Q + A with Derek Webb

Luke Hawley
Dordt College, luke.hawley@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work
Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Music Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/831

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work: Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.
Q + A with Derek Webb

Abstract
"I don’t know how many songs I’ve written but it’s still a completely unfamiliar process to me."

Posting about an interview with music industry veteran Derek Webb from In All Things - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God’s creation.

https://inallthings.org/qa-with-derek-webb/

Keywords
In All Things, Derek Webb, musicians, songs, albums

Disciplines
Christianity | Music

Comments
In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

This blog post is available at Digital Collections @ Dordt: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/831
Tell me about the record.

*Fingers Crossed* is my first record in about four years. It just came out about a month ago. I've called it a tale of two divorces, so it's a pretty cathartic record. It's a heavy record, but in terms of my job description, which I've always thought of as looking at the world and describing it, I feel like I've hit closer to the center of the bullseye on this record than I ever have before.

It sounds really different, sonically, a lot more digital, almost industrial noise.

Yes. Which are some of my favorite things. I feel like I've kind of grown my way into some of those sounds. My early records were coming right out of Caedmon's [Call] records, so they were very folky, organic and Americana influences, and then over the years I've kind of worked my way to this spot. I made some more experimental folk records early on and then a couple nearly rock records and then I made *Stockholm Syndrome*, which was a very electronic, program-my urban record, and *Feedback*, an electronic instrumental record and then *CNTRL* which was kind of a weird juxtaposition of electronic and organic. I'm primarily a programmer, a remixer, definitely kind of a mad scientist in the studio. I've gotten to the point now where on my last few records I played more and more of all the instrumentation… the last record I put out before *Fingers Crossed* ([I Was Wrong, I'm Sorry, and I Love You]), I played almost everything. But this is the first record that I literally did everything other than mix it, which is not a thing I trust myself to do.

The record is sad—it's heartbreaking. Often. But the first release was *The Spirit Bears the Curse* which feels much more like poking somebody in the eye than laying your heart bare. I think the song is great; it's a perfect subversion of praise and worship music. What were you thinking about when you released it first? Was that a kind of business strategy?

I didn't see the release of *Spirit Bears the Curse* as any kind of a business strategy. I totally understand how people could feel that way, but I've seen more than a handful of people say that once they heard it as the third song on the record, it didn't at all feel that way to them. They felt really different in the context of the record. Whatever statement it is about modern worship songs and whatever else were all very incidental and unintentional on my part. That song like the rest of the record felt to me like an act of desperation. I didn't have the emotional bandwidth required to make clever statements about culture on this record. This was an autopsy, a desperate act. I wasn't able to craft a lot about this one, it just kinda had to come out.

But the production on it is sort of at least winking at praise and worship.

Oh, sure. I remember a couple years ago hanging out at a bar with a bunch of friends… and we were talking about how long it had been since any of us had been in church and we were kind of joking about how this is the promise of what's supposed to be, what we've actually found here. We have an honest community. We call each other our stories, we partake of the spirit, so to speak, and we congregate here and we're doing life together here. And it's a place we all feel safe to walk into, where we don't feel as though there's anything we have
to do to get in the door or anything that would exclude us from being welcome here.

I’ve never really written worship songs before. I’ve rewritten some old hymns over the years, which is a thing I feel like I understood how to do, but I was like, “You know, I should write the best worship song I’ve never written but make it about this place.” Because it rings so much more true to me. So I started to experiment with it. There was definitely a point where I was like, “I should go all the way here; I should go all the way with this.” That is in line with my general approach to how I make music; I’m contrary and I like subverting things and I like causing people to look at things a different way. So, yeah, that was not unintentional, but at the end of the day if the job of an artist is to look at the world and describe it, then the challenge is whether or not you lie about what you see or you tell the truth. And for me, if this record was not desperately sad, it would have been completely dishonest. This is the result of my looking at the world and describing the same as I’ve always done and it’s the same process by which I made She Must And Shall Go Free, my first record, it’s the same process by which I made Mockingbird, the same process by which I wrote all the Caedman’s songs. You look at the world and describe it. You change, the world changes, but that process for me has been the same and I wouldn’t have really done it well if the record had been anything short of really desperately sad because it’s really desperately sad stuff that I’m looking at and describing.

So I know that this is maybe contrary to what you just said but it does seem that there at least has to be some difference in the songwriting you were doing with Caedmon’s Call and the songwriting you’re doing now.

