"LET'S GET ON THAT ROAD TO HEAVEN:"
THE BLUEGRASS GOSPEL SONGS OF RUDOLPH O'DELL

by

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Abstract

Daniel Rudolph O'Dell was a minister, musician, and songwriter who spent nearly fifty years performing on local radio stations in Southwest Virginia. His music reflects the religious doctrine that was taught at the time and the bluegrass musical style that gained popularity in the early 1950s. After considering O'Dell's biography and the bluegrass/gospel music tradition that played such an important role in the shaping of O'Dell's songwriting, this paper will argue that three of O'Dell's songs – "Live for Sweet Jesus," "The Tragedy of Pulaski," and "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven" – serve as evidence of an especially close connection between the composer and his music.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late grandfather, Rev. Daniel Rudolph O'Dell, who gave so much of his life by ministering to the community through music. His devotion to God, his wife Bessie, his family, and all the people whom he touched with his kindness, humility, guidance, and music will forever remain within the hearts of all who knew him.

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Introduction

In March 2002, Leslie Hager-Smith, a reporter from the *Roanoke Times*, knocked at the door of the recently widowed Bessie O'Dell, longtime musical partner and wife of the Rev. Rudolph O'Dell. Rudolph was a local musician who hosted and performed on a weekly radio show that aired in the area for almost fifty years. The reporter had heard of O'Dell's passing from local gospel radio stations and newspapers and wanted to know more about the man and his music. As Hager-Smith walked through the O'Dells' family room, he soon discovered that they were much more involved in making music than he had previously thought. There were hundreds of recordings stacked on a shelf from the O'Dells' weekly radio broadcasts, as well as several guitars, microphones, recording machines, harmonicas, and a suitcase full of sheet music.

He soon discovered that Rudolph O'Dell was more than just a minister of music who held an occasional radio broadcast; he was a man who had devoted his life to serving his God through music via a weekly radio program for almost fifty years, providing his listeners every week with an assortment of music, preaching, and a little humor all thrown into one broadcast.

The article that Hager-Smith was researching the day he met with Bessie O'Dell appeared in the Current section of the *Roanoke Times* on March 17, 2002, with the title "His Music Was His Ministry." In the article, Hager-Smith talked about the man and his music by describing him as a hard-working man who once owned a mulching business and a wood business to provide income for his family and support his radio program. Hager-Smith also spoke with Bessie about how long O'Dell had hosted the radio program, where he got his start, and what venues he performed in. She was quick to point out that O'Dell had performed throughout the area in many churches, nursing homes, and family reunions, and had preached at

several weddings and funerals, but would never accept any form of gratuity. If a love offering were collected, he would always give it back to the church. He also encouraged his other band members not to accept any form of payment because he felt that he was preaching to people through music, and he thought Christians should not accept payment for informing people how to be saved and go to Heaven.

The songs that O'Dell wrote and sang on his weekly radio programs were reflections of the man himself. While O'Dell imitated traditional bluegrass/gospel style in his songwriting, his songs reflect a deeply personal connection to his own religious faith, his sorrows, and the tragedies in his life. His songs were personal reflections of his faith, his love of God, and his love of humanity. O'Dell's desire and ambition in life was that people would listen to his songs and become so inspired that they would accept Jesus Christ and follow his teachings.

After considering O'Dell's biography and the bluegrass/gospel music tradition that played such an important role in the shaping of O'Dell's songwriting, this paper will examine three of O'Dell's songs as evidence of an especially close connection between the composer and the songs themselves: "Live for Sweet Jesus," "The Tragedy of Pulaski," and "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven."

Chapter 1: Biography

Daniel Rudolph O'Dell was born on February 14, 1927, in Snowville, Virginia, a small town in Pulaski County. He was the seventh child of Charlie Lee O'Dell, a farmer, and Maggie Kidd O'Dell, a homemaker. His family worked very hard on their farm growing a variety of vegetables for their own use, as well as to sell to their neighbors. At one time the family owned and operated a cannery on their farmland.[1] Charlie Lee was often plagued with poor health, including recurring seizures, high blood pressure, and heart problems, and could not tend to the farm, requiring Daniel Rudolph O'Dell and his brothers to take care of the farm themselves. Rudolph and his brothers often helped out on their Uncle Lewis O'Dell's farm as well. Rudolph would later recall that even as a child many times he would work until dark tending the crops, and would be so exhausted that he would lie down in the field and sleep until morning.

Childhood

Rudolph' childhood was not a happy one; constantly plagued by illnesses like his father, he grew up at the height of the depression era. His family's small cannery faltered, and O'Dell and his family often went without food. On occasion, he and his mother would stand in the local soup line to get enough food to feed the family. O'Dell's house burned down when he was a young man, due to an oil lamp being turned over, and the family had to stay with a relative until a new house could be built.

