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**ECCENTRIC: WRITING THROUGH THE LENS OF  
EMPATHY**

**by**

**STEVEN BLACKSMITH**

BA Media Arts  
University of New Mexico  
2022

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts  
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**Steven Blacksmith**

**BA MEDIA ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2019**

**MFA DRAMATIC WRITING, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2022**

**ABSTRACT**

In this essay, I detail my growth as a writer through different periods of empathic learning. I examine my childhood struggle to understand many common emotions and the ways in which I began to logically dissect and replicate them in life and in art. I further delve into this examination through my discovery of comedy and the lifelong process of understanding the deep connections humans make with humor. I then discuss how my understanding of empathy allowed me to write my dissertation play, *The Eccentrics*, and create a world in which empathy among the characters can be a catalyst for learning in the minds of the audience.

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## Preface

I was born without a sense of humor. Or, at least, that's what my mom told me. I was born without much of a personality at all, to be truthful. From the moment that I came out of my mother's womb until late into my childhood, I wasn't much fun to be around. That was a strong indicator for personality disorder, but in the early 90's there wasn't much mainstream research that my parents knew about to point in that direction. I was just a little weirdo that never really laughed or cried or got scared.

Now, there is plenty of debate over what are natural versus learned behaviors among children. What in a child's brain makes them cry? How do we find things funny without being told that they are funny and that the normal thing to do would be to laugh? The most obvious explanation for these behaviors would be that that they are developed over time from our most basic aesthetic experiences. For example: A baby is cold, so it shivers. It associates the cold with the biological reaction of the body trying to warm itself. This function of the body is also a means of trying to maintain control. Perhaps, that is why we also shiver when we aren't breathing correctly or undergoing anxiety or fear response? These responses store in our brain and inform one another. Interestingly, we also take these experiences with discomfort to reinforce our positive emotions. There is a reason why babies laugh at pain and discomfort - because their entire existence has been informed by jarring experiences and various growing pains. When Dad bumps his knee on the table in front of Baby's crib, Baby might laugh, but what they are really saying is, "Ha! Been there, bro!". So, how did little baby Steve, who was making fewer of these connections than other people, grow up to write about the human condition? That, my friends, requires a lifetime of learning, failing, and personal growth.

It's the night of January 23rd, 1988. Fog slowly dissipates off the rural road. Light strikes the cracked tar with the intense luminosity of a Winter's moon. The faint sound of electric guitars wail in the distance. Tires squeal with dangerous pitch and the rockin' music starts to grow louder. Suddenly, a beaten up, old truck flies over the hill, several feet off the ground and faster than a bat out of hell. The truck crashes back to the Earth with a monstrous twist of metal amongst the heavy beats of Boston's classic banger, *Peace of Mind*. Sparks fly as the rear bumper drags along the asphalt.

"You okay back there, Honey Bunch?" Mike shouts. He takes a drag of his cigarette then flicks it out of the window. He then takes a swig of his beer and throws that out of the window.

Natalie lays down in the bed of the truck, holding her pregnant belly with a mixture of love and fear. She knew one thing was for certain: that the baby was coming soon and that if they didn't get to the hospital fast, she was going to have him right there in the truck.

Okay, that story is not how I was born. I honestly asked my mom once, (because my wife wanted to know), and she couldn't really remember how it happened either. My best guess is that my mom felt like I might be coming out, went to the hospital on a safe, maintained city road, and had very few-to-zero problems with the birth. She didn't even remember what time I was born. It's just more fun to spin a new, potentially more exciting tale of my birth because drama is complication. Drama is when things are tense and emotionally complex or when there are actual stakes beyond, "this is my third kid and I'm kind of over it by now". But, even some of the most popular biographies have embellishments in them. Even the coolest stories don't necessarily make good movies or plays or even novels. Events are consolidated and timelines are condensed. Things are changed to get... Sexier. More action packed.



Memory, as it turns out, is its own way of consolidating history to make a sexier story. As I thought back on my life to find out how I got to be the writer that I am today, I found myself constantly questioning if my memory of events was correct. Memory is flawed in that it is constantly evolving and never definite. Basically, a moment happens and can never happen again for the first time but can be repeated to a certain proximity of the truth via memories. The mind, however, can manipulate our own memories for the sake of self-preservation. How many times did I end up the hero of my own story when it was unwarranted, and how many perspectives have I discounted that could fill in the truth a little better than my memories could?

So, why do I even bring any of this up? It's simple: that is what I explore in my writing. Memory, humility, fallibility, our misplaced feelings of infallibility, humanity - all aspects of the human condition that I explore using one, simple tool: Empathy. Empathy, in its most broad terms, is the ability to understand what another person is feeling. Empathy is the driving force behind my work because it is the driving force behind my understanding of the world around me and the people that inhabit it. Where I find a divergence from emotional empathetical learning is with an overreliance on cognitive empathy.

Most people are familiar with emotional empathy. That is where we feel another person's emotion through our own emotions. For instance, people may cry at funerals or weddings even though they aren't close with the person they are remembering or celebrating. Most people feel the sadness or joy within the room and the people that inhabit it as mirror neurons activate in their brains to release similar chemicals to make them feel the emotions of the grieving or betrothed. By now you are either bored or intrigued. Cognitive empathy, however, uses logic and reasoning to tell us what a person is feeling and how to empathize

accordingly. Cognitive empathy might not trigger a bout of crying if you're at a friend's father's funeral, but it may tell you to put an arm over your friend's shoulder rather than pop a bottle of champagne and congratulate him. It's basically how we "read the room" without being affected by it.

For the longest time, I was often told that my "cold" nature was a lack of empathy. It took me many years to realize that I had been using empathy my entire life, just within the frame of logical reasoning. It was conforming my behavior to other peoples' expectations that was a dangerous and repressive form of masking that was preventing me from being the most empathic person that I could be. It wasn't until my adulthood that I began to turn my observation back toward myself and look at my own history through a lens of empathy. I realized that the way that I used observation toward other people could be used on my own behaviors, both physical and mental, to analyze the person that I was and allow me to embrace the truest version of myself. This required a vulnerability that I had never experienced before, and an acknowledgment that my own memories would most certainly be false in many ways. Through years of engaging with these moments in my life and reconciling with the bad, I have become a writer that represents himself on the page and tries to use the same empathic tools to hold a more accurate mirror up to the world.

In the next portion of this paper, I will give an in-depth examination of key moments in my life that have brought me to this realization of the power in my writing. I have tried my best to see the perspectives of those involved. I have also tried not to present a revisionist history of my life, but rather flesh out the learning moments that shaped me as a writer and human being.

## **PART ONE: A WRITER'S JOURNEY**

### **Paper Boy**

I've mentioned a couple of times that I didn't have much of a personality growing up. That's completely true. I was a boring kid. I never really wanted to do much of anything. Hell, to this day I still don't want to do much of anything. I'm not very dynamic when I'm on my own; my personality was completely derived from a strange interplay of selective perfectionism and masking. I was malleable for most of my adolescence to the point where my personality changed drastically with what was being asked of me by my peers from year-to-year. I went from playing sports, to being super into nerdy stuff, to becoming immersed in pot culture, to being a chain-smoking tough kid, and there was probably a week or two where I was emo. I didn't just want to do these things, but I wanted to do them the best that I could so that I would fit in the best that I could. Only now do I see that those were untenable façades that I projected as me. After all, a child being asked to smile more or risk being labeled as a "freak" is a damn common motivation to avoid that label. My life only started to change when I asked myself, "what is a smile and what causes it?".

The concept of joy was hard to crack. I thought that if I was going to understand what made me happy, I first had to better understand humor, as it was the most obvious form of joy I could see. I often found myself not finding the same things funny that other people found funny in the mainstream. My brother would laugh at movies or TV shows whereas I had a better time following plots and the logic behind them. Kids at my elementary school would laugh at blowing into their elbows to create facsimiles of farts, whereas I didn't really get why that was funny. I knew there was something I was missing, but I couldn't put my

finger on what that was. It wasn't until a rare spark of creativity in elementary school that I identified that imagination was what I was deficient in.

I don't have a very strong visual imagination. I tell that to people all the time and they absolutely don't believe me. They don't see how I can create worlds in my plays and movies with nothing but words and very little visualization on my part. Now, I'm lucky enough to have some capacity for visualizing in my mind. Unfortunately, some people can't conjure any images in their minds. If this is your first time hearing that and you have a vivid imagination, then please take a moment to allow the shock of that reveal to wash over you and your entitled perspective. I'm just kidding. I really appreciate all the amazingly varied types of minds. More on that later, but for now, you need to know that my mind's eye sucks. I can perhaps conjure 30% of an image in my mind and hold it there for two or three seconds before it disappears forever.

One day, in what must have been second or third grade, I got a strange jolt of creativity. We were given time to do any sort of art that we wanted. Another student and I decided we were going to make a man out of construction paper. I'm sure creating a Frankenstein's Monster out of thick paper wasn't my idea at first, but I honestly just went with the flow of whoever was leading the charge. Soon, I started to get into the process. As we started to cut out various body parts of our man, we discussed why each part should be handled a certain way. Little did I know that I was creating story. Our man had a huge head, with triangles cut out of the top to simulate spiky hair. I guess he was a bit punk rock. Next, he had one strong arm with our best approximation of what muscles looked like. I mean, Schwarzenegger was a huge star at the time, so who could blame us? After that we made a Swiss Army robot arm full of all sorts of interesting gadgets. Finally, we settled on having a

horse body for the legs. Our man was now a centaur and ready to play whatever games we could think up.

Making this paper man was my own awakening to the power of my mind. I already had an inkling that I couldn't imagine visually like some others around me. It had made me awkward and not-too-fun to be around when other children were playing in incredibly immersive worlds of their own creation and I couldn't see the dragon, orcs, or whatever in-fashion bad guy everyone else was supposed to be fighting. Creating this paper man with my classmate was different though. I was able to logically look at his body and work out an expansive story of his life. How did he get that robot arm? Well, let me tell you. He had it bitten off by a shark, then had the arm replaced with a cybernetically enhanced one made by the U.S. Government. (I watched a lot of *Inspector Gadget*.) As I relayed this information to my classmate, I remember feeling--possibly for the first time--that I had entered into a state of flow. Something possessed me in that instant and I became an author for the first time. I was pulling from a place in my mind and memory where imagination could live beyond the visual. I was creating story from what I knew and making logical connections between different aspects of my known universe to flesh out a detailed and coherent background for this character. I was in my element and beginning to define just what that state of being meant to me. And, best of all, I found myself laughing.

"...And I Just Grew, Tangled Up in Blue"

Years later, I was a teenager who mostly kept to himself. The paper man and other social breakthroughs as a child had kicked off years of me trying to artificially create moments where I felt like a normal person. As I mentioned earlier, this led me to become involved in various social clubs and activities. After a few years, I was starting to get burnt

out from the near-constant masking and didn't care about what was going on in my social life. I had somehow fallen into hanging out with a group of boys and girls who were somewhat popular. It seemed that my burnout was perceived as a mysterious nature and my introverted personality mistaken for a sexy brooding that appealed very much to teenagers. For whatever reason, they accepted me as one of their own and let me sit with them at lunch every day. I quickly found that I could not hold my other end of the social bargain at the lunch table. I brought nothing to conversation and was often challenged by the other boys as to why I was even present. Though I wouldn't have minded going back into isolation, there was something exciting about having a group of people around me that wanted to hear me contribute to conversations as a version of myself that felt as close to real as I ever had been. I knew that I had to find a niche, however, or this avenue would close itself off and I wouldn't get to explore it.

I began to observe my fellow boys at the lunch table. What seemed to garner them the most attention were the jokes that they made. They would not only get praise from the other boys, but they would make the girls laugh, which was admittedly appealing to me as well. Though they would often fall back on the horribly problematic, insult-humor that teenage boys are very capable of getting lost in - I was not interested in getting those types of laughs. What I was interested in was their ability to recite bits from stand-up acts.

For years, I had been learning to appreciate humor as the most affective and universal emotion that humans are capable of - despise of small talk on long elevator rides being the obvious, close second. I taught myself to make logical connections between moments in comedy in order to find out why other people were laughing, and in doing so began to appreciate comedy myself and to find genuine humor in moments. It wasn't until I

started watching stand-up that I began to appreciate joke structure. It was an interesting form of storytelling, so I wanted to try it myself. What started as me trying to sneak in the occasional joke when I could, quickly snowballed into me going into full bits from comics I loved like Robin Williams, George Carlin, David Cross, Dave Chapelle, and more. This not only gave me an appreciation for new structures in which to tell stories but showed me that I enjoyed making people happy through performance.

In high school, I had narrowed down the popular kids table to a group of five friends from vastly different backgrounds and social standing. We had a cheerleader, a beatnik/goth, a wrestler, a repressed Christian, and someone whose first language was sarcasm. We would all stand outside during our lunch period and talk to each other about anything that came to mind. I would still try to be as funny as possible, though I had graduated from other people's jokes and started coming up with my own. There was a hollowness to this, though, and I could see it in the faces of my peers. I wasn't going to lose them, as we were all good friends at that point, but I certainly wasn't impressing them with lackluster material. I hadn't realized that I had become a shock comic, and that was garnering me more pity laughs than ever before.

The early 2000's was a terrible time for comedy. What was popular among young people in theaters and on TV was incredibly problematic and exclusionary for most groups that weren't cis white men. This miseducation on my part was only compounded by my habit of going to the local video store every weekend and renting six-to-eight equally problematic, older movies such as *Porky's*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and to a lesser extent, *Animal House*. So, there I was, standing before my friends making sexist, racist, homophobic jokes and not having much of an idea of what I was actually saying. To slightly tweak a quote from John C.

McGinley in the movie *Point Break*, I was "young, dumb, and full of [shit]". I knew that something didn't sit with me right when I saw other teenage boys making fun of each other in these horrible ways, so why was I allowing film and stand-up to influence me to go against my natural inclinations toward more empathic forms of comedy? It was a nagging feeling in my mind that made itself known when I realized I was getting more groans than laughs. Fortunately, the wake-up call I needed came when I signed up for my first creative writing class.

Mrs. Hutchins, (identity changed because I couldn't remember her name), was an interesting teacher. She stuck to her guns, tried not to stifle our creativity, and was pretty freaking funny to boot. I enjoyed her class, but I couldn't shake the feeling like I had to be this shock comic in everything - including my writing. My first few stories were absolute trash, but they made the class laugh hysterically. I thrived on this emotional reaction to my stories. I had never felt anything like it before. Sure, my friends laughed at my stories, but that was on a small-scale and they knew and liked me as a person. This new crowd, however, reignited my want to shock and disgust and inflict extreme feelings with my writing.

One day, I wrote a story about a homeless drug addict that gets into precarious situations while looking for a fix. It was more tasteless than anything I had ever written. The class laughed heartily, but Mrs. Hutchins wasn't having it. She took me outside and we walked a bit of the way down the hall so she could really let me have it. I don't remember many specifics of what we fought about, but I do remember trying to defend myself by saying, "...comedy is shocking. Look at George Carlin.", to which she responded, "You are not George Carlin. George Carlin actually has something to say". Oh man, that stuck with me. I was speechless. Did I really have nothing to say?



One good thing about having severely reduced emotional responses to things is my ability to quickly get over being upset about things. Seriously, you can t-bone my car and, as long as we're both not grievously hurt, I'll make a joke with you two minutes later. So, by the time I got back to Mrs. Hutchins classroom, I was over the verbal ass-whooping she gave me. You see, the cool thing about Mrs. Hutchins was that she believed in free speech to the extent where she didn't report me to the principal for my offensive writing. Instead, I had to sit there with the knowledge that I wasn't as cute as I thought I was. I was given the choice to continue playing the lowest, most degrading forms of comedy, or to challenge myself to be better. I chose to challenge myself, and the first step in doing that was learning how to listen. I had gotten drunk on the affect I could provide to my classmates with raunchy, meaningless jokes, but I hadn't truly listened to whether it was my truth or if I was putting anything good out into the world. Once again, I wasn't listening to myself or having empathy towards my gut instincts which were telling me that I didn't really like what I was doing. In order to make people truly laugh with meaningful comedy, I would have to sit back, shut up, and not just hear, but listen.

As the semester went by, I starting paying more attention in Mrs. Hutchins class. This included actually listening to the stories that my classmates were writing and contributing constructive feedback. I didn't bother writing a new story of my own, as I just wasn't ready yet. I found that Mrs. Hutchins was a fantastic English teacher and showed me things that forever changed my understanding of writing. She had us read Anne Lamott's book, *Bird by Bird*, which was fantastic and led to a comforting lecture where Mrs. Hutchins explained the concept of the "shitty first draft". A shitty first draft is basically a form of humility that helps writers complete drafts by embracing the knowledge that every first draft will have bad

aspects, so we should just write it without killing our creativity through restriction and editing our instincts as we go. This is a fantastic concept that every writer should know and forever changed my motivations during the draft phase. Mrs. Hutchins also introduced us to various pieces of media that she considered poetry, like playing Bob Dylan's *Tangled up in Blue* multiple times to show us what a true storyteller can do with lyrics. I still love that song.

Back in my friend group, I started to analyze the comedy that I was doing before this new awakening. I quickly realized that I didn't really like gross out comedy and was merely emulating what I saw was popular in the mainstream. I knew that I had to change to a style that I actually thought was funny, but I had no idea where to begin. I began researching countless items in the comedy section for things that would give me a good belly laugh or two. What I quickly found were comedies that focused on more sophisticated forms of comedy such as wit, sarcasm, and parody. I watched *Daria*, *Monty Python*, the films of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, *Black Adder*, *Clue*, and many others of the sort. I wanted to do more of *that* and less of the easy, blue material that dominated pop culture in the early and mid-2000's.

