

Dan Fefferman and a Call to Song

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March 8, 2013



Fefferman at an academic conference in Morocco, 2012.

The following is an overview of recent releases and re-releases of Dan Fefferman's songs. Fefferman's songs can be found on SoundCloud, an online audio distribution platform.

I am glad to see an internet "SoundCloud" recently made available by the prolific Dan Fefferman and consisting of a notable number of songs he has created over the past many years - complementing earlier materials with which many have long been familiar. Fefferman is a pioneer of the Unification Church (UC), having joined the "Unified Family" in Berkley in 1968. Fefferman has held a range of leadership positions in the Unification Church, today called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification Today he serves as the president of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom. He resides in Bowie Maryland and plays in the Good Time Band.

The reasons for my enthusiasm are several. For one thing, only a short time ago I found myself identifying to a colleague what seemed to me one of the clearest symptoms of a spiritual malaise in our movement that, initially subtle, had reached virtual crisis proportions before most of us had even begun to notice. I was reflecting on the gradual disappearance of a tradition of songs that, like those of Fefferman, had issued spontaneously from the hearts of a young membership afire with hope upon first encountering the Divine Principle.

For another thing, I have always appreciated the reality that those early songs, mostly direct outgrowths of a simple tradition that had found a new stride in the 'folk music revival' of the 60s - some of them charming, many of them quaint, a very few relatively skillfully crafted - had energized a young movement (a movement, alas! no longer young (at least in all quarters) and at least a little 'stalled' (in at least many quarters)).

Happy to oblige with a requested review of the recent release, I am happier still for the opportunity of calling broad-based attention to not only the materials themselves but to the importance of what they represent; of going "on record" as cordially in favor of revival of the tradition that Fefferman - along with the likes of such "classic" contributors as Sandra Singleton Lowen, Christopher Davies, Barry Cohen, Hillie Edwards, and others too numerous to mention - spontaneously established without any of them so much as realizing they were doing so.

So I'll get right into it, advising preliminarily that since the variety is broad and the number large - so that listeners are likely to tune in "off and on" and to "pick and choose" at random - what follows in the available space will amount to a little "tiptoeing through the musical tulips" of my own as I make some observations on a number of representative items.

I'll begin with the one I liked best - and hope collaterally to encourage others to have a listen to the whole "cloud" as time may allow and enthusiasm encourage. The release is worth it.

"Going for the Blue" - the meaning of whose initially puzzling title becomes clear when one realizes that the reference is to the 'blue tuna' - is a ballad in the tradition of the swashbuckling sea chanteys that were "bread and butter" (all right, haggis and oats) to such redoubtable Scots entertainers as Andy Stewart (1933-1993). It plunges energetically along and is sure to get your toes tapping after first claiming your attention with magically synthesized wave-sounds and seabird-calls in the opening moments. It is of interest that Fefferman recalls, in an "aside," that after having enjoyed the song for the first time in Gloucester in 1986, True Father not only advised the addition of the fourth verse but even suggested its content.

“A Young Man’s Faith” could be aptly described as a “folk-ballad counterpart” of the kind of reflection recorded by the occasionally mystic British poet William Blake (1757-1827) in the volume *Songs of Experience* - published in 1794 as a sequel to his 1789 *Songs of Innocence*) - in which an increasingly seasoned writer examines the relationship between the world as viewed by his earlier and idealistic self and as viewed in light of the life-awareness that his maturing and wiser self has begun to acquire.



Dan Fefferman at the Oakland holy ground in 1969.

With handsome guitar-work and in a style nostalgically reminiscent of the often masterful work of western cowboy-balladeer Marty Robbins (creator of, among a great many hit singles, “El Paso,” which this selection rather resembles), “A Young Man’s Faith” - with a refreshing “mariachi” style - represents a Dan Fefferman I’d never encountered before. It is an unusual and thoughtful number.

