

In County Clare

At daybreak we drove
from Barna down to the Burren,
through Clarinbridge and Kilcolgan.

After Kinvara
among the fields and farms,
hemmed in by the low mountains
and grey sea, I spotted

a curlew flying. Through the window
I followed its undulating flight
and thought I saw it almost glance my way.

Where I come from one has to seek out
such rare sights in special places.

Here, on this mild winter's day I could see
I was not the one watching, but the watched,
welcomed as a wayfarer who is only passing through,

this curlew clearly content
in the only place it needs to know as home.

Reading the Desert Fathers

The room's silence,
the fire,
the dog curled up in the corner.

And a crack in my heart revealing
a space where the flame still burns.

Holy Island

It is almost
the last day of the year.

Driving across the causeway
we see snow at the shore's edge.

And a few miles out
a whiteness on the top of the waves.

I am just another pilgrim – lost
and left wondering,

Is this the world's end
or its beginning?

SONG OF LIFE:
MERTON, MUSIC AND JAZZ

IN THE FLURRY OF LAST MINUTE preparations for the Asia trip, Merton presented his friend of over a decade, Ron Seitz, with a stack of records 'mostly jazz' as a parting gift.² These records have since disappeared but we can speculate about titles based on Merton's documented conversations.

Certainly John Coltrane's *OM* had pride of place with other selections from the tenorman's so-called 'late' or 'spiritual' period.³ We would find albums by the Kansas City Stride pianist Mary Lou Williams.⁴ Also included would be traditional blues artists such as Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins. More popular fare would include Bob Dylan⁵ and Joan Baez.⁶ We would also find albums by Wes Montgomery; other performers may have included Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong whose recordings Merton collected in his youth.⁷

It is interesting to speculate what would not have been in the stack. Discussion with Merton's friend Dick Sisto⁸ indicates that his Jazz knowledge would have been spotty. Access to recordings and live venues was limited. So while aware of Coltrane he seems ignorant of Sonny Rollins or Miles Davis. While he justifiably praises Mary Lou Williams he knows nothing of Bill Evans or Thelonious Monk.

The stack of records functions as a *Desert Island Discs* indicator of taste, priority and personality. We see Jazz as a recurring theme in his life. He is both keen to participate in it and yet aware of its hold on him.⁹ Through such enquiry we can see Merton in a new way, as one connecting with popular culture as he encountered it. Such an approach stands alongside studies of Merton and Art¹⁰ or Merton and Jack Kerouac.¹¹ Had

he lived longer, there would have been time for publication of his intended study of the Blues.¹² It would have been wonderful to hear him on Billie Holiday or Nina Simone.

Beyond Jazz itself, attention to musical themes in Merton's writing and teaching demonstrates not only his considered use of musical image and metaphor but also a remarkable ingenuity in linking faith and spirit with music. One example from the recorded addresses to Novices at Gethsemani illustrates my point.

Merton asks the novices to distinguish between poetry and song, even popular song. What can a song say that other forms such as poetry cannot express? If a song is a poem that can be sung, this implies music where the listener hears something with a rhythmic pattern expressed over time. This is something different from hearing continuous prose; even noise (such as a moving train), which can become rhythmic, even satisfying.

Song...reaches much deeper into the heart of your being. It appeals to a deeper activity, which itself is love. [There is] an inseparable relationship between singing and love... Where there is deep love for God there has to be song. It is inevitable. Song is an expression of life; listen to the birds; they are singing all over the place; people tend to sing; in the solitary life you can sing all you want without bothering everybody.¹³

In conversation with Ron Seitz, Merton goes further.

'[W]e would die without these songs which make us persons and not things ...'¹⁴

So why would we die if we lacked certain songs to, literally, enliven us? How do songs personalize us in the humanistic sense? For Merton, music is part of an individuation-like process leading toward discovery of the true