

THE LOCUTORIUM

MUSICIANARY

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICKY SKAGGS

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A true tradition is something living and life-giving, received and practiced, rooted and growing, solemn and playful. Being rooted in a living tradition helps one explore and create. In his faith, family, and music Ricky Skaggs knows where he comes from. Born in the hills of east Kentucky, he had a mandolin in his hands at age five. He lives in Tennessee now, not too far from where he was born, and he has been playing and singing ever since, bringing the ancient tones of bluegrass and country to contemporary audiences around the world through his concerts and recordings. The fans and music industry are in agreement: Ricky is one of the greats. He has won fifteen Grammys. He is a member of the Country, Bluegrass, Gospel, and Musicians Hall of Fame. He has won awards as a mandolinist, guitarist, fiddler, singer, collaborator, and producer. He has recorded number one singles and albums. He is a member of the Grand Ole Opry. He has played with many of the greats: the “Father of Bluegrass” Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, Emmylou Harris, Bruce Hornsby, and his wife, Sharon White. His work in music has borne abundant fruit, but Ricky is always quick to note that everything, including

his musical talent, is a gift from God. He knows the Holy Spirit is alive and at work in the hearts of men, and he sees his music as a collaboration. He's a musicianary.



Ricky Skaggs

Ricky's opening prayer:

Father God, we thank you so much for this time. I pray that your Holy Spirit would lead this. Guide and direct it, Lord, to what you want it to be, and let us speak about your faithfulness to us even when we're unfaithful, Lord, and how you use music to touch so many lives around the world in a universal language—your language, not just our language. It is one of the ways, God, one of the many ways you use to touch the depths of their heart and their inner spirit. Thank you God for it. We're thankful to be musicianaries that take music out of the Church but not the Church out of us. Help us take music out to the world, Lord, where hurting people are—they need a touch from you Lord, and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Can you speak about your experience of faith and music growing up?

When I was growing up, my mother was the only one in the family that I knew of that prayed. My dad was a believer and a wonderful Christian man but very quiet. And he would spend a lot of time going out in the woods, and he would take these walks. And I believe now that he was spending time with the Lord when he was going out in the woods: talking, hunting, whatever. He loved music, but Mom was sort of the spiritual leader of the home. She was the barometer for righteousness and godliness. She was a godly woman who had a precious relationship with Jesus. It was really wonderful.

As for music, she told me early on, when I was just learning to sing and play the mandolin, that God gave this gift, a talent for playing and singing that I should always be aware of. She told me I should be grateful and thankful for it because I have something that many other people do not have, but God chose to give this to me, and I should always honor it and honor him, the Gift-giver more than the gift. That was a great thing. It was good to know early

on because it started creating a humility to know that the Father had given me something but not to make me more special than someone else. Once I got older and started reading the Scriptures, I realized that these talents and gifts—they're never for us. They're always for others. They're for someone else. So I think that's what she was really trying to let me know.

It often seems that some of the best musicians are also very humble.

Yes, they are. My friend Garth Brooks is a perfect example of that. He is one of the most humble people, and thankful. He does so many good things that nobody knows about. I'm glad that he doesn't publicize that kind of stuff. He's so gracious. People don't know that Alice Cooper is a Christian. It's amazing. I've never got to meet him but I've seen him interviewed and man, he is so humble. Goodness gracious. He is so kind and gentle and he uses his gift to influence others. When I found out he was a Christian I just laughed so hard. I thought, "God, you are so funny. I love how you just disperse gifts as you see fit. They are your gifts, and you can give them to whoever you want to. You can give the measure to whoever you want to, but we're responsible for our gifts and what we do with it." The question is: Do we do it unto ourselves, or do we do it to honor the Lord and glory in the Gift-giver not the gift?

Speaking of the unexpected, my Mom often says God is the divine ironist. He does the unexpected but in order to teach us. You wouldn't necessarily think Alice Cooper is a strong Christian, but he is. The Lord often teaches us and uses us in ways we didn't plan, and we need to be open to that.

That's true. I never thought I would be in churches speaking and sharing the Gospel. I thought I'd be more up in front of people in a club or a casino or a bluegrass festival, but here in the last four or five years, I've had more offers from churches and pastors to come and share what's on my heart—what the Lord is giving to me

and what I'm hearing from him. The Spirit is always at work, even when we're sleeping, you know. When we're quiet and still, that's really when the Lord wants to speak to us because he's got our undivided attention.

Could you speak about American roots music? Maybe you could speak about your love of it, how you learned it, and its history?

The foundation stones of bluegrass really started getting laid, I think, with the Irish and Scottish immigrants coming over, bringing the fiddle tunes, the pipes and whistles, their hearts, and their lonesomeness even for their homeland. They brought their sounds to the hills and hollers of Kentucky and the western part of Virginia, western North Carolina, east Tennessee. The whole Appalachian region was bombarded with Scotch-Irish immigrants, and much of what we know as bluegrass was laid through that culture—certainly the fiddlin' and that kind of stuff. I think Bill Monroe really felt the same. He would talk about the ancient tones, old sounds, and old ways. He had an uncle named Pendleton Vandiver, a.k.a Uncle Pen. He really influenced Bill with those old style fiddle tunes with those slides and slurs, the speed of the bow, and the speed of the fiddle.