One of the greatest feelings of my life came out-of-the-blue one day. You see, I didn't realize that I was training my brain to operate in different ways when I started watching these smarter comedies. I was talking with my group at lunch one day and my friend Chelsey said something that was a seemingly mundane, throwaway line. I quickly picked up on it--my brain working faster than it had ever done before--and I snapped back with a witty remark that had everyone practically on the floor with laughter. It was strange, but I couldn't really process what had happened. Did I really say that, and if so, how did I come up with it? It was like my mouth worked faster than my mind, though I know now that is not the case. I had

simply built up the muscle of wit to the point where those kinds of jokes were now living in my pre-conscious and ready to strike with the speed of a freaking cobra once I allowed myself to enter a flow. As I looked at my friends who were all struggling to breathe, I realized that this is what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted to make people feel so deeply that they remembered those moments. I wanted to be the bright spot in their day. Little did I know that this was empathy working through me and, in turn, helped me to be closer to those people than I ever had before. I wanted to expand this reach. I wanted to make everyone laugh and feel, but first, I had to learn how different people perceived the world for me to make the most resonant observations.

### The Em-Path

During my junior year of high school, I noticed a casting call posted outside of the acting classroom. Now, I had never really thought about acting in the past. I was on my way to becoming a comedian and already had a lot on my plate if I was going to accomplish that. When I saw that the show the Theatre Department was putting on was Woody Allen's, *Don't Drink the Water*, I jumped at the chance to audition. I had recently rented the 1994 version of the film from our local video store and enjoyed the hell out of it. It seemed serendipitous that our school would be putting on such an obscure play version of two almost-forgotten Woody Allen movies.

I had never acted before in my life. I had never even played a turkey in some lame, third grade play about Thanksgiving. So, when I showed up at the audition and had everyone laughing with my cold reading, I was very surprised. The acting teacher, Ms. Hines, seemed just as surprised when I said that it was my first time acting. I realized afterward that I should have lied about my experience, as I believe it might have cost me the lead role. Even though I

killed it in the call back, I was untested, unknown, and not old enough to lead the cast, as the meatiest roles often went to seniors who had put in their time in the department. I was annoyed, but not heartbroken. Instead, I was offered the bit part of "Janis" who plays the straight man to a fun, physical comedy gag. I was quickly introduced to the classic Stanislavski line, "there are no small parts, only small actors." and decided to make my two minutes onstage the best damn two minutes I could muster. And I did - acting my butt off as I delivered a quarter page of lines that had the audience believing I *was* a forty-year-old Russian aristocrat who enjoyed being snarky to lower class Americans. The feedback from the crowd was exhilarating and kicked off a lifelong love for theatre.

In the Spring, I signed up for as many acting classes as I could. I discovered that I loved pretending to be other people. With this newfound passion, I also learned something new about myself: I had been acting all my life through masking. It's peculiar that the study of an art form was the first thing that let me analyze my own mind. It wasn't the Intro to Psychology class or guidance counselors or any other pathway toward introspection that told me this - no, it was staring at myself in the mirror and wondering why I couldn't cry for a big monologue or appear frightened for a horrific moment in a scene. I continued renting the same amount of movies I always had been, except now I was mimicking the facial movements and vocal inflections of the various actors. I got pretty good at mimicry, but nothing could get me to a point of believability that I was satisfied with.

I went through the rest of my high school career improving on my craft, though always finding a hollowness to it. I couldn't bring myself to a highly emotional level of embodiment of a character. I had always heard that it was easier to reach a level of emotional understanding of a character if you reach into your own past and pull from a similar

emotional experience. Very few of those moments existed in my past, leaving me at a loss for how to progress as an actor or bring truth to moments of heightened emotionality.

Fortunately, nobody seemed to notice my imposter syndrome, and I quickly rose to be a star in my thespian troupe. If there was a "Captain of the Football Team" of theatre, I was it. I would secure lead roles in productions, emcee our talent shows and award ceremony, plot and hang lights for productions, and even do some welding for sets. Accolade after accolade would get thrown at me, but I still felt like a phony in the back of my mind. I had to find my truth, and I knew that understanding people better would be a large part of that.

There were two defining moments that set me on the track to creating with empathy in mind. One occurred during a run of *The Wizard of Oz* where I was playing the Tin Man. There was a small moment where Dorothy, Scarecrow, Toto, Lion, and Tin Man arrive at the Emerald City. They ring a bell at this large gate and a Doorman answers saying something like, "Who rang that bell?" This was the case for the first few performances. Closing night, however, the actor playing the Doorman was dicking around in the dressing room when we ring that bell. The problem is the play grinds to a halt when nobody is there to answer the door and let the cast into the Emerald City. After about a minute or so of awkward small talk, I get the bright idea to say, "Maybe they think we're Mormons?". The audience was dying with laughter. The rest of my cast broke character while I tried my best to relish in the laughs rather than break along with them. (And, not to suggest this joke was completely at the expense of Mormons and negate what I've said previously about my dislike for punching down, but I only said this joke because we had a Mormon family that was heavily involved in the play and enjoyed Mormon jokes. They were laughing heartily as well.) The laughter eventually died down, and an incredibly out-of-breath Doorman let us into the city.

This moment was incredibly important to me. First, I was allowed to realize that I loved comedy more than anything. Not just that, but I loved giving people the opportunity to feel positive emotions. The ability to make people feel something positive is a gift that shouldn't be squandered. Next, I realized that the joke worked because it was taken from a mass experience that most in the audience had either gone through or were familiar with through pop culture. Though I didn't have the language at the time, this was one of my first acknowledgements of a difference between cognitive and emotional empathy, and how I could use cognitive empathy to learn more about the world, human behavior, and myself.

I took the lessons from that moment and brought them with me to my first writing job. It was the last production of my Senior year and my Thespian Troupe brainstorming what one-act play we could present at the International Thespian Conference. By this point I had written some short films for Thespian talent shows and was eager to try my hand at writing a play. I have no idea how it happened, but somehow, I was allowed to write a one-act reimagining of *Antigone* set during the Vietnam War. To my surprise, the play came to me easily. I wrote it, we workshopped it, I changed a few things, and boom - we had a script ready to be rehearsed and performed with the full support and resources of the department.

No offense to Sophocles, but I felt like there were a couple of things that I could change to heighten the drama over the tragedy. For one, I wanted King Creon to be the one to kill his son Haemon. In the original play, Haemon takes his own life after a fight with his father. I turned that around and had Creon plunge a dagger into Haemon's heart after their fight. To reinforce the animosity between Haemon and Creon, I had Haemon offer more support to Antigone in her effort to bury her deceased brother. Of course, this dramatic action was a bit easier to understand than the original suicide, and thus it swayed the audiences'

emotions with audible gasps as Creon killed Haemon. I loved that reaction, and so did the rest of the cast and crew. Unfortunately, one of the competition judges had a different idea. During our one-on-one judging session, we were torn apart for "bastardizing" the play he did his doctoral thesis on. His tirade put us in a terrible mood for the rest of the weekend and made me question my role as a playwright.

I had to fight every instinct telling me that he was wrong with his emotional outburst in order to allow myself to pick out legitimate criticisms. He had valuable critiques regarding my treatment of the feminism that can be so prominent in the character of Antigone. My decision to take Haemon along for the ride in burying her brother undercut the action of Antigone breaking the law on her own. Haemon's later decision to attack his own father further made the play "The Haemon Show" and less about Antigone. In going for the easy, emotional manipulation of the audience, I took away part of the message of the original. I empathized with this judge who refused to go along with the ride that everyone else was enjoying. That was an incredibly important moment for me as a writer. To make something meaningful and ultimately more impactful, we can't just rely on emotional manipulation. It is important to see all sides of the content that we are putting out there. I'm not saying that I'm never going to put writing into the world that isn't offensive to at least one person. That would be a nail in the creative's coffin. I do, however, want to be more deliberate in my writing and be empathic toward more than just my target audience.

#### That's A Wrap?

After high school, I quickly went into the film industry. I started off as an actor. First, I got an agent who completely got my type wrong and sent me out for gangbanger roles and something called "Comically Hispanic Guy #2". I quickly realized that I wasn't going to get

anywhere with this agent, so I started making connections in the industry. I took background actor gigs which led directly to a dense network of people trying to break into the bigger world of film. We helped each other work toward a common goal of bigger and better roles. Eventually, my interests were expanded by a few of these people and I was given day-player gigs as a PA. This slightly-better-than-gum-on-your-shoe position on the film set gave me greater access to cast and crew members.

I see this time in my life as a pivotal moment in my journey to becoming a writer. You see, I didn't graduate high school with some sort of direction of where I wanted to go. I kind of just did whatever the hell I wanted or thought would be interesting. While some who went a different path might think I wasted the first decade out of high school, I saw everything as a learning experience. I met tons of people in my jobs on film sets. Those people put me on other film sets. Eventually, I was asked to write movies and sketches for those people. Those writing experiences gave me a thirst to write more. Finally, having that newfound need to write made me seek out new opportunities to see my work produced.

I was in my mid-twenties when I was approached to write a cable access show about nerd culture. This was a low-profile gig, and the benefits such as press passes, studio space, and access to film equipment far outweighed the next-to-nothing pay. I was given press access to all the biggest comic, anime, and gaming conventions in New Mexico. Not only were they almost always incredibly fun, but I met some fantastic and influential people that I'm still friends with today. The best parts were when I was given the opportunity to write lines for my hosts and our interviewees as we segued into commercial breaks. I honestly never realized it until now but, holy crap, Stan Lee once said a line on camera that I came up with! That's not worth any points with the Writers Guild of America, but it should be.



My experience working in public TV came to an end when I brought up a behavior that I saw as unethical by one of the show hosts. I quit following a large comics convention and gave my hosts the keys to everything we had created. The decision was made partly because I didn't want my reputation to get sullied by them, but also because I was getting sick and had no idea why. I had been having panic attacks for no apparent reason for years, and they were steadily increasing in frequency. Now, I don't really panic over stuff, so it was doubly confounding to doctors trying to treat me. Things got so bad that I became agoraphobic, which is an inability to leave certain environments - in this case my home. You may remember it as the same condition Amy Adams had in that one movie, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*.

I spent about three years with what psychologists call a "sense of impending doom." The best way I can describe the feeling is that it seemed like an absolute fact that my heart was going to explode with every step that I took. Eventually, I wised up and got my ass to a therapist. With her help I was able to find out that, no, it was not particularly normal that I didn't have much emotional depth or a normative fear response or that I didn't get angry at things that would make most others furious. I had strong markers for antisocial personality disorder with a heaping dose of narcissism and dulled emotional understanding or "alexithymia" if you want to get clinical about it. We hypothesized that the panic was from a lifetime of not sorting out the feelings that I did feel and unknowingly concealing things from my conscious mind, like a dam with a pressure problem. I was also severely depressed, but I didn't know what depression was or how to be sad. I had to figure out a new way to communicate with my brain, and to do that I had to recognize the limitations of my mind and

the places where it excelled from not being hindered by neurotypical thought processes. How I figured this out was by writing a movie.

I never thought that writing could be my way to not only release my own pent-up feelings, but also a way to better experience and understand the world by finding a deeper way to put myself in others' shoes. I wrote a feature-length film script for the first time in my life and the damn thing just poured out of me. It was cathartic. I remember those days fondly, as I would write all night and stop at the crack of dawn. I would go outside to watch the sunset and enjoy a well-earned cigarette in the morning breeze. That was paradise.

I tried making that movie, but I had constant cash flow problems. Most of my friends from the industry were in Atlanta or LA or wherever, and it just failed to come together. I realized that I needed more experience on the business side of things, as well as a better appreciation for directing and crew positions. That's when I decided to go back to CNM to study Film. I took a theatre class as an elective and fell back in love with that too. That's where I met Leonard Madrid, who took a chance on me and allowed me to put on a one-act play that I wrote. It felt amazing to create again, but this time, from a place within me that was getting closer to my true voice. I wanted to show people on stage and not just bodies. I wanted to understand their minds and their actions, so that I may better explore my own. I wanted to write from a place of empathy, and if I couldn't experience much of the emotional side of things then I was sure as hell going to love finding ways to make the audience feel through logical, emotional progressions.

## **PART II: THE WRITING PROGRAM**

### **The Writing Program: Know Thy Systems**

Coming into the MFA Dramatic Writing program, I had a pretty good understanding of my voice. At this point, I had been writing for over a decade and could comfortably write with confidence and speed. I wasn't really prepared for the academic side of things, however. The first year was brutal, but necessary. I had done plenty of my own study on psychology, cultural studies, history, and whatever other topics I found interesting from one week to the next. The material that was covered in Graduate Studies was way more intense than the leisurely pop-science/humanities reading that I could get at Barnes & Noble.

What I realized was that I had only been scratching the surface with my research before. There was a dense layer of academia that only seemed to be primarily accessible to students and academics at a collegiate level. And, while that fact has problems of its own, I was given the privilege of using that access in any way that I could. And, at first, I had no idea how this would all tie into my work as a writer, so I definitely had those moments of, "Why the hell am I doing this?"

The answer to my questioning came at the end of the year. At last, the supposed gauntlet had been run through, and my mind was full of a thousand new or expanded ideas that I would have otherwise overlooked. Though I had known of a few of these before, e.g., Critical Race Theory, modern waves of Feminism, Cultural Studies, I hadn't delved deeper than a few introductory classes during my first Associates Degree. I am absolutely grateful that I was given a chance to further my studies by being given the tools to do this research and do it properly. I was also pointed in countless, wonderful directions by Professor Dominika Laster as well. She helped me see that there were far more layers to these subjects

that I could possibly imagine and that they all interacted with and informed not only each other, but also art. I also branched off of our classroom research and found my own pathways of interest, such as representation of neurodiverse and disabled people, which my dissertation play is partly about. Exploring all of these subjects has made me see that an empathic understanding of people, and how they behave and think, has a great deal to do with the systems they interact with.

This newfound love for research tied directly back to my writing in the subsequent years. At first, my empathic understanding of things was very surface level. It's easy to see big emotions displayed on someone's face and get a basic idea of what could be going on. The research allowed me to take a beat and sit in certain situations in order to try and peel back the layers of everything that could be happening. For instance, we may write a person in a local jail cell who is crying. It's easy to think, "Oh, well, they performed a crime and know that they have been caught and most likely charged and sentenced." That thinking projects very few layers to that character. It would be more interesting to examine this person and see what we can infer from his situation. Does he really deserve to be in there or is his supposed "crime" nothing more than facing prejudice at a traffic stop? Is he a POC, family man who was just trying to rush home with dinner for the family and now sits in a cell for a reason that a white man would have only received a stern talking-to? Is he crying because he knows that the cards are stacked against him because of a deeply broken system and entrenched racist beliefs in his particular corner of the US? Suddenly, we're not just writing about a sad person anymore, but something of meaningful impact that is an indictment of broken systems. It's important to try to understand the immensely complicated reasonings behind social problems so that we can try and tackle them correctly or know when to shut up and not write about

them at all. Without this awareness we may ultimately confound, oversaturate, or take voices away from mainstream discourse that should be heard.

### The Writing Program: Skippity Bop

One of the most surprising and invaluable classes that I took in this program was a Topics course that heavily featured Jazz. Now, sorry to disappoint all of you hep cats out there, but I dislike jazz very much. I don't like a lot of music. Imagine going to lunch with a person who has gluten, dairy, egg, nuts, and soy allergies. That person is going to dislike a lot of things. That's how I am with music and jazz is certainly no exception. Being forced to listen to legends like John Coltrane, Nina Simone, Nat King Cole, and many others was enlightening. It was different-yet-familiar to the kind of flow I was familiar with. It was naked, in-your-face, and seemingly effortless yet absolutely powered by years of mastery coupled with experimentation. I went into the class thinking I had made a huge mistake and wouldn't learn anything to help my writing. What I learned were important lessons on flow that I often failed to appreciate in my own work but would ultimately allow me to connect with an audience on a deeper level.

I've talked disguisedly about flow a few times in this paper. I first discovered it in comedy when I threw out a lightning-fast quip to punctuate a friend's thought. I also detailed how I quickly wrote the script for a feature film over a few long nights. Flow was not something that was particularly new to me on an instinctive level. I didn't, however, have the language to identify just what flow was or the ability to recognize the importance of it. Flow, in my experience, is a state of unseen preparedness that is tapped into in moments of heightened, creative thought and action. Learning about jazz taught me that seemingly

random bursts of energy and creativity such as those found in jazz can come from this unseen preparedness.

I like to think of flow as a liminal state where the conscious and preconscious mind are experiencing hyper-connectivity. In essence, our conscious actions and interactions with the world around us can summon an idea effortlessly out of our preconscious mind in this state of flow. This may allow musicians the ability to solo in wild directions by simply trusting their instinctual abilities to call upon their training, muscle memory, life details, heard knowledge - pretty much anything they have ever aesthetically experienced or passively absorbed. I remember experiencing this once before as I was learning how to play the guitar.

A couple of years after first learning how to play, I was somewhat proficient at classical guitar. I chose to learn Eric Clapton's, *Classical Gas*. It was a challenging song, but only in a technical sense. My girlfriend at the time wanted me to also learn Carlos Santana's, *Samba Pa Ti*. I learned both songs but enjoyed playing the Clapton song more. The song has strict notation with enough variation to give the appearance of emotionality--provided the guitarist knew how to sell the performance. The song was basically my masked personality in music form. My girlfriend, however, did not care about this technically challenging song, and wanted me to play the song that I wrote off as simpler. What I found was that I had a great amount of difficulty playing *Samba Pa Ti*. Even though the music is repetitive and relatively easy, there is a great deal of soul that the guitarist has to put behind it to sell the performance. You can't fake it like Clapton. The notes are less strict as well, allowing the guitarist to change things up if they feel like it. Listen to it sometime. Santana never does the same thing twice. He can pull from an unseen place of experience both as a guitarist and as a human and

dares his fellow players to do the same. When I saw this same ability everywhere in the art of Jazz, I knew that I wanted to tap into that same source. I knew that I couldn't do it musically--as I have never been able to get to that place--but I wanted to better implement flow into my writing.

