

Joey + Rory

Some notes on the public and private nature of Protestant mourning

Joey + Rory's 2016 album *Hymns that are Important to Us*¹ was recorded while Joey Feek was dying of cancer. It is not a lost masterpiece, but it is a small, modest piece of private devotion, well-crafted and well-constructed. The modesty of the work is a Protestant modesty—a public performance, a private desire for connection, and the intricate negotiation between these seemingly irreconcilable aesthetic problems. The modesty comes from a Calvinist tradition that rewarded plainness—one that was anxious about the secular world staining the sacred one. The desire to pull away from the world while still evangelizing within it is one of the mostly American crises between private and public that the two performers tried to reconcile (Think of Winthrop's City on the Hill,² the sermons of Jonathan Edwards,³ various attempts like the Shakers and the Oneida to craft retreats outside of common experiences,⁴ or, in this century, popular media from places like Focus on the Family.⁵). In the following few pages, I want to place Joey + Rory into popular context, consider this album as a kind of hymnal, and discuss its aesthetic power in the social context of late American Protestantism.

There are two arguments that come from this album, one about modesty and one about devotion. Both center on the friction between private and public. Modesty in an old-fashioned virtue—one that is often centered on bodies. It is a virtue about absences—about not showing too much skin, about not saying too much out loud, about curtailing pride, and assuming that desire is a sin. Cancer is an immodest illness. It is a body that

1. Joey and Rory, *Hymns That Are Important to Us* (Gaither, 2016).

2. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to 1820*, ed. N. Baym (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

3. Gerald R. McDermott, "Poverty, Patriotism, and National Covenant: Jonathan Edwards and Public Life," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2003): 229–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9795.00136>.

4. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969); Philip J. Bryson, "In Defense of Capitalism: Church Leaders on Property, Wealth, and the Economic Order," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 89–107.

5. "Focus on the Family," RightNow Media, accessed 23 March 2019, <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/Publisher/3>.

declares itself, takes over. Modesty is a virtue that is anxious about prioritizing the body. Cancer is a disease whose rapaciousness makes the body public.⁶

Devotion is one way out of the problem of modesty. Part of the tension about performing, when one is supposed to be modest, is the seeking of fame working against the desire to not have people pay attention to you. The solution is to sublimate all of one's desire to have a public life, into thinking that desire is praising God. This is made especially fraught when women in some conservative denominations are not allowed to preach or teach: the public praising is often through singing, or through prayers of healing.⁷

A Joey + Rory cancer album must be understood as one that understands suffering within an American Calvinist lens, just as Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*⁸ must be read through the lens of race, and Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* or *AIDS and Its Metaphors*⁹ through a discreet queerness. The connections they have are layered—a private act becomes a document intended for an interior or small, contained audience, a self-contained audience that on occasion can break into wider spaces. Joey + Rory's audience, perhaps more than Lorde's or Sontag's, rests on influences that are under-discussed, communities who rest on inference instead of explicit telling; and communities who are modest, and often private.

Listening to the album, I keep returning to this problem of how modesty interacts with the public and the private: How does a work of private devotion become an act of commercial skill? Or, to be slightly crasser, how does this work return to being an *act* of public devotion? The private becomes public; the public returns to the private. A hymn that is sung in church is sung in private times—as an act of memory or comfort; a hymn that is recorded by Joey + Rory holds the tension between singing it corporately and individually. A person listens to the record at home, incorporating and extending the public/private tension.

Joey and Rory Feek began their career as songwriters, mostly of secular material. Sometimes they were sentimental. Sometimes they were wry. But they were often very successful. They wrote or co-wrote Clay Walker's 1999 Top Five hit "The Chain of Love," Blake Shelton's 2004 Number One hit "Some Beach," Blaine Larsen's 2005 hit, "How Do You Get That Lonely," Jimmy Wayne's 2008 single "I Will" and Easton Corbin's 2010's "A Little More Country Than That."¹⁰ When the songwriting dried up a bit, and they wanted to have a more public-facing career, they were contestants in

6. For discussions of modesty post-2000, see Cara Anthony, "Modesty in the Service of Justice: Retrieving Tradition and Reversing the Gaze," *Horizons* 36, no. 2 (2009): 265–84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900006381>; Jan Jagodzinski, "The New Virginité: The Nostalgic Return of the Veil," *Music in Youth Culture* (2005): 217–34, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230601390_15; or any of the discourse surrounding Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

7. The Feeks' Reformed Baptist home church has this quality. It is a controversial history in Reformed circles, and with the recent Calvinist revival, messy at best.

8. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997).

9. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin, 2002) and *AIDS and Its Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989).

