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On Music Angels

God Only Knows

David Milo Kirkham

Yester-Me, Yester-You, Yesterday

The trek from my office at the Air Force Academy history department to the faculty parking lot was long enough—about a ten-minute walk—sufficient time for some substantive thinking. One winter evening in about 1992, as I made the walk, my Comparative Revolutions course weighed on my mind. As I pondered how I might introduce the next day's discussion on causes of revolutions, I climbed into my 1987 red Dodge Colt more out of habit than deliberation. At the turn of the ignition key, the radio's boom broke my reverie and jarred me back to the reality of my immediate surroundings.

"Where did it go, that yester-glow, . . . yester-me, yester-you," rang out the soulful tenor voice of Stevie Wonder from Colorado Springs' sole oldies station. *A decent song*, I thought, ready for a musical interlude to my heavy thinking, *but I wonder what's on the other stations.*

My fingers instinctively hit the button for the only other accessible oldies station, from Pueblo, Colorado, fifty-seven miles to the south. Reception of Pueblo's station wasn't always very good at my house in the Springs, but sometimes I could pick it up while perched on the mountainside where the Academy was located. That night, in fact, I was in luck. The music came in softly but clearly: "Yester-Me, Yester-You, Yesterday." Stevie Wonder.

That's odd, I thought. *The same more-than-twenty-year-old song playing at the same time on two different stations in two different towns. What are the chances?*

* * *

A friend recently asked me to prepare some thoughts on the ethics of torture (or “enhanced interrogation techniques”) from a “Mormon perspective.” On another occasion I was asked to write an article about LDS perspectives on conscientious objection. Although I am happy to comply with such requests, looking at some topics, especially publicly, from the perspective of a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, poses challenges. For one, I’m a lay member, not a presiding authority. I can’t and don’t want to speak for the Church. I further have to wonder on such occasions how much of what I have to say is really from a Mormon perspective and how much is just me. Even some spiritual matters, I find, are better approached from a personal perspective than from the perspective of an adherent to my religion.

It’s not that my experience with spiritual things contradicts the teachings and doctrines of the LDS Church. Quite to the contrary, really. In the great majority of cases, experience reinforces my formal convictions. On the rare occasions when it doesn’t reinforce them, it doesn’t undermine them either. On some questions, the Church simply offers a figurative “no comment.” Despite the tight discipline under which most people think Mormons live, Church authorities are mercifully silent on much that we encounter, even some things bordering on the mystical. They provide general guidelines, teach correct principles, then, to my pleasure, leave me to figure out much on my own while governing myself.

In the end, all things are spiritual and I like the challenge of looking at the “unobviously religious” at least from a spiritual if not a strictly LDS perspective. It doesn’t always have to be headline grabbing things like torture or conscientious objection, however. It can be something seemingly small like, say, “music angels.”

Cherish

One afternoon in the early 1990s, driving through heavy traffic on Denver’s I-25, I turned on the radio looking for some calming music. My preferred station was playing a commercial. *I could use a good love song*, I thought. *What’s a favorite love song?* “Cherish,” by the Association, came to mind. *Great lyrics, great harmonies, unique arrangement. It’s a great song. 1966.* (I like to pin the year of a song to my pop music ruminations—it’s a game.)

The commercial ended. The music began. Bom, bom. Bom, bomp-ba-bom. “Cherish is the word I use to describe . . .”

The coincidence startled me and awakened my sense of wonder. *Now how did this happen?* What are the chances that the station would play

the very song I was thinking about, especially when the song is twenty-five years old? Instead of just laughing and shuffling it off into the “hey, weeeird” category of my life, I pondered the question for a minute or so. My internal debate went something like this:

“Well, David, as unlikely as it seems, it’s probably just coincidence. Recall all the times you might have been thinking of a song that didn’t come on the radio. It’s bound to happen once in a while that they play what you’re thinking.”

“Actually, I don’t know that I am thinking of particular songs all that often when I turn on the radio,” I replied.

“Yes, but ‘Cherish’ was actually a pretty big song in 1966. It’s not like you chose some obscure piece by the New Vaudeville Band.”

“I’m not sure I ‘chose’ anything,” I answered. “And I can probably count on one hand the number of times I’ve heard ‘Cherish’ on the radio over the past five years, despite its original popularity.”

I tossed around another possibility or two. It is not beyond belief for me that human brainwaves can pick up radio signals under certain circumstances, for instance, maybe even shortly before they are picked up by man-made receivers. I don’t know the science on that, but it was at least one theory I entertained about my entertainment. Still, in the end, I dropped the thought. I had no satisfactory answers, the question overall seemed trivial, and I needed my brain for better purposes, if only to navigate the traffic on I-25.

