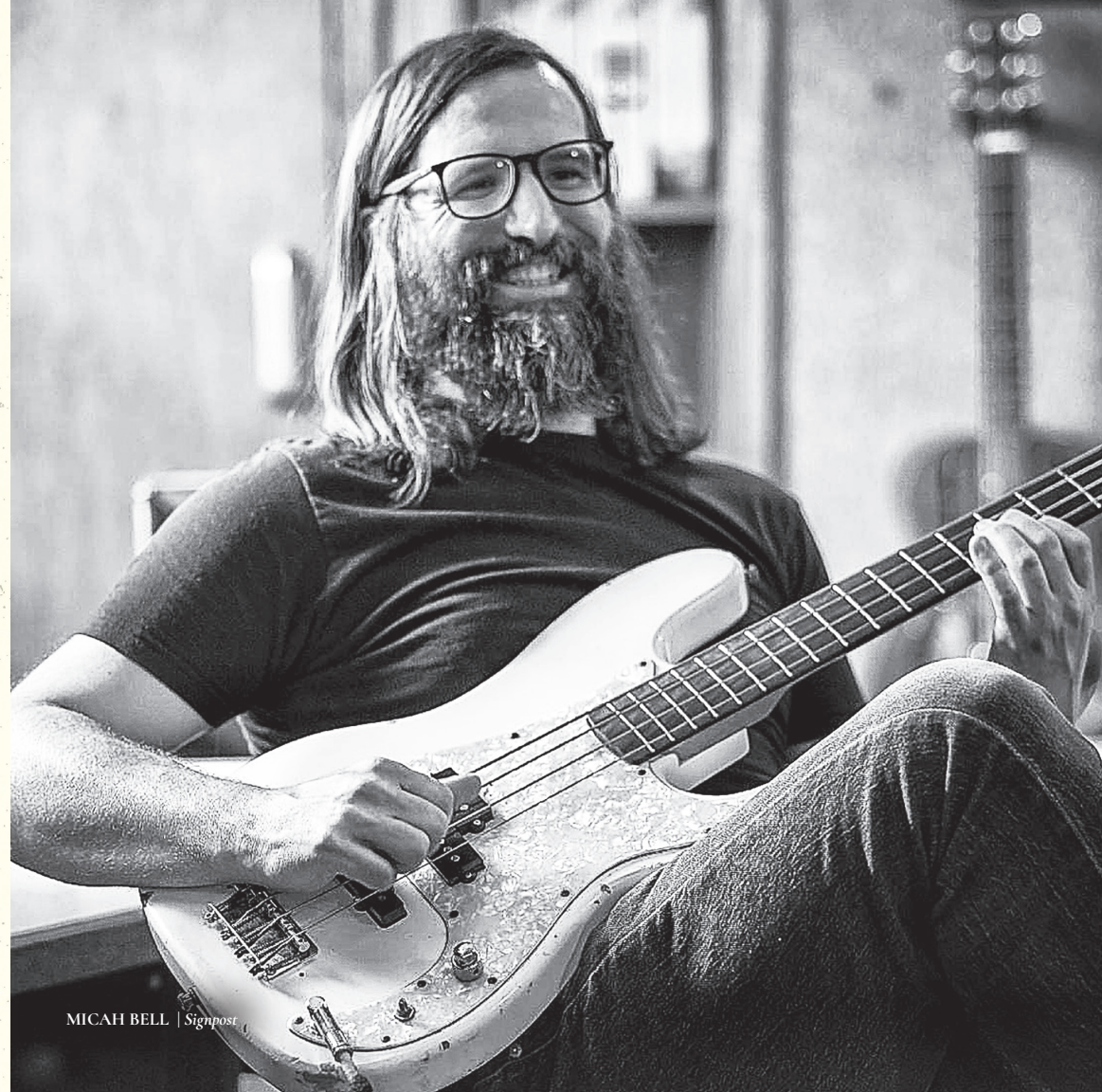


1970 MARTIN NEW YORKER

1939 EPIPHONE OLYMPIC



ERIN PROPP

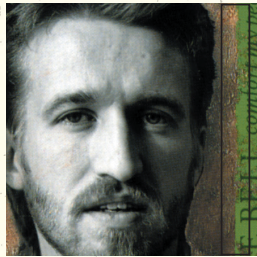


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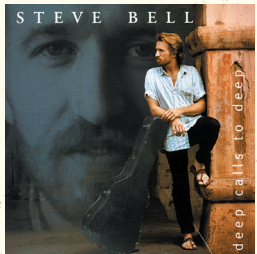
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COMFORT MY PEOPLE (1989)

