

# Theater: 'Early Shaker Spirituals' Are Resurrected; 'Airline Highway' Pile-Up

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**EARLY SHAKER SPIRITUALS: A RECORD ALBUM INTERPRETATION** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**AIRLINE HIGHWAY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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### ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

It's a cruel irony that every piece of technology we create to capture the world around us usually kills off some earlier technology, trapping whatever work it contains in an outdated format that becomes all but lost to us. In turn, that new format is superseded by something else and everything it contains becomes trapped in an outdated format and essentially lost forever, like a museum no one will ever enter again, dusty and forgotten.

Look at music. Wax cylinders and 78s were a miracle that allowed more people to hear and enjoy great artists than ever before in history. At the same time, it (and piano rolls and other devices before it) killed off a tradition of communal singing and folk songs that had been handed down for thousands of years. No one knows how many were lost in time. But at least the great performers of the age were captured and preserved on 78s! But the 78 was displaced by the LP and the vast majority of music captured on 78s has been all but forgotten. The LP was shouldered aside somewhat by the cassette and 8-track with all three of them crushed by the compact disc. Most of the music captured on LP never made it to CD. And now CDs have been supplanted by the MP3 format and digital music in general. And yes, most of the music on compact disc never made the transition.

A curious other shift happened. Almost every step of the way, the ability to record music increased. From the 78 to the LP to the cassette to digital music, recording got cheaper and easier. So as format displaced format, the mountain of actual recorded music increased exponentially as well, with more and more of it slipping through our fingers at every stage. People used to need a lot of cash and the ability to book a recording studio; now they can create world class recordings in their living room and send it out over the internet in a few easy steps. The more music we create, the more we lose.

It's true in a lot of other areas: most silent movies have been lost forever. Most TV shows never made it onto VHS or DVD. Now as more and more and more TV shows are created for hundreds of channels in the US (and multiply that all over the world) how many of them will be preserved and archived for future generations? Literally anyone can publish a book and post it online for the world to see. But who can keep track of it all, much less read it?

To give one small example, according to the new book [The Millionaire and the Bard by Andrea Mays](#), industrialist Henry Folger was a passionate, compulsive collector of all things Shakespeare, especially First Folios but far more than that: period instruments, pamphlets, scholarly works, reference books Shakespeare might have used and literally half a million "playbills" for shows of the time. He built a library in DC to house it all for scholars to dive into. It officially opened in 1932. That was more than 80 years ago and they haven't even finished cataloguing everything he collected.

So here we have Early Shaker Spirituals. It's a strange, defiant, quixotic, fruitless and all-the-more-admirable-

for-it evening of entertainment created by [the Wooster Group](#), the latest in a series of works inspired by old, all but forgotten LPs. One show was based on an album of Hawaiian hulas, another somehow linked to LSD. This particular album was released in 1976 on the Rounder Records label and any serious music buff will recognize that as a smart, independent outfit with great and varied tastes. Release number 0078 from that company, *Early Shaker Spirituals* was recorded sporadically over 13 years by the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake.

Onstage, a group of five women in various configurations sit or stand, literally singing along to side one of the original LP as it plays in their ears via wireless headphones. A handsome narrator (Jamie Poskin) bounces up between most songs to introduce a tune or two and read some of the brief explanatory notes from the LP liner notes. They sing it, pause, wait for more brief comment if any and then move on to the next. Another man stands on the side by a turntable, lifting and lowering the needle back onto the grooves of the actual LP as close as possible to where they left off. If the needle returns to the last snatch of the previous song, the women sing quietly along with the fade out and then wait for the new song to begin in their ears before starting again. Mostly, we hear just their singing though sometimes the original recording is introduced softly into the mix as well. Towards the end, they are joined by four men who dance along with them. It lasts one hour and is, appropriately enough, seemingly simple and straightforward in every way. I'm not sure Shakers would take a bow, but other than this forgivable theatrical tradition, it's purely in the spirit of that strangely memorable religious sect.

It's amusing to see New Yorkers who might not have been to any house of worship for a long time quietly and respectfully listening to performances of old Shaker spirituals. But this is not a recreation. It is a reinterpretation; pay attention and you'll see. The costumes by Enver Chakartash with Naomi Raddatz are sober and straightforward for the women, true. But there's a dash of modernity for the men, especially the modern shirt print sported by Matthew Brown (like the other men, he was sitting in the audience and surprised me when he jumped up and began taking part). The set by Elizabeth LeCompte & Jim Clayburgh is also modest, but more suggestive than authentic, with half a wall and half a window and a few pieces of furniture hinting at their world easily enough. Kate Valk directs invisibly, with dances drawn from obvious sources like pamphlets on traditional Shaker dances and first-hand accounts, but also from temple marches found in a documentary about Malcolm X and varied music videos on YouTube (which isn't as un-Shaker like as you'd think; they always embraced technology).

The layers of remembering are thick and suggestive here. First there is the remembering of the original LP, a heroic attempt to nail down just a handful of the thousands upon thousands of Shaker spirituals that poured out of this community over the years via "gifts" from spiritual presences like *The Little Shepherdess* and *Laughing Jack* (I think that was his name), musical guides channeled by members. Many of the songs were captured on paper by the sect in their heyday of the mid-1800s. Dubbed the Era Of Manifestations, it's when the Shakers grew to some 6000 strong and the songs they created grew even greater in number. Yes, there were probably more Shaker spirituals than there were Shakers.

Frances McDormand has a lovely monologue (taken from the LP, I assume), in which a Shaker woman discusses her fascination with the songs she heard and becoming determined to learn as many of them as possible. Even here, the show is subtle, with McDormand beginning her story speaking over the voice of the original Shaker on the album, a woman we can hear for a while from the original recording, until it fades away and only McDormand is heard in her place. Later, the wonderful Suzzy Roche delivers a poignant tale of an old woman's remembrance about being a child and hearing a 90 year old Shaker woman sing and begging her to sing some more. (I won't spoil this poignant story by revealing any more.)