“I’ve Got a Right to Be Happy,” sporting “quasi-Caribbean reggae” influences that conjure a “steel drum” that one can almost “hear,” is described by Fefferman himself as “one of those love songs that doesn’t know whether it’s addressed to one’s spouse or to God.” (Fefferman recalls having written it upon being advised of his wife’s imminent return from the missionary fields when they were about to begin family life.)

With its close-to-magical (“Presto! Presley!”) style, the song will get listeners wanting to dance; and it certainly represents still another side of the multifaceted Fefferman. And yet, Fefferman’s witticism aside - about the “deliberate” ambiguity concerning either God’s or a spouse’s identity as the song’s intended listener - I must confess that I find its focus puzzling. Even after several hearings it remains unclear to me how the lyric

I ... wanna dance till you cry and beg me to stop
could reasonably be addressed to either.

In the first place, where the “God” alternative is concerned, it is unclear as to whether the singer visualizes himself dancing “with” God (who, given his firmly established reputation as the durable “Alpha and Omega” type that God is, is hardly likely to run out of breath) or “in the presence of” God - as David danced triumphantly before the Ark of the Covenant in an exuberant moment of his own. In the second place, one cannot but wonder what must occasion such tears as either God or a spouse might burst into upon the singer’s dancing either “with” or “in the presence of” either - irrepressible joy in his happiness or unbearable apprehension about his breaking a leg. In short, such responses as are reasonably to be expected from a spouse in the context of the scenario the song presents are not at all to be expected from God; and vice-versa (even when the imaginary relationship visualized between the singer and the singer’s ostensible hearer is clear - which this one never is - i.e., “dancing” does not automatically imply “dancing with” - especially when the element of “God” is introduced into the picture as one of the visualized participants).

It is always of the indispensable essence (for that matter, an inalterable principle that a creator ignores at his peril) - for the sake of both a song’s immediate impact and long-term survival - that lyrical clarity be an absolutely central focus; its absence is the problem with this song.

Otherwise, it’s pretty nice - very clearly “catchy” (which nobody can deny - which nobody can deny . . .). I am only afraid that, from a “discipline” perspective, this is just ‘one of those lyrics’ that, insufficiently

refined, simply raise too many questions, leave them unanswered, and leave me close to tears of my own (It was such a good idea; could have been so successful - and isn't).

I found the whimsical "My Fingers Do the Walking" to represent Fefferman at his "homespun honky-tonk best." I am bothered coincidentally by the reality that the precise image of "letting one's fingers do the walking" may well be seen as a direct "borrow" from a "Bell Yellow Pages" television advertisement campaign of some decades ago, and yet - since the phrase has long since become pretty well as decidedly ensconced in American parlance as the phrase "Where's the Beef?" from Wendy's Hamburger ad campaigns of about the same period - I think there is little likelihood of anyone's objecting in the event of the song's possible eventual publication - particularly in light of the very plausible reality that an imaginative mind visualizing a set of fingers making their way across guitar-frets accompanying a singer "in mid-wail" could very well have come up, altogether independently, with his own version of the very same phrase.

I'll just quote a few lines that are likely to say all that needs saying:

There comes a time for every lover
when the honeymoon is over
angry words are quickly spoken
fragile bonds of trust are broken . . .

. . . when I feel the need for leaving
I let my guitar do the grieving. . .

I let my music do the talking,
I let my fingers do the walking . .

Nice going on that one.



Fefferman singing at a CARP program in Boulder, CO in 1980.

It is the tradition of the Anglo-Scottish border ballad "Lord Randall," which had made its way by 1629 into American Appalachian settlements, that Fefferman offers his "Ode to Takako," a tribute to the twenty seven-year-old Japanese Unificationist who committed suicide in 1997 while confined against her will by her parents, who disapproved of her having married a Korean husband.

The haunting melody of Fefferman's dramatic ballad is based on the traditional American "Ballad of Omi Wise" (1789-1808) – memorializing a similarly youthful American murder victim of a couple of centuries ago. Fefferman's adaptation includes the plaintive sounds of the bagpipe and wood flute and features frequently arcane language and word orders - e.g.,

Takako, you married without their consent
And to a far country to join him you went . . .

reminiscent of a good many of the folk songs performed over the years by Joan Baez and contemporaries of her own.