Rudolph O'Dell and his family went through a lot of emotional problems as well. His mother, Maggie Kidd, suffered from severe depression most of her life. O'Dell often recalled that his mother would go through their house wringing her hands in anguish and even threatened

[1] R. Joan Aliff, interview by author, Snowville, Virginia, February 18, 2013.

to commit suicide on many occasions. O'Dell also had a troubled relationship with one of his older brothers, who often verbally and physically attacked him.

The O'Dell family worked hard all week, but on Sundays they took time off to go to church. They attended Max Creek Baptist Church in Hiwassee, Virginia, a small Primitive Baptist church that had an austere style of worship; no collection plate was passed, no musical instruments were allowed in the church, and no social gatherings or dinners were allowed on church property. In fact, the church did not even have a full time pastor. Instead, a traveling pastor visited various Primitive Baptist churches in the area and once a month they would have a Sunday church service. It was during these monthly church meetings that O'Dell began to sing, and he developed a love for the old Baptist hymns that would later steer his ministry and song-writing career. The church services lasted about two hours, after which families took turns serving as hosts to the entire congregation and pastor for dinner at their houses.

Education

O'Dell attended Snowville's small one-room schoolhouse, only going as far as the third grade. The schoolhouse was not equipped with inside plumbing, and heat came from a pot-bellied stove that sat in the corner of the school house. During the winter months it was the male children's job to keep wood in the stove.[2]

The state did not provide transportation for children going to school at this time, so O'Dell and his siblings had to walk to and from the school every day. Many times fierce snowstorms would keep the O'Dells from attending school during the winter months, and when they were able to attend, O'Dell and his siblings would take turns carrying the younger brother

[2] Ann O. Davidson, interview by author, Draper, Virginia. March 4, 2013.

and sister on their backs. The severe weather hindered education and he soon got behind in his schoolwork. O'Dell wanted to continue his education; however, his father's continuing ill health forced him to quit school and help his brothers and sisters.

Musical Beginnings

O'Dell's love of music did not come from his immediate family, but from his future wife Bessie's family. Before he and Bessie married, every Saturday night O'Dell and his brothers would gather at Mr. and Mrs. Warren Foutz's residence to listen to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio. Afterwards, everyone would play music and sing gospel songs as well as old bluegrass and country songs. The Foutz familywould have many neighbors over to join them on Saturday nights, and Bessie's mother would cook food for everyone. After several years of courtship, Bessie, then fifteen years old, married twenty-one year old Rudolph O'Dell at the local justice of the peace's office on December 4, 1948.

O'Dell taught himself to play the guitar, and his wife's mother taught him the harmonica. He started writing songs in his late teenage years, first learning the craft from a locally known singer and songwriter, Zeb Sutphin. Sutphin taught O'Dell the rudiments of structuring a song, but after that O'Dell had no other formal training. O'Dell never learned to read music and his handwriting was illegible, so his wife Bessie became his musical assistant. "He'd keep a book at the bed, and he'd wake up and tell me had a song in the middle of the night. He'd sing it, and I'd write down the words."[3] O'Dell never needed to write down the melody of his compositions, for he "kept that tune in his heart to tell the band." [4]

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[3] Jane Graham. "Veteran Gospel Singer Rudolph O'Dell Dies." *The Southwest Times* vol. 99, no. 57 (March 8, 2002) A-1, http://www.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed February 14, 2013).
[4] Ibid A-1.

O'Dell began singing in churches and radio stations in the early 1950s. He had several cousins who performed with him, including Elbert O'Dell, who would later record several songs with him. Rudolph and Elbert traveled extensively to various radio stations around the area to sing gospel music, including stations located in Hillsville, Blacksburg, Radford, Pulaski, and Roanoke, as well as stations in North Carolina and West Virginia. They also sang at their own church in Virginia.[5]

In the late 1950s, O'Dell started attending Dora Highway Baptist Church, which his cousin Edgar O'Dell had started in Pulaski, Virginia. Aloma O'Dell, an original member, and wife of his cousin Elbert, recalled that O'Dell and others would stay late at church on Sunday and Wednesday nights, long after the service had ended, playing music and singing for the "pure enjoyment of it." She also reported that, for O'Dell, "music was his life." O'Dell and his band wanted to share their love of music and their faith with all people, and invited others to join their ministry in music by traveling to various neighbors' houses, where they would occasionally record their weekly show. One of the first gospel radio stations where O'Dell sang was WHHV, located in Hillsville, Virginia. Aloma stated that O'Dell was "very dedicated, and would always have people lined up to listen to his music." O'Dell and Elbert and their wives would often gather up all their children and travel to different churches and revivals to sing each week.[6]

O'Dell recorded gospel programs every week from the late 1950s until his death in 2002. At first, he and his band performed their show live in the radio stations; however, it became difficult to accommodate all the band members in one small room, and since O'Dell wanted

[5] Elbert O'Dell, interview by author, Pulaski, Virginia. April 24, 2013.
[6] Aloma O'Dell, interview by author, Dublin, Virginia. March 5, 2013.

everything to sound just right, they decided to start pre-recording the program each week at their home, taking the finished product to the radio station to be broadcast. At first, O'Dell recorded his programs on a reel-to-reel tape recorder, then he moved to cassette tapes in the early 1980s when they became more cost effective and easily available.

