

God Plays the Trumpet

By John N. McDowell

—Revelation 8:6–13, 9, 11:15–19

I

God no longer plays rock and roll,
he became disenchanted with MTV videos
and those laser and smoke
stadium shows that try to outdo the Apocalypse.
He now understands that from the King onward
they are all just trying to steal his thunder.
He first had doubts when, although he'd liked
Abbey Road and Sergeant Pepper, there was the claim
that they were more popular than his son.
In this business, God slowly realized, popularity
was what mattered. Nashville providing in the end
all the proof needed. When he saw
the pilgrimages to Graceland, he understood
why his calls to Capital and EMI were never returned,
and he turned business and promotion over to his son.





II

So seven years ago, Dad takes us out
on the road to play his brand of acid blues
in clubs with names like Rafters and Junkyard.
all with the same sour smell of spilled beer—
Chicago and east down the coast to Miami,
He is known, of course, for his trumpet playing.
We're a last supper tableau with five-alarm chili for the fare,
James on guitar, John electric bass, Peter on drums,
I'm on keyboards. We know we're the firewall to his genius.
When we get cooking, we've learnt
how to hold on and ride the croc's tail
as he, with tongue and lips, pistol-whips notes
through the froth of sound, and the high Cs
hold and sting like bees,
yet look out when he comes down, his horn
growling, hot as a tigress in heat, but before
you can blink an eye you're caressed with the cool
lick of a crocus spring, and you believe
this lion can indeed lie down with the lamb.

This is the miracle that keeps us together
night after night, through Comfort Inns and women
who smell too heavily of cigarettes and Charlie.
The master's sound leaves us amazed and dizzy.
After each set he hardly speaks at all
(plays with his eyes closed). One of us almost always
announces the names of tunes, and thanks
the folk for coming out.

Last summer our break came,
we're invited to Montreal and the Flying Fish
label signs us up. We had gigs
in Chicago, Boston, New York, New Orleans at the House of Blues
and now here we are in the City of Angels—last stop on the tour.

Tonight at the end of the last set he takes us by surprise.
In the blink of any eye he's into a piece we've only practiced
once or twice before. But this time
it is clear we're going for more than we've ever done before.
He begins low and quiet, a baby-cradled spiritual
builds the sound in spirals louder and louder until a thunderhead
cracks open the smoke-slick air.

Peter sweats the high-hat cymbals like never before,
while James flicks lightning through cord changes, yet
he's motionless, he's the dead eye
we chase with everything we've got as the hurricane
swamps and drenches us—all afraid of drowning,
afraid to exhale—Hail Mary hang on to the glory
blistering from that gold horn
desperate to reach the hallelujah shore: his lips
bloody and thick as beefsteaks.

It brings the audience to its feet shouting,
stomping, clapping, whooping in the gift of breath
so that no one hears his whisper to the mike,
“Thank you. That's The Apocalypse
Good night to you all.”

John N. McDowell teaches at Pacific Union College, where he is a professor
of English and directs the Honors Program.

