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Under the Sun: Songs from Ecclesiastes

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*Under the Sun: Songs from
Ecclesiastes*

A Senior Honors Thesis by Emma Kay Smith
2024





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The thread of story through
Under the Sun





01

Introduction

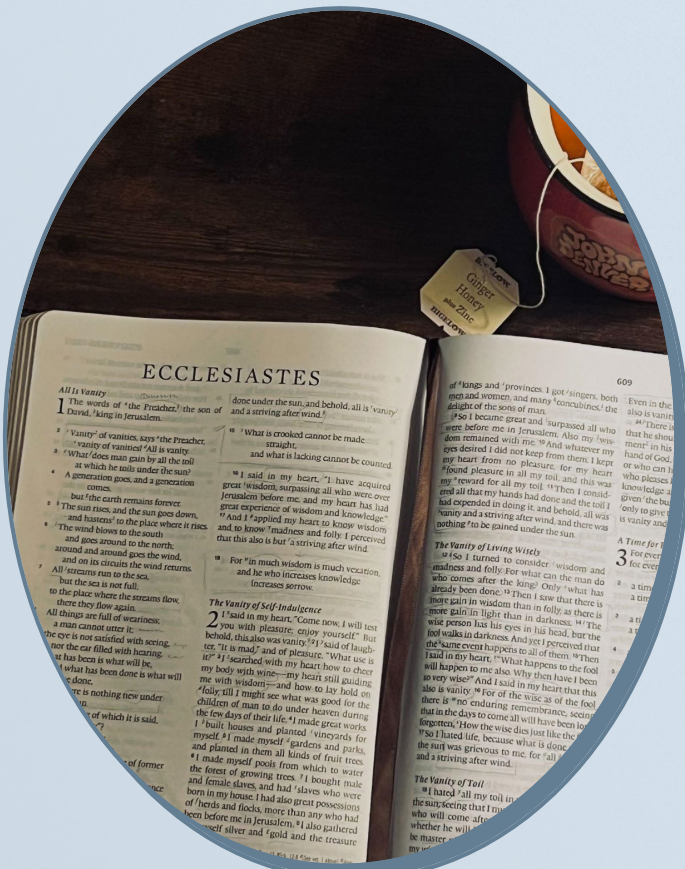
The Groundwork



Inspiration

In 2022, I did my directed study, *A Semantic-Thematic Study of Ecclesiastes* with Dr. Nikolaishen. We explored the text of Ecclesiastes, zoning in on its themes and images, to try and get at, as much as we could, the essence of the book. I knew that I wanted in this academic year to shift, using my directed study as groundwork, to a creative project.

Throughout my time at Ouachita, God has made it clear that I'm an artist first. I've also reignited my love for 1960s-era folk music and become a songwriter. One night, I thought to myself, *Why don't I just use the inspiration I've gleaned from Ecclesiastes guide me in writing my own folk songs like the ones I love so well?* Thus the project's aim came into being: to craft an EP inspired by Ecclesiastes and 1960s folk music.





How do I “do justice” to the text of Ecclesiastes in my songwriting while retaining creativity?

◆ Essential Question ◆

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again...”





02

The Process

Research and Rhythm






My Research: Listening



Listening to the Greats

- Bob Dylan
- Leonard Cohen
- Joni Mitchell
- Joan Baez


I especially observed the biblical allusions in Dylan and Cohen's work: how did these writers use the Bible to communicate?



Listening to the Text



Audio-Bibles are a great invention.

- What does the rhythm of these words inspire in me?
 - What story or journey is happening in Ecclesiastes?
 - What passages are taking me on a journey?
- 



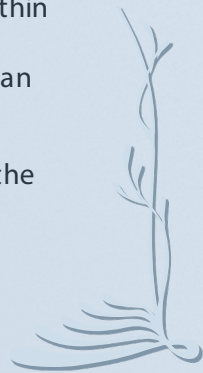


Biblical Allusions in 1960s Folk Music

- Ideas, images, and characters from the Scriptures were often used to blow the whistle, to bolster the fight for human rights, expressing human stories more evocatively in turbulent times.
- COHEN: Method - builds a theology of love, wisdom, and redemption in his song “Suzanne”
- DYLAN: Flash/Parable - early and late 60s see biblical language used to “protest” or moralize, mid 60s present surreal, Rimbaldian symbolist stories

Under the Sun is situated firmly in its source text, so I operated within a middle ground between these two approaches. The songs themselves come from specific passages in Ecclesiastes rather than any overt personal experiences of mine.

However, sung in the first person, they reflect the universality of the book, and they take on a character called **the Seeker**, who represents the ways that Ecclesiastes has shaped me.





03

The Songs

The Story of *Under the Sun*



Track Listing



01



sweeter
almost

Eccl. 6:15



02



whether love
or hate

Eccl. 9:16



03



the clouds
always win

Eccl. 11:46, 12:44



04



the seeker's
song

Eccl. 1:211, 3:9, 8:15,
12:13



Common Ground : In each song, the Seeker encounters **ignorance** , and goes on a journey of gathering the **bedrock of her perspective/choices** from her **experiences** , **settings** , & **reason** .





Vital Question

What is truly good for me to do?

Main Themes : the **path of human life** under the sun, the **reality of death** and the **slippage of time** toward it, and an **unshakeable awareness of God** as actor upon creation

Interacting with the Vital Question

04 the seeker's song

- By the end of the EP, the Seeker, cognizant of her own inability to teach anything to life/her world, reaches the conclusions made by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes:
 - "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13)
 - "Eat and drink and be merry" (8:15)
- The Seeker acknowledges & accepts her powerlessness, turns to what she *cando*

(In folk tradition: set to the tune of "Red Is the Rose" (Irish) or "Loch Lomond" (Scottish))



02 whether love or hate

- The song in which the Seeker is most acquainted with her own ignorance - ignorance of her future
- Question becomes, "What attitude should I give my assent to, knowing that I know so little about what will befall me?"
 - The Seeker learns that it is best to leave herself, her future, and her works "in the hand of God" as an act of faith
 - This plants the first seed of the acceptance reached in track 04
- Follows from revelations in track 01...





Interacting with the Vital Question

01


sweeter almost

- This song acts as the catalyst for the Seeker's whole journey
- Meditations on the enjoyment of life
 - The wealthy man of 6:1-5 is an acquaintance of the Seeker's
 - His inability to find satisfaction in his work, children, etc. shows that he has voided his life of its significance
 - The Seeker's observation leads to a mystical vision: the dead are "happier" than this man
 - Therefore, what ought she do with her own life to avoid such a fate?



03

the clouds always win

- Catalyst for "the seeker's song"
 - Most personal to the Seeker: tension between hurt at a lover's idleness and her mistaken, futile attempts to remedy it in him
 - Confronts her own vanity as a necessary step toward arriving at the Preacher's conclusions
 - Song applies the agricultural principles of 11:4 to another universal scenario: wounded, dead-end love
 - Most complex feelings toward God, toward herself, toward another person
- 

Thank You!



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