O'Dell's first gospel group was named The Gospel Harmoneers. By the 1960s the group changed its name to The Max Mountain Gospel Singers, named after a mountain in Hiwassee, Virginia. The band initially included his cousins Cletus, Randolph, and Junior O'Dell, and featured a variety of instruments, including banjo, mandolin, harmonica, acoustic guitar, and bass guitar. On occasion, a band member would also play the autoharp. The band first started performing on WRAD in Radford, Virginia in the late 1960s. They later added other radio stations to their weekly schedule, including WPUV and WBLB in Pulaski, and WHHV in Hillsville.

O'Dell tried to serve as a role model for his younger cousins; he did not tolerate drinking, profanity, or any type of promiscuity from any of his band members.[7] O'Dell's cousin Elbert once recalled that "Rudolph gave young people a sense of satisfaction, to do something good for people, by ministering and singing gospel music, which kept us out of mischief. When you sang gospel music with him, you did not have time to get into trouble."[8]

The band's membership changed over time, as some band members grew weary of his clean cut image and eventually drifted away; however, O'Dell always found other members who wanted to carry on his ministry in music with him.

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[7] Elbert O'Dell, interview by author, Pulaski, Virginia, April 23, 2013.
[8] Ibid.

By the early 1960s, O'Dell had written many songs and recorded them on 45 rpm records with the help of his cousin Elbert, Charles Marshall, and Tony Smith. They recorded their first song, "Live for Sweet Jesus," in 1965, along with "The Tragedy of Pulaski," on Cozy Records in Princeton, West Virginia. The next year he recorded "You Pray for Me" and "Glad That You Have Prayed for Me." At least one of his band members felt that he would become more famous and earn more money if he switched styles and started singing rock n' roll or "hillbilly music," but O'Dell refused to change styles and made it clear that he was not singing gospel music to become rich. O'Dell had a strong commitment to gospel music and felt he was serving God by ministering through music to others. O'Dell never accepted any money or donations, and never charged to perform.

While his band members accepted O'Dell's religious beliefs and his convictions for not charging a fee to perform music, many of the band members got married and started families of their own, and no longer had the time or the money to continue O'Dell's crusade. O'Dell himself struggled at times with his duties as husband, provider, father, minister, and singer/songwriter. He worked at several jobs over the years to support his family, all the while continuing his weekly radio programs as well as his appearances at churches, homecomings, reunions, and other special events.

In the mid-1960s, O'Dell became friends with a man from Giles County, Elmer Jones. O'Dell's son, Daniel Kenneth ("Butch"), met and married Brenda Dickerson, a niece of Elmer Jones. O'Dell, Elmer Jones and his sister Viola Dickerson, along with her two children Brenda

and Gary, began performing with O'Dell and his wife on their weekly radio programs.[9] Viola Dickerson and her two children later dropped out of the band, but Elmer Jones continued performing with O'Dell until Jones' death from cancer in 1982.

For years, O'Dell was the main singer on his weekly radio programs. However, in the early 1970s his wife Bessie joined him as a singer and song collaborator on his weekly radio shows. She recalled that on one occasion in the early 1970s, when O'Dell and his band were rehearsing their program for WRAD in Radford, Virginia she heard that there was a particular tune "that they did not have the correct melody for, so I jumped in and helped, and I never got out of it after that." [10] O'Dell and his wife worked together as a team on their weekly radio broadcasts until the day he died.

A few days before the Friday night recording session, O'Dell and his wife sang a variety of gospel songs but tended to sing the traditional bluegrass songs that had been sung and recorded years earlier by Roy Acuff, Ralph Stanley, Bill Monroe, and the Carter Family. He and Bessie would sit down and decide which songs to sing for that week's broadcast. O'Dell always incorporated at least three of his own songs into each broadcast. They would then go through an old leather-bound book full of hundreds of traditional gospel songs and decide which ones fit the program that week. He once commented about his and his wife's collaborative efforts that "We never argue. We pick out our songs and we get it all together." O'Dell always began each radio program with a theme song that he had composed; for example, on WBLB in Pulaski, Virginia, he began each program with "Live for Sweet Jesus," one of the original songs that he and his

[9] Brenda O'Dell, interview by author, Pearisburg, Virginia, March 14, 2013.
[10] Leslie Hager-Smith. "His Music Was His Ministry." *The Roanoke Times* Sunday Current, (March 2002): 7, http://www.pclibs.newsarchive.com (accessed April 15, 2013).

