



Q-and-A with Stephen Becker

What was your Catholic conversion/reversion journey like?

It's true that relatively recently I went through a conversion/reversion experience, which progressed over the course of several years. It was not something that happened in an instant, although there were many pivotal instantaneous moments coupled with slow developments.

Ultimately, from one angle, my reversion was the culmination of a search for truth throughout my adult life that had sent me down many fascinating, if false, pathways intellectually and spiritually before I came home.

I would not say that my journey of conversion/reversion was primarily an intellectual journey of history and theology — yet at the same time an important part of that journey initially, which had great impact on my songwriting, was the dawning upon me of the reality of Jesus's resurrection, the prophesies of the Old Testament, and where we are all at on the timeline.

You begin to realize: It isn't that the Bible is an old thing that is still relevant — that's true, but it's much more than that. It is alive and you are in it. You are located in the Biblical landscape, whether you are Jewish or you are Christian or you are pagan or whoever you are — I could have either chosen to ignore that reality or accept it, but what I knew was that, either way, it was impossible to escape it.

Leonard Cohen realized this, too, and it was part of what inspired his music to have profound undercurrents, maybe more so later in his life. He was Jewish and he went through periods of his life where he was in a Buddhist monastery, but I think he had some glimpse of what history is, what humanity is, what evil is, and Jesus WAS on his mind. He was quoted as saying: “We inhabit a biblical landscape, and this is where we should situate ourselves without apology. ... That biblical landscape is our urgent invitation ... otherwise, it's really not worth saving or manifesting or redeeming or anything, unless we really take up that invitation to walk into that biblical landscape.”

What this album isn't ...

I did not set out to make Christian Contemporary Music or music for a devout Catholic audience. If people like the music who are devout, that's perfectly wonderful (and more than I could ask for), but I was not envisioning them as the audience. The truth is, I never think about who on earth the songs are for or who may or may not like them — that seems to only be an afterthought for me. (More on this topic of 'who is the audience' in the section below.)

It's also not primarily an effort in evangelism — although there is a sincere devotional current flowing through the whole album, which is the album's 'heart,' so to speak. I suppose some of the songs do have details in the lyrics that could serve an evangelistic end.

For instance, if we were to go past the new single and get into the songs that will be appearing on the full-length album, there are many songs inspired by Catholic saints. The songs are more like explorations set the context of the minutia of my own life and expressions of love than songs with an evangelistic aim, per se.

Similarly, I would like it if more people knew about Blessed Carlo Acutis and knew about Eucharistic miracles. I hope the song does bring awareness of those topics to some people — that would be a much more significant outcome than someone unraveling and interpreting my lyrics, but it's a song that weaves a lot of mystery and pain together. It's not music written primarily to evangelize — at least not on the surface.

What this album is ...

I've released two full albums and two EPs before making "Second Mansions," as well as a third full album from the mid-2010s still unreleased.

What this album is, is the personal effort of a songwriter to enter the Biblical landscape in an authentic way. It is merely the personal expression of a songwriter who was having new sources of inspiration entering into his 20th/21st century life amid the context of Los Angeles.

I wrote and performed the album out of the exhilaration and the inspiration I was finding in the mysticism of the faith, the *reality* of Jesus and His resurrection, recorded miracles, and lives of the saints.

What a lot of this album is really about is how these inspirations intersect with the fallen landscape of the modern world and the minutia of my own life. These are patterns that characterize the first single, "**Corpus Christi**" and which run through the album. The second single, "Saint James," is another good example and so is the album track, "Therese of Lisieux." Other songs on the album are less complex in their interweaving and are more straightforwardly devotional, such as "Thirty-Four Trillion Watts," which is about the moment of the resurrection and the creation of the Shroud of Turin.

Who is the audience?

The music is simply something I made which is there for anyone of any background to enjoy.

That said, from personal experience, the music fans I probably care most about are those who have never called on God and have never developed love for God yet deep down, maybe subconsciously, they are often seeking some kind of spiritual solace, some kind of transcendent experience, in listening to music. I admit I do have a sort of affection for these people and in a way they are ‘my people’— the ‘motley crew’ who love modern music and have heart but don’t (yet) love or call on God. Why? Because that used to be me ...

