

Storyteller: Nashville artist David Olney

by [Jewly Hight](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

For over 30 years singer-songwriter David Olney has been a fixture in the Nashville music scene. His songs grow out of the storytelling branch of American roots music and include some of a spiritual nature, such as "Jerusalem Tomorrow." His compositions have been performed by many artists, including Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle, Johnny Cash and Linda Ronstadt. Olney is a Presbyterian.

What first drew you to writing songs that tell stories and are driven by characters?

When I first got interested in music, folk music was a big deal, noted for groups like Peter, Paul and Mary and the Kingston Trio. If you went a little deeper into that music, you quickly ran into Woody Guthrie and the blues and ballad traditions. The songs I liked to listen to were story songs—even outlaw songs like "Pretty Boy Floyd."

I found that if I created characters in my songs, I could get into what was going on inside of me. It's like dreams: every person in your dream is an aspect of yourself. And every person you make up in a song is an aspect of yourself. It's like going incognito.

You composed a trio of songs in the voice of King David: "If I'd Have Known I Couldn't Do It," "Bathsheba Blues" and "Absalom." What made him a good subject?

David is a very complicated character. He's a womanizer. He wages a kind of guerrilla warfare against Saul. He's vain. He can be corrupted by power. Still, he's a totally likable guy. It was easy to write about him. He's very human.

The way you take liberties with those stories and imagine David's inner dialogue makes him seem a modern figure.

What he's feeling is pretty timeless. The grief you would feel if your child died—that's pretty much been there the whole time. I don't think David would've been a very good poker player. Everything seemed to register with him.

Your songs “Barabbas” and “Jerusalem Tomorrow” describe events of Jesus’ life from the vantage points of contemporaries who don’t know who he is. Why approach the stories that way?

If you write about Christ, you've got a problem—because he's perfect. That's great in a religious sense, but it's not great in an artistic sense. What can you say about him? So my approach in those songs was to find somebody on the periphery who was looking at Christ. Those people have wrinkles and warts. Then you have something you can get your mind around.

The way the Barabbas story is presented in the Bible, you don't really care who he is. When he is released instead of Jesus, you just think, “Oh, they got the wrong guy.” But that guy himself is saying, “What is going on here? I was ready to accept my punishment. This guy shows up and suddenly he's taking the rap, which is good for me, but it's a little weird.” He would want to find out what this was all about. To understand this stuff at all you have to use your imagination.

It seems there's an art to writing songs that are scripturally inspired yet meaningful and entertaining for an audience that you can't assume has any particular relationship to religion.

The yearning for the real meaning of things is more elemental in people than whether they're Buddhists or Christians. The symbols and iconography and the language and vocabulary that I want to use to talk about the meaning of things—it turns out it's all Christian stuff. That's what I grew up with. That's what's most natural for me.

My family was nominally Congregationalist. My inclination was to say about Christianity: “That can't be true. There's no way that happened that way.” I've tried any number of times to completely blow it off, and I can't. There's a lot more doubt than faith that goes on with me, but I just can't dump the whole thing. It's much harder to do that than to accept it on some level and just bite my tongue in a church service when the Apostles' Creed is recited.