cousin Elbert recorded in 1965. On WRAD in Radford, Virginia, he began the program each week with his song "Glad You Have Prayed for Me." In a 1987 interview for the *Southwest Times*, O'Dell stated that "This is our way of serving the Lord. It helps the sick people and shut-ins who can't get out. We don't ever get tired of singing. I believe whenever anyone is born, the Lord has a job for them to do; this is our job for him."[11]

O'Dell wrote approximately one hundred songs, all of them copyrighted through BMI in Nashville, Tennessee. O'Dell wanted his music to be heard by more people and always strove to find new venues for his music to be heard. He always hoped that a famous music celebrity would record one of his songs and make a "hit" of his music but that dream never came true. Although he never received world-wide recognition for his music, that did not deter him; O'Dell kept singing, preaching, and writing songs, trying to reach as many people as he could.

Family Life

The O'Dells felt that God had called them to help the poor and sick, and to live their religion, not just preach and sing about it. They opened their home and their hearts to anyone that came, often picking up hitchhikers and bringing them to their home for a hot meal and a place to stay. At one time they took in a young couple with two small children, feeding them and giving them clean clothes. They invited the young family to weekly family dinners and special occasions and provided them with jobs in their mulch and wood business. On many occasions, while attending various churches in the area, the O'Dells would meet a person who needed a

[11]Wayne Quesenberry, "Max Mountain Gospel Singers Mark 39 Years on Radio." *The Southwest Times* vol. 90, no. 99, (April 11, 1993): A-3, http://www.pclibs.newsarchive.com (accessed February 4, 2013).

place to stay for a couple of days or food to eat. O'Dell and his wife would always welcome them into their home.

Family played an important role in O'Dell's life. He was extremely close to his wife, Bessie, whom he idolized, as well as his three children, Reba Ann, Daniel Kenneth ("Butch"), and Kathie Lynn, and his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The O'Dells hosted Sunday dinner at their house each week for many years, attended by all of their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The holidays were very important to them, and they always had large gatherings at their house for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. As Rudolph and Bessie's children were growing up, they always found time and money to take their family on vacations and to the local fair that was held each year. Every Sunday, the entire family would visit other family members or friends, and would often stop along the road somewhere and have a picnic. O'Dell once said to his wife Bessie that "the children will not remember how poor we are, but they will remember the vacations and fun times that our family has had." [12]

Later Life

The 1980s were a dismal time for O'Dell and his family, as he was involved in one accident after another. In 1986 O'Dell was in a severe car accident with his wife Bessie and one of his grandchildren. The accident caused O'Dell to lose the eyesight in his left eye, he suffered a stroke and back and neck injuries, and Bessie was seriously injured as well. Bessie later had to quit her job due to her injuries, and never fully recovered.

O'Dell's health also began to deteriorate starting with several heart attacks and two strokes. It was also at this time that doctors found that he had hemochromatosis, a hereditary

[12] Ann O. Davidson, interview by author, Draper, Virginia, March 4, 2013.

blood disorder in which too much iron is built up in the blood, which required regular medical treatment.

In 1987, a stroke caused him to lose his speaking and singing voice for almost two years. During this time, his friend and fellow band member Jack Lunsford took over as lead singer on their weekly radio program. O'Dell received treatment for the side-effects of the stroke and ensured his family and friends that he would sing again. In the latter part of 1988, he fully recovered his singing and speaking voice.

O'Dell's wife, Bessie, began taking more control over their weekly radio programs, due to Rudolph's declining health. Despite its overwhelming success, O'Dell considered quitting the radio program due to his sickness. On one of his weekly radio broadcasts in February 1987, he announced his plans to retire from the radio program, and he was inundated with calls from listeners begging him not to quit. O'Dell decided that he would not retire after all, and that it was selfish of him to even consider it. "As long as the people want us to sing, we'll keep at it." Despite being plagued by constant sickness, O'Dell continued his weekly radio programs with more vigor than ever before, declaring to his daughter Ann that he had to keep going "'cause you have to. That's what God put you on this earth to do: the Lord's work." [13]

Throughout the years, O'Dell was plagued by many illnesses, accidents, tragedies and mental anguish. He suffered a nervous breakdown while in his mid-thirties, for which he underwent electro-shock therapy and received sixteen treatments. He also lost part of each of his index fingers in two separate incidents: one at a furniture factory where O'Dell worked and the other at a sawmill that he once owned. As O'Dell aged, his health declined rapidly. In the early

[13] Ann O. Davidson, interview by author, Draper, Virginia, March 14, 2013.

1990s he was diagnosed with coronary heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, which required him to use an oxygen tank to breathe. He suffered his first heart attacks at age forty-one, and had eleven more heart attacks and two strokes before his death in 2002. O'Dell underwent a quintuple heart bypass in 1998. Despite his increasingly frail health, O'Dell was determined to continue his weekly radio programs.