Psalm 90 • Comfort My People • Amen, Listen to Our Prayer • Jenny • You are to be Holy • Ride on King Jesus Shepherd of Life • The Lord has Done Great Things You are Near • The Lord's Prayer



DEEP CALLS TO DEEP (1992)

Wings of an Eagle • Why do We Hunger for Beauty Hear Our Prayer • Faith's Song • Cache Island Fashion for Me • Deep Calls to Deep • What a Longing Marie • Blessed are the Poor • The Wellspring Holy Lord



BURNING EMBER (1994)

Dakota Hymn • As Long as the Sun • Psalm 40 • Never Mind • How Long • House of Peace • Song for the Life So Long • She's in Love with Me • I Will Not be Shaken Burning Ember • Psalm 32 Even so Lord Jesus Come



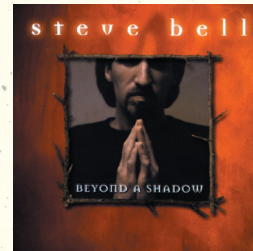
THE FEAST OF SEASONS (1995)

Ready My Heart • May it be Done • Magnificat (Holy is His Name) • The Angel Gabriel • Come Thou Long Expected Jesus • God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen • Angels We Have Heard on High • Silent Night • The Coventry Carol • O Holy Night • I Heard the Bells • Every Stone Shall Cry • Old Sage • The Coventry Carol (reprise)



ROMANTICS & MYSTICS (1997)

Dark Night of the Soul • Here by the Water Remember Me • Alone Tonight • Drumheller Circle All for a Loveless Night • Moon Over Birkenau Lament for a Nation • Keeping Vigil • This is Love Can I Go with You • Let's do it Again



BEYOND A SHADOW (1999)

Here by the Water • Remember Me • Wings of an Eagle • Psalm 40 • Never Mind • How Long • Burning Ember • Drumheller Circle • Ride on King Jesus Shepherd of Life • The Wellspring • Holy Lord This is Love



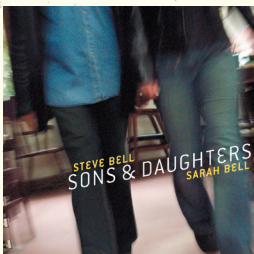
SIMPLE SONGS (2000)

Peace Prayer • Done Made My Vow • We Come • What Kind of Love is This • Come Thou Long Expected Jesus/ Be Thou My Vision/Great is Thy Faithfulness • Fresh and Green • Fox Glove • High Above the Fray Unto the Least of These • Down the Way • God Our Protector • Home • All the Diamonds • For the Journey



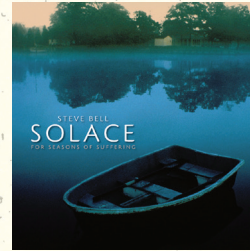
WAITING FOR AIDAN (2001)

The Water Runs • Stay Awake • Somebody's Gotta Pay Restless • Oh Love • Psalm 121 • Eventide • Pleasing to You • Jesus My Glory • Waiting for Aidan • Diamonds From the Other Side • A Sorrow for Connoisseurs



SONS & DAUGHTERS (2003)

In the Morning • Hosea (Come Back to Me) • Ever Present Need • We Believe in Love • I'll Fly Away • Psalm 116 • Getting Ready for Glory • Everything's Lies • Air Jam • Subtle Shiver • Lauds • The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)



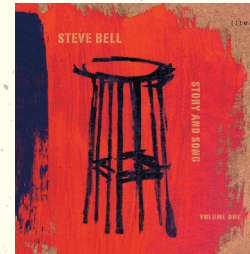
SOLACE FOR SEASONS OF SUFFERING (2005)