Now, I am in my mid-thirties, half-white, and did theatre in high school. I'll save you the trouble - of course I'm in an improv troupe. I've known for years the incredible thrill that comes with being in a comedic flow during a live show. When the audience is laughing their asses off because you said just the right thing in the right cadence at the exact right moment, hell, there ain't nothin' better in the world. It took me a while to recognize that same thrill in my writing, or that tapping into that kind of flow would be the same process in my writing as it was in my comedy. I mean, I definitely felt flow as a writer, but those moments were not easy to get to and there was always something in me that told me writing was work. And, it is, to be clear, but it's also me poured onto a page. It took me a while to reconcile that me performing comedy and me writing was just me pouring myself out to someone. That is because writing is performance too, and once I started visualizing the reader or viewer experiencing my plays for the first time, I began to get an amazing high off of those moments of tapping into literary flow. I began to trust my first impulses more because that flow was often more of an informed and complete thought than what I came up with during the times I tried forcing myself to write. Finally embracing flow as a writer felt like a heavenly, unifying force the propelled me forward and made me feel connected to people and the world around me. This was writing for me; writing my truth. This was jazz, baby.

The Writing Program: Thrill of the Skill

My biggest takeaway from the program was finding my way to what I really wanted to do with writing. Before the program, I was lost in the multitude of options that were laying before me. On one hand, I could dedicate myself to being a filmmaker and directing my own stories as well as other writer's works. I could pursue comedy because, in all honesty, I've probably made the most money from it over the years and I enjoy making people laugh. I could keep writing for small audiences in both theatre and media projects and become a more prominent member of those local communities. I could also do a thousand other things that sounded equally appealing. It was all overwhelming. I had prided myself on being a jack-of-all-trades and that left me adept at a lot of things, but happy in very few. Finding that path that I really wanted to pursue for the rest of my life would scratch this nagging itch. I finally found that path in my second semester of Graduate Screenwriting.

First, I cannot convey how invaluable those screenwriting courses were to me and to the program in general. They taught me and my cohort practical skills that expanded our writing training to include the know-how to enter into the massive and competitive film and television industries that often attract and employ playwrights. Writing for film and TV is much more structured to industry standards than playwriting, and knowledge of those standards is incredibly useful. When I saw that it was part of the curriculum for the program, I was excited to refine those skills. It was also in my 2nd year Screenwriting course where I nailed down exactly what I wanted to do with my future career.

I had just finished directing my first feature film at the start of 2020. I had been writing screenplays for years and had even taken a couple of screenwriting classes as an undergrad. Screenwriting was always a lot of fun for me, though I didn't fully appreciate that



fact. It wasn't until I tried sitting down and really writing a television show that everything clicked for me.

I love television. I absolutely, one hundred percent, with all of my heart love television and have had a deep appreciation for it since I was a child. I had taken a class on writing sitcoms with legendary TV showrunner, Brian Levant, in 2018, but after that ended, I was completely lost. There were no writers rooms in Albuquerque, and thus my love for it was a seemingly-unreachable dream. When I started thinking about my semester-long script for my screenwriting class, my mind went back to television and my hopes for a future in the industry were reignited.

I started to write a sitcom pilot that I would like to see on TV. This pilot followed a young man who moves back to his rural town to help run his stepfather's ailing farmers market. It was sweet and funny and exactly what I wanted to be doing. I received wonderful reactions and feedback on the script and fell into states of flow even in rewrites. I listened to podcasts, lectures, and interviews with legendary writers like Michael Jamin, Andrew Reich, Shonda Rhimes, Phoebe Waller-Bridge and more to stay informed on the industry. All seemed to have slightly different perspectives on writing for television and running a show. I was able to take this information and put it against my many years of television knowledge to track interesting changes in popular styles of shows over the years, such as our fascination with procedural dramas in the Aaron Sorkin/ Dick Wolf-dominated 1990's and early 2000's, and the more recent slow death of the multi-camera sitcom. Most importantly, I could feel myself coming to life as I relayed this information back to my class and cohort in lively discussions about how to best use our writing to build upon the history and traditions of television. TV writing was a wonderful logic puzzle that I had always wanted to solve, but

just didn't know it yet. I loved the strict structures of things and appreciated the challenge of playing within those confines to create something unique, yet still allowing myself to break those structural conventions every now-and-then.

Television is where I want to work. I want to create narrative-driven television shows for mass consumption and give people plenty of warm-and-toasty dopamine spikes deep in their minds and hearts. Does that make me a sell out? Look me in my eyes as I drink this delicious Crystal Pepsi and ask me that. I dare ya! Does this new direction in TV mean I can't be innovative in my writing? No. Does that mean I have to give up making theatre? Hell no! But, I deeply respect those who have helped me to this discovery and know that with their help and encouragement, I was able to figure out a true passion in writing and another way to connect empathetically to my audience.

This experience in the program has led me to become a more fulfilled writer and human being. In the past, I had been writing about my views, social issues, the human condition, and just about anything else I could think of, but there had been only a tenuous connective tissue to make this writing well-rounded and meaningful. I had to figure out how to make better connections between myself, my truth, and my perception, and that growth included vulnerability on my part. I had to put aside ego and making myself the constant priority so that I may walk the walk of living an empathic life and allow these new experiences to inform my writing. Luckily, my college career allowed me the time and resources to grow and put myself out there in ways I never imagined before. Through my new skills in research, depth in understanding of flow, trusting myself, and my rekindled love for screenwriting and playwriting, I feel like I have boundless energy to go out into the world and create.

### **PART III: THE DISSERTATION PLAY**

#### *The Eccentrics*

In the year 1999, I was attending the Calvary megachurch in Albuquerque. I had never been a big fan of church. I had gone my entire life and didn't really care for it that much. Every now and then you got a story about a guy in a lions' den or a puny kid chucking a rock at a giant and killing him, but mostly it was all, "Hezekiah begot Samuel, who begot David, who begot Noah," and so on. Something interesting was in the air, however. You see, according to the church leaders, Jesus Christ was coming back to rapture all of the good Christians off to heaven and begin a seven-year period of tribulation in which those left behind would suffer the most horrific events in the history of humankind. That would make a pretty bitchin' Roland Emmerich movie, amirite? Well, it was never an Emmerich movie, but it was well-solidified in the consciousness of Christians around the world due to popular media like the *Left Behind* series of books and films. I was caught up in the kookiness of the whole thing - not really believing - but definitely consuming the sometimes action-packed and tense narratives designed to terrify others into showing up to church. I probably read every one of the *Left Behind: Kids* books, which, as you may have guessed, put people of my age in this rapture scenario.

The year was ridiculous and full of all the nonsensical melodrama that could only come from people absolutely sure that they were either going to be swept up by a supernatural being or else die a slow and torturous death. I was certain that nothing would happen, so I got to kick back and watch the show. Even though I was only eleven years old, I was able to have enough sense of technology to be fascinated by how much effort was being put into relaying the church's message. As we neared Christmas, the sound system seemed to

get louder and more in-your-face, often playing music you'd typically find in a big-budget action flick. Massive screens were brought in to show CGI-packed films, snazzy stingers, and of course to amplify the face of the righteous pastor who played the hip-and-handsome young priest schtick so well that you could tell he didn't mind being on the big screen. I remember being pretty blown away by the video they played to intro the Christmas Eve show/church service. It was this inky, beautifully animated shadow play that detailed everything from Adam and Eve to the coming end times battle between good and evil. It was stellar. The production had to have been contracted out by some fancy animation studio because I was shook.

Though Calvary provided a very entertaining apocalypse show, I couldn't help but wonder how much it all cost. There were tithing boxes at every door where my grandmother would pop in some folded up bills. My mom preferred to give her money directly to the volunteers that would go to each row of seats individually and pass a collection basket around. I remember thinking about how my family was on the free lunch program and often couldn't afford basic necessities--so what was this money doing for us? That thought followed me through my teen years as my family went to church more regularly. I found hypocrisy in Evangelical churches and, though I often liked dissecting the sermons, I strongly disagreed with the culture of flash and excess among the leadership and infrastructure. I was lucky enough to have gone to Catholic masses as a child, so I knew that there were other ways to worship. That previous experience encouraged me to study other religions, rites, and styles of worship, though I never found anything as wild as the time I spent at the supposed end of the world.

In 2020, it took the world coming to a grinding halt to finally get me on TikTok. At first, the app appears to be an absolute crapshoot of the internet's worst and most vapid. Once the algorithm starts figuring you out, however, the app is fantastic. In between the vast stream of videos showcasing wiener dogs being adorable, I started to get a bunch of videos of current and former Christians deconstructing Evangelical Christianity. These were people way more versed in scripture and history than I was going back into their own experiences with the church and recognizing the hate that often permeated their congregations. Now, I hadn't known enough about the prejudice that was rampant in United States Evangelicalism. I was aware of the homophobia within my own church, but that was only because it wasn't hidden. The common tactic of the day, and still in many churches to this day, was to claim that Jesus loved the LGBTQ community, but hated the sin of homosexuality. At our church, they still didn't get into heaven even with Jesus's love. Through deconstructing the religion, these TikTok-ers were able to point out these insidious forms of church-sanctioned exclusion that often-enabled abuse. There was scripture that okayed the othering of those with both mental and physical disability, those who were trans, BIPOC, and many other criteria that constantly shifted the balance of power away from those the church deemed were less righteous. Through these videos, I found a way to empathize with church goers who perhaps weren't being treated as well as those leading the "proper" Evangelical lifestyle.

When thinking about my Dissertation play, I wanted to create something that utilized the advances in empathy that I had gained over the previous two years. Seeing my friend Shannon Flynn's love for creating engaging, interactive theatre, I thought I would try and write a play that incorporated elements of participation to help make an empathetic connection with the story and characters. He was a fellow student in my cohort, and I

admired his ability to connect with and develop material that made the site of the play behave as if it were an active character in the story. I was intrigued by this idea and settled on centering my story around an Evangelical Church in 1999. I figured this could be my way of commenting on the hypocrisy of modern "Christian love" which is best summarized in a particularly powerful piece of Christian branding, "love the sinner, hate the sin". I wanted to show regular people who are othered by their congregation for minor deviations in their minds and bodies from what is commonly considered "natural" or "proper" among able-bodied neurotypicals. This would allow me to also present somewhat of a modern, Christian morality play. I wanted to highlight the good things I found in Christianity and the ideals that are often proposed then abandoned in efforts to live a "Godly-life".

I have no idea what made me want to make the play into a musical, but dear god, did the idea storm into my mind like an avalanche. There is an interesting history with Christian pop music and appropriation. This wasn't the case with my church, but many churches across the US went through periods of rewriting popular songs into Christian versions. This mostly meant the instrumentals stayed similar enough to be recognizable, while the lyrics changed to some generic sing-along that was as predictable as it was lame. The songs they picked were usually massive hits on the radio but were already simplistic and soulless to begin with. They were probably picked because they were easy to learn and sing along with after only one or two listens. This allowed for another entryway into making the play a participatory experience for the audience. I took popular songs from the 80's and 90's and rewrote the lyrics into fun, Christian sing-alongs. I grew up with all the songs I chose, so I thought the audience might know and appreciate them as well. And, as evidenced by the audience members I heard singing along, it worked. Not only were the audience members watching a

play, but they were a part of the play and invested in the experience. I found a new and deeper level of sharing an emotional experience with my audience, which has been my mission all along. Though I think I accomplished what I set out to do with this play, let's take a closer look into what it is and how the script came together.

The play is really a culmination of my study of empathy over the past three years. My Linnell plays have consistently been focused on trying to understand my characters' social and psychological reasonings behind their actions and words. However, I have discovered that it's one thing to write down words and actions and another thing entirely to make those things come to life in a true way. That is where my use of cognitive empathy comes in. For instance, I began my first exploration in empathy with a more poetic, shocking play focused on two prisoners who had committed heinous crimes and now circled the drain that is a decent into hell. I think it was necessary to focus on this poetic form of writing because it aided in defamiliarizing myself with this surface-level understanding of the human condition that I had become too comfortable with. This play relied on me to construct deeper levels of characterization for these people and create logical pathways in their lives that led to the criminal choices that they made. The defamiliarization kicked in during times where logic could break down, and my characters commit their ultimate sins during times of radical impulsivity or mania that overcame them. This bolstered my writing because it allowed me to explore pathways that people could take that have little or no logical explanation.

For the next Linnell Festival, I wrote a play about a woman who accidentally brings a dead body to life with the help of her daughter and the static electricity from a balloon. Halfway through the play, it is revealed that the child had really been the one whose body was on the embalming table, and the mother was imagining a scenario in which she could be

brought back to life. This began my turning toward more realistic depictions of empathy as the woman's grief is visualized, made apparent, then examined. Once again, I brought in the mania that can often come with overwhelming emotions, but unlike my first Linnell play, this one was more finite and less abstract. Yes, fantastical things happen in it, but there are rules established and boundaries set that characters cannot cross. The audience is allowed a peek into a secret world that lives inside of our own, but are forced into another, more grounded paradigm when the story is flipped back into its harsh reality. This theatrical gut punch was meant to create a hard association with grief, as the playfulness of the first half of the story lowered defenses enough to get the audience to care.

In my 2nd year, I had a reading for *Kid's Play*, one of my favorite pieces of writing so far. In it, four children each take turns inventing a game that they all play. The story follows a traditional dramatic progression of a challenge being posed followed by a journey of play and discovery, then a rift happens that places the children as far away as they can be from each other, then the satisfying mending of the friendship and continuance of play that is informed by their new advances in empathizing with each other. What makes this play particularly interesting is that I left it open to the production team to decide how imaginative versus realistic they wanted to make it. Kids can either play with the pictures in their heads or the audience can go on the journey with them via more grandiose visuals. I made this choice because the empathy should work the same with whichever direction the production decides to go in.

*The Eccentrics* is the play most grounded in realism that I have ever written. In it, there is one fantasy sequence, but it is quickly made apparent to the audience that it is taking place inside of the mind of one of the central characters. I did this in a way to both trigger



nostalgia in church goers who had a similar experience, and to show a realistic depiction of an Evangelical church to secular individuals or members of other faiths who may be coming into the setting for the first time. The play follows the events that could have happened in any Evangelical church at the turn of the millennium. The gateway to empathy is how I let people peek behind the curtain, not as audience members, but as members of this ad hoc congregation they joined when they sat down. Furthermore, occasional dialogue by the characters actually calls on the audience to participate in the fun, by treating them as the actual church congregation and calling on them to say things like "amen" or join in on a song. This is designed to bring the audience closer into the world and forge connections that they might not have found had the fourth wall stayed up. I knew that this play had to pack an empathetic punch, so I used every skill in my toolbox to get the job done.

In order to create the level of empathy and catharsis that I was aiming for, I designed this play far more strategically than I had ever done in the past. My four characters weren't just distinct personalities but drawn up to be immensely sympathetic in their own, unique ways. That isn't to say that the audience was meant to look at them with pity, but rather see aspects of themselves in the characters. Cam is a rebellious, sarcastic teen with slight anger issues and a problem with authority. Gideon is shy, but nice, and often has to put his own foot in his mouth for oversharing things that others might not have said. Emma is a person who wants to do her best at the things that she loves and hold true to her beliefs, but she is constantly told "no" by everyone around her due to their perceived limitations of her. Nicole is a good person at heart, but her inability to fight against her imposed obligations to her family makes her do things she otherwise might not do. All of these aspects are common behaviors that I'm sure much of the audience had experience with. I counted on them to also

associate with the core casts overlapping awkwardness, anger, humor, and heroism. I wanted the audience to see themselves in these characters at their most vulnerable and their most in command. I believe that this is a key to putting ourselves in another's shoes, be they a character on stage or anyone else in your life.

### The Production

I didn't really make many changes to my script during production. I don't typically, unless something is glaringly bad or logically wrong. I had plenty of table reads and the first Linnell reading to inform my rehearsal draft. So, once I gave the draft to the designers, actors, and my director, I let it sit for a while. I didn't want to touch it until it had time to be read and performed a few times by the cast. I have a strong belief that nothing is completely set in stone after its finished. Actors are the primary driving force behind that. I want there to be space for one actor to say, "it feels better if I say \_\_\_\_\_", then have an actor on the next production who is playing that same part say something completely different because it feels truer and reflective of what they're bringing to the role. I gave them a few weeks with the script, then went in for one of their Zoom rehearsals. Everything sounded good to me, with only a couple of corrections that were dutifully noticed by the cast and made clear enough that we could all make an on-the-spot note change.

The next time I visited was the first day they were off book. I was proud to see that almost everybody was off book and saying their lines as written. It was a great joy for me to watch this beautiful stumble-through, where the cast was clearly having a lot of fun with my words. I didn't have to change anything, thankfully, as it all seemed to work onstage wonderfully. I thought we were good to go, but the performance brought some interesting and unforeseen script problems to light. You see, young actors and quite a few veteran actors

often get this nasty habit of improvising out of character when they aren't 100% on their lines. Though they didn't do any of this during the rehearsal I saw a couple of weeks before, about half of the cast had fallen into this habit and seemed to double down on it for the show. They started improvising on the more intense moments of the play and moments where jokes were meant to be quips and not a button. Oftentimes, these moments went by unnoticed by the audience, but I felt each one sharply. It was obvious enough that my wife turned to me multiple times and said, "You didn't write that line". I was admittedly a little heartbroken by what these interjections were doing to the play.

