

## Soundtracks for our spirits

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

February 26, 2014

[Pete Seeger](#) used music to create poems of us. His folk songs became 20th-century anthems of justice. They envisioned what good could be done with a hammer, when standing hand-in-hand we could overcome, and how to make polluted water clear.

With his passing, I began considering the playlists of our lives and societies. Songs structure our experiences. We know, for instance, that Darth Vader or something equally sinister will appear when the “Imperial March” begins to beat. *Forrest Gump* might not have been as gripping without its vintage historical soundtrack. Music moves us and binds us. It troubles as it teaches. The soundtracks of our lives give direction and solace. They help us make meaning of our worlds. Music functions a lot like faith.

During the past few years, singer-songwriter [Greg Laswell](#) has become a regular part of my playlist. You probably won’t hear his songs in church. You’re more likely to catch them on the radio or in the background of a particularly intense moment of shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Parenthood*, *Glee*, or *The Carrie Diaries*.

Yet his songs animate the highs and lows of my spiritual journeys. I’ve also started using them in my U.S. religious history courses. Laswell took time from his tour schedule for his new album, [I Was Going to Be an Astronaut](#), to Skype into class and address questions of faith, creativity, religious experiences, and morality. It was electric as we bounced from his songs and insights to the writings of Joseph Smith, perspectives of Ralph Waldo Emerson, sociological work of Rodney Stark, and theodicy questions from narratives of former slaves.

Laswell grew up in southern California in the 1980s, and followed the flow of many teenagers from his church to Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. He has spent the past two decades making music. Most of his songs run melancholy.

The track that most speaks to my spirit and to my classroom is “[Comes and Goes \(In Waves\)](#).” He toys with the interplay of individual experience and community affection: “This one’s for the lonely . . . the experts at the fall,” Laswell begins,

“Come on friends get up now / You’re not alone at all.” We fall individually, but rise as members of a group. In fact, we rise as his friends, that precious category Jesus used to transform his followers. John Milton played with these types of movements in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Satan fell as part of a gang, then fled hell alone.

Later, Laswell sings, “This one’s for the faithless, the ones that are surprised / They’re only where they are now / regardless of their fight.” The inversion is remarkable. The faithless are neither self-sufficient, nor self-authoritative. The song does not strike me as against atheists. The lyrics, however, question the certitude of lack of faith. Some Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins followers may find these words haunting.

Then Laswell shifts the emphasis subtly. He is no longer singing “for” individuals. Instead, “this one’s for believing, if only for its sake / Come on friends get up now, love is to be made.” Laswell encourages belief in belief. Faith can remain after it has lost the object of its affection. It reminds me of the [1950s when President Dwight Eisenhower and other leading Americans called for faith in faith](#). It was not which religion one believed in; it was believing in something. This was the milieu that gave rise to our currency and national motto receiving the imprint from Congress of [“In God We Trust.”](#)

I experience the waves Laswell verses every day. Raised among Presbyterian Calvinists, I feel a profound sense of expertise at fallenness. Alone as a teenager, I wrote daily in my journal recounting my sins. The effect was devastating. They were the same, seemingly insurmountable, and isolating. Only in communities did I experience God. In song, in prayer, as a member of teams, I felt the strength to get up and, as Laswell sings, “to try again.”

Following the [death of our infant son Elijah in 2011](#), my life has become a daily struggle between faithlessness and believing for belief’s sake. I perceive the God of my past affections as a monster. I no longer catalogue my sins, but God’s. I write poems attacking this God for hypocritically and narcissistically chastising others for infanticide, killing Bathsheba’s son (had she not endured enough, oh God), and then resurrecting his own. My poetic play of faithlessness, however, only works to distance me from the friends who help me up.

As the waves of guilt, anger, and longing come and go, I listen to Laswell and believe for belief's sake. I have to, because the object of my affection—Elijah—is gone. There is something I cannot name, but will not (cannot) give up. I believe for belief's sake, yet I know not why. I only know it honors my relationship with my son.

Laswell's songs are a precious part of my walks, talks, and fights with God. He [shows me](#) that the "bridge ahead is long enough" for us to take our sweet time. I wish it had been [longer with Elijah](#).

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).*