By the year 2000, O'Dell was forced to use oxygen on a full time basis and was constantly hospitalized for pneumonia, congestive heart failure, and other heart and lung infections. Despite his health issues, O'Dell refused to quit his gospel program. He continued to record his weekly radio programs and serve as an assistant pastor at a local Pentecostal Holiness Church in Pulaski, Virginia. His love of God, his wife, family, and the community kept him alive. [14] As he once stated, "As long as God gives me the strength to keep going, I'll keep singing. We don't ever get tired of singing." [15] O'Dell also refused to quit playing his harmonica. The harmonica had become increasingly difficult to play due to his lung condition, but he once said, "I put the harp to my mouth, and God does the blowing." [16]

On New Year's Eve, 2001, O'Dell received a lifetime achievement award, presented to him by Larry and Kathy Nipper from WBLB radio station and local minister and singer J.B. Shelton, Jr., for music that he provided to the community for over forty years. O'Dell recorded his last weekly radio program in February 2002. He passed away on one month later, on March seventh, 2002, at the age of seventy-five.

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Wayne Quesenberry, "Max Mountain Gospel Singers Mark 39 Years on Radio," *The Southwest Times* vol. 90, no. 99, (April 11, 1993): A-3, http://www.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed February 4, 2013).
[16]Wayne Quesenberry. "Singers Feature Gospel in Bluegrass: Group Named for Mountain in Hiwassee Going Strong forThirty-Three Years." *The Southwest Times* vol. 84, no. 44, (February 22, 1987): A-9, http://www.pclibs.newsarchive.com (accessed February 14, 2013).

Within a few hours of O'Dell's death, word began to spread throughout the community. WBLB in Pulaski, Virginia and WRAD in Radford, Virginia made a special announcement of his passing. The *Southwest Times* featured O'Dell on the front page with the headline "Veteran Gospel Singer Rudolph O'Dell Dies." The station manager at WBLB, Sandy Long, described O'Dell as "a person who would give and help. He was always faithful. He always wanted to bless everyone. He's been a blessing to everybody here."[17]

In the weeks following O'Dell's passing, WBLB was inundated with requests to hear his music. Leslie Hager-Smith, from the *Roanoke Times,* came to visit O'Dell's widow, Bessie. He had heard of O'Dell's passing from various gospel radio stations, and had read the article in the *Southwest Times* and thought a little more information was needed about Rudolph O'Dell. The article, titled "His Music Was His Ministry" was published in the Sunday Current section of the paper on March 17, 2002.The article focused on O'Dell's early life and his affiliations with BMI in Nashville, Tennessee, and cited the many songs he had written as well as his weekly gospel broadcasts. Mrs. O'Dell told the interviewer: "If he had lived to Easter Sunday, he would have been solid on radio for forty-nine years." Mrs. O'Dell stated that even though her husband had passed away, she went ahead and had his last broadcast aired the weekend of his death because "I knew he would want me to run it. He spent a lifetime writing, performing, and recording gospel music"[18] A photo of the O'Dells can be found in Figure 1.

Today, only a handful of his former band members are still living. His weekly radio programs, most of which are served on cassette tapes, are deteriorating quickly, and only a few

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[17]Jane Graham. "Veteran Gospel Singer Rudolph O'Dell Dies," *The Southwest Times* vol. 99, no. 57 (March 8, 2002): Front Page, http://www.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed February 14, 2013).
[18]Leslie Hager-Smith, "His Music Was His Ministry," *The Roanoke Times* (March 17, 2002): Current Section, http://www.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed March 9, 2013).

of his 45 rpm records can be found. O'Dell never had the fame or recognition that he wanted, but his music did not die with him; the family, friends, and loyal listeners of O'Dell's gospel program still remember a man who tried to walk a path of righteousness, humility, and compassion for fellow mankind – a humble and kind man.

Chapter 2: The Roots and Style of Bluegrass/Gospel Music

In order to fully understand the nature of O'Dell's songs, it will be helpful to sketch briefly the roots and development of bluegrass/gospel music. Bluegrass music has been in existence for about 100 years, giving rise to many famous musicians, including Bill Monroe, Allyson Kraus, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, Carter and Ralph Stanley, the Carter family and the Lewis family. Every year, there are many festivals held throughout the country, celebrating this "pure, honest, and original style of music."[19]

Bluegrass as we know it today had humble beginnings, deriving ultimately from rural folk music in the southern Appalachian Mountains, one of the most rural areas of the country, in the early 1900s. It was originally described as "hillbilly music", as most people who originally played, sang or listened to this type of music were farmers or working class people.[20] Many came from families that lived on large farms and worked from sunrise to sunset, rarely traveling far from home, and whose only form of entertainment came from gathering together to play music, or if one of the families had electricity, listening to it on the radio.[21]