I’m just 20 years older so I’ve been doing it for longer. I don’t feel like it comes any easier. I don’t feel like I know anything fundamentally more about it than I did when I was writing songs in my 20s. I’ve never felt as though I am a meaningful participant in the moment of inspiration, the moment when the songs come. I feel like the only real craft to songwriting for me has been good preparation. That’s kind of the only part that I feel like I have any control over.

There’s this Leonard Cohen quote that I’ve always loved that says, “If I knew where the good songs came from, I’d go there every time.”

Exactly. I feel like for me sometimes it’s a hard labor and sometimes it happens in a second. Like Chasing Empty Mangers—I mean it was Christmas Eve, I was half drunk, and I wrote it in maybe twice the time it took to play it and I recorded it on my iPhone and then it was done forever. That’s what went on the record and that was it.

Then there’s a song on the new record called Easter Eggs and I wrote part of Easter two years ago and I finished on Easter this year. It’s so weird that I didn’t write any of it between, but I only wrote it on Easters and went a good year in between and that song took forever to finish. I don’t know how many songs I’ve written but it’s still a completely unfamiliar process to me. I wish I could do it all the time; unfortunately, I only really get to do it every few years and I try to get as much as I can I’ve managed to cobble together a career out of that rhythm

I sometimes think that the only thing keeps me attached to the idea of God and thus keeps me attached to Christianity is the songwriting process. There’s just so much mystery and magic that goes into it.

I know what you mean. There is something mysterious and that kind of goes into the question mark box for me.

What’s that thing that Catholics talks about where they take the Eucharist and there’s this moment where you—

Transubstantiation? The mysterious way by which the elements become the body and the blood of Jesus and all that.

Yes. I feel like songwriting is transubstantiation in a way. I don’t know if that makes any sense.

Sure. Yeah, that sounds cool. I don’t know. It’s definitely a mysterious process for me and both in seasons of life where I felt very in tune with or had a comfortable name for the source of that inspiration and in other seasons
where I haven’t, it still feels like something that comes in from the outside, which is a really strange thing.

I read somewhere that you said that when you are attached to Christianity that you “have a very conservative theological ethic.” It sounds to me—and I might be way off here—but... there’s a world in which believing that this thing that just comes to you is the thing that is given to you, that aligns pretty well particularly with people’s extreme ideas about Calvinism and the sovereignty of God and the prewritten arch of the world or something like that. If that’s true, do you think the way that you approach and think about songwriting is attached to that in some way?

When you’re drowning do you give any thought to what stroke you’re using to keep yourself above water? I’m not really aware of what stroke I’m using, I’m just trying to not die. I don’t have the luxury of thinking about how it looks to anybody or who it might be for. Not that I don’t think about those things, I just think about them after the fact. I think about those things in a constrained way because I work to provide the real estate for the thing to exist and to come into the world and then I look at it and figure out what it is and who it’s for and how to try and connect it with those people if I can.

I don’t have huge ambition. Well, I have a pretty huge creative ambition, but I don’t have a huge commercial ambition at all. It’s almost non-existent; I want to sell just as many records as I need to make a living at it and really no more if I can help it because I think that’s the best version of being a professional musician. The ambition I do have is that I want to figure out who this is for and everyone who I think it’s for I want to hear about it. I don’t make music for everyone. I’m a niche niche niche niche niche artist. I’m complicated. I understand not liking what I do because it’s not for most people. Out of ten people only 2 or 3 of them are gonna be someone who might like my music. But I want to do the best job I can for the people who it’s for to hear about it and for them to have the means to connect with it and that sort of thing.

I’ve often thought really good, trustworthy artists who I love, I want them self-indulging. I mean people talk about self-indulgence like it’s the worst thing but who would we prefer an artist indulge? The record label? The radio? Their fans? Fans of artists hardly ever know what they want and I think some of my favorite records of all time wouldn’t have been made if those artists had been considering what their fans wanted. Achtung Baby would never have been made, Yankee Hotel Foxtrot would never have been made, OK Computer would never have been made because none of those fans wanted those records. They wanted the previous record again. So it’s up to the artist to dig in and follow those coordinates to where they need to go next and bring whatever remnant of their fans wish to go with them along. That’s part of what I mean when I say that here in my twenty-almost-fifth year in this job I feel like I’ve only barely begun to really understand and do the job. But it’s been a long journey. The tall fires have come low in terms of me locating, identifying, discerning, and dismantling any filter through which anything might go before you have a chance to hear it. I feel like I’ve done the job better on Fingers Crossed than I’ve ever done it before.