Most of the songs are easily grasped, some with amusing references to liquor and most everyone will know their greatest hit, "Simple Gifts" aka "Tis the gift to be simple," a melody seized upon by countless other faiths and popularized forever by composer Aaron Copland. The evening is not moving in a theatrical sense, but it moves. Personality peeks out, as when LeCompte very subtly moved her feet in time at various moments, a show-offy

gesture in this restrained setting that could mark her as a bit of a live wire in Shaker terms. It might be welcome: as of 2013, only three Shakers remained at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine, their last remaining community.

So Shakers strove to learn these songs. Rounder Records strove to preserve at least a few dozen of them. And now the Wooster Group resurrects that LP, one of thousands upon thousands lying alone and unplayed in attics and garages around the world. And even in the performance they reclaim the act of sitting and listening to an LP, the communal experience that existed when people would sit around a turntable and read the liner notes and stare at the album art and just listen to an album, as a group. With digital music and headphones holding sway, the idea of an album as a group experience seems archaic. But here they are, raising and lowering the needle, listening to a song, singing along, sharing the liner notes and then raising and lowering the needle again. It was quaint. It was sweet. When can we do it again?

**AIRLINE HIGHWAY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE**

Every character is aggressively colorful in Lisa D'Amour's new comic drama *Airline Highway*. Set in New Orleans, it's like very bad Tennessee Williams, with each new person spouting cold truths, snappy rejoinders and hard-won pearls of wisdom until you long for someone to just show up and not have a backstory or some pain bursting to get out. No such luck.

The excuse for all this noise is the funeral of the very much alive Miss Ruby, or should I say the barely alive Miss Ruby (Judith Roberts). She's the colorful (of course) and beloved matriarch of The Humming Bird Motel, a rundown place off Airline Highway and across the street from a soon to be built CostCo. Miss Ruby once ran a strip club (again, of course) and this faded impresario has gathered around her "duckies," the lost and wounded souls that strip clubs and rundown fleabag motels attract.

You've got the hooker with a heart of gold and a taste for hard drugs (Julie White as Tanya); the drag queen who has seen it all, baby (K. Todd Freeman as Sissy Na Na and I couldn't make that up); a street poet with not a dime to his name (Ken Marks as Francis and boy can I relate!) and prodigal son Bait Boy (Joe Tippett), back for the afternoon after making good in the fabled suburbs of Atlanta, which might as well be Shangri La it seems so far away from these down and outers. It's all as cliched and dire as the descriptions of those characters sound.

True, Miss Ruby is not exactly dead yet, but in a moment of lucidity Ruby says she wants to have a funeral so everyone can say nice things about her while she's still around. Bait Boy's return stirs things up. He left behind the homeless stripper Krista (Caroline Neff), who can't even afford a room at the Humming Bird Motel anymore, which makes her truly lost. She ignores the attentions of the handyman Tim Edward Rhoze, a nice guy who likes her and would provide a stable environment relatively speaking and thus is of no interest to the self-destructive Krista, who doesn't really think she's worthy of love anyway. Bait Boy was the one, she believes, wrongly and you know Krista and he will exchange words if not bodily fluids. He brings along his new wife's 16 year old daughter Zoe (Carolyn Braver) and she immediately starts interviewing everyone for a class project in as forced a case of exposition as I've seen in a while.

This is dire stuff, with that kid Zoe yelled at every five minutes by this and that person and then bizarrely saying she wants to move in. (She'd last about five minutes.) The funeral kicks into high gear, revelations are made, Bait Boy is built up and torn down and then Miss Ruby is trotted out to give her benediction. You can see it all a mile away, which only makes the predictable twists and turns of D'Amour's work more exhausting. Her *Detroit* was a flawed but interesting play that became a Pulitzer finalist. This is a long way down from that.

Director Joe Mantello has had a rough season, with the musical *The Last Ship* bedeviled by a weak book and now this. He does what he can -- namely an effective act two opener mid-party that mildly brings the show to life

for a few minutes before wearing out its welcome. The scenic design by Scott Pask is the show's strongest element. It's a realistic and effective set, capturing the main strip of rooms, the manager's office, a useful stairway for variety as characters talk to each other. The set is ably supported by the lighting of Japhy Weideman and especially the music and sound design of Fitz Patton, who subtly places this motel in the context of a wider world without calling attention to itself. The costumes of David Zinn are a little over the top, but that's unquestionably what the material called for.

Clumsily, a gun is introduced in act one, namely the repeated suggestion that Bait Boy likes his girls underage. However, it never goes off since teenage Zoe convincingly describes him as behaving appropriately with her. Indeed he's (sort of) shackled up with an older woman now and Krista was apparently of age when they dated for six long years, so why did the play hint darkly about it anyway?

Under the circumstances, you simply feel for the actors asked to embody such cliches and applaud those who manage here and there to carve out a little humanity. Marks is good as the poet, perhaps in part because he's unburdened with any elaborate revelations. Tippett is appealing as Bait Boy and captures his quick descent into old habits effectively, though he can't make sense of the bizarre behavior the character indulges in towards the end. Roberts and Freeman are both saddled with nonsense in their monologue and snappy comments, respectively. What could they do except deliver it with gusto? And Julie White surely yearned for a meaty dramatic role after years of being so good in so many comedies. She surely deserves much better than this.

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[Constellations](#) \*\* 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) \*\* 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) \*\*

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) \*\* 1/2

[Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center](#) \*\* 1/2

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