More Than Words

The room was a dull gray, the walls and floor bare. It was in good enough repair, but bleak nonetheless. I had a bed, sheets, a pillow, blankets, and what I had brought in my suitcase. It could have been a cell, but it was a dorm room in 1991 at Philadelphia’s Temple University, where I was attending the annual conference of the World History Association. Other professional responsibilities had kept me away from my family for two weeks, and I was missing them. The only company I had was a couple of books and a small radio. Music, of many genres—pop, classical, folk, oldies—has often comforted me, so I turned to the radio.

Last summer when Judy, the kids, and I spent several weeks together at the University of Notre Dame, I thought as I leaned over to flip it on, that song “More Than Words” by Extreme was playing just about every time we turned on the radio. Not particularly a great song, but it makes me think of the family.

I hit the switch: “If you only knew how easy it would be . . . more than words . . .” ran the two-part, high harmony vocals coming through the radio speaker. And for me it *was* more than words, more than music even. It was a tie to my family. *Was it also more than coincidence?* Although this time the song was a mere year old, not twenty-five, and much more likely to still pick up a little radio play, I took comfort in it—even this mediocre song—and it sustained me through the lonely evening.

After the Temple University conference, I flew from Philadelphia to Salt Lake City where my family was waiting. A day later we were in the car together making our way back home to Colorado over five hours of I-80 and four hours of other assorted streets and freeways. In these days before kids were each plugged into their own individualized entertainment systems, we shared the car’s common radio, with the understanding that as long as Dad was driving, he got to choose the station we listened to. I tried to be fair about my choices, but most of the time it meant, given limited selections through Wyoming and Colorado, we were going to be listening to old pop and rock songs to keep me awake. The kids didn’t seem to mind. They knew the music almost as well as I did.

As we drove, we regaled each other with stories and anecdotes about things that had occurred during our separation. As the radio passed from one oldie to the next, I told the children about the coincidence of “More Than Words” coming on as I was thinking of it and then the week before. A few minutes later, when the radio began crooning “Count Me In,” by Gary Lewis and the Playboys, my daughter Angel, then about nine years old, said:

“Hey, Dad, when you told us that story about hearing ‘More Than Words’ when you were thinking about it, I told myself I wanted to hear a song by Gary Lewis and the Playboys, and now, listen.”

We all laughed.

“But actually,” she added, “I really wanted to hear ‘This Diamond Ring.’ Still, it’s pretty neat.”

“Good job, Angel. We’ve still got the music angels working for us. You’ll get better at it in time,” I teased as the song ended and I hit the radio button in search of another station.

“This diamond ring doesn’t shine for me anymore, and this diamond ring doesn’t mean what it did before . . .” rang out Gary and his band on the new channel. For a moment we were stunned, then we laughed again.

“Hey, I want to try that!” my eleven-year-old daughter, Aimee, declared.

“Okay, what do you want to hear?” I chuckled.

“‘Surfin’ USA’ by the Beach Boys.”

It took twenty minutes: “Everybody’s gone surfin’, surfin’ USA.”

Okay, it must be more than coincidence. The brainwave theory again? A good friend of mine told me recently that one day during a rather lengthy hospital wait, he was chatting with a technician about such things. The technician said he was convinced musical “coincidences” occur because time is an illusion, that we have “heard” these songs at this particular “time” and place in some kind of other dimension. Whew. I’m not sure humans are expected to get their heads around that one, as intriguing as it sounds. Alma does say, “All is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men” (Alma 40:8), but I’m not sure that’s what the hospital technician meant. As a family, we sort of prefer the “music angels” theory: Someone—who knows? maybe a family member who has passed on—wants in on the fun, just wants to show us love in a small way, and plays this game with us.

Of course there are problems with this fantasy, and I mull them over occasionally. When we speak of the “ministering of angels,” surely we don’t expect that they would have the time or inclination to play games with us. Or would they? When my daughter Bonnie was three, she matter-of-factly declared that sometimes Jesus would pick her up when she fell down and they would tease each other. Is it possible angels might do whatever is necessary to minister to us according to our particular circumstances? If we need a good song, could they provide it? Pondering this possibility, I realize I may be on theological thin ice and promise myself not to raise the theory in Sunday School.