Psalm 90 • God Our Protector • Remember Me • Burning Ember • Shepherd of Life • How Long • Dark Night of the Soul • Moon Over Birkenau • Ever Present Need • Wings of an Eagle • Hear Our Prayer • Deep Calls to Deep • For the Journey • Hymn Medley



MY DINNER WITH BRUCE (2006)

Pacing the Cage • Lord of the Starfields • Southland of the Heart • Thoughts on a Rainy Afternoon • Closer to the Light • All the Ways I Want You • Going to the Country • God Bless the Children • Wondering Where the Lions Are • Love Loves You Too • My Lady and My Lord • Red Brother Red Sister • The Coming Rains



STORY AND SONG VOL. 1 (2006)

Intro • Psalm 40 • Fat and Flourishing • Fresh and Green • Go Forth and Multiply • Marie • Romance and Reality • That's Alright With Me • Censoring the Laments • How Long • Pick up the Phone • Psalm 22 In Closing • Lauds

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SYMPHONY SESSIONS (2007)

Burning Ember • Deep Calls to Deep • Dark Night of the Soul • Here by the Water • Even So Lord Jesus Come • Moon Over Birkenau • This is Love • Pleasing to You • Waiting for Aidan • Lord of the Starfields • The Wellspring • Holy Lord • Eventide

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DEVOTION (2008)

Almighty God • Everything We Need • He Will Know Praise the Father • Gone is the Light • Embrace the Mystery • Jesus Feed Us • Who Condemns You Now • The Lorica • Benediction • Praise the Father {String Mix} • Gone is the Light {String Mix}



KINDNESS (2011)

About Love • Kindness • Changes • Good Friend Absalom, Absalom • These are the Ones • In Billy's Wake • Stubble & Hay • Birth of a Song • Greatest Gift Gifting & the Giver • Was it a Morning Like This

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KEENING FOR THE DAWN (2012)

Oracles • Keening for the Dawn • Fashion for Me Peace Be Unto You • O Come, O Come, Emmanuel While Shepherds Watched • In the Bleak Midwinter Glory • Descent • Refugee • Epiphany on the Jordan

JUNO
winner

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PILGRIMAGE (2014)

Think About That • Big Mistake • Lenten Lands • Turn it Around • Wayfaring Stranger • Mercy Now • Mary (Theotokos) • Borrowed Shoes • Long Love • Pop-Pop and the Lads • The Riddle Song • Felix Culpa



I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN (2015)

Ps 90 • Ps 23 (Shepherd of Life) • Ps 126 (The Lord Has Done Great Things) • Ps 72 & 131 (As Long as the Sun) • Ps 13 (How Long) • Ps 40 Ps 16 (I Will Not Be Shaken) • Ps 32 • Ps 25 (Remember Me) • Ps 84 (God Our Protector) • Ps 113 (High Above the Fray) • Ps 92 (Fresh and Green) • Ps 3 (Jesus My Glory) • Ps 19 (Pleasing to You) • Ps 8 & Heb 1 (Oh Love) • Ps 116



WHERE THE GOODWAY LIES (2016)

Bring It On • Love Song • Where the Good Way Lies
 And We Dance • Bethany in the Morning • Wait Alone
 in Stillness • Freedom Road • A Better Resurrection
 Let Beauty Awake • Love is Our Way • Ash Wednesday
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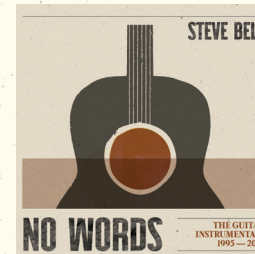
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 God Bless the Poor • The Strange Blessing of Bearing
 In Memoriam • A Heartbeat Away • Because I
 Languished for Love • The Home of Our God
 Long Shadows • Because We Hunkered Down • Do Not
 Judge • Together



NO WORDS: THE GUITAR INSTRUMENTALS (1995-2023)

Drumheller Circle • Waiting for Aidan • Down the Way • She's In
 Love With Me • Freedom Road • This Too, is True • Hymn Medley
 Pop-Pop and the Lads • Borrowed Shoes • Fox Glove • Judy's
 Garden • Christmas Medley • Cashe Island • Air Jam