William Smith Monroe, or as people would later know him, Bill Monroe, is known as "the father of bluegrass music." He was born on a small farm in Rosine Kentucky, the youngest child of six. Monroe's mother and father both played a variety of musical instruments. They also sang and danced, and it was not long before he started playing the mandolin and the guitar. As a young man, he began playing on radio stations in the late 1920s, and by the 1930s he had

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[19] T. Ewing, (ed.), *The Bill Monroe Reader* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2000), 10.
[20] Ibid 10.
[21] Ibid 8.

developed his own style of music, which would later be referred to as bluegrass.[22] This name derived from a band that Monroe formed early in his career called the Bluegrass Boys, and it later became the official name for this style of music. In the early part of the 1930s Monroe had been trying to form his own musical style, a style that differed from country music as it was known then: "I wanted to have a style of music different from anybody else. I wanted to originate something."[23] He used a variety of past cultures and styles, and wove them all together into the style of bluegrass. Monroe once stated that he used musical styles from the "Negro Blues" to "Scotch music," from happiness to church hymns to form his own style.[24]

Monroe began a whirlwind of performances and recordings throughout the country in the 1940s with his band and his new style of music, which focused on virtuoso instrumental playing and a high-pitched tenor singing style known as the "high lonesome sound." [25] His band had a string of number one hits in the '30s and '40s, including "Mule Skinner Blues," "What Would You Give in Exchange," and "This World is Not My Home."

While Monroe occasionally devoted radio shows on Sundays to gospel music, he rarely performed more than one or two gospel songs in most performances. However, even though he may not have performed many religious songs during his concerts, Monroe insisted on maintaining an image consistent with what he considered traditional Christian values, refusing to

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[22] Ibid 28.
[23] Joti Rockwell, "What is Bluegrass Anyway? Category, Formation, Debate and Framing of Musical Genre," Popular Music vol. 31/3, (20212):377
[24] T. Ewing, (ed.), *The Bill Monroe Reader* (Urbana and University of Illinois Press, 2000) 45.
[25] Ibid 46.

play in dance halls or in any performance hall that allowed drinking. He did not consume alcohol, and he strictly prohibited any of his band members from drinking.[26]

Other bands soon copied his style, taking bluegrass farther than he could have imagined. Chief among these are The Stanley Brothers. Carter Stanley and his younger brother Ralph are considered direct descendants, musically speaking, of Bill Monroe's bluegrass style. The Stanley Brothers were born in Big Spraddle Creek in Dickerson County, Virginia, a small town with strong religious ties to the Primitive Baptist Church. They began their musical career in the late 1940s, forming a band along with Darrell "Pee Wee" Lambert, who was from West Virginia. Pee Wee Lambert played the mandolin, Ralph played the five string banjo, claw hammer style, and Carter played the guitar. Pee Wee sang tenor, Ralph sang baritone and Carter took the lead voice. They began traveling in the late 1940s and soon were in high demand all over the country, with a string of number one hits. The Stanley Brothers recorded more gospel songs than Bill Monroe had, modeling old Protestant hymns or old religious folk songs that they had heard as children in the Primitive Baptist Church. These religious songs, including "Rank Strangers," "Who Will Sing for Me," "Amazing Grace," and "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder," became number one hits.

Bill Monroe and The Stanley Brothers were not the only bands that lit up the bluegrass music genre. Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt became great recording artists on their own. Lester Flatt had played the banjo for Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys. In fact, Ralph Stanley imitated Lester Flatt's banjo picking style with his own fingering system, with thumb and forefinger only.

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[26] Carl Fleischhauer and Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass Odyssey: A Documentary in Pictures and Words, 1966-86,* (Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 27.

Musical Style

While bluegrass has been associated with country music from the early 1900s to the early 1950s, it does not deal with the same type of subject matter. Older country songs often made references to drinking, divorce or love affairs, whereas bluegrass has always placed family at the heart of its musical content, which is why it has been natural for bluegrass to blend with gospel music. Bluegrass/gospel, accordingly, tends to focus on family and strict adherence to Christian values, and will often refer to a family member directly or recount a biblical story or tragic incident. In fact, nearly all bluegrass bands have performed religious songs, and some bands like the Carter Family and the Lewis Family performed and recorded gospel music extensively.[27] As Fleischhauer and Rosenberg have observed, "Bluegrass is vigorously defended by its adherents on religious ground, even being described as 'honest music.'"[28]

Bluegrass/gospel music has certain characteristics that make it unique. It adheres to some of bluegrass music's style and techniques, but there are significant differences in the approach to its subject matter. As Howard Wright Marshall has shown, bluegrass gospel songs address one or more of five distinct themes: (1) individual salvation – the performer sings about his or her "hope of expectation of making it to that yonder city." Great emphasis is put on the sinner's being "saved" or "touched" by God's hands. There is a strong sense of reward for the believer and follower of Christ in the afterlife; (2) life's "rocky road" – this theme is closely associated with individual salvation. Christian faith teaches its followers that they must and will endure many trials and tribulations that test their faith including pain, sickness, heartache and death. All of