I've never felt the need to write a note at the top of my plays that dictated how something should be performed by an actor. I realized, though, that this play was different. This play was trying to attain meaningful representation of marginalized communities. I had written certain things in certain ways, and it was easy to go off script and undercut the message. For instance, there was a rivalry between the core band, The Eccentrics, and another band that was made up of Youth Group kids who acted like holier-than-thou bullies to our heroes. During the performance, this animosity got out of control as both The Eccentrics and the rival band started adding much harsher insults than I had in the script. I cringed at these additions as these moments were written to be so reliant on one-another in building this swell of empathy that they had to be performed almost word-perfect to achieve the catharsis that I wanted. This was a massive moment for me as it wasn't enough to just make an entertaining play anymore; I wanted to make an entertaining play *and* create a meaningful, transformative experience for the audience. That wouldn't happen if the audience wasn't on the kids' side. Though I was assured by many audience members that the message

did get across, I can't help but wonder if the script would have affected more people more deeply without the improvisational punch-downs by the cast.

I know the improvising habit was born out of a mixture of nerves and lack of preparedness because I had spent a fair amount of time working with people individually on appropriate representation at various times during the rehearsal period. I was especially on guard, as I found out that one of the actors cast in the initial staged reading of the play actually had Tourette's and didn't appreciate how Emma's vocal tics were being portrayed by another actor during our first rehearsal. I apologized and asked if they would help me work on the representation and they agreed. A day later, they emailed me and apologized, as they read through the entire script for the first time and did end up appreciating what I was trying to do. We went through with the reading, but they never followed up on helping me work on the representation. This event worried me into thinking I had made a mistake. I tried my best in the writing and rewriting phases to incorporate good representation of neurodiverse and disabled individuals, but there was and is still plenty of doubt in my mind if I accomplished that.

During the rehearsal process for the actual production, I asked multiple times if anyone had any questions about their character and pointed to resources for those who had specific behavioral traits that were being represented, such as physical and verbal stimming and tics. It was wonderful to see the initial enthusiasm and rightful concern about the portrayal of these characters. We all wanted to do right by them, and I believe that people tried their best. I believe we accomplished that goal on some level. I have received complements from neurodiverse and disabled individuals about the play. I have also received

minor criticisms about my ability to write about types of neurodiversity outside of my own. All I can do is take the praise and criticism and grow as a writer while keeping each in mind.

The somewhat negative experience I had while watching my play in performance actually helped better inform the intention of the play and the world in which the characters live. We can see, for instance, the parents who seem perfectly nice, but have a shocking lack of emotional understanding of their children's plight. The rival church band, Michael's Horn, offer up a more performative display of paying forward the thinly veiled hate and abuse they see normalized by others around them. Both the parents and Michael's Horn have various levels of internalized anger masquerading as "helpful advice" being offered through their Evangelical lens. In a way, this play became a study of my study of hidden hate within the church. The actors inadvertently showed me that the work wasn't necessarily done just because we have a blueprint on how to talk about it because, much like the church members that are oppressing *The Eccentrics*, we often resort to internalized, discriminatory conditioning, even when we try like hell to overcome it. Like my Graduate Studies training and how it pulled back the immense complexity of social systems, so too did this play help further my understanding of the immense complexity of empathy and how we convey, depict, and duplicate it in theatre.

## PART IV: ONWARD

### Lifelong Learner

Let us hold hands in prayer and transition from our lovely play about church to a spectacular film about boxing. Remember in *Rocky* when Rocky Balboa goes through that whole training montage on the streets of Philly and races up those seemingly insurmountable steps so he could strike a victory pose at the top? What people often forget, is that Rocky goes on to lose his fight with Apollo Creed. So, why celebrate? Cause that dude went the distance. The thing is, I feel like Rocky at the beginning of that montage, rather than at the end. The piece of paper that I am about to receive only advances the montage forward a few seconds. And, honestly, I'm fine with that.

I'm the type to think that a person should never be done growing as an artist, person, place, thing, or noun. I have had many battles and I have lost some or won some but learned from them all. Eventually, I'll go up against another Apollo Creed in writing or performance or work, and I'll fail and stumble and learn and grow and train up for the sequel where I'll win. I vow to never get complacent with where I am as a writer. No amount of success will stop me from learning and no amount of failure will push me to quit.

The recurring theme in this paper is that empathy needs to not only be embraced, but we need to first discover how to witness, listen, and utilize it properly--be that with a better understanding of emotional empathy, or through cognitive empathy like I rely on. I believe that empathizing with others starts with empathizing with the self and discovering and embracing the places we feel most vulnerable. There are far too many writers out there that don't understand themselves. They don't see why they behave a certain way or write certain characters in stock types or put strained relationships between fathers and sons in EVERY.

SINGLE. PLAY. I have been fortunate over the past few years to be given the time and space to explore my own mind and the way that it behaves, (and have only put strained father/son relationships in half of my plays, thank you very much.) This inward journey has helped me better understand the world around me and the people that inhabit it. I have been pointed down the right paths that help me see my writing as something that not only exists in the world, but comments and builds upon it. Those are the lessons that I will carry forward with me after graduation until the day I'm thrown into the wilderness as wolf chow. As for something more immediate... I dunno. I guess I'll write something.

**APPENDIX: *THE ECCENTRICS***

# The Eccentrics

By Steve Blacksmith



## CHARACTERS

### The Eccentrics

Gideon  
Cam  
Emma  
Nicole

### Parents

Bill  
Lois  
Kyle

### Michael's Horn

Jebediah  
Rachel  
Paul

### The Wild Cards

Jesus  
Brady  
Harold

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This play was written from a place of love for an absolutely wild point in my Evangelical upbringing. If you aren't familiar with the community or the frenzy that was 1999 Rapture culture, please research some videos from the era online. They are seriously something else. I wanted to capture that moment and say some poignant things about the failings of Evangelical Christian love and how it can be improved to lead a more empathetic life. In doing so, I have provided some recommendations to help produce this play.*

*Though my scripts are usually quite malleable, I would highly recommend playing this one as close to word-perfect as possible. The language has been carefully selected and reviewed to build empathy toward all of our characters - not just the core cast that is *The Eccentrics*.*

*We also have a great deal of representation for neurodivergent and disabled characters in this play. The characters have been written as best I could to be fully fleshed-out characters and not stereotypical of the various diagnoses they may represent. In fact, they are never given official diagnoses, as neurodivergence is an immensely complicated and often overlapping subject. I would recommend doing your best on research in how to best represent these characters, if neurodivergent and disabled actors cannot be cast themselves.*

*Furthermore, I would also suggest to make the set as realistic as possible. Evangelical churches are often akin to proscenium stages themselves, so it's an easy transition if that is the space you are working with. Feel free to place tithing boxes or have the deck crew dressed as ushers. These choices can add to the interactivity and participation the audience may feel, as it is an invitation for them to be a part of your congregation.*

*Thank you and enjoy *The Eccentrics*.*

Steve Blacksmith

## 1.

*[We're in an Evangelical church in 1999. There is no doubt that Jesus Christ is returning to Earth at the turn of the Millennium. Only the most righteous and devoted Christians will be taken to heaven when He returns...]*

*EMMA, 17, enters in a conservative dress. She has an acoustic guitar in hand. She starts playing a simple, gentle strum.*

## EMMA

Hello, my brothers and sisters. We welcome you to this holy site on this holiest of days. We join together in worship of Him - the Lord Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Won't you join us in worship?

*Emma starts playing a just-different-enough version of Sweet Child O' Mine.*

HE HAS THE GRACE AND IT SEEMS TO BE  
 THAT E-VER-Y WORD IS HOLY  
 FOR IT WAS ORDAINED FROM THE VERY DAWN OF TIME

AND ONE DAY I'LL LOOK ON HIS FACE  
 AS HE TAKES ME AWAY TO THAT HALLOWED PLACE  
 WHERE ALL OF MY FRIENDS AND MY FAMILY NEVER DIE

OH, MY LORD  
 LET GLORY SHINE  
 OH, OH MY LORD  
 LET GLORY SHINE

*Emma goes back to a simple strum. CAM, 17, enters in a floral dress. They sit at a drum set.*

## CAM

Let God's glory shine unto you on this day. He joins us here in this holy temple. Can you feel him? He's all around you. He's in everything you do. He's inside of you... He has sent his only son to join in as well. Can you feel them there? In your heart?

*Cam starts playing along.*

HE HAS THE POWER AND THE LOVE  
 TO MAKE HEAVEN THRIVE FROM MILES ABOVE  
 AND GRANT US THE GLORIOUS GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE

ALL WE MUST PROMISE TO BE  
 TO SERVE IN HIS HEAVENLY ARMY  
 AS ANGELS FLYING ACROSS THE BRIGHT WHITE SKY

CAM

OH, MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE  
OH, OH MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE

*GIDEON, 17, enters wearing a dress shirt, tie and slacks. He picks up a bass guitar.*

GIDEON

The Bible tells us that Jesus is coming and he is coming quick. Not too quick - as the last two thousand years demonstrates. But, he is coming quick enough. As his two thousandth birthday rapidly approaches, the scripture tells us that he will be here soon. My question to you is this: When he approaches you and knocks on your heart's door, will he fit? Is your heart wide enough to fit the whole of the Son of God inside of it? Or, do you need to practice stretching out your heart? Stretching out your love... Let's practice stretching ourselves out. Together.

*Gideon starts playing the song.*

OH, MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE  
OH, OH MY LORD LET GLORY SHINE

OH, MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE  
OH, OH MY LORD LET GLORY SHINE

ALL

WHERE WILL WE GO  
WHERE WILL WE GO WHEN  
WHERE WILL WE GO WHEN WE DIE?

WHERE WILL WE GO  
WHERE WILL WE GO WHEN  
WHERE WILL WE GO WHEN WE DIE?

WHERE WILL WE GO  
OH, LORD  
WHERE WILL WE GO WHEN WE DIE?

OH, OH, OH, OH, OH, OH, OH, OH  
WHERE WILL GO WHEN WE DIE-I-I-I-I-I-I-I

ALL

OH, MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE  
OH, OH MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE

OH, OH, OH, OH  
LET GLORY SHINE  
OH, OH MY LORD  
LET GLORY SHINE

*Emma goes back to her simple strum.*

EMMA

If there is one thing that I want you to take away from this sermon, it's that God's glory shines on us. It is limitless and can accomplish anything if we just ask. I want you to understand that you can ask God for anything. He is always listening.

CAM

He is always open to receiving your prayer. There is no "catching him at a bad time". You'll never receive an email that says, "God is out of the office until Monday". He will be ready at a moment's notice to take you in his arms and whisper in your ear that you are heard. Your prayer is not falling on deaf ears.

GIDEON

Yes, God is listening, but he needs to know that you believe, for when we believe, we can accomplish the impossible. Do you believe?

*Wait for response.*

Out there in the audience, do you believe?

*Wait for response.*

We need to hear that you believe with us. Believe at our level. Come on, you can do it. Do you believe!?

*Wait for response.*

That's right. Do you hear that, Father? We believe! Let's show him how much we believe and welcome out Lord back... IN STYLE!

*Emma pulls out an electric guitar and strikes a metal chord that pierces through the congregation.*

EMMA

Welcome to the New Millennium, Jesus!

*The mind-blowing intro to Welcome to the Jungle blasts out of the modest, church speaker system.*

WELCOME TO THE CHURCH NOW  
WE GOT LOTS OF PRAISE  
WE GOT EVERYTHING YA WANT  
OUR SOULS ARE SAVED

WE ARE THE PEOPLE THAT DON'T MIND  
GIVING GOD OUR PRAISE  
CAUSE WE WANT HIS NAME SANG HIGH  
TIL THE END OF DAYS

IN THE CHURCH NOW  
WELCOME TO THE CHURCH NOW  
GONNA BRING YOU TO YOUR  
SH-NA-NA-NA-NA-NA-NA-NA  
KNEES, KNEES

OH, GOD IS ALL YOU NEED

*A large plume of smoke EXPLODES in the middle of the stage and a radiant, golden light starts emitting from the cloud. When the smoke clears, JESUS CHRIST, 33, white, chiseled abs, is standing with his arms outstretched.*

*The music stops immediately.*

JESUS

Behold! I have returned! I am your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, arisen on the eve of my two-thousandth birthday to save mankind from the End Times.

EMMA

Jesus? Is that really you?

JESUS

It is, my child.

EMMA

But, why have you chosen to show yourself in this church? With all of the churches praising your name right now... Why choose us?

JESUS

I have heard all of the other churches, Emma. Not one of them rocked as hard as you did tonight.

GIDEON

Yeah!

CAM

We did it! Good job Emma. Gideon.

GIDEON

You too, Cam! Jane's Conviction is the best Christian band ever!

JESUS

Damn straight.

GIDEON

My Lord, is this really the end times? Have you returned to take us to heaven?

JESUS

I have, my child.

CAM

But, why now?

JESUS

Well, I told you I would, didn't I? It's in the Bible. To quote the scripture...

*I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles) by The Proclaimers starts playing.*

WHEN I COME BACK, WELL YOU KNOW I'M GONNA BE  
I'M GONNA BE THE GOD WHO COMES TO EARTH FOR YOU  
WHEN I GET BACK, WELL YOU KNOW I'M GONNA BE  
I'M GONNA BE THE GOD WHO RAPTURES ALL OF YOU  
WHEN I COME HERE, WELL YOU KNOW I'M GONNA BE  
I'M GONNA BE THE GOD WHO FIGHTS THE DEVIL TOO  
AND I DO THIS, CAUSE YOU KNOW I'M GONNA BE  
I'M GONNA BE THE GOD WHO SHELTERS ALL OF YOU

WELL I WILL WAIT 1000 YEARS  
AND I WILL WAIT 1000 MORE  
JUST TO BE THE GOD THAT WAITS 2000 YEARS  
AND NOT A SINGLE DAY MORE

DA DA DA DA (DA DA DA DA)  
DA DA DA DA (DA DA DA DA)

DA DA DUN DIDDLE DUN DIDDLE DUN DIDDLE DU AMEN

JESUS

DA DA DA DA (DA DA DA DA)

DA DA DA DA (DA DA DA DA)

DA DA DUN DIDDLE DUN DIDDLE DUN DIDDLE DU AMEN

*The music continues playing as Jesus takes Emma aside.*

JESUS

Hello Emma.

EMMA

Hello Jesus.

JESUS

Thank you for worshipping me. I listened to your prayers every night.

EMMA

Oh, I knew that if I just worshipped hard enough, you would hear my prayers...

JESUS

That's right. But, I must confess, there is another reason I came back. To this church... To you...

EMMA

Oh?

JESUS

Yes... Two-thousand years is an awfully long time to not have a girlfriend.

EMMA

Oh, Jesus!

*Jesus and Emma embrace. The lights begin to fade down until they are isolating them.*

CAM

Emma...

*Jesus and Emma move to kiss each other.*

EMMA!



*Emma snaps herself away from Jesus. The lights bump back to normal.*

EMMA

VEINY. HARD. VEINY JESUS. WANT.

*Jesus awkwardly leaves.*

2.

*Emma's fantasy ends.*

CAM

Whoa. What just happened?

EMMA

I, uh, have no idea what you mean.

CAM

Bull. All I asked you was how you pictured the Millennium Concert was gonna go, and all-of-a-sudden you started fantasizing about Jesus.

EMMA

Not ah! Fantasizing is a sin... I would never fantasize about something so sacred... ABS. HARD ABS.

CAM

You know, your poker face would actually be pretty good, if you didn't shout what you were really thinking all the time.

EMMA

It's not what I'm really thinking. I can't control what I say. And I definitely don't want to say the things that my brain makes me say.

CAM

Sure, you don't.

GIDEON

Quit messing around, you two. We don't have time for this. The audition for the church band is coming up quick. We can plan what we're going to do for the concert, but that won't mean jack if we can't even book the performance.

*Gideon starts moving around his guitar pick in his hands.*

EMMA

He's right. Can you imagine what it would be like to play Jesus' birthday on the millennium? How many people get to say they did that?

GIDEON

Well, there are like thirty thousand churches across the globe with an average of three bandmates per band...

*Gideon starts counting on his fingers.*

CAM

It was a rhetorical question, Gideon.

GIDEON

Yeah... I knew that.

EMMA

He's right though. We should practice as much as possible. Can you imagine what it would be like to lead the congregation in worship at the turn of the Millennium? We'll be a part of history.

CAM

Fine. I'll admit that it would be cool to be a part of history.

GIDEON

And, if Jesus comes back, we may be one of the last church bands to play ever!

EMMA

What do you mean by, "if Jesus comes back"?

GIDEON

Well, the Bible doesn't really say when he is coming back. Jesus just says, "I am coming".

EMMA

He's coming back.

GIDEON

Okay.

EMMA

Okay.

*Awkward tension.*

CAM

Well, regardless of when he comes back, it's going to suck if we suck at playing him in. We need to practice - and way more than usual. We can't mess up if we're going to secure this gig.

GIDEON

Okay, jeeze. No need to get--

CAM

--Get what? Obsessive?

GIDEON

I wasn't going to say that.

CAM

Sure.

EMMA

Come on, guys. Let's just get started. We can argue like a real band when we actually are a real band.

*Emma moves up to the microphone.*

CAM

What are you doing?

EMMA

I was, uh --

CAM

--You know you aren't allowed to sing.

EMMA

Yeah. I know. I was just testing to see if it was on.

Test one. Two. BASTARD. ASS HAT. BASTARD.

It's on.

CAM

Yeah. That's why you don't sing.

*Gideon takes over the microphone.*

Alright! So, if hired, we'd be playing the Christmas show. Let's stick to the standards.

EMMA

Standards? Do we have to?

GIDEON

Yeah, I kind of like what Emma was suggesting. Why don't we do something cool like *Sweet Child O' Mine* or *Welcome to the Jungle*? I hear a lot of churches these days are playing Christian-friendly versions of popular songs at their services.

EMMA

It's a real trend. I heard Jars of Clay started out covering Prince songs.

CAM

I don't know. I just don't want to rock the boat, you know? Our church isn't really that cool. Sometimes it feels like they're still stuck in the Middle Ages with how they worship and think and stuff.

GIDEON

Yeah. I guess you're right.

EMMA

I - HMM.

CAM

You don't think so?

EMMA

I think the change starts with people like us.

CAM

People like us? If there is one type of person this congregation is not going to listen to it's people like us.