There's also our African American brothers and sisters who brought these shoutin' hymns out of the fields, cotton fields, and plantations and bringing all that they went through, which was a terrible thing. The Irish were treated awful in a lot of places too when they came to America. The banjo and that sound came up through the South into the mountains and hills and hollers of Appalachia. And then you had the Cajuns. Many of them came from Nova Scotia, which is New Scotland. Those islands up there were impacted by both Scottish and Irish immigrants, and much of their music also has French influence like the Cajun accordion. The Cajuns were kicked out and eventually moved to Louisiana and said, "We're gonna go so far back in the woods ain't nobody gonna know where we are." And so they got to southern Louisiana.

You just can't imagine what American music would be without those different people groups. Goodness gracious alive, y'know. You think about the color and sound, it's like a gumbo. Think of everything that goes into a gumbo. The Irish may be a piece of sausage. The French may be the rice. I'm just saying it's the sum of all the parts that makes something this beautiful and gives America such a beautiful array of sounds, not just one sound.

One of these days we will have one sound. It will be one sound unto the Lord. Many pieces without sameness. Jesus wants us to be one as he and the Father are one. But oneness don't mean sameness, y'know. God never wanted to make things the same. When he does a new move of the Spirit on the earth, it's never like the last revival. It's always greater, it's always bigger, it's always a different manifestation of the Spirit because God works in multifaceted and diverse ways.

Have you seen Amazing Grace, the new documentary about Aretha Franklin? It's basically a two-night concert of her roots music, which is Gospel. We've spoken about the cultural influences coming together for American roots music. But these cultures also retained the Gospel in their music. A lot of this music comes from within the Church and is about a Christian response to suffering. These displaced peoples retained their music but through it prayed and processed what they were going through. Can you speak about that and if that rings true with your experience?

The first audience I ever played for, besides Mom and Dad, was singing in church. I would sing harmony there with my Mom and Dad. And I remember these old preachers and old men of God would stand over me and start praying for me after the service or even during the service. These old prophets and preachers would start prophesying over me. "One day God is gonna use you—you're gonna be an instrument in the hand of God when you get older!" I think that there are many musicians that got their start in church,

especially in the rural areas of America, where all of us went to church as kids.

I once heard Billy Graham say just because you're in a garage don't mean you're a car. Meaning: Just because you go to church don't mean you're a Christian. You gotta accept Jesus and what he did—his price to purchase us from sin and death. It's almost too simple for the human mind to understand it. You take it by faith, which is just how we accept the Lord anyway. Everything is by faith: faith that you can't see, faith you can't hear, faith you can't touch. Scripture is full of people who grew in faith. Faith is something you grow in. You start seeing faith and you start hoping for things and praying for things. Faith is like a muscle you have to exercise. Otherwise, your faith muscle is not going to be the taut strong arm that God wants you to have. Faith is something you do every day.

That reminds me of your song "Can't Shake Jesus." You've recorded many songs over your career, but you usually include this one in your live set. This song reveals a tension. That Christ is close to us but he's also pursuing us like the Hound of Heaven. God wants to always go deeper with us. Can you explain that song a bit?

It's not like a Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" thing. I think of course that there are things that offend God, but I know that in the next breath God is also 100 percent loving and kind and all the attributes that we know of him. Jesus says he wipes away every tear, yet I believe there are things that break the heart of the Holy Spirit.

Regarding that song, my friend Gordon Kennedy co-wrote it with Phil Madeira who's a keyboard player in Nashville and has toured with Emmylou Harris. They got into a writing session, and they were talking faith. Phil was talking about his friend who used to be in a relationship with a religious zealot who used the Word of God over her and on her, and if she didn't add up to it he would use the Word to knock her down. That relationship finally came to an

end. Then she studied Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions and at the end of the day she couldn't shake Jesus. There was still something about Jesus she knew as true. So when Phil said, "She just couldn't shake Jesus," Gordon said, "That's what we're writing right there. That's the title."

That's how the song came about. Yes, we do it almost every show. People come up to me at the book table after shows when I'm signing books or meeting fans and they tell me just how much that song affected them. They see the picture the first verse gives:

Naked and alone, cold cobblestones,
They beat him 'til the blood ran.
They brought him to die, the cross up on high,
With spikes through his feet and his hands.

With those four lines, you're at Calvary. You see it. You cannot hear those words and not see the cross and not see Jesus on the cross. I never really set the song up much when we play it because I want the Holy Spirit to use not my words but the words I'm singing to paint a picture or let people see what they need in that moment. It's such a strong evangelistic tool.

We have a lot of songs. We just wrote one called "We're One or the Other" about the two thieves on the cross with Jesus. Because we're one or the other. There's a thief that cursed God, and there's one broken and humble that says, "I have nothing to give you but my life. Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom." He didn't start well, but he finished well. Obviously, he had nothing to give the Lord. But the Lord isn't looking for things we can give him. He's looking for our heart. He wants us to speak the Word and realize that Jesus is Lord of all.

What about your successes as a musician? What stands out for you in your career?

After I found out I was going into the Country Music Hall of Fame, there was an interviewer who asked me if this was the greatest thing I've ever achieved. On this earth, maybe yes, but the greatest thing any of us can achieve is hearing the Lord say "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come into my kingdom." He will or he won't say those words. That's the greatest thing we could ever have.

Br. Justin Bolger entered the Order of Preachers in 2012 and hails from Frederick, MD. He studied business at the University of Baltimore and earned a master's degree in philosophical studies from Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, MD. He also wrote, recorded, and performed as a singer/songwriter.