[27]Carl Fleischhauer and Neil V. Rosenberg, *A Bluegrass Odyssey: A Documentary in Pictures and Words, 1966-86* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 87.
[28] Ibid 88.

these are seen as part of God's eternal plan to weed out false Christians and test the true faith and beliefs of righteous Christians; (3) the maternal hearth – this theme deals with a mother's love for her children and for the "old homeplace," and how the mother "presides over the rural and mountain home and hearth, providing security and devoted love for her spouse and children;" (4) grief for the deceased – the loss of one's mother or spouse is sung about with great pain and anguish, even though the singer knows that person has gone on to be with God; and (5) the good Christian's action orientation – this theme focuses on the "good will" and "fruits" that the Christian has sown here on Earth and will be rewarded for in the kingdom of Heaven. While it was not generally believed that one's good deeds would be enough to achieve salvation, doing good deeds and "planting good seeds" on earth reflects the believer's work by spreading the gospel to those who do not understand it, or who reject it; doing good deeds and doing the Lord's work are seen as preparation for the bountiful rewards that await on Judgment Day.[29]

In Bill Monroe's style of gospel singing, the instrumental accompaniment was usually kept to a minimum. The songs did not contain any examples of instrumental virtuosity, and the banjo and other solo instruments did not appear at all. The tone was more reverent, reflective and more reserved than any of his secular songs. It was during a gospel song that Monroe often would play the autoharp, with its soft delicate sound, perfect for the message that he was trying to send his listeners: one of humility, compassion and obedience.

This all changed when the Lewis family began playing professionally in 1964. The Lewis family primarily played in the mountain regions of southern Appalachia and had studied the

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[29] Howard Wright Marshall, "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life: Patterns and Religious Expressions in Bluegrass Gospel Music," *New York Folklore Quarterly* vol. 30, issue 1 (1974): 31.

bluegrass style of Bill Monroe and others, adapting it to their own style of gospel music. The Lewis family started playing and singing in church congregations, schools and community halls and decided to bring the style of bluegrass to their gospel music.[30] They did not feel the need to separate the secular bluegrass style from the religious bluegrass style as they only sang gospel music. Their type of musical style began to flourish in the 1960s and 1970s, and was later imitated by the Easter Brothers. What made them special in the gospel circuit was their use of bluegrass instrumentation.[31] The Lewis family approached gospel music differently from Bill Monroe. Their music reflected God's love, grace, and blessings that had been bestowed on people. They rejoiced in praising the Lord, and felt their music should reflect their joy and happiness in serving God. Therefore, their music reflected this "happy approach" to the gospel repertoire, as it was woven into every show they performed. Unlike Bill Monroe's scaled-back musical accompaniment, the Lewis family made the banjo, played by little Roy Lewis, an integral part of the band. Roy would often have solos in the gospel songs, sometimes performing entire songs on the banjo alone.[32]

Scholars began to take bluegrass seriously in the late 1960s. In one of the first studies on bluegrass music 1965, musicologist Mayne Smith described five main characteristics of bluegrass: (1) bluegrass is hillbilly music played by professional, white, Southern musicians primarily for a Southern audience; (2) bluegrass is not dance music; (3) bands are made up of four to seven male musicians who play non-electrified instruments; (4) bluegrass includes interaction among instruments and voices; and (5) every bluegrass band includes a banjo in

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[30]Carl Fleischhauer and Neil V. Rosenberg, *A Bluegrass Odyssey: A Documentary in Pictures and Words, 1966-86 (*Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 87-91.
[31] Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 239.
[32] Ibid 240.

Scruggs style or some derivative.[33] Some of the bluegrass bands that featured some or all of these characteristics were the Stanley Brothers, Bill Monroe and his band, Earl Scruggs, and Lester Flatt. Two bands that broke away from the tradition and allowed women to be in the band were the Carter Family and the Lewis Family.

An important part of bluegrass music is the time signatures being in either duple or common time, giving it the "punch" and "drive" rhythm that is associated with this style of music. Examples of this type of meter are: "Keep On the Sunny Side," "The Wildwood Flower," and "Home Sweet Home."[34] Many of the musicians who perform in a bluegrass band are virtuosic instrumentalists as well as singers. They usually split up solos, taking breaks between verses of a song and providing a harmonic and rhythmic background behind the other singers.[35] Most bluegrass bands were made up of men only, whose vocal techniques tended to be rather impersonal and stylized, as can be found in traditional folk singing and most country music. This vocal singing style has been described as piercing, clear, and cutting, in which the singers, mostly the lead singer, sing with a high-ranging tenor voice. Often a surge in the tempo can be found in many bluegrass recordings and bands as the instruments tend to push the tempo ahead and add emphasis on the off beats.[36]

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[33] Howard Wright Marshall, "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life: Patterns and Religious Expression in Bluegrass Gospel Music," *New York Folklore Quarterly* vol. 30, issue 1 (1974): 15.
[34]Dennis Cyporyn, *The Bluegrass Songbook: Eighty-Eight Original Folk and Old Time Mountain Tunes* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc, 1972), 75, 78, 94,
[35]Howard Wright Marshall, "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life: Patterns and Religious Expression in Bluegrass Gospel Music," *New York Folklore Quarterly* vol. 30, issue 1 (1974):17.
[36] Ibid 19.