*Silence.*

That's what I thought. Let's stick to standards. *Little Drummer Boy*. Let's go.

*Cam hits the drumsticks together.*

ONE  
TWO  
THREE  
FOUR

Oh wait. I didn't like that one. Let me try again.

ONE  
TWO  
THREE  
FOUR

Nope. Didn't feel right. Give me a sec.

ONE  
TWO

THREE  
FOUR

CAM

Okay. I got this.

ONE  
TWO  
THREE  
FOUR

*Cam starts playing the song. They all suck. Gideon is not a confident singer and Emma is bored out of her mind.*

GIDEON

COME THEY TOLD ME, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
A NEWBORN KIND TO SEE, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
OUR FINEST GIFTS WE BRING, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
TO LAY BEFORE THE KING, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
RUM-PA-PUM-PUM, RUM-PA-PUM-PUM

*A slow clap begins offstage. JEBEDIAH, 17, RACHEL, 18, and PAUL, 18, enter. They are all pretentious church kids.*

JEBEDIAH

Bravo! I have to say -- that is exactly the kind of outdated, lame crap I would expect from you weirdos.

CAM

Well, if it isn't our rival band, *Michael's Hole*.

JEBEDIAH

It's Michael's *Horn*. As in the Archangel Michael. But, you would know that if you read your Bible.

GIDEON

Go away, guys. We're busy practicing.

JEBEDIAH

All the practice in the world isn't going to save you. We're going to blow the judges away at the audition.

EMMA

As if. We're gonna get that slot. We have a - a secret weapon.

PAUL

What? You think because your parents are the judges that they'll feel sorry for you and you'll automatically win?

RACHEL

No, I think we'll be fine. Their parents are probably used to disappointment.

EMMA

P-PU-P...

RACHEL

P-P-P?

JEBEDIAH

What are you trying to say, Demon Girl?

EMMA

PUSSIES!

JEBEDIAH

Now, that's not nice. Paul, make a note. Let's pray for these poor, lost souls.

CAM

You better not pray for us.

*Cam squares up to Jebediah.*

JEBEDIAH

Or what?

*Jebediah pushes back.*

CAM

Or you'll regret it.

JEBEDIAH

Oh, we're gonna pray so hard for you. You're going to spend the rest of your lives sinning - just begging to get into hell, but God won't let you because we prayed so hard.

RACHEL

Oh snap!

CAM

You better not.

JEBEDIAH

What are you gonna do... Little girl?

*Cam raises their shoulders, but Gideon stops him.*

GIDEON

He's not worth it.

*Cam takes a beat and composes herself.*

CAM

You're right. He's not.

GIDEON

Will you guys just leave us alone. We have to practice.

JEBEDIAH

You'll need it, from the sound of things. But, what can you expect when your lead singer couldn't speak until he was six?

GIDEON

Shut up.

JEBEDIAH

You're right. I'll take a cue from your book and "be quiet".

EMMA

FU-FU-...

JEBEDIAH

You know, when a good Christian starts saying things beyond their control, we call that "speaking in tongues". But, your words are so filthy, they might as well be coming from the devil himself. Come on, guys. Let's leave this den of sin.

CAM

"Den of sin"? Is it too late to change the name of our band?

JEBEDIAH

Peace be with you.

RACHEL

Peace be with you.

PAUL



Peace be with you.

CAM

And also, up yours.

*Cam flips them off as they leave.*

CAM

Can you believe those jerks?

EMMA

Don't let them get to you, SH-SHI-... Ah!

CAM

Yeah, don't let it get to *me*. Are you okay, Gideon?

GIDEON

I'm fine. Let's just practice.

CAM

Hang on. Emma, what was all that "secret weapon" stuff?

EMMA

I - I don't know. I was just saying stuff.

GIDEON

Let's just practice, okay? We'll show them up by beating them.

CAM

You read my mind.

*Cam takes their drumsticks and raises them high.*

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

Oh, wait. That one didn't feel right.

GIDEON

Oh God. We're gonna need a miracle.

*The lights fade.*



3.

*BRADY, 30's, and NICOLE, 17, enters. Nicole is in a wheelchair and Brady is pushing her. They are both covered in tomatoes. Brady has a sweet, southern accent and is wearing a white suit. Nicole's accent is less refined.*

BRADY

Praise be. I think they've stopped chasing us.

NICOLE

Thank God.

BRADY

Hey! No taking the Lord's name in vain. Didn't mama teach you anything?

NICOLE

Of course she did.

BRADY

Then you better abide by those teachings, girl. She knew right.

NICOLE

Oh, I know. She was the *only* role model I've ever had, after all.

BRADY

Now, that is not fair. I have taught you what you needed to know to survive, little sis.

NICOLE

You're right, Brady. Hell, without you, I would have never been running from an angry church congregation that's throwin' tomatoes at us. Such a wonderful teacher you are.

BRADY

You ain't, "running" from nothing, Nicole. Don't you forget that.

NICOLE

Yeah, yeah. How'd we make out this time?

*Brady digs through his pockets, taking out various pieces of trash until he pulls a wad of money.*

BRADY

Kinda light. Looks like. We'll get the next church for more.

NICOLE

You went too big for your own good again. Started believin' your own fibs.

BRADY

It wasn't my fault. I really thought you would be able to walk.

NICOLE

Well, damn brother. If there is one thing I would think you would know about me by now it's that walking is somethin' I cannot do. I thought we agreed that miracle healing was off limits? I don't feel comfortable when you tell everyone that I'm deaf or blind or have leprosy. And I especially don't feel comfortable when you tell me to walk, and when I can't, you tip me out of my damn chair so I fall on my damn face!

BRADY

Calm down, sis. It was a nothing, backwoods town anyway. We were done with it. You're getting all riled up over nothing. Remember - honor thy mother... You know, without me, you'd just be another lame girl in a home for unwanted children somewhere... Look, I get that you're angry at me. This may not be the life you imagined as a kid, but at least this way we're together. Like a family should be.

*Beat.*

NICOLE

Sorry, brother. You're right... I'm just sick of traveling all over. I would like to settle down for a bit.

BRADY

We will soon. We just gotta find a score big enough to get us on our feet properly. Then, we can start our own church, just like momma wanted. We just need to find some church folk that are lost enough to give us their money. Same folk that think they can buy their way into heaven.

NICOLE

I dunno. We've been at this for a while now. Going town-to-town, getting scraps of money from bad Christians - it's not workin' fast enough. Where are we gonna be if Jesus comes back at the New Year? Maybe we should think of settling down and starting to preach the true word? You know? Before it's too late.

BRADY

Don't tell me you're one of them, now?

NICOLE

One of who?

BRADY

One of those people that think Jesus is going to come back on January 1st in the year 2000. What? You think he's just been waiting until the clock strikes midnight to return to this Earth. Two-thousand years and six days after he was born? That's ridiculous! Besides, who's midnight is it?

NICOLE

What do you mean?

BRADY

Midnight is different all around the world, baby sis. You ever heard of time zones? Which clock does Jesus go by? Standard Mountain Time? Papua New Guinea time? Teatime in London? It's nonsense.

NICOLE

And what if it's not nonsense?

BRADY

Look. The Lord works in mysterious ways. *Mysterious ways*. As in, ways that are a mystery to us. We won't know when he is coming back and to try and predict that should be a sin.

NICOLE

It's not like it's a bunch of Christians cutting off the heads of chickens and scrying in their blood to figure out when Jesus is coming back. These are the church leaders saying this stuff. Word is coming all the way from the top. Churches all over the world believe this and they are sparing no expense to greet the Lord properly.

BRADY

Wait... What do you mean, "sparing no expense"?

NICOLE

Well, I've been watching a lot of Church TV lately, and it just seems like they've been making a lot of upgrades. Ya know? New sound systems, sets, video cameras - they're trying to greet the Lord in style. As if he'd approve of any of that stuff.

*Brady thinks deeply for a beat.*

BRADY

That's it! We've been hitting these rinky-dink, backwoods churches for too long. Heck, we've been conning them on everything from Snake Handling to the Prosperity Gospel, and we always come away with pennies to our name. What we need to do is hit one of these big city churches. You know? The "megachurches-in-training". They want to expand their reach and they seem to have an endless amount of money to throw at anyone willing to help them do that.

NICOLE

What are you thinkin'?

BRADY

We're going to put on a show for Jesus' big comeback. We just need a flock desperate enough to help us do that.

*Blackout.*

4.

*HAROLD, an old man, is standing in front of KYLE, BILL, and LOIS, who are all in their forties and looking very bored. They are on the church stage.*

HAROLD

"And glory be to God, for he commanded thee to worship. We must bring glory unto the world through his name, for that he shall be revealed to all--

KYLE

Okay, thank you. That will be all.

HAROLD

Are you sure? I can do another one. How about the story of Noah and the Flood?

"God looked upon the world and saw it was wicked--

KYLE

--No, no. I think we've heard enough. Thank you. We'll let you know.

HAROLD

Of course. Praise be.

KYLE

Praise be to him.

*Harold slowly exits.*

LOIS

Jeeze. That was rough.

BILL

We are never going to find a new pastor.

LOIS

Or a new band, for that matter.

KYLE

Hey! I know that this is a tough time for our church, but we can't give up. We have to push forward. It's what Pastor Beckett would have wanted.

BILL

I don't know, Kyle. Nothing seems to be working out. We have this huge flock and no shepherd. Church attendance is down because we can't find a permanent pastor to lead them.

LOIS

Maybe we should give up. I mean, why would God call Pastor Beckett home if he wasn't going to send a replacement? Maybe... God doesn't believe in our church.

KYLE

Hey, hey, hey. We can't lose faith. Can you honestly hear yourselves right now? When God closes a door, he opens a window. We just need to look for that open window and fly on through.

LOIS

We can't fly, Kyle. We're not angels.

KYLE

We're whatever God needs us to be. When Pastor Beckett and the church band's bus swerved into the Grand Canyon on the way to Salvation Con 1999, we were called upon by God to lead the charge in finding a new worship team. We have to keep our heads high and our eyes open. It's our duty to the Lord. And to our congregation.

BILL

Well said.

LOIS

You're right. I will not deny God's charge.

KYLE

I know you won't. We must be strong as God's representatives on Earth. Praise be to Him, my brothers and sisters in Christ.

LOIS

Praise be.

BILL

Praise be.

*Cam, Gideon, and Emma enter.*

KYLE

Children! To what do we owe the pleasure of seeing your smiling faces?

CAM

Uh, hi, dad. Mr. Foster. Mrs. Embry. We are here to audition for the band.

LOIS

Band auditions are tomorrow. We're auditioning pastors today.



Gideon!

CAM

I thought it was today.

GIDEON

*Gideon starts fidgeting with his pick again.*

You DU... DU...

EMMA

What's that, hon?

BILL

Nothing--DUMMY...

EMMA

Emma.

BILL

Sorry.

EMMA

Mom, isn't there a way we can just audition for you now?

GIDEON

I don't know, Gideon. We're not really in the right headspace--

LOIS

--Please. We've been practicing all day.

GIDEON

*Lois takes a deep breath.*

Alright. I know how big of a scene you can make when you don't get your way, Gideon. I'm fine with them playing if you all are.

LOIS

I suppose.

KYLE

Sure. Let the little tykes play. It'll be adorable.

BILL

We're a serious band.

EMMA

BILL

Oh, I know, hon. I know.

*Cam, Gideon, and Emma take up their instruments nervously. Cam notices Emma has her electric guitar.*

CAM

*(Whispering)*  
Emma. Where's your acoustic guitar?

EMMA

I forgot it.

CAM

That's not what we practiced.

BILL

Everything alright, kids?

CAM

Everything's fine!

*Cam squares their shoulders and gets ready to play.*

ONE  
TWO  
THREE  
FOUR

*Cam smacks one of the drumsticks out of their hand.*

Wait. That didn't. Argh.

*They pull a backup stick.*

EMMA

Just play.

*Cam reluctantly starts playing The Little Drummer boy.*

GIDEON

COME THEY TOLD ME, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
A NEWBORN KIND TO SEE, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
OUR FINEST GIFTS WE BRING, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM

TO LAY BEFORE THE KING, PAR-RUM-PA-PUM-PUM  
RUM-PA-PUM-PUM, RUM-PA-PUM-PUM

KYLE

Awww.

BILL

So cute.

LOIS

My grandmother loves this song.

*Emma sees that they are not being taken seriously and quickly strikes a screeching metal chord. The parents are instantly taken aback.*

EMMA

How's this for cute? Welcome to the 21st Century Jesus!

CAM

Oh no.

*Emma begins the intro to Welcome to the Jungle. Cam and Gideon look uncertainly at her, but Emma gives them a reassuring nod. They soon join in as best they can.*

EMMA

WELCOME TO THE CHURCH NOW  
WE GOT LOTS OF PRAISE  
WE GOT EVERYTHING YA WANT  
OUR SOULS ARE SAVED

WE ARE THE PEOPLE THAT DON'T MIND  
GIVING GOD OUR PRAISE  
CAUSE WE WANT HIS NAME SANG HIGH  
TIL THE END OF DAYS

AT THE CHURCH NOW  
WELCOME TO THE CHURCH NOW  
GONNA BRING YOU TO YOUR  
SH-SH-SH-SH-SHI-I-IT, SHIT-SHIT-SHIT

*Cam and Gideon instantly stop playing.*

Oh my God, I'm so sorry!

BILL

Emma! That was very inappropriate. This is a church! Not a rock concert! And the language. I thought we had your little outbursts under control?

EMMA

I didn't mean to. I just got carried away and it slipped out.

BILL

Do we need to take another trip down south for a "tune-up"?

EMMA

No! I'm fine. Just a little slip-P-P-P.

KYLE

I am disappointed in you kids. The devil clearly has an influence on you all.

GIDEON

I'm sorry. We have failed you.

*The parents take a moment to cool themselves.*

KYLE

You haven't "failed us". You've just, gone down a wrong path. But, maybe that is just from aiming too high.

GIDEON

What do you mean?

KYLE

Are you familiar with the Greek myth of the man who built wings and flew too close to the sun?

GIDEON

No.

KYLE

He flew so high that his wings were burned off and he was sent hurtling back toward the ground. Do you know why that is?

GIDEON

Because he aimed too high?

KYLE

No... God was punishing him for being a pagan. And, just like his interests were placed in false ideals, so are yours with this music.

GIDEON

I don't get it.

KYLE

We sing hymns in this church. People know them and they love them. It brings the congregation together in worship when they can share in an experience that is safe, and familiar, and--

BILL

--Mechanical.

KYLE

And mechanical. Thank you, Bill. Mechanical, like a reflex. Now, what would happen if a doctor was testing the reflexes in your knee, and when he hit it with his little hammer, you slapped him in the face?

GIDEON

You've lost me.

KYLE

I'm just trying to say that there is a reason why we keep certain things in this church from changing. I mean - if we start modernizing and changing things all willy-nilly, then what's to stop us from getting slapped in the face?

EMMA

That doesn't mean we can't learn and grow together as a congregation.

BILL

We can learn and grow together. By staying exactly the same.

LOIS

Don't let it get you down, kids. Some people weren't born to lead in worship. Some people were born to just... Sit back and pray along.

EMMA

But, that's not us. We were born to play music!

LOIS

They're not getting it. We have to stop dancing around the subject. Time for some tough love.

KYLE

You may have been born to play music, but you were also born with problems. Flaws, errors, eccentricities - dents in the armor of your soul, or whatever you would like to call it. Each one of you was tainted by evil the moment you came out of the womb. We have always known that. It has been our hidden shames.

CAM

Why are you saying this?

KYLE

Because it is time that you heard it. This little display made it clear. You can't handle being good Christians on your own. You cannot lead your brothers and sisters in Christ because you cannot control these demons.

BILL

I don't think we're getting through to them.

LOIS

The kids clearly like rock'n'roll. Maybe we can put this in a way you'll understand. With *real* rock'n'roll.

*Lois, Bill, and Kyle take over the instruments. They start playing the intro to Born in the USA.*

GIDEON, YOU HAVE TO SEE  
YOU NEVER DID MAKE SENSE TO ME  
BORN QUIET, AND EMOTION-FREE  
I HUGGED YOU THEN YOU FLEE'D, YEAH

BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY

KYLE

CAM, HONEY, WAS BORN A GIRL  
CUTER THAN THE ENTIRE WORLD  
THEN OBSESSIONS CAME AND FILLED HER HEAD  
AND THE WOMAN SHE COULD BE WAS DEAD

SHE WAS BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY

BILL

EMMA WAS A SIMPLE LADY  
TIL SHE GREW TO BE A TALKITIVE BABY  
SHE WOULD JERK, AND YELL AND FIGHT  
SO WE FOUGHT HER BACK WITH ALL OUR MIGHT

*Brady and Nicole enter quietly and unseen.*

ALL

SEE YOU ALL, WERE BORN WITH SIN  
THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOUR FUNCTIONIN'  
YOU DON'T ACT LIKE A NORMAL CHILD  
THE DEVIL HAS DRIVEN YOU WILD

AND NOW, UNTIL THE DAY  
WHEN YOU CAN ALL LOOK BACK AND SAY  
YOUR HEADS WERE FULL OF STRIFE  
AND THEN GOD TOOK CHARGE OF YOUR LIVES

UNTIL THEN, BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN, BORN KIDDOS TO SIT AND PRAY

BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU WERE BORN TO SIT AND PRAY  
YOU'LL BE GOOD CHRISTIANS, BUT UNTIL THAT DAY  
YOU WERE BORN, BORN BABIES JUST TO SIT AND PRAY

*The song ends and Cam, Gideon, and Emma are stunned.*

LOIS

I'm sorry, kids. I'm sure none of us meant for our feelings to come out like this, but you're almost adults now. It's time you took charge of your relationships with God. Let's face it - you're not getting better. Trust in him completely and he will heal you all.

KYLE

Amen.

