

The songs I hate to love

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A [post](#) last week by *Century* contributing editor Jason Byassee raised a subject of some personal significance to me:

[Johnny Cash's] ["My Mother's Hymn Book"](#)

had that same wise, scratchy, God-like voice, and the hymns are some of the favorites of the tiny country church of the sort he and his mama grew up in. But they also had some of the weaknesses of that tradition. The songs are taken up with post-death salvation, souls in flight, bodies left behind, the world forgotten. I'm sure these songs can be read more charitably than that, but it would take some fancy footwork to do so.

As a musician, I love nothing more than traditional American country/gospel hymns and spirituals. But as a Christian, there's little I find more troubling than the dualistic, pie-in-the-sky theology that dominates much of this beautiful music.

Jason's right about the fancy footwork. I've tried interpreting these songs as liberationist instead of escapist. I've tried hearing them as historical expressions of faith shaped by considerable hardship. But it's hard to avoid the fact that when I sing these songs now, I'm in some small way reinforcing what I believe persists as one of the most unhelpful strains in popular Christianity.

My typical approach has been to simply favor those specimens of the genre that steer clear of this kind of thinking. I love "On the wings of a dove" and "I want Jesus to walk with me"; my favorite is "Fill my way everyday with love." But you can't avoid the bad-earth-vs.-good-heaven songs for

long, and anyway it's hard to bring yourself to simply banish a song as lovely and haunting as "Wayfaring stranger." (Similar issues exist in other church-music traditions—it's one thing for us Lutherans to reject substitutionary atonement theology and quite another to reject "Ah, holy Jesus.")

Jason makes a good case that Cash's more [recently released](#) version of the spiritual "Ain't no Grave" does better than all this by highlighting the music's darkness and tension. I also admire Woody Guthrie's somewhat more radical solution. Now, I'm pretty sure Woody didn't share all of my religious commitments, and obviously he didn't work within the practical constraints of church music.

But I love how he approached the song "This world is not my home." He didn't say, "Hmm, actually I'm pretty sure this world *is* my home" and tie himself into knots trying to make the song mean that instead. Nor did he simply give up and find a different song. Instead, he rewrote most of the words and turned the song's message on its head. Here's a verse:

My brothers and my sisters are stranded on this road,
A hot and dusty road that a million feet have trod.
Rich man took my home and drove me from my door,
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

In Woody's hands, the celebratory line "I ain't got no home in this world anymore" becomes protest and lament—and the song becomes a powerful critique of its original, of a spirituality so future-focused that it encourages passive acceptance of the unacceptable present.