Vocal harmony also plays a central part in bluegrass style. In two-part textures, a tenor part is often added above the melody sung by the lead, while in trios a part is added below the melody line as well, known as the baritone part.[37]

[37] Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 65

Chapter 3: "Live for Sweet Jesus"

O'Dell composed one hundred songs during his career. "Live for Sweet Jesus" summarized his outlook on God and life (see Figure 2). It was written early in his career and was heavily influenced by the bluegrass style of gospel music that was becoming popular in the 1950s. Although it was written in the mid-to-late 1950s, it was not recorded until 1965, at Cozy Records, a small recording studio in Davis, West Virginia. It features two tenor voices, O'Dell's and his cousin Elbert's, with Elbert O'Dell also playing one of three guitars in the song (see Figure 3). The other two guitarists are Charles C. Marshall and Tony Smith.[38]

"Live for Sweet Jesus" is a strophic song with three verses and a refrain, and it is in a moderately quick 4/4 meter typical of the bluegrass style. The melody is simple, sung in a medium-high range, and is inundated with a repeated note pattern, which focuses heavily on the tonic. The opening verse (mm.1-5) is joyful and inviting, and has a sense of openness with an anacrusis/crusis pattern and an emphatic plea to the listener.

It has the effect of a sermon, as the opening is highly charged with energy and rhythmic momentum. O'Dell starts the phrase with a series of repeated C's that sounds almost like a trumpet fanfare, announcing to all the sinners that their time on Earth is short and they had better follow him on the road to salvation. The melody of the whole song hovers around the use of C for dramatic purposes. The harmony in verse one has a static tone until he cadences in measure five on G. O'Dell then uses the exact opening phrase structure to introduce the second half of the first verse (mm. 5-9) with the repetitive pattern of C's to reinforce the words "please get on that

[38] Daniel Rudolph O'Dell, "Live for Sweet Jesus," Elbert N. O'Dell, Charles C. Marshall, Tony Smith, Cozy Records no. 555/38368. 1965. 45 rpm.

path to heaven," only occasionally leaping down a fourth on the words "that" and "heaven." In the second half of the first verse, he uses the word "path" (m. 6), changing it from "road" (m.2). He then leaps back up to C with a sixteenth note pattern, on the words "just a little piece," to reassure the listener that Heaven is just a short distance from Earth "beyond the stars." This provides a sense of forward momentum in the piece that highlights the urgency for the listener.

After O'Dell resolves to the tonic on the words "beyond the stars," he immediately sings the refrain (mm. 9-17), which contains the highest pitches in the song. It at first sounds like a continuation of the first verse, with a lot of repeated notes; however, in the refrain O'Dell leaps up a fourth to high F, creating the characteristic "high lonesome sound" of bluegrass/gospel singers. Here O'Dell is alluding to Heaven as he sings, "there are so many prophets, have gone on before up there with our sweet Jesus, just beyond the heaven's door." Here again the opening phrase of the chorus creates a sense of restlessness for the listener; it contains many more leaps in the melody as O'Dell sings about other prophets that have gone on before. It is unclear as to why O'Dell uses the word "prophets." We do not know if he was alluding to the prophets of the Bible or using the word to describe other believers who had gone on to Heaven. The refrain ends with O'Dell again reassuring the listener that "heaven's door" is just "a little piece beyond the stars." After the refrain there is a short guitar interlude (mm. 17-20), a freely varied form of the melody which returns each time the refrain is sung.

The beginning of verse two (mm. 20-28) is exactly the same melodically and rhythmically as the first verse, with the repetitive use of C's on the phrase "we are saved by the grace of God" leaping down a fourth on the word "God" like it did on the word "heaven" (m.3). In verse one (mm. 1-9), the opening words are "Let's get on that road to heaven," and in verse

two (mm. 20-28), O'Dell is still trying to persuade his listeners to follow him on the road to Heaven as he sings "we are saved by the grace of God" and then repeats the plea "we should live it every day." By using the repeated C's, he adds more drive and force behind the words; there is the sense that O'Dell is pleading for the listener's life.

The refrain appears again after the end of verse two (mm. 28-36), and is identical rhythmically and melodically to the first refrain. At the end of the second refrain (mm. 36-38), we hear another solo guitar interlude, which has been elaborated a bit more and is