BILL

Run along now. I believe you have some scripture to study.

*Cam, Gideon, and Emma somberly exit.*

BRADY

Goodness. Well, that was a tough lesson to witness, but it seems like one that had to be taught. I hear that it is never easy to be a parent. If I wasn't so devoted to the Lord, maybe I would have a child of my own by now to teach.

KYLE

I'm sorry, but who are you?

BRADY

Pastor Armand Brady. I hope you don't think of me as intruding. I assure you that I never intended such. I merely came after seeing in the newspaper that you were interviewing potential pastors. Also, I am terribly sorry of the tragedy that brought about such circumstances.

KYLE

It's quite alright. You weren't intruding. We just weren't expecting you.

BRADY

I understand. My arrival was very last minute. My sister, Nicole, and I just moved to your town yesterday, in hopes that the dry, desert air would help alleviate her... Condition.

KYLE

Well, that's very understandable.

BRADY

My resume.

LOIS

Thank you.

BRADY

My pleasure.

*Brady and Lois share... Something.*

BILL

It says here that you went to First Divinity of the Pacific. Is that the Malibu campus?

BRADY

More West.

LOIS

Oh. Aloha.

BRADY

Gesundheit.

BILL

I think she was asking if you went to the Hawaii campus.

BRADY

Oh! No, sorry. I went to First Divinity Rarotonga Campus. Though, it's just as beautiful a place as any Hawaiian island just... More exotic.



LOIS

Oh...

KYLE

Yes... Well, your credentials do look good. My only concern is that you seem to hop around from church-to-church a lot.

BRADY

Yes, I understand that could look bad. I assure you, every job that I have ever taken was in service to my lovely sister here. We have moved all over in trying to get her the care she deserves. However, we have finally found a home in this gorgeous town. You see, a special care facility has graciously opened its doors for us, so my sister can finally get the spinal treatments she so desperately needs.

LOIS

Good for you!

NICOLE

Thank you. And thank the Lord for his grace and glory.

BRADY

Hallelujah!

LOIS

I don't often say this, but, in talking with you, I feel the glory of God rising up inside of me.

BRADY

Yeah... I bet you do.

*Nicole quietly smack his shoulder.*

BRADY

But the Lord himself is infectious, as I always say! If you find God to be strong in someone chances are that love for the Lord will spill over and convert everyone around him! Heck, I was on a bus once in New York City--

KYLE

--Filthy town--

BRADY

--An absolute hellmouth, as I always say, but I wasn't there to sightsee - I was there to convert! I got on a bus, crowded with all manner of filth and degenerates, but I held tight to my Bible and started singing his praise. Not five minutes later, I swear to you, every single soul on that bus was hollering, "Hosanna, on high!" at the top of their lungs. I brought twenty-seven souls to the Lord that day, including the bus driver.

Amen!

LOIS

Praise be!

KYLE

Glory in the highest!

BILL

BRADY

Aw, shucks. It was nothing. God put me on this Earth to bring others to him, and that's just what I do.

KYLE

I think I've heard enough. Do we even need to deliberate?

BILL

I don't think so. You've got my support, Pastor Brady.

LOIS

And mine.

KYLE

I guess that settles it. Pastor Armand Brady, will you lead our flock?

BRADY

It would be my honor to bring honor onto God through this congregation.

KYLE

... Is that a yes?

BRADY

Yes.

KYLE

Woo!

BILL

Congratulations, brother!

BRADY

Thank you, kindly. Now, what'd'ya say we save some souls!?

ALL EXCEPT BRADY

Amen!

*Lights fade as they talk excitedly to each other.*

5.

*Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul are practicing in the green room. Rachel is playing a very basic strum on her guitar.*

JEBEDIAH

AND JESUS IS GOOD.

*The song ends and they all collapse over their instruments in defeat.*

RACHEL

That was painful. Really? "Jesus is good"? Is the lyric really, "Jesus is good"?

PAUL

Well... I mean, He is.

RACHEL

No one is debating that, Paul. It's just that the lyric stinks.

JEBEDIAH

Don't blame me. I got the song from the list of Pastor Beckett's approved, modern songs for young Christians. It's not our fault if they're all lame.

RACHEL

How are we going to nail our audition if we can't play music we like?

PAUL

Don't say "nail" in front of - You know - G-O-D. He was C-R-U-C... E? F.

*Paul gestures over to a crucifix.*

RACHEL

Relax. Everyone knows God can only hear you if you fold your hands in prayer or raise them straight up in worship. And, I'm pretty sure he can spell, Paul.

JEBEDIAH

Quit it, you two. We have a real problem here. What are we going to play for the audition?

RACHEL

Whatever it is, it'll be better than *The Little Drummer Boy*. I can't believe those sinners think they're going to win with that.

PAUL

Uh...

RACHEL

Something to add, Paul?

PAUL

I don't think we should plan on them singing that.

RACHEL

What do you mean?

PAUL

Well, I was walking in the quad earlier and Emma was sitting on the grass, listening to music. I was curious, so I walked past her and I could hear that she was listening to the radio. It was a rock song - like a *real* rock song.

JEBEDIAH

Okay. So?

PAUL

The thing is - she was writing in her notebook and singing along to the song, only she was working out new Christian lyrics to go along with the melody.

RACHEL

What? Can you even do that?

JEBEDIAH

That's... That's brilliant! Safe, Christian versions of popular rock songs! Oh, and I bet they were only playing *The Little Drummer Boy* as a clever ruse to throw us off their trail. They were really going to play some rock song and blow everyone else away! Those deviant, little shi-taki mushrooms.

RACHEL

No way. The congregation would never go for that. They're reluctant to change.

JEBEDIAH

Maybe, but maybe not. I mean, just look at how much this church has modernized over the past few years? Last year, we didn't have our own café. Then they built one and now we don't have to buy Amy Grant CD's at Sam Goody anymore! Maybe music is one of the last remnants of the old church and it just needs someone like us to push it into the twenty-first century?

RACHEL

Okay. Let's say that we rewrite a modern song to appeal to Christians. Rock music is too divisive. Is there a genre of music that has universal appeal and will be popular for generations to come?

*They think for a beat.*

RACHEL/JEBEDIAH/PAUL

Swing music.

RACHEL

I can play the saxophone.

PAUL

I'll... Still play the drums, I guess.

JEBEDIAH

Alright! Let's get to work.

*There is a knock on the door.*

RACHEL

Ah! What now? Come in!

*Nicole enters.*

JEBEDIAH

Oh, sorry kid. We have this space reserved for another hour. Bingo starts at 4.

NICOLE

No, I'm not here for bingo. I was actually looking for you three.

JEBEDIAH

Really? Well, you found us. What's up?

NICOLE

I heard that there was an audition coming up to be the new house band. And, I heard you three were the best band in the whole congregation. I was wondering if you had room for one more member?

JEBEDIAH

Like a roadie? I don't think we're there yet.

PAUL

Yeah, and roadies typically have to run around and lift heavy stuff.

NICOLE

No, I mean like another band member. I have a lot of experience, and I can sing.

JEBEDIAH

I sing.

NICOLE  
Um. Okay, I can play the guitar.

RACHEL  
That's my job.

NICOLE  
Drums?

PAUL  
That's me.

NICOLE  
Um... Tambourine?

JEBEDIAH  
Look, kid, it's cute that you look up to us. I just don't think we have space for another member, especially one we've never even seen or heard of before. I mean, who even are you?

NICOLE  
Oh, sorry. I'm Nicole. You've probably never seen me because I'm new in town. The church just hired my brother as the new pastor.

JEBEDIAH  
Wait. What? Your brother is the new pastor?

NICOLE  
Yeah. He wanted me to make some friends in the congregation. He suggested I get involved with a good band, since I like music. You know, my brother really trusts my opinion. I'm sure whatever band I'm in will really stick out in his mind at the audition...

JEBEDIAH  
Oh, well who cares about that? We want to win this based on our talent, right? Yeah, but, I mean, perhaps we were too quick to judge here. You said you play the tambourine?

NICOLE  
And drums, guitar, piano, MOOG, and sing.

JEBEDIAH  
Right, well I think we definitely could use a tambourine player. Provisionally, of course. After the audition, we can look into promoting you to full time.

NICOLE  
... Great. I appreciate you giving me the chance...

JEBEDIAH

Don't mention it. If it's God's will, then who are we to stand in the way?

NICOLE

Praise be. Should we rehearse?

RACHEL

We actually just decided to change our sound, so we don't really have any rehearsal material yet. Speaking of which - let's go to the café. I'm gonna need some caffeine if we're going to write some songs.

NICOLE

Sounds like fun.

JEBEDIAH

Uh, full-time bandmates only. I'm sure you're a great songwriter, but I'm just not sure we're ready to give you that much input into the direction of the band. Sorry, uh...--

NICOLE

Nicole.

JEBEDIAH

Nicole. I'm Jebediah. That's Rachel. Paul.

PAUL

Sup.

RACHEL

Welcome to Michael's Horn.

JEBEDIAH

Provisionally.

*Paul, Jebediah, and Rachel exit.*

NICOLE

Heathens. I was really getting tired of these con games. But, after seeing those Michael's Horn jerks and those poor kids' inconsiderate parents at the audition - I feel rejuvenated. I really feel like I'm on the right path. That what we are doing is righteous and in accordance with your will, Lord. I promise that after we are done with this church, we will use the money to finally start preaching your truth. We will turn people back toward loving their neighbors. We will encourage giving - not so much to the church - but to the community. I want parishioners to come into the church halls and allow me to wash their feet. Well, maybe not wash their feet, but something of equal and less icky spiritual meaning. I promise to make a place of peace and love and understanding, Lord...



*Nicole moves to a piano. She starts playing Sugar Ray's, "Every Morning" and improvising her own version.*

EVERY MORNING THERE'S A HALO STREWN ATOP THE BORDER  
OF MY SAVIOR'S HOLY HEAD  
I KNOW IT'S NOT MINE BUT I'LL SEE IF I ATTAIN IT  
BY FOLLOWING IN HIS HEAVENLY STEAD

CANNOT UNDERSTAND  
HOW THE WORLD TURNED OUT  
WHEN MY MOMMA STARTED LEAVIN'  
THEN I COULD'VE STOPPED BELIEVIN'  
BUT I WORKED IT OUT

I HEARD A HIGHER CALLING  
NO LONGER FELT LIKE FALLING  
WRITING WITH JESUS' PEN  
GOD SAID THAT WE COULD DO IT  
AND NOW I'M GONNA PROVE IT TO MAN

*Cam, Gideon, and Emma enter, unbeknownst to Nicole.*

EVERY MORNING THERE'S A HALO STREWN ATOP THE BORDER  
OF MY SAVIOR'S HOLY HEAD  
I KNOW IT'S NOT MINE BUT I'LL SEE IF I ATTAIN IT  
BY FOLLOWING IN HIS HEAVENLY STEAD

EVERY MORNING  
EVERY MORNING  
PROVE IT TO MAN  
EVERY MORNING

CAM

Oh man! Is that Sugar Ray? I hate them, but they're catchy.

NICOLE

Oh. I'm so sorry. I thought I was alone.

GIDEON

No, we're sorry. We saw Michael's Horn leave, so we thought the room was free. We wanted to practice.

NICOLE

Wait... You're the band who was auditioning earlier.

EMMA

You saw that?

NICOLE

I did. I guess my brother and I accidentally snuck up on you.

CAM

Yeah. Sorry about that. Must have been awkward. Our parents can be a little harsh. Honor thy mother and father, right?

NICOLE

Yeah... Oh, uh, I'm Nicole, by the way. My brother, Brady, just became the new pastor.

CAM

Cool. What are you doing playing music all alone down here?

NICOLE

Oh, well, he said there was a band down here, so he sent me to see if they needed a new band mate. I'm a singer.

GIDEON

Oh, thank God. We could use a new singer.

CAM

What the heck, Gideon? You're our singer. Are you quitting?

GIDEON

What? No! I'll still play bass. I just hate singing. But, I was the only one capable of doing it, so I graciously stepped up.

CAM

Eh, I guess that makes sense. You kind of suck, anyway.

GIDEON

Hey!

CAM

Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like to be the singer then?

GIDEON

No.

CAM

Then what's the problem?

EMMA

Hey! I can si-i-ing, SH--SHIT BALLS. Ah!

CAM

I'm sorry, Emma. You can't. I mean, you sound great, until you...

EMMA

FU-U-What? Until what? Say it.

CAM

Until you do that. Besides, it doesn't matter anyway. Our parents made it clear that we're never going to be the house band.

NICOLE

Why not?

CAM

Because we're different. We're off-putting. We're the losers that don't make friends or make nice with people enough to lead them in worship. They're looking for a band that can fit a mold, and we're not it.

NICOLE

Well... Neither am I. I mean, look at me. I'm a freak. I've been in this chair for as long as I can remember. People often don't treat me as an equal. They look down on me instead of at me.

*Nicole starts to cry. There is silence.*

EMMA

My parents had me exorcised four times.

NICOLE

Really? You look great.

EMMA

Thanks. I threw up a lot of green slime.

NICOLE

Ew.

GIDEON

She means exorcised. Like *The Exorcist*.

*Nicole looks blank.*

Like as in, "possessed by the devil".

NICOLE

Oh... Oh! You're not still...

EMMA

Never was.

GIDEON

I was never like other kids growing up. I never liked to be touched. My parents say that I never cried or laughed or anything. Plus, I didn't talk until I was pretty old, so they couldn't tell what was wrong with me. Sometimes, the world gets so overwhelming that I just... Explode... Music is the only thing that really calms me down.

NICOLE

I'm sorry to hear that. That must be tough.

GIDEON

Eh. Hanging out with these dorks makes it tolerable.

CAM

Thanks, Gideon.

NICOLE

What's your... I dunno... Eccentricity?

CAM

Me? I'm just a neurotic mess most of the time. I can be very obsessive - especially with things like numbers. For instance, I'm kind of obsessed with the number four. Like, I have to take four sips of a drink or, I always have to touch my refrigerator four times to make sure it's closed. But, sometimes, the damn thing just doesn't feel closed, ya know? Once I stayed up all night just touching my refrigerator. I kept going to bed then getting up again because it just didn't feel right. It's odd. But, if I don't get things like that to my satisfaction, I get this strange feeling like the world is about to end. Then I feel really crazy; I act out. I can't settle down until I can do something to make it feel like the world is back on track.

NICOLE

Wow. I can't imagine how hard that must be.

CAM

I can't imagine how hard *your* life might be. Maybe you are one of us.

NICOLE

Thanks. I would love to be one of you.

CAM

So, what do you say?

About what? NICOLE  
 Joining the band! Are you in? CAM  
 Oh... I would love to, bu-- NICOLE  
 --Perfect! We've found our singer! CAM  
 What's the point? Everyone has it out for us. We're not going to win. GIDEON  
 Not with that attitude. Look, we can still audition again tomorrow. I say we play again and prove our parents wrong. CAM  
 Yeah! EMMA  
 Alright. Let's do it. At least we can say we tried everything we could. GIDEON  
 That's the spirit. CAM  
 The holy spirit. EMMA  
*They share a laugh.*  
 Should we practice? NICOLE  
 Good idea. Let's play *Hosanna, Be His Glory*? CAM  
 Love the enthusiasm, hate the song. EMMA  
 But it's a classic! CAM

GIDEON

So was *The Little Drummer Boy*. We all know how that turned out.

EMMA

So, let's do my idea. Let's play some rock songs.

CAM

Emma--

GIDEON

--No, she's right. We were on the right track last time. We just have to commit to the song. We weren't giving Emma any support at the audition. That's probably why the performance broke down. And, we know Nicole can write lyrics.

CAM

Okay... Let's do this. I trust you guys.

NICOLE

What would be a good song to change the lyrics too?

GIDEON

Well... Do you know Smashmouth's new one? *All-Star*? It's on Astro Lounge. We've actually played the original version a couple times before. Just for fun. Do you know it?

NICOLE

Of course! It's all over the radio.

CAM

Let's rock it, then.

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

*Cam starts playing. Gideon joins in.*

ALL

SOME-BODY ONCE TOLD ME  
THE WORLD WAS GONNA ROLL ME  
I AIN'T THE SHARPEST TOOL IN THE SHED

*Nicole starts feeling it.*

Wait, wait. I got it. Something like--

MY SAVIOR ONCE TOLD ME  
 THAT HE WAS GONNA RULE ME  
 ONCE I GOT UP TO HEAVEN ONE DAY

CAM

Wait! Hold on.

*Cam runs to their bag and pulls out a small tape recorder.*

This is gold. Can't lose it. Ready?

*Cam starts playing again.*

NICOLE

MY SAVIOR ONCE TOLD ME  
 THAT HE WAS GONNA RULE ME--

*Suddenly, Brady, Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul enter.*

BRADY

What's all the ruckus down here? Ah! That's where you went off too, sis. I've been looking everywhere for you. Who are your friends?

NICOLE

Oh, I don't think I caught all of their names, big brother.

CAM

I'm Cam. This is Gideon and Emma. I see you've met Michael's Horn already.

BRADY

Yes. They were about to play a song for me, but I see that you are rehearsing. Speaking of which - Nicole, why are you playing with...

CAM

Oh. We're "Jane's Conviction".

BRADY

How cute. But, don't you think you should be playing with the band you just joined, little sis?

NICOLE

I, uh... Yeah. Of course. I was just jamming with these guys in the meantime.

*Nicole turns to Jane's Conviction.*

I'm sorry to get your hopes up. Good luck at the audition tomorrow.

*They don't know what to say.*

BRADY

Okay, well, I believe Michael's Horn still has the room reserved. So, if you don't mind skedaddling.

CAM

No problem. It's good to meet you, padre. We look forward to rocking your face off tomorrow.

BRADY

Oh my. Well, I certainly am looking forward to that then.

*Cam, Emma, and Gideon exit.*

Lovely kids.

