



Jesus Is My Rock and He Rolls My Blues Away

Godspell turns 50 within Jesus Movement anniversary

The delightfully oddball “Jesus rock” opera *Godspell* turned 50 this past summer. Although few may recall this quirky artifact of the early 1970s Jesus Movement today, most people would recognize at least one of its wonderful songs.

Written as a master’s thesis project at Carnegie Melon University, this cultural relic gained a lot of traction among those who weren’t necessarily open to some of the more “in-your-face” lyrics of the emerging Jesus Rock music genre. But, as the contemporary Christian rock pioneer Larry Norman would sing, “Why should the devil have all the good music?”

I was not a theologian at that time in my life. I was a 17-year-old kid in Los Angeles County right in the middle of the Jesus Movement. But, I was also a decent guitar player with my 1964 Fender Jazzmaster electric guitar and I somehow was offered a gig to play in the orchestra of a production at a large mainline church in Los Angeles.

I fell in love with several of the songs, especially the wonderful “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord,” and also “Day by Day” which became a radio hit in the summer of 1972, the year before the movie version of *Godspell* brought this unique version of the story of Christ to mainstream audiences.

The production itself was comical and irreverent, one very old review I found online describing it as, “the Gospel according to Matthew featuring a comedic troupe of eccentric players who team up with Jesus to teach His lessons through parables, games and tomfoolery.”

Jesus was a white guy whose costume included a huge afro-style hairdo, and dressed in clown garb and shoes, yet in its obvious comedic appearance the Jesus character is both thoughtful and reflective. The actor portraying Jesus captured some of His infinite longsuffering, patience, love and peace.

Some of my fellow “Jesus freaks” at the time thought it was heretical. The rival Broadway production that season, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, was in many ways just that. But *Godspell* rang true. Jesus reached out to the marginalized, just as Matthew’s Gospel shows us, and we see in this ridiculously 70’s-era absurdity a

Messiah who came to do His Father’s work.

Contextualization is the term we missiologists use often. To contextualize *Godspell*’s message, it is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 when he says, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Whether it is musical style, dress or other culturally defined distinctions, the apostle seems quite adamant to say those things are minor; do what you need to do in order to reach others with the good news of the gospel. Which, by the way, is what the title of this musical, cast soundtrack and later the movie version, meant, *Godspell*, i.e., “Gospel” with a little twist on the words, seeming to note the message of how Jesus’ words and actions had an effect on people touching hearts and souls in the deepest ways imaginable.

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So, was *Godspell* just an outlier, something to smile about as we consider other obsolete expressions of that era’s culture (polyester floral shirts, bell bottoms)? The remarkable reception to this year’s *Jesus Revolution* movie struck a powerful resonating chord in the lives of so many people. Some, like those my age, were reminded of a genuine move of the Spirit of God among an entire generation—younger followers of Christ, longing for a similar move

of God’s Spirit, inspired by the movie to pray for a new and genuine revival that would reach another generation today.

Perhaps there is an inspiring takeaway possible from this goofy production that was, quite honestly, just a blip on the screen in terms of its historic importance within the turmoil of that decade. Artists and musicians often are left out of serious discussion about revival, even though frequently it will be the arts and music communities who are contributing to the wider staying power to a revival. Think of the Brownsville Revival songs that we still hum in our minds today. King Solomon ordered that the musicians and the artists would have a central role in establishing God’s temple.

We probably don’t need an updated version of *Godspell*, but we do need the younger generation to use their God-given gifts and talents for His glory!

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