Another possible audience I do care about are Catholics who are lukewarm because it doesn’t need to be bleak like that — the treasures and miracles and spectacular supernatural mystery that can set a heart on fire are all there for them yet for some reason many Christians, particularly Catholics, seem to rarely talk about it — to me that is surprising and even a bit dismaying!

The supernatural for some reason makes a lot of people, even believers, uncomfortable, but the Gospels are full of spectacular miracles and angels ... and miracles happen every day. For instance, why aren’t the jaw-dropping results of the scientific Shroud studies on the front page of newspapers or studies of the Tilma or Eucharistic miracles?

I’ve met a lot of ‘New Age’ types in LA who are far more open to contemplating, say, angelology than most of the Catholics I knew throughout my young adult life seemed to be ... they love the holy angels! Go into any “new age” bookshop, and the shelves are filled with books about the angels. I have a sort of affection for these people, as well, because I went down a lot of these rabbit holes. I think Jesus loves these seekers and sees special potential in them because of their openness to belief in the supernatural.

Why choose modern music for anything related to what is holy?

That is a question that I do feel should be asked. I’m not certain of the answer. All I know is I felt guided in this direction and, in 2020, it seemed that this was the most I could do creatively at this point in life with the humble talent God has given me.

Paul commands us to rejoice in song — he doesn’t specify the musical style or that it should be a command performance! Obviously the point is, music is an extraordinary gift and we can all put some heart into using it in our own way to rejoice in what is worthy of rejoicing in.

I still love a lot of modern music — it is my primary vocabulary as an artist. For better or worse, it is the lingua franca of my generation and I still believe it can both communicate transcendence and rise above the primitive and the puerile. I know my favorite records achieved that in my eyes.

The 80s genre now called “sophisti-pop” was full of music with Christian/Catholic themes, not because all of them were even practicing their faith, but because the Biblical landscape was real for many of these young writers — my friend referred to them as “God-haunted Catholic boys.” I think many were striving to make ambitious records that achieved some transcendent, soulful experience — bands like The Blue Nile, Simple Minds, China Crisis, Prefab Sprout.

What about making this album in Los Angeles?

The reality of Los Angeles is misunderstood by pretty much everyone who has never lived here and even for people who live here for years, it is difficult to describe. It's a city of so many layers and very stark contrasts — the high and the low, tremendous natural beauty and abject decay. It resists any effort to sum it up in words.

Its name was originally the “Town of Our Lady of the Angels” and so many of the neighborhoods have the names of saints — something that is true around the USA.

At some point on the journey of making this album, it hit me that here I was making this music in a city called, “The Angels” — the place where I came to realize as a songwriter that I was living in the Biblical landscape and the soul of the music coming out of me reflected that.

I am not a booster for Los Angeles. I do love it and it also scares me and drives me crazy a lot of the time. It is quite an experience to live here. It is a city with a dark side, which we all read about with horror. But the fact is that Los Angeles does also have a very large, vibrant and devout Catholic population — there are many Latino and Filipino parishes, and even a large Polish church right near Hollywood full of Polish people of all ages, also Latin Mass churches with hugely expanding congregations. It is a complex city of many layers and many opposing contrasts.

That said, I never in a million years would have guessed that my experiences of the past 10 years would play out in Los Angeles. As I began to make discoveries for myself and find my way home it really felt like I was in a chapter out of Philip K. Dick's novel “Valis” for a while.

Are you surprised to still be making modern music after age 40?

My favorite songwriters seem to either carry on in ‘middle age’ because, as people, they are simply too interesting and eccentric to quit or they put out very little music because they don't want to make something until they have something that they truly feel compelled to express — and as you get older you realize that there is very little that rises to that level — but, you know, when you are young you're often arrogant and have a lot to say ... and what seems profound at certain age might be the dramas and vicissitudes of romantic love.

But with songwriting in modern music, to do it well, I think you just need to be capable of being inspired and a little eccentric maybe, read good books, go deep into things, look for what's interesting in unlikely places and then the songs come more as a symptom of living than something you work for. There's a phase of the writing that CAN be more like intense work, but that comes after the initial phase, I find. The big thing is having an album, not just a song or a single. That is still the big fish you hope to reel in. The novel is still the form to strive for — not the short story or the Twitter post.