*To Michael's Horn.*

It's true that the meek shall inherit the Earth, but they shall not prevail tomorrow. Wipe the floor with them.

*Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul laugh deviously.*

Hey, why don't you all give me and Nicole a minute? You can go upstairs and get us all a dozen donuts and some coffee. Can't rehearse on an empty stomach!

JEBEDIAH

Sure thing!

*Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul exit.*

BRADY

Just what in the hell are you doing? You need to keep your eyes on the prize. You need to spend your time with the winning band. Not the loser band featuring the robot, the tomboy and the freak girl.

NICOLE

Hey! Don't talk about them like that.

BRADY

Aha! So you are developing a... Friendship... with those kids.

NICOLE

What if I am?



BRADY

Then you are liable to get us caught. Stick to the plan. We have to have a *talented* house band. One that we can advocate is worthy of much more than what the church is providing. We are going to convince every soul in this congregation, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus is coming back at the turn of the millennium, and that we need to welcome him back in style. We are going to bleed this place dry with promises of better, expensive equipment and renovations to the church. Except, we were going to pocket most of the money instead.

NICOLE

And you think these people deserve that?

BRADY

If they are willing to think that Jesus wants ostentatious stuff, then yes. Absolutely. We can take that money and make a new life and settle down for good this time. Remember what momma wanted.

NICOLE

Don't do that.

BRADY

Remember what she asked of you? As she laid dying in that car crash that you caused. She said, "you and Brady go out and find God. Make a place where everyone can see the true light of the Lord. Where they can turn away from sin and live for each other instead of themselves." She said all that. Then she--

NICOLE

--Don't.

BRADY

Died. She died, Nicole. Staring into your eyes. Wanting nothing but for you to bring as many people to the real nature of God as you could. And, if you have to step on a few people in order to get there, well... So be it. Do not talk to that other band. Do not give them any sort of help. Make sure that band doesn't make it anywhere near the finish line.

*Beat.*

NICOLE

... Okay, big brother. I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that I lost my way.

BRADY

We all stumble in the darkness. Just trust in me when I tell you where the light switch is.

NICOLE

Thank you. I will.

## BRADY

Atta girl. Have a good rehearsal. I'll be in my office. They have me signing a lot of paperwork, and I keep forgetting my new social security number.

*Brady playfully punches her in the arm. He exits, leaving her on the dark stage.  
Alone.*

7.

*It's the day of the big audition. Harold is onstage singing. Bill, Lois, Kyle, and Brady are sitting at a large table like an early episode of American Idol.*

HAROLD

AND THE HO-O-O-ME  
OF THUH-UH-UH  
BRA-A-A-VE

PRAISE GOD!

KYLE

Thank you, Harold. We appreciate your audition and we will get back to you.

HAROLD

Thank you, kindly.

*Harold exits. Brady turns to the audience.*

BRADY

As our bands get ready, I would like to thank you all again for coming tonight. We appreciate your help in making this difficult decision. As your new pastor, I appreciate the dedication that you are showing to our church. It shows that we are not just a congregation, but a family. For, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

LOIS

Well said.

*Kyle covers his microphone.*

KYLE

Pastor Brady. I don't mean to question your methods, but we usually do these kinds of things as a closed audition. I'm not sure what these church goers are bringing to the decision-making process. Actually, I don't even recognize these people. Do they even go to our church?

BRADY

Are you saying that I went to a casting agency and hired a bunch of movie background actors to fill these seats to sway the opinion of this prestigious panel of judges?

KYLE

Um. No. That would be crazy.

BRADY

Exactly. And, it wouldn't be very Godly of me, now would it?

KYLE

I suppose not. I apologize, Pastor Brady.

BRADY

I understand what you're saying. I'm doing things a bit differently by inviting these wonderful members of our congregation to participate in this audition process. But, that's only because I value their opinions. I just hope that, someday, you see "these peoples" values the way that I see them. Are they not worthy enough to be heard?

*Lois shoots Kyle a dirty look.*

LOIS

You disgust me, Kyle.

KYLE

What did I do?

BRADY

Who is ready for our next audition!?

*Audience reaction. Cam, Gideon, and Emma enter and stand at one side of the stage.*

I can't hear you!

*Audience reaction. Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul enter and stand at the other side of the stage.*

Please welcome to the stage - Jane's Conviction!

*Cam, Gideon, and Emma reluctantly take the stage.*

GIDEON

Are you two ready?

EMMA

Uh... Uh huh. Sure. We got this - MMM.

CAM

Don't give up hope, guys.

GIDEON

I wish Nicole was on our side. She was nice.

CAM

Yeah right. She's on the enemy team now. Anyone who would associate with them has got to be evil.

EMMA

Funny. That's what people call us.

*Cam disregards this and picks up their drumsticks. Gideon takes out a piece of paper and holds it in front of him.*

CAM

Let's rock.

ONE  
TWO  
THREE  
FOUR

Nope. That felt weird. I didn't like it.

EMMA

Cam, come on!

BRADY

Is everything okay?

CAM

Everything is fine!

BRADY

Well, don't keep us in suspense!

CAM

Okay. I got this.

ONE  
TWO  
THREE  
FOUR

*Cam, Emma and Gideon start playing a terrible version of Smashmouth's All-star.*

GIDEON

This one's for all you saved Christians out there. The Lord is coming back and he is coming quick!

*Gideon starts singing weakly, without any confidence.*

MY SAVIOR ONCE TOLD ME  
THAT HE WAS GONNA RULE ME  
ONCE I GOT UP TO HEAVEN ONE DAY

*Emma rolls her eyes and pushes Gideon out of the way. She takes the mic and the paper.*

EMMA

HE WAS LOOKIN' PRETTY FLY  
WITH THE ANGELS IN THE SKY  
AND I DROPPED TO MY KNEES AND I SU-SU-SU, nope, SUCKED A-nope. Not saying. SUCKED ON JESUS, nope, AHHH--

BRADY

--Ohhh kay then. I'm going to stop you right there. Let's give a hand for Jane's Conviction!

*The band is defeated. They stop playing. The audience shows their disapproval with boos.*

Tough break, kids, but thank you for trying. God appreciates all forms of worship. I'm sure he's proud of each and every one of you despite your... Obvious eccentricities.

*The audience claps lightly.*

*Michael Horn laughs as Jane's Conviction slinks off to the side of the stage.*

Please, save your applause, because I heard the next band is so good that Lazarus himself returned from the dead to turn up the volume. It's Michael's Horn!

*Michael's Horn readies themselves at their instruments. They begin to play drums and horns to the tune of Brian Setzer Orchestra's, Jump Jive an' Wail.*

JEBEDIAH

SISTER, SISTER, IT LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GONNA PRAY  
BROTHER, BROTHER, IT LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GONNA PRAY  
STEP INSIDE AN' I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO PRAY TODAY

OH, YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY

*Nicole sees Jane's Conviction - utterly defeated and watching the show from the sidelines.*

JEBEDIAH

FATHER'S UP IN HEAVEN AN' HE'S WAITING TO HEAR YOUR LOVE  
FATHER'S UP IN HEAVEN AN' HE'S WAITING TO HEAR YOUR LOVE  
MAMA'S IN THE KITCHEN AND SHE'S LOOKIN' TO THE STARS ABOVE

OH, YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
YOU GOTTA DROP--

*Nicole rushes over to Paul and takes over the drum kit. She starts playing All-Star.*

NICOLE

MY SAVIOR ONCE TOLD ME  
THAT HE WAS GONNA RULE ME  
ONCE I GOT UP TO HEAVEN ONE DAY

*Michael's Horn stops playing.*

BRADY

What's going on? What's happening?

*Nicole enters with a mic.*

NICOLE

HE WAS LOOKIN' PRETTY FLY  
WITH THE ANGELS IN THE SKY  
AND I DROPPED TO MY KNEES AND I--

KYLE

--NO NO--

NICOLE

--PRAYED

KYLE

Oh, thank the Lord.

NICOLE

Come on, guys!

*Cam, Gideon, and Emma start playing. Cam takes over the drums and gives Nicole the lyrics.*

WELL  
 THE TEARS STARTED COMIN'  
 AND THEY DIDN'T STOP COMIN'

NICOLE

SAW THE LORD'S FACE  
 AND IT SHONE LIKE THE SUN AND

IT ALL MADE SENSE WHEN THE WORLD WAS DONE  
 RAPTURED OFF TO HEAVEN AND THE LOVIN'S JUST BEGUN, YEAH

SO MUCH TO PRAY  
 MANY TO SAVE  
 SO, WHAT'S WRONG WITH TAKING WHAT HE GAVE?

YOU NEVER KNOW IF YOU DON'T HOPE  
 YOU'LL NEVER SHINE IF YOU SAY "NOPE"

JANE'S CONVICTION

HEY NOW  
 IT'S THE RAPTURE  
 GET BELIEVIN'  
 GET SAVED

HEY NOW  
 IT'S THE RAPTURE  
 GET TO HEAVEN  
 HE'S RAISED

ALL THOSE FORGIVEN WILL GO  
 ONLY ONCE YOU'RE SAVED, YOU WILL KNOW

*Michael's Horn starts playing.*

JEBEDIAH

THE PASTOR'S IN THE PULPIT AND HE'S LOOKIN' FOR A SOUL TO SAVE  
 THE PASTOR'S IN THE PULPIT AND HE'S LOOKIN' FOR A SOUL TO SAVE  
 GOD IS UP IN HEAVEN AND HE'S WELCOMIN' THAT SOUL TODAY

BRADY

Looks like we got a sing off!

*Kyle and Bill are dumbstruck. Lois gets off her feet and starts clapping along.*



JEBEDIAH

OH, YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY

*Jane's Conviction starts playing.*

NICOLE

MY SAVIOR ONCE ASKED  
 IF I COULD COMPLETE A TASK  
 SO I COULD GIVE HIM MY WHOLE SOUL EVERY DAY

I SAID "YEP"  
 I WILL ACCEPT  
 I WILL GIVE OVER ALL MYSELF  
 AND WE CAN ALL SETTLE DOWN AND PRAISE

WELL  
 THE TEARS STARTED COMIN'  
 AND THEY DIDN'T STOP COMIN'  
 SAW THE LORD'S FACE  
 AND IT SHONE LIKE THE SUN AND

IT ALL MADE SENSE WHEN THE WORLD WAS DONE  
 RAPTURED OFF TO HEAVEN AND THE LOVIN'S JUST BEGUN, YEAH

SO MUCH TO PRAY  
 MANY TO SAVE  
 SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH TAKING WHAT HE GAVE

YOU NEVER KNOW IF YOU DON'T HOPE  
 YOU'LL NEVER SHINE IF YOU SAY "NOPE"

JEBEDIAH

OH, YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY  
 YOU GOTTA DROP, KNEEL, AN' THEN YOU PRAY

NICOLE

HEY NOW  
IT'S THE RAPTURE  
GET TO BELIEVIN'  
GET SAVED

HEY NOW  
IT'S THE RAPTURE  
GET TO HEAVEN  
HE'S RAISED

NICOLE

ALL THOSE FORGIVEN WILL GO  
ONLY ONCE YOU'RE SAVED, YOU WILL KNOW

JANE'S CONVICTION

ALL THOSE FORGIVEN WILL GO  
ONLY ONCE YOU'RE SAVED, YOU WILL KNOW

*The music dies down and the audience reacts.*

BRADY

Wow! That was incredible! Let's hear it for Michael's Horn!

*Audience reacts.*

And let's hear it for the Jane's Conviction!

*Audience reacts.*

Honestly, I'm having a hard time picking a winner. I guess there is only one way to solve this... With a much larger Battle of the Bands next week! That's right - please congratulate Jane's Conviction and Michael's Horn as they have made it to the finals! We would like to thank the four other bands that played before these two. Yes, let's give a hand to "Good Religion", "Peter, Paul, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus", "Three Doors Down from Heaven", and "Jesus Jones". Come back next week to see who will prevail between our two finalists. You get to decide, America!  
Tickets on sale soon!

KYLE

Tickets? What tickets?

BRADY

We'll talk.

GOODNIGHT, FELLOW CHRISTIANS!

*The lights bump out.*

8.

*Nicole, Emma, Gideon, and Cam enter the green room with huge smiles on their faces.*

EMMA

That was amazing!

CAM

I literally cannot believe that just happened.

GIDEON

I thought for sure we lost the audience when Emma sang about God's di --

EMMA

--Yeah, we were all there. We don't have to re-live it.

GIDEON

I'm sorry. Was that traumatic for you?

EMMA

Yes, Gideon. It was incredibly traumatic - NN.

GIDEON

Well, it's over now. How you feel about God is between you and him.

EMMA

Thanks, Gideon.

NICOLE

What a recovery though! The audience was loving us!

CAM

There's no way we're going to lose the contest next week. Thanks for coming over to our side. Getting booted off the stage was probably the worst I've ever felt. We appreciate the help.

NICOLE

Of course. I couldn't stand by when I saw that. Nobody should be made to feel that way.

GIDEON

We should probably discuss how we're going to kick Michael's Horn to the curb next week.

EMMA

We have to bring it. The congregation will be expecting us at our best.

CAM

Of course.

NICOLE

Oh, we will bring it. We can practice all week! Remember, "the simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge".

CAM

Whoa. Did you just make that up?

NICOLE

No... It's from the Bible.

CAM

Oh. I should really read that thing.

NICOLE

It has some good stuff in it.

*Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul enter.*

JEBEDIAH

Well, well, well. Guess who rose from the dead.

PAUL

Um... Jesus?

JEBEDIAH

Ugh... Yeah, Paul. But, I was referring to them.

PAUL

Oh.

RACHEL

You're lucky the new girl bailed you out. You're clearly terrible without her.

EMMA

Am not! - MM.

GIDEON

It's true. We're all talented in our own ways. We just lack confidence in front of other people due to years of abuse and pity.

CAM

Whoa. Too real, Gideon.

GIDEON

Oh. Sorry. I overshared.

JEBEDIAH

Well, you can trust that we won't over-share the spotlight with you when we over-shadow you in the finals.

EMMA

I'm over this conversation.

RACHEL

Conversation? Are you capable of having a conversation? It seems like you can't say two sentences without FU-FU-FU-Fu-reaking out.

EMMA

A-ASSHOLE! Come over here and say that!

RACHEL

Oh, just try and make a move. I'll hit you so hard that your children will be born with the imprint of my purity ring on their faces.

GIDEON

Real nice. Tell that to God when you see him in five minutes!

CAM

Then tell that to Satan when you see him a minute after that!

JEBEDIAH

That's it!

*Jebediah raises his fist.*

PAUL

Whoa. Maybe we should just take a beat and calm down, everyone.

CAM

He's right, Jebediah. You better leave. You don't want to get in trouble. You might upset the only parent you have left and have them abandon you too.

JEBEDIAH

You little freak!

CAM

I'll send you straight to hell!

EMMA

Whoa! Not cool, Cam. Paul's right. This isn't very Christian behavior. We're letting our emotions get the better of us - SH SH --

GIDEON

-- Clearly, we all want to win. But, we have to do what's best for the church, right? We have to trust that our congregation will make the best choice for the church. Let's just play and whatever happens, happens.

*Jebediah takes a moment to think and calm himself.*

JEBEDIAH

I'm not going to risk my eternal soul over losers like you. We'll just have to slaughter you the best way we know how... Musically.

RACHEL

Yeah!

JEBEDIAH

Come on, guys.

*Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul exit.*

EMMA

That was mean. I mean, really mean.

CAM

Whatever. He deserved it. Did you see him? He was about to cry.

EMMA

That's not funny.

CAM

It's a little funny.

EMMA

No, Cam, it's not. You made fun of him for something that he has no control over. It's not his fault that his mom left him and his dad.

CAM

Whatever.

EMMA

No, not "whatever". Don't you see? MM-MM -- We screwed up just now. If we drop down to a bully's level, then we become the bullies. Punching down at him doesn't help anyone. It just makes a situation worse and more complicated. Shouldn't we be building each other up rather than chipping away at their own self-worth? We can't just see them as lesser-than, even if they see us that way. We are all God's children. We can't use their misfortune to take advantage of them.

*Nicole takes this to heart. She looks so full of guilt she could explode.*

CAM

Jesus, Emma... Well said... I'm sorry.

NICOLE

Uh... Ugh... I'm... Uh...

CAM

Are you okay?

GIDEON

She's having a seizure - help me put my belt in her mouth!

*Gideon takes off his belt. His pants fall down.*

NICOLE

I'm not having a seizure. I just... I *think*, I just realized something.

GIDEON

Okay. Clearly, I was overreacting. Carry on.

*Gideon pulls his pants up and puts his belt back on.*

NICOLE

Guys. I have a confession to make... Brady is going to ruin the church.

EMMA

What?

NICOLE

I know it sounds strange, but he's not a good guy.

GIDEON

But, he's your brother. Why do you think he's bad?



NICOLE

I know he's bad. He came up with this scheme - I mean - *we* came up with this scheme. We're not who we said we were... We're con artists. Brady used to be a Catholic priest, but he was excommunicated for selling indulgences--

GIDEON

--What's wrong with that? I indulge in things: Chocolate cake.

CAM

Soda. Reality television.

CAM/GIDEON

Pokemon. Jinx!

EMMA

No, dorks - Indulgences were pretty much bribes. A sinner could pay the church for an indulgence to lessen their punishments for their sins.

NICOLE

Yeah, and they were outlawed a long time ago. So long ago that a lot of people didn't even know about them. Brady would go out and tell them they could buy indulgences and pretty much have free reign to sin all they want without fear of hell. The Vatican found out and defrocked him. He kind of grew resentful of Christianity after that. Then, my momma died and he claimed to be a changed person. He wanted people to live more like Jesus' actual teachings: Not living life to make money. Actually caring about people and even giving them the shirt off your back if they needed it. He changed his name and started preaching to Evangelical churches. But, he fell back into his old ways in the guise of building his own church. And, I fell along with him. We've been conning people ever since, and... Here we are. He's planning on using the Second Coming of Jesus as an excuse to take as much money from the church and the congregation as he can.