I am always unsettled by misaccentuations, especially when they occur repeatedly and involve one of the phrases central to an entire selection - as is the case here with the name "Takako" – consistently accentuated on the second as opposed to the first syllable; though in this instance the misaccentuation may be allowed the "benefit of the doubt," implicitly enhancing - as it actually may be intended to do - the atmosphere of naïveté tragically characterizing the attitudes of the family responsible for the death of a young woman so needlessly and untimely deceased.

In most respects and 'all things considered,' this is a pretty fine song in a longstanding and venerable tradition.

“Trees of Life,” which Fefferman performs with his wife Susan partnering and singing “backup,” is in another of those styles - namely, American folk à la “Peter, Paul, and Mary” - in which Fefferman seems at his comfortable best. Like “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” it is an easy “sing” and very pleasant.

Marty Robbins’ ingratiating influence shows up again in “I Pray in My Own Name,” which, including intermittent trumpet declamations-punctuations, sings, once more, like a ballad out of the nineteenth- or early twentieth-century American west.



The cover of Fefferman’s “Greatest Hits” album released in 1996.

Unfortunately, the lyrics are not among Fefferman’s strongest, resulting in the song’s achieving an impact significantly lesser than it might - relatively memorable though it is. Another reservation I must admit to having is that since “praying in one’s own name” is actually a development of providential significance not other than huge - actually, dispensationally ground-breaking - I am not sure the concept ought even be approached in a format so casual as the one represented here - in the context of a form where it cannot possibly be accorded the background-explanations necessary to make the basic premise even comprehensible - to say nothing of acceptable - to the larger world (which, even in the case of materials ostensibly exclusively intended for “in-house” distribution, ought always still to be borne in mind).

From a musical-religious-practical perspective it is my considered feeling that even if the intention is exclusively to reinforce traditions new to even our own membership, a song with the ostensible intent of this one (achieving or affirming internal realizations, if I speculate rightly) would succeed far better were it practical to include a verse or two dedicated to detailing the origins, prospects, and future implications of the development being celebrated. I don’t think that, short of an expansion of this material into a length that would put it into a category with “Macarthur Park,” (Jimmy Webb; “smash hit” for Irish actor Richard Harris, 1968), this format will realistically allow for a treatment of such inescapably necessary detail.

My feelings are similar when it comes to the 1997 song (ahead of its time? Yes; adequate to purpose? No) “Absolute Sex” - in which the massively far-reaching spiritual, sociological, and even eternal implications of the genuinely providentially new concept of “absolute sex” as defined by True Parents do not begin to be addressed - as, instead, the phrase “absolute sex” is interjected into the context of something with the character of a relatively freewheeling improvisation on relationship characterized by the same variety of abandon as that with which, say, rock-and-roll groups have been going on ““forever” about “sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll”(!).

Again, it is format-context that is ill-suited to the purposes here. This whole matter - the whole very serious process of introducing ““absolute sex” to the public - or even discussing it among ourselves – is “just too serious” for a format so unmistakably exclusively entertainment-oriented as the “folk-rock” one. (There are those who would argue that even the attempt, twenty-plus years ago, to present

Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* in a format by nature so demanding of the “suspension of disbelief” as the musical theatre constituted a serious affront (given the original author’s very clear intentions) - or at least at best a questionable approach - to human sensibilities and serious taste; I am given to feel somewhat similarly here.)

“Live Your Dream” and “Wouldn’t It Be Grand” (the latter co-written by Isaiah Poole) again are reminiscent of the “soft rock” styles of the “Elvis” era; the organ-music opening of “Wouldn’t It Be” clearly referencing the 1960s Connie Francis hit single “Love Me With All Your Heart” (lyrics by Englebert Humperdinck).