God Only Knows

On September 23, 2004, the day of my fiftieth birthday, I was living with most of my family in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. Aimee was married, and Angel and my next daughter, Brittany, were roommates attending BYU, but the rest of us had settled into a generally happy routine of school, work, and fun extracurriculars in the Bavarian Alps. Part of my routine was to get up at five, jog three miles with Judy, then settle down at my computer with a glass of juice and a couple of pieces of toast while I checked the morning news and fired off an email to the BYU girls, usually to musical accompaniment. As members of an online music subscription service, we had a wide range of choices in melodies and songs.

*It’s my birthday, I told myself. I think I’ll listen to some old stuff that I really like and haven’t heard for a while. How about the Beach Boys? I played two songs and only two songs: “God Only Knows,” my favorite, and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice?” both from the *Pet Sounds* album. Meanwhile,*

I noted the news then opened the email. A note waiting from Brittany and Angel indicated it was a birthday greeting. I opened it up to find a poem of sorts:

“To be sung to the tune of the Beach Boys’ ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice?’” read Angel’s instructions, followed by a little song she and Brittany had made up, a tender and silly parody, extending to me greetings for the day and a lot of daughterly affection. I quickly fired off a note in reply:

“Hey, Angel, Britt, thank you, girls, for the tribute. I’ll have you know ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice?’ was one of two songs I listened to on the computer this morning.”

It being eight hours earlier in Utah and not too late for a college student to be up, Angel was online.

“What was the other song?” she replied moments later.

“God Only Knows.”

“That’s funny,” she answered. “Just a few minutes ago, about when you would’ve been listening to that, Brittany and I were driving home from the library and ‘God Only Knows’ came on the radio. I told her, ‘Let’s leave this on and listen to it in commemoration of dear old Dad’s birthday.’”

“Music angels,” we agreed. And I felt loved by heaven and earth.

I don’t know what else to say. I am leaning toward cosmic explanations for some of these things. But why should the cosmos care about what song is playing on the radio or on my computer? I mean, if there are music angels, wouldn’t they want to elevate my taste and play me a Mormon Tabernacle Choir rendition of the “Ave Verum Corpus” or at least “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”? On the other hand, if a hair of my head shall not be lost and go uncounted, could God care to show me in a creative way how much my daughters love me, to give me these fun bonding moments with my family, and in the process be showing us his love as well?

Certainly God takes an interest in the affairs of his children: discoveries, migrations, constitutions, even revolutions. The day my contemplation of the causes of revolutions was interrupted by the simultaneous playing of “Yester-Me, Yester-You, Yesterday” on two radio stations, I basically concluded that conditions for revolutions and musical coincidences in our personal lives could easily share similar possible explanations:

They could be matters of chance. Things just happen to line up in a particular time and place, making conditions ripe for a revolution. And two station programmers might just happen to put on the same song at the same time within listening distance of each other.

They could be matters of human agency. Dissidents plan and execute the overthrow of governments. And DJs or programmers either conspire

to play the same song, share a playlist, or one hears the other's song playing and puts it on his station at the same time.

Or there are cosmic possibilities. God intervenes in the affairs of mankind. Latter-day Saints believe with Nephi that the American revolutionaries who went "out of captivity were delivered by the power of God" (1 Ne. 13:19).

Music angels might be another story. Do they exist? From my perspective, God only knows. Sometimes it's easier to grasp big things like revolutions or matters of collective conscience than small things like musical coincidences. A week after I had written a first draft of this essay, I was riding in my car with a good but not particularly pious nephew who has struggled this past year in his marriage. I said nothing to him about the ideas I had been exploring in this writing. I mostly just listened to him share some of his concerns. He explained to me that a few days earlier he had been on the brink of despair, driving in his car, deciding whether he had the courage to repair his relationship with his wife. He said he began to pray fervently, asking God if he should try to make his marriage work. When his prayer was done, he turned on the radio to find "their song" playing, his and his wife's. He decided the song was his answer: to really try again.

So *was* it his answer? I don't know. I will not say it wasn't. Certainly it seems likely he derived from it the right answer, regardless. I cannot honestly explain these phenomena. I will conclude merely on this note: If there are such things as music angels, then when I die, I want to be one, at least for a hobby or a part-time job. I may join in musical games, dream up melodic tricks to play on surviving family members and others who need to be reminded that they are loved. If I get the chance, I may play "God Only Knows" as a wistful daughter looks at a picture of us together, or, if God allows that sort of thing, play a meaningful song for a friend seeking courage to take on something important in his life. I know, it's not exactly a still small voice; it's no substitute for pure communications of the Spirit, but it may be at least a mysterious act of kindness that draws someone's eyes—and ears—heavenward. And it may be a lot of fun.

This essay by David Milo Kirkham (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) won third place in the *BYU Studies* 2010 personal essay contest.