*Silence.*

CAM

That bastard! Oh, and you too. Maybe not as big of a bastard, but... Yeah. Still a bastard.

NICOLE

I'm sorry. I know I was in on this scam when we first got here, but... I dunno. I just fell in love with you guys. I haven't felt like I belonged anywhere since my accident. Being with you all made me feel like less of a freak.

EMMA

Because we're bigger freaks than you?

NICOLE

No! Not at all. It's because you made me realize that we're more normal than most of the people out there. They're not normal. They're all wearing masks, but they can't see it. You've at least tried. You've bared yourselves to those around you, even in the face of rejection. And, Emma, with your beautiful words, you made me realize that we had a responsibility. We can see people better than they can see themselves, and that means we have more insight on how to love them.

EMMA

Yeah... Yeah, I guess we do.

CAM

I never looked at it like that. So, I'm kind of a like a superhero.

NICOLE

Uh, sure. Or, just a good Christian.

CAM

A real superhero.

GIDEON

I don't really want to be a hero. I feel like heroes shake a lot of hands, and I don't like to be touched. I'll settle for being a good Christian.

EMMA

E-E-EAT IT JERKS! Other Christians got nothing on us! There is nothing wrong with our minds or our bodies!

CAM AND GIDEON

Yeah!

EMMA

And there is nothing wrong with fantasizing about Jesus!

*They share an uncomfortable beat.*

CAM

Uh, yeah!

EMMA

Hell yeah!

NICOLE

So... Do you all forgive me?

CAM

Maybe. Five bucks and you can buy our forgiveness.

EMMA

Cam.

CAM

Just kidding! Bring it in.

*They all share a hug.*

I don't know how Brady's can be stopped. This church seems to love him.

NICOLE

I'm going to have to expose him at the Battle of the Bands. Every member of this congregation has to know that he's up to no good.

EMMA

But how?

NICOLE

I'll just have to tell them.

EMMA

But, why would anyone believe you? I mean, it's your word against his.

NICOLE

I know. But, I have to try.

CAM

Whoa whoa whoa - you can't go to jail.

NICOLE

It's okay. My brother told me one good piece of advice. "Sometimes, you have to step on the little people to get what you want". This time, the little people are me and Brady. And what I want is to save my friends and their congregation.

CAM

Well. What are we waiting for?

NICOLE

We?

CAM

Yeah. Can't let you have all the fun.

I'm in!

GIDEON

Let's do it!

EMMA

Put your hands in.

CAM

*They do.*

Jane's Conviction on three. One. Two.

NICOLE

Actually, I think I have an idea for that name change you've been looking for.

*Cam smiles as the lights fade down.*

## 9.

*Lights up on the main stage. Brady is at the center, wearing a fancy suit and holding a golden microphone.*

BRADY

Hello, my brothers and sisters in Christ. How are you all doing today?

*Audience reacts.*

Can ya'll hear me up in the balcony? Everyone up there in the nosebleeds feeling alright? I'm just playing with ya'll. I thank you for coming to tonight's Battle of the Bands. Remember, that tickets are still available our New Years Rockin' Millennium show! That'll start on New Years Eve and go well into midnight for the return of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ Almighty Amen. I said, can I get an Amen!?

*Audience reacts.*

Tonight, however, we celebrate two things. One. It is the night before our precious baby Jesus was born in that mangy barn exactly one-thousand nine-hundred and ninety-nine years ago, can I get an Amen!?

*Audience reacts.*

But, it is also the night that we crown our new house band who will create the sonic, acoustical field of wonder that will great our glorious Lord for his return, I said Amen!

*Audience reacts.*

Before we get to the battle. I must appeal to you a dream that I had. A dream that shook me to my very core. You see, in this dream, I was standing right here on this stage, when suddenly, a flash of light filled the church with blinding furiousity! As my eyes adjusted, I could see that I was standing in the presence of the one true God in heaven the almighty Jesus Christ. I immediately dropped to my knees and started kissing his feet. I was saying, "Oh Lord, I hope that I lived exactly to your plan and that you were proud of me". Can you believe that? I hoped that he was "proud of me". Completely left my mind that Pride was a sin. There I was, supposedly a pastor, supposedly well-versed in the Bible, and I asked if he was proud of me. Well, what did Jesus do? He laughed. He said, "Armand, boy, I am not proud of you." That just stung like a dagger in my heart. The Lord Jesus Christ said *that* to me. It hurt, I'll tell ya. It hurt bad. So, I said, "Lord, was I at least a good shepherd?" and he said, "Boy, you weren't even a good sheep". Well, I was confused. I thought I was living according to his plan. I thought that I was devoting my life to his teachings so that I may put some good in the world. He said to me this. "Boy. Look at your surroundings. Look at the power of your voice and the way in which you choose to amplify my teachings. Are they loud enough?"

*A soft, acoustic guitar starts playing.*

So, I thought back to this church. It's a good church, I tell ya. But, is it enough? Is It LOUD ENOUGH? Are we good enough to welcome the Lord when he arrives? I think we are. I can't do it alone though. We need your help. We need you to reach deep into your pockets and pull up everything you can spare so that we may get to where we need to be for the Lord's first physical steps on this planet in almost two-thousand years. I have made plans to rent out the football stadium for New Years Eve - you know the one. Big place, holds fifty-thousand people, every now-and-then some NFL teams come together to throw the ol' pigskin around. We got it. But, it doesn't come cheap. We're talking the entire package. State of the art video systems, security, concessions and vendors, special effect pyrotechnics and a whole slew of other stuff that I won't spoil the surprise for you. Long-story-short is it costs money. We need this. Please find whatever you can spare and spare a little bit more. Don't let the Lord down.

*A soft, drum beat starts playing with the guitar.*

Back in my dream, the Lord told me what would happen if we didn't worship loud enough. Actually, he showed me. Much like Paul witnessed in the Book of Revelation, I too was shown the end of the world. The furious tribulation that every non-saved soul is doomed to suffer. God told me that in an instant, he will rapture all of the good Christians off to heaven and begin seven years of war, famine, disease, and pain. He showed me... Well, maybe this'll get the point across.

*It's the End of the World As We Know It by REM starts playing. A curtain is lifted to reveal Jebediah, Rachel, and Paull playing the song.*

BRADY

NOT GREAT, IT STARTS WITH A RAPTURE  
GONE ARE CHRISTIANS AFTER  
TAKEN TO GREEN PASTURES

EARTH IS FULL OF PAIN, EVERYONE'S INSANE  
ALL THOSE LEFT DO PLEAD  
SCRAPING UP THEIR OWN KNEES  
PRAYING NOW TO NOTHING, SIN, NO, LOVE, NO, LOVE  
LADDER LEADS TO HEAVEN  
STILL TUMBLES DOWN, SWAYS, DROWN  
BURNING SKY OF FIRE, FOR ONLY SEVEN YEARS  
THEN ETERNITY OF FIRE IN A BRIMSTONE PIT  
LEFT HIM, SHOULD'VE MET HIM  
BUT THE DEMONS HAVE A HOLD OF YOU BY THE NECK

ROW BY ROW, SOUL BY SOUL, BEATEN, BRUISED, BROKEN, POKED  
 NO ESCAPE, ALL AROUND FLAME, RISE, SMOKE  
 UH OH, I DUNNO, SINFUL PAST, CANNOT GO  
 SAVE ME LORD, SAVE US ALL, SAVE MY FAMILY, NO, NO  
 WE SERVE OUR OWN NEEDS, DOWN HERE AS WE BLEED

BRADY

TAKE ME WITH THE RAPTURE, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE, LATE  
 JESUS CHRIST, LORD OF LIGHT, FOR ME, FIGHT FIGHT  
 SAVE MY SOUL TONIGHT

MICHAEL'S HORN

IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 I GIVE MY LIFE

BRADY

TWELVE O'CLOCK, RAPTURE TIME, EVERYONE IN A LINE  
 HOPE I DON'T GET LEFT BEHIND, LEONARD BERNSTEIN  
 GHANDI, ASK JEEVES, TEENAGER SELLING WEED  
 VANITY, MR. BEAN, EVERYONE ON HALLOWEEN  
 ALL HERE, LEFT ON EARTH TO DIE, RIGHT

MICHAEL'S HORN

IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 I GIVE MY LIFE

IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 IT'S THE END OF ALL DAYS AND I KNOW IT  
 I GIVE MY LIFE

*The song ends and the audience reacts.*

Give it up for Michael's Horn! You know, I hope that song inspired you to give to this glorious cause. Together, we can make Jesus' return a homecoming fit for the King of Kings. After all, when he comes back, what are we going to need that money for anyway? The only currency in heaven is smiles and praise. But, as we are still on the mortal plane, please use actual currency when voting. It's only one dollar per vote with no limit to how many times you can vote. Simply use one of the ballots located near the tithing boxes. Also, you can use any Nokia or Kyocera mobile phones and text our voting line for only \$1.99 per text. Text Battle1 to vote for Michael's Horn. Up next is the band that wowed us all at the preliminary

audition. They came out of nowhere to show us that anyone can be a star, no matter what their limitations are.

Please welcome, Jane's Convi-- Oh. It appears the teleprompter is saying there has been a slight name change. Please, give a warm round of applause to, The Eccentrics!

*The Eccentrics are nowhere to be seen. The lights BLACKOUT. After a beat, they BUMP back on. The Eccentrics are standing there in white pants, white button ups, and whitetank tops. They start singing a version of "I Want It That Way".*

CAM

YEAH

NICOLE

YOU ARE A LIAR  
A GOD DENIER  
BELIEVE WHEN WE SAY  
YOU WON'T GET AWAY

GIDEON

WHEN YOU CAME INTO OUR HOME  
CONVINCED US YOUR ROLL  
WAS TOO GREAT  
BUT YOU WON'T GET AWAY

CAM

TELL THEM WHY

ALL

YOU SCAMMED THEM FOR ALL THEIR PAY

CAM

TELL THEM WHY

ALL

YOU WERE NEVER PLANNING TO STAY

CAM

TELL THEM WHY

NICOLE

YOU NEVER WANT TO HEAR US SAY  
YOU WON'T GET AWAY

EMMA

DO YOU, NOT WONDER  
IF THEY, ARE UNDER



YOUR SPELL, ANYMORE  
 YOU HOLD NO POWER, WH-WH-WHORE

*Emma embarrassedly claps her hands over her mouth.*

CAM  
 TELL THEM WHY

ALL  
 YOU SCAMMED THEM FOR ALL THEIR PAY

CAM  
 TELL THEM WHY

ALL  
 YOU WERE NEVER PLANNING TO STAY

CAM  
 TELL THEM WHY

NICOLE  
 YOU NEVER WANT TO HEAR US SAY  
 YOU WON'T GET AWAY

CAM  
 NOW WE CAN SEE THAT YOU'RE FALLING APART  
 FROM THE WAY THAT YOU USED TO BE  
 YEAH  
 YOUR WALLS ARE CLOSING IN  
 AND EVERYTHING  
 IS GETTING A BIT BLURRY

NICOLE  
 YOU ARE A LIAR  
 A GOD DENIER

CAM  
 DENIER

EMMA  
 DENIER

GIDEON  
 DENIER

DENIER  
NICOLE

WE WANNA HEAR YOU SAY  
CAM

ALL  
YOU SCAMMED THEM FOR ALL THEIR PAY  
YOU WERE NEVER PLANNING TO STAY  
YOU NEVER WANT TO HEAR US SAY  
YOU WON'T GET AWAY

TELL THEM WHY  
CAM

ALL  
YOU SCAMMED THEM FOR ALL THEIR PAY

TELL THEM WHY  
CAM

ALL  
YOU WERE NEVER PLANNING TO STAY

TELL THEM WHY  
CAM

NICOLE  
YOU NEVER WANT TO HEAR US SAY  
YOU WON'T GET AWAY  
NO, WE WON'T GET AWAY

*The song ends. The audience reacts, (hopefully in stunned silence).*

BRADY  
Uh... Ha ha, what a strange and powerful imagination you kids have. Certainly, we should take nothing away from those lyrics and just forget that this performance ever took place. I, for one, have no idea who or what that song could have been about, and am honestly a little ashamed that a band that we had such hope in, produced a sacrilegious and offensive song that instantly disqualifies them. That's right. Michael's Horn wins. They are the new house band. There will be no refunds for anyone who has voted already. Have a good night.

*Brady heads for an exit fast, but Lois, Bill, and Kyle block his exit, along with Harold.*

Oh! Fantastic! Please take away your sinful children at once. After the show we can discuss options to get them the help they so desperately need.

KYLE

Yeah, that's not going to happen, "Pastor".

NICOLE

Harold. Please place my brother under arrest.

BRADY

What!?

NICOLE

You see, not only is Harold here an excellent Biblical scholar, he is also one heck of a police chief.

HAROLD

I was the inspiration for Columbo. And Christine Cagney. Not Lacey though. She was an amalgam of a few different people, most notably --

NICOLE

-- Thanks, Harold. But, I think we'll have to save that story for later.

BRADY

You have no evidence of any wrongdoing on my part. Zero. Zilch.

CAM

That's not exactly true. You see, with all of the improvements you've made to the sound system recently, it got me thinking about my own equipment. I had this tape recorder that, for the life of me, I couldn't remember where I left it. Then it hit me. I left it in the green room when you kicked us out the first time we met. I went back for it and found the tape had run out. It recorded a lot of random stuff, but also one interesting tidbit. Hit it, fellas.

*A recording plays over the sound system.*

BRADY (RECORDING)

We are going to bleed this place dry with promises of better, expensive equipment and renovations to the church. Except, we were going to pocket most of the money instead.

HAROLD

And, that's not even all of it. You really shouldn't back load important conversations with such detailed exposition.

*Brady looks at Harold curiously.*

I also write Cozy Mystery novels.

BRADY

Of course you do.

NICOLE

Time to go, brother.

BRADY

If you think you're getting away with a clean record you're mistaken. I'm going to turn on you so fast.

NICOLE

I don't think so. I've already turned on myself.

*Nicole holds her hands to Harold, who proceeds to handcuff her.*

I may not have a clean record, but I can have a clean conscience. And, hopefully, a clean soul. I've confessed everything.

BRADY

You... Judas!

NICOLE

Oh honey. That's such an elementary interpretation of the Bible. But, I guess that was never really your strong suit.

BRADY

Why you--! Mom would be so ashamed of you.

NICOLE

Maybe. I'll ask her one day. I have a feeling we'll wind up in the same place.

*Harold escorts Brady out. Brady is seething.*

*Lois, Kyle, Bill, Jebediah, Rachel, and Paul gather around The Eccentrics.*

KYLE

Jeeze. I don't know where to begin, kids.

LOIS

We can begin by saying we're sorry.

BILL

That's right. We're sorry for doubting what you were capable of. I mean, you really proved us wrong here. You saved the church and our congregations' livelihoods!

KYLE

We're proud of you.

LOIS

All of you.

*Lois puts a hand on Nicole's shoulder. They share a smile.*

JEBEDIAH

We shouldn't have treated you like that either.

PAUL

Yeah. We were jerks.

CAM

No, I acted like a monster. I should have never said that to you, Jebediah.

JEBEDIAH

Thank you, Cam. I appreciate that.

RACHEL

Christians should never treat anyone that way. We are supposed to love one another as brothers and sisters. Not treat those who are different like they are less than.

GIDEON

Well, I suppose we did act a little un-Christian toward you all too.

RACHEL

It's in the past.

KYLE

Well, now that this old feud has been put behind us, maybe we can figure out who won the Battle of the Bands?

EMMA

I think we have to forfeit. We won't have a singer soon.

NICOLE

Of course you do. It's you, Emma. It always should have been you.

EMMA

What? I can't. What if I mess up the songs again?

CAM

I think we've proven over the past week that anything you add to a song just makes it that much better.

GIDEON

And unique.

EMMA

Thank you, guys. I can't tell you how much that means to me.

JEBEDIAH

So, if you don't forfeit, then who's going to be the new house band?

NICOLE

You know... I actually have an idea about that.

*Everyone gathers around Nicole as she relays her plan.*

*Lights out.*

## 10.

*Smoke fills the church stage. After a moment, a LOW RUMBLING sounds. Colorful lights slowly turn on around the stage, almost as if we were in an alien starship.*

*A spotlight comes up on a banner that reads, "HAPPY NEW YEAR".*

*Another spotlight comes up on a banner that reads, "WELCOME BACK, JESUS".*

*The familiar, rockin' synth beats of Europe's, The Final Countdown begins to play.*

*Lights up on the newly formed band, The Eccentrics. Cam, Gideon, Emma, Jebediah, Paul, and Rachel all take their positions.*

EMMA

WE'RE LEAVING TOGETHER  
BUT STILL IT'S FAREWELL

JEBEDIAH

AND MAYBE WE'LL COME BACK  
TO EARTH, WHO CAN TELL?

EMMA/JEBEDIAH

I GUESS THERE IS NO ONE TO BLAME  
WE'RE LEAVING GROUND (LEAVING GROUND)  
WILL THINGS EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN?

ALL

IT'S THE FINAL COUNTDOWN  
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

EMMA

OH WE'RE HEADIN' FOR HEAVEN (HEAVEN)  
AND STILL WE STAND TALL

JEBEDIAH

'CAUSE MAYBE THEY'VE SEEN US  
AND WELCOME US ALL, YEAH

EMMA/JEBEDIAH

WITH SO MANY LIGHT YEARS TO GO  
AND THINGS TO BE FOUND (TO BE FOUND)  
I'M SURE THAT WE'LL ALL MISS EARTH SO

ALL

IT'S THE FINAL COUNTDOWN  
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN  
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN  
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

*The chorus continues as, indistinguishable through the haze, a certain Jesus-shaped form stands silhouetted by a light. He raises his arms and - BLACKOUT.*