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Steve Turner. *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song.* New York: Ecco, 2002. xxxii + 266 pp. $23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-000218-3; $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-000219-0.

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Published on H-Amstdy (May, 2004)

Toward a History of "Amazing Grace"

Billed on its book jacket as an "unprecedented musical history" and aimed at the general reader, *Amazing Grace* is indeed the first book-length attempt to trace the history of a single song. Given its enormous popularity and canonical status in American culture, this song is an apt choice for such an exploration.

Turner, a music (mostly pop/rock) journalist who has published in *Rolling Stone* and *Mojo* and whose other books focus on Marvin Gaye, Van Morrison, and the Beatles, aims his book at a general audience and divides it into two parts. The first part, called "Creation," examines the life of John Newton, the hymn's author, from his rebelliousness and deistic inclinations as a youthful sailor through his conversion to Christianity after surviving a frightening storm at sea to his captaincy of slave-trading vessels and, finally, to his career as a minister, hymn writer, and abolitionist. The second, titled "Dissemination," follows the song in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States from its appearance in early shape-note hymnals through the development of gospel renditions to its entrance into American popular culture as a pop-rock standard.

Turner sets two primary goals for part 1. Self-consciously revisionist here, he explodes what he calls the "folk myth version" (p. 49) of the hymn's origins, according to which Newton converted to Christianity and abandoned the slave trade after his near loss of life, and wrote "Amazing Grace" about his having done so. In fact, Turner argues, Newton began commanding slave-trading ships only after embracing Christianity, saw no inconsistency between these two commitments, and turned against slavery only gradually. Turner's other key concern is to pinpoint precisely the song's musicological roots and date of composition. For the latter, he settles on the second half of December 1772, a date he deduces from Newton's intention of using the hymn to accompany his New Year's Day sermon for 1773. For the former–having acknowledged that Newton did not participate in the eighteenth-century evangelical revival in England–he rests content to locate Newton within a Calvinist theological tradition, the new current in popular hymnody being established by Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts, and a contemporary tendency, apparent in the hymns of Watts and Philip Doddridge, to refer to divine grace as "amazing." He also identifies the Biblical sources of the song's lyrics.

"Dissemination" grounds the early spread of "Amazing Grace"–shorn of most of Newton's original verses–in the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and in the simultaneous shape-note revolution in American music. In particular, he notes its suitability to the camp meeting emphasis on simple songs of interdenominational appeal. He ranks William Walker–whose *The Southern Harmony* (1835) set the lyrics to the now-familiar tune and brought the hymn to a wide churchgoing audience–"second only to Newton himself" (p. 123) in the hymn's history. Walker's hymnal and Benjamin Franklin White's rival *The Sacred Harp* (1844) made "Amazing Grace" "a vital part of many American lives" (p. 126) by the time of the Civil War. The song took strong root in American culture because it expressed not only "the archetypal evangelical conversion" but also "the groans of a people who frequently had to struggle with poverty, sickness, and the elements in order to survive" (p. 126).

"Amazing Grace" became even more firmly established in the American hymnal canon and became the nation's "spiritual national anthem" (p. 131) during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as the result of several important developments: Dwight L. Moody and his musical assistant Ira D. Sankey used it to elicit emotional conversions in their urban revivals; Edwin Othello Excell wrote a new, contemporary, Europeanized arrangement that became the "standard" by virtue of its acceptability to a new, self-consciously genteel, and culturally influential northern middle class; Robert H. Coleman, a music leader for the Southern Baptist Conven-

tion's annual meetings, established it as a staple in Southern Baptist hymnody; African Americans embraced the song as an expression of their yearnings for freedom; and the Fisk Jubilee Singers and later black gospel recording artists such as Mahalia Jackson, the Blind Boys of Alabama, and the Mighty Clouds of Joy perpetuated the camp meeting version. Turner attributes its expanding appeal to its increasing value as secular entertainment and its nostalgic qualities in a modernizing America.

Turner links the real pop culture breakthrough of "Amazing Grace" to its increasing adoption in increasingly "secular" contexts during the mid- to late-twentieth century–first by folk singers such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, who politicized it in the name of the downtrodden and brought it into urban clubs and the civil rights movement during the early 1960s; then by countercultural figures such as Arlo Guthrie, who performed the song at Woodstock and featured it in the 1969 film *Alice's Restaurant*; and finally by pop and rock artists such as Janis Joplin, the Byrds, Aretha Franklin, and Judy Collins, whose 1970 recording, rooted in the Excell version (in contrast to Franklin's rendering, which was more akin to Jackson's) hit the bestseller charts and sparked the song's spread into a wide range of musical genres. According to Turner, these developments, part of a broader infusion of Christian themes into pop and rock music, were inspired by intensified nostalgic yearnings in the wake of the upheavals of the 1960s and *accelerated* the song's dissemination by stimulating its expansion beyond evangelical Christianity and into the New Age and human potential movements. "Amazing Grace" survived in secular contexts because its message of overcoming hopelessness and oppression was both spiritual and material and because the concept of grace–on which the author ruminates in the final chapter–has taken on multiple meanings. The song's appearance on key chains, refrigerator magnets, bumper stickers, and T-shirts in recent decades therefore raises few eyebrows.

Turner's book is commendable for its attempt to combine musicology with cultural and religious history, but as a work of cultural or religious history it falls short. For example, Turner makes the highly problematic and unsubstantiated claim that the Bible's tenets "inevitably" led to a decay in the practice of slavery (p. 61), and closes part one with a chapter on Newton's antislavery activities in which "Amazing Grace" is barely mentioned and its relation to Newton's abolitionism is left unexplained. Perhaps more seriously, Turner's claim that he had "no previously published studies to draw on" (pp. xxi-xxii) as he worked on the second half of the book is true only in the narrow sense. While there may have been no prior intensive studies of "Amazing Grace," Turner had access to a growing scholarly literature on the history of American hymnody, religion and American popular culture, and American evangelical Protestantism, all of which would have helped him contextualize the song's development but is absent from his bibliography. Greater familiarity with the recent work of June Hadden Hobbs and Jon Michael Spencer, not to mention a host of doctoral dissertations, might have prompted him to address women's role in spreading the song during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; to consider what the song tells us about the cultural relation between "white" and "black" hymnody; to use "Amazing Grace" as a window into the actual practice of hymnody; and to explain further the song's precise function in stimulating conversions in the context of a growing Arminian emphasis in Protestant theology. Such important studies as R. Laurence Moore's *Selling God* (1994), meanwhile, would have provided insight into the meanings of the song's expanding presence on the American pop culture scene–particularly the implications of the song's popularity for the notion, increasingly questioned by historians of religion, of an ongoing twentieth-century "secularization" of American life.

The "general reader" and professional scholar alike will find *Amazing Grace* enjoyable reading, but in the end the book reminds us less of how far we have come in wedding musicology to cultural history than of how far we have yet to go.

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Citation: Bret E. Carroll. Review of Turner, Steve, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9298

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