Where I have long been concerned, the national culture is long overdue for a little “faith in romance” (by which I mean belief in the value and future prospects of altruistic love - as distinct from belief in the inevitability of resignation to the race-wide omnipresence of self-centered determination to quiet one’s hormones at the sacrifice of another’s heart); hence I must hope that I am far from alone as prospectively

susceptible to the blandishments of what I should find an irresistibly enchanting development - namely, the broader based acceptance-assimilation, on the part of the larger world, of the spirit of the more “popular classic” musical expressions that Fefferman emulates here.

That not only could, should - and even must - happen. Those expressions do, after all, more clearly celebrate the pursuit of actual, sincere love than most of the musical pollution that sullies the hearts and minds of a sexually preoccupied and devotion-starved nation and world in this very troubled era. (I could say, “Don’t get me started,” but I won’t. Or maybe I will . . . (but maybe it would be better if Fefferman - and as many others as are capable of doing so - would ‘get started,’ themselves, and begin turning out providential-sociological age-appropriate materials with which to shower the hearts of a sorrowing world - treating prospective hearers as the sincere and loving adults they would far prefer to live as than the pantingly animalistic, self-absorbed ‘creatures’ into whose condition most of today’s popular entertainment implicitly reduces them).)

Unfortunately, though, once again in these instances, the lyrics are less than particularly inspiring - presenting, as they do, the “how-many-thousandth?” iteration of the hopelessness of the human condition in this sociologically-politically-religiously undeniably utterly dreadful century - without identifying any genuine hope. (By way of explaining my reaction, I would posit that saying “. . . If we only had true parents” - without any specification of the actual contextual meaning and significance of the phrase itself - doesn’t actually ‘count’ as an even vaguely passable expression of the kind of hope anyone can possibly hang onto in the world today - no matter how much hope absolutely everyone needs and how desperately absolutely everyone needs it).

“Wouldn’t It Be Grand” has a readily memorable triple meter and is a danceable tune; but since the lyric fails, it is, sad to say, ‘close, but no cigar’ on this one.

“Use Our Blessings Wisely,” is something of an anomaly, cut, as it would seem, from a cultural cloth better suited to the fabrication of a cowboy ballad than the high school prom “slow dance” it actually resembles. There is a certain “earthy” charm to this selection, though the lyric and music are less well suited to one another than are their counterparts in other selections; the lyric comes across with unfortunate frequency as self-consciously “moralistic” - e.g.,

Brother once you’ve seen the light,
Don’t you know you’ve got to follow
Shedding now the cloak of night,
No empty promise of tomorrow
The sun is shining now, out of the east it rises,
Giving light to those who see

“Abraham” is another of the offerings that benefits from an ambience of the “western-style” ballad at whose writing Fefferman is quite adept. The refreshing opening moments feature a ‘soprano guitar’ (with a sound close to that of a mandolin or balalaika) standing in for the traditional Western guitar - an interesting twist inasmuch as virtually all western stringed instruments share ancestry in the form of the Middle Eastern Oud, and of course Fefferman’s own ancestral Jewish faith, coming as it does, from Abraham, is of Middle Eastern origins).

Another comparably intriguing “sidelight” is that, like thousands that came after him throughout the earth - including the Western United States sheep-herders and cattlemen, Abraham was a herdsman - so that Fefferman’s homage to him with a “cowboy-style” number sets out from a starting point not nearly as far-fetched as it might appear upon “first blush.”

Again, though, this is one of those items, begun on an estimable premise, whose execution suffers from stylistic inconsistencies unfortunately frequent in Fefferman’s otherwise reasonably good (and certainly “in house popular”) work - as exemplified in the verse below (punctuation ad hoc in the absence of any in the “cloud”) -

