

One New Tape for the Preacher

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Henry Norman says that a liberation spirituality demands “a constant careful listening to the people of God and especially to the poor...(with) an ear that has been well trained by the scriptures.” (Introduction to Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Well*). The Neville Brothers’ album *Brother’s Keeper* is the stuff of liberation spirituality. It sings of faith: faith that has come through the fire of poverty, racism, addiction, and violence; a gritty, street-wise faith. As they sing in “Brother Blood,” “I’ve got the fire of the gospel, a river of blues, And I’ve got the soul of belief.” It must be impossible to listen without being drawn into the beat and believing it with your whole body.

On the album cover of *Brother’s Keeper* is an icon of an African American Christ figure, a crown of barbed wire around his head, a fire burning in his chest. He is framed by various fetishes that indicate the symbol-rich culture of New Orleans African American Catholicism which nurtures the Nevilles.

The album is dedicated to Almighty God the Great Spirit, the parents of the four brothers, several musicians who represent their roots, and the Spirits of Congo Square. Then it is signed, “We pray that this album will help bring its listeners together as brothers and sisters and closer to the love of God. Peace and Love, the Neville Brothers.”

Brother’s Keeper is an act of love: a critically acclaimed musical rendering of the long and perilous faith journey of four middle-aged African American men, Art, Charles, Cyril, and Aaron (who won a pair of Grammy awards for his duets with Linda Ronstadt). Nine of the thirteen songs are written by one or more members of the Neville family. They celebrate family, faith, human solidarity, and survival against the backdrop of the urban street corners and jailhouse with all their dangers and pitfalls. The stories break your heart. The music, described as “sinuous funk” — a distinctive New Orleans blend of rhythm and blues, soul, jazz, funk, and reggae — dares you *not* to dance. Find a reminder here: it is so often that lives of struggle nurture an appetite for the gospel not found among the privileged. But the music is generous and inviting — an outpouring of gratitude for life and God’s goodness and a call to human solidarity.

“Witness” is Cyril’s testimony of coming out on the other side of being “down so long.” He remembers, “My momma and my Aunt Virginia/ Say love God with all that’s in ya/ And there ain’t no words to say how I feel/ But I know in my heart the love of God is real/ Knock and the door will open.../I’m a witness — a witness to your love.” The song goes on to call on a cloud of witnesses including Saint James Booker, Saint Professor Longhair, Saint Gerald Tillman: New Orleans musicians who influenced the Nevilles. Some of these made it to success; some were beaten by addiction or jail. “Witness” is about appreciation and encouragement: appreciation for the mothers and fathers who went before and showed how to pray and trust and sing; and encouragement for those coming along. “Keep on seekin’ — keep on knockin’ — keep on lockin’/ Keep on searchin’ — you will find what you need/ It’s right there — what you need.”

The faith of the Nevilles is straightforward and deeply personal. The tender prayer “Steer Me Right, Sweet Jesus” calls on Jesus as the friend who bends down

into the darkness to save the petitioner from “an appetite for destruction.” The cross is a constant presence with all its rough edges, and Jesus is the companion who knows every pitfall. The hope too is abundant but not glibly dished out. It is hard-won and held with a sense of awe and reverence.

But lest we find any schmaltz or easy comfort here, the political analysis is as sharp and penetrating as the love is tender. In singing of God’s love in “Jah Love” (Jah is a short form of Jahveh or Yahweh), they insist on facing the contradictions and injustice of the American city: “Steel towers rise to pierce the sky/ While in the shadows the children hurt and cry.”

“Sons and Daughters,” sung in a full version and then again as a haunting reprise, slaps us with the harsh facts of life for young urban African American males. It is the picture of despair on the street corners and the prisons and jailhouses. “We think we’re safe at home with our bumper stickers saying/ Just say no/ We give up a few freedoms here and there in the name of a/ Squeaky clean America/ Now they’ve got us hypnotized and hysterical.../ Screaming for blood and justice.” “Faces of Hatred” are presented to the public as an underpinning for making the young Black male our sacrificial lamb. The song adds, almost sardonically, “It’s a freedom of speech — as long as you don’t say too much.” Then, strangely, the song switches images, “You can’t stop running water/ You can’t kill the fire that burns inside.” It seems to be an image for the Nevilles themselves and their family survival.

Other songs on the album celebrate love, freedom and solidarity, and “Brother Jake” is an old-time New Orleans funeral song. It laments Jake’s suffering as a victim of our domestic war on the poor then fashions the tears into a joyful send-off. “Brother Jake is finally home/ No more to cry, no more to weep and moan/ No more to have to run and hide/ He’s hopped his last freight, and took his last train ride.”

The picture painted in these songs is harsh and the analysis biting, but the real point here is rugged, against-the-odds faith. And faith means, very specifically for the Nevilles, being free of fear, focusing one’s life energies, claiming the gift of human solidarity, claiming the sister or brother in the stranger, claiming the cross, and claiming a resurrection hope and justice. These are the grateful and insistent songs of survivors. They made it through because of a fiery gospel and the care of brothers and sisters. They evangelize us to do the same.