10. "CMT," Artist Bio, Joey and Rory, accessed 23 March 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080915135409/http://www.cmt.com/artists/az/joeyandrorby/bio.jhtml>early%20l.

a 2008 reality show, *So You Think You Can Duet*, where they placed second. What followed was a lukewarm duo career and some mild hits, often for other artists. They were not as successful as artists as they were as writers for other people. In 2011, a single failed to chart at all and was placed in relief with a Christmas album that sold fairly well. The Christmas album provided an example: that while they might have burnt out in a secular market, they might have a place in a religious market.

This was followed by an album of hymns for an explicit Christian market, a move that occurred at the same time as a national renewal of interest in rural culture. The overlap between piety and this back to the land movement helps explain why Joey and Rory were offered their own television show, on the satellite network RFD, a channel owned by The Rural Media Group. It describes itself as “the nation’s first 24-hour television network featuring programming focused on the agribusiness, equine and the rural lifestyle, along with traditional country music and entertainment.”¹¹ Though up to that point Joey and Rory were not considered traditional country, their variety show on Rural Network, with Rory in overalls; a barn setting; and their choice of guests, such as inspirational bluegrass player Bradley Walker, fellow married gospel duo June and Jack Martin, and label head and country gospel legend Bill Gaither, made very explicit this rebranding. Putting on the overalls and suiting up is refusing to put on airs—it is performing modesty, and like country music at its core—cynical about earnestness, and earnest about cynicism.

The tail end of the [George W.] Bush years and the emergence of [Barack] Obama provided fallow ground for this kind of performative rurality. The hymns they sang led to a kind of nostalgia for a country that didn’t exist and had overtones of racial segregation and heteronormativity. They were singing hymns in concert and on television for most of the 2010s, but they sang them with renewed vigor after 2014, when Joey was diagnosed with cervical cancer. The cancer spread quickly, and less than a year later, she moved from Nashville to receive hospice care in her mother’s house in Indiana.¹²

In Indiana, Joey and Rory recorded mostly old fashioned—and mostly within their tradition—songs that one would sing to provide (often private) succor. These were hymns of lamentation, of desire for healing.

Thus, their work is by and large about cancer without directly mentioning cancer. There are country songs that mention cancer but are not written about cancer itself—see how Brad Paisley’s song “This Is Country Music”¹³ talks about the genre as one where you can sing about cancer. There are also songs written about cancer patients, but not by people who have cancer, like Rascal Flatts’ “Skin,”¹⁴ or Jason Isbell’s “Elephant,”¹⁵ where Isbell sings:

11. “Introduction,” RFD, accessed 23 March 2019, <https://www.rfdcc.com/>.

12. It seems significant that much of the information on Joey’s cancer came from Rory blogging about it. See Rory Feek, “Home of the Brave,” published 25 June 2014, <https://www.roryfeek.com/the-blog/home-of-the-brave-joey-courage-and-cancer/>; or Rory Feek, “To Joey With Love,” published 26 June 2016, <https://www.roryfeek.com/the-blog/to-joey-with-love>.

13. Brad Paisley, “This is Country Music,” track 1 on *This Is Country Music* (Arista, 2011).

14. Rascal Flatts, “Skin,” track 12 on *Feels Like Today* (Lyric Street Records, 2004).

15. Jason Isbell, “Elephant,” track 4 on *Southeastern* (Southeastern Records, 2013).

But I'd sing her classic country songs
And she'd get high and sing along
She don't have a voice to sing with now
We burn these joints in effigy

For Joey and Rory, performing hymns is a subtle act that evades direct naming. This is an album haunted by the specter of cancer but never says it directly. Isbell is too hip to be sentimental (though he comes close, his distance providing a gap, a kind of ironic meta-sentimentality), and Paisley is too self-aware to be sentimental. Paisley did not have cancer, and Isbell's work is too self-consciously literary. Both distanced themselves.

But Joey + Rory, using the disease that was invading Joey's body, could not allow themselves such rhetorical tricks. The album's hymn choices are mostly from the nineteenth century and could be considered sentimental. She sings more than he sings, and her voice is plain, without emphasis, and modest—really not much different than a very good singer that you would hear in a local church. It is not a praise and worship album. It might be a performance against them.

The country gospel genre can take a very specific act—like a woman dying of cancer—and have work made explicitly about that specific life experience, but it can also have that widening—that the specific context is needed to transform the private tragedy into an act of public ministry. The tension between the public and private becomes key here.

It is a mark of the genre of country to be explicit about heartbreak. It is a mark of the tradition of this Protestant gospel, to take one's specific suffering to the cross, making that suffering universal and elegantly move between the public and private discourses. That tension is a space for modesty to become real, as a public act intended for private feelings—something that written and oral traditions of hymn singing reflect in this American Calvinist tradition.