My faith is stronger than my fear of death.
Then I’ll build your altar with my tears and sweat.
My flesh and blood without question I’ll give,
For somehow I know that in dying I live

which transgresses two of elementary principles of successful versification - namely, (1) that final words in each of the two lines in a couplet - within a format ostensibly espoused here - should either rhyme or not rhyme; and that assonance (the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds in neighboring words) - as occurs between the words “death” and “sweat” not only does not “count” but actually disserves the verse - providing, as it does, a reasonable rationale for the reader’s imagining that the writer was attempting a rhyme - and, unable to manage one, substituted, instead, “the next best thing” to come to mind; and (2) that word order in verse - by standards adopted in the English-speaking world since at least

the middle or even earlier part of the last century - should match the word order of common speech - which the word order of the third line quoted does not. (Reference Oscar Hammerstein II or Robert Frost; these writers have lasted and are likely to continue to do so; Fefferman should aspire to do so, too; and his adjusting his habits accordingly would give him a far better shot at that.)

“Lord Pour Down Thy Spirit” is good clean honky-tonky fun - with a “square-dance-bluegrass-style” opening (this time you can almost ‘hear’ a country fiddle) - a little like the ‘tent revival’ music after the fashion of “Gimme That Old-Time Religion” and other popular religious folk-tunes rooted in the musical practices of the nineteenth-century church-going United States. Once again there are verses whose outmoded word-orders would be bothersome apart from their appropriateness to the character of the comparably “old-fashioned” music (i.e., this song, happily enough, “gets away with it” – and simply could not help being the “good clean honky-tonk fun” it is, even were one obliged to pronounce it guilty of doing so in spite of itself). I’m glad Dan wrote this.

The last selection on which I’ll comment specifically - while advising that there are others well worth attention - will be “The Candle Flame” (inspired, as Fefferman reflects, during the adventurous days of fund-raising campaigns enlisting most of the American membership in the sales of scented candles from sources in San Francisco and Maryland).

Fefferman’s Jewish heritage seems to sing through this one, too – with its enchanting minor-mode ambience closely approximating that of an Israeli line dance; collaterally, it very readily calls to mind any number of Elizabethan English rounds - very particularly, “Heigh-ho/Rose Red” (“Meat, nor drink, nor money have I none.. .”).

The “quasi-martial” motion of this selection puts me in mind of Fefferman’s all-time greatest hit, “Generation of Righteousness” - whose quality this comes close to approaching while dealing with a subject intended, of course, to be very considerably smaller in scope. I’d give it a “thumbs up” and hope a lot of people enjoy it.

As I draw this (rather extended) overview to a conclusion, I hope that I may be permitted to add that while worth paying attention to by reason of their own merit (alternately very much fun and sometimes quite inspiring), these songs serve well as exemplars of the kinds of things - namely, internally inspired and generated creations issuing from the collective breast of a movement of people (now of all ages) commonly inspired by a genuinely promising ideal - that ought never to have discontinued happening; that gradually disappeared for a few simple reasons; and that very much ought to be happening now – when the influence of deeply motivated, carefully crafted creative output is clearly in greater need than ever before.

The tradition of which these songs and their likes are part did, as I have observed, energize a once young movement, enabling its membership not only to go forward in the songs’ own day but actually to survive, throughout the notable “wilderness periods” so clearly unforgettable to us all, into this age when the movement, no longer young, is of not one but three generations.

It is to be hoped that Fefferman will continue (and perhaps Lowen, Davies, Cohen, and the many others resume) what they have always done well and now - as of the significant advances in understanding that have come to characterize the movement today - are surely capable of doing still better; and that new generations will “take up the torch” and burn through the malaise, firing a new “breakthrough” in these days of our own; so that still more visionary, still more exceedingly skilled installments of the same heartfelt and profoundly meaningful tradition will take over where earlier efforts have pointed the way.

Inspiring as many of all these referenced creations have been, I must hope (as I dare to speculate Dan Fefferman must, too), that the attention called to them here may serve in the way of a “wake-up call” to the many (certainly hundreds) of creative souls within our national and worldwide communities who are ‘just dying’ not only to speak, but to sing.

Contributed by Randolph L. Rimmel, the founding conductor of the New Hope Singers International. He and his wife, Christine Edwards, have housed more than one hundred twenty international student guests from more than twenty nations since 2000 in their home in Portland, Oregon.