It might be useful to think of *Hymns That Are Important to Us*, then, as a hymnbook, one that has centuries of tradition in America marking the space between public and private. Hymnals, as public acts and private, were used as personal devotions and as gifts to public worship. In the 1790s, John Wesley, writing in the introduction to his brother's small hymnal, talked of Protestant hymnody as “a little book of experimental and practical divinity,” and for the next two hundred years, attempts at repackaging and editing hymns, functioned in this capacity.

The tension between the personal and the public was a large portion of this struggle—a struggle that can be seen in some eighteenth-century hymnals: The General Assembly of the Presbyterians' publishing of *A Selection of Hymns, adapted to the duties of the closet, the family, and the social circle, Private Hymnal* (1831),¹⁶ for example, or a private Baptist publisher working on *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Social and Private Worship* in 1820, which was popular enough that it was fully revised and still in publication by 1845.¹⁷ The publisher, Hale, put out *A Book of Hymns for Public and Private Function* in

16. *A Selection of Hymns*, Hymnary.org, accessed March 2019, <https://hymnary.org/hymnal/SHAD1831>.

17. *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, Hymnary.org, accessed 23 March 2019, <https://hymnary.org/hymnal/CPHS1845>.

1843. The Hale collection was surprisingly robust, with several runs of 500-1,000 in a month, and the run moved from the second to the third edition in a matter of weeks or days, with a fifteenth edition availability by 1866; it is currently available via a semi-vanity Print on Demand press.¹⁸

There were monumental hymn books, some with up to 1,400 pages, and tiny hymn books, sometimes no more than twenty or thirty pages long. The large hymn books were often carved up like a Christmas turkey, where individual denominations would use a larger source, for more precise constructions of their needs.¹⁹ Families would use these hymn books for public singing on Sunday, family singing throughout the week, and as aids to individual prayer. There are stories of Washington Irving taking his hymn book to church the day his brother died, writing on the front flyleaf and the back page of his personal hymnal the dates of his brother's life and death. The hymnal functioned as an informal, more personal, and thus more intimate record, than the official genealogical work done in the family Bible.¹⁹

One of the underwritten about but vital understandings of hymnals in the history of American Protestantism is that they were used for acts of public worship and private devotion, but the idea of public worship could mean a small and intimate gathering, and private devotion could include a number of family networks—including some marked outside of time or space. Joey + Rory's album, in how it is both a public and private record of religious practice (especially religious practice in the midst of private mourning) is well within the tradition of the American hymnal. It might be useful to mark exactly how the album is a public act and how it might be a private one, and thus how the album could be considered a hymnal.

The album could be considered a private album in several ways: First, it could be seen as a devotional act between Joey and God. Her singing the hymns of her childhood marks a liminal space between life and death. That liminal space, or that negotiation between death and life, becomes an act of family mourning—like Irving marking the death of his brother on the flyleaf decades earlier. In this way, the album could be considered a private language between a husband and wife. The reader could also expand how much that private life encompasses—this album could be considered private within a specific spiritual community. Here, the spiritual community is post-denominational. If we think of the nineteenth-century hymnals as acts of creation within an American Calvinist theological framework, then the album would be an act of creation as an aesthetic argument. That said, the line between aesthetic and theological concerns is hazier than church authorities or aesthetically minded critics might want to admit.²⁰

On a more personal note, the first draft of this essay was written when my mom was very sick, and in the ICU. I would visit her, and then go where I was staying and listen to Joey + Rory. Mom used to listen to a lot of country gospel in her kitchen. She is a devout

18. *A Book of Hymns for Public and Private Devotion (15th Ed.)*, Hymnary.org, accessed 2 April 2019, <https://hymnary.org/hymnal/BHPPD866>.

19. Phillips, *Hymnal*, 58–9.

20. James F. White, *Protestant Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

woman, and though I don't remember Joey and Rory, the hymns were the same. I can imagine that any number of listeners, anxious about their own parents, or their own families, seeking succor, would listen to this. Quietly in your own room with the door closed, this becomes its own kind of privacy.

If there are ways in which the album could be viewed as private, a hymnal exists also for public consumption. This album could be regarded as a kind of congregational singing. Though the hymns were sung on a television show for a satellite television network, thinking of these audiences as a twentieth-century tradition of faith mediated by technology, might expand what we view as a congregation, like radio sermons between the 1920s to the 1940s,²¹ Billy Graham's history of film and television in the 1950s,²² or televangelists in the 1970s and 1980s.

Knowing which hymns were sung in those spaces and knowing how to sing them marks a specific social practice: in these contexts, they could be considered public aid to private devotion or shibboleths of political/social/aesthetic claims. One of those claims is the idea of spaces where the angels and saints of heaven curve time—a cosmic, transtemporal public, where Joey would eventually enter.

One of the ironies of evangelical shibboleths is that there is a goal for everyone to eventually know them. In this sense the album could be considered public as an evangelical tool for Jesus—not for new members, but for backsliders, or for those who are intrigued by Christianity. In this capacity, the album could function in a similar way to how Gregory Jackson talks about sermons in his essay “America's First Mass Media: Protestant Sermons.”²³ Jackson argues sermons “needed not just to convert the lost, and inform the audience about their faith; they needed to teach their audiences how to think about their faith, how to read and apply the scripture to their own lives.” (This is something that country songs about what country is also do.)

It is also possible that two cultural networks exist here, with significant overlap. This could be considered public as an evangelical tool not for traditional Christianity, but for traditional country. A recent trend, although a cynical one, shows artists who have failed commercially shift to releasing albums of devotional hymns, the conventional understanding being that older audiences are more loyal and more willing to engage in this kind of nostalgia. See recent work by Josh Turner (*I Serve A Saviour*²⁴), Alan Jackson's *Precious Memories*,²⁵ Reba McEntire's *Sing It Now: Songs of Faith and Hope*, or most of Randy Travis's work, though Travis included a praise and worship song on one of his gospel records that he had heard because a younger congregant hipped him to it.²⁶

21. Two fascinating examples are “Radio Religion,” *Time*, 21 January 1946, and “Air Worship,” *Time*, 9 February 1931.

22. Some of this history can be seen on the Graham website: “Billy Graham TV Classics,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, accessed 23 March 2020, <https://billygraham.org/tv-and-radio/television/classics/>.

23. Christopher Jackson, “America's First Mass Media: Protestant Sermons,” in *A Companion to the Literatures of Colonial America*, ed. Susan P. Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 204.

24. Josh Turner, *I Serve A Saviour* (MCA Nashville, 2018); Reba McEntire, *Sing it Now: Songs of Faith and Hope*, 2017.

25. Alan Jackson, *Precious Memories* (Arista Nashville, 2006), with a sequel in 2013.

26. Randy Travis has had three albums of gospel. The praise and worship song is on *Worship and Faith* (2003).

Most cynically, considering the nature of country music and its publics—this kind of work could be considered public as entertainment—perhaps like the most business-like aspects of Aretha Franklin’s recording of the *Amazing Grace* album and documentary film in Los Angeles.²⁷ The fascinating thing about that film is how much the audience signifies, edging on glossolalia, and Aretha treats it like a gig. The professionalism of Franklin, her bandleader James Cleveland and the choir becomes another kind of entertaining and preaching, half a concert, half a church service, never really quite either public or private.

The line of public and private discourses that Joey and Rory construct is such that the two artists portray themselves in a very specific Puritan context with very specific tension between the personal and the collective. The collective becomes one entity comprising the human and the angelic, this world and the next. For certain kinds of Calvinist-oriented evangelicals (and I would argue, this could be considered Christian orthodoxy), Joey’s dying, is both sad, because she will leave her husband and children, and profoundly joyful because she is returning home. It is personal because of her relationship to Christ, and it is collective because she is part of the body of Christ. It is collective because her corporeality is being returned to the gathering of the saints and that she positions herself as part of this complex, ongoing narrative of renewing creation.

In making the personal universal, the mourning of an individual with cancer into a cosmic act, this work evades bathos because of this understanding of the Christian body as ever expandable but completely rooted. Listening to the work that Rory has done, when discussing his wife’s death, one hears that it is rooted in explicit details of place. He discusses her saying that she wanted to die before the flowers bloomed in Tennessee so that her husband could move from her mother’s house in Indiana and return to Nashville. This ability to hold two kinds of collective understanding, of the individualized and the corporate, seems impossible—for cynics, we can talk about Rory’s continued collection of works about his wife, but also for people who do not understand this Puritan line about hymnody.

Singing these hymns helped Rory die with dignity, and through the performative act of Rory’s dying and, through the aesthetic choices that foreground her dying, allowed others to be comforted at the most difficult moment of their lives—both the individuals who might be dying with Rory, and the friends or family who are looking for direction. The act of hymnody roles cannot be determined by purely aesthetic criteria. ■

27. Sydney Pollock and Alan Elliot, *Aretha Franklin’s Amazing Grace*, 2017. Al’s Records and Tapes, Forty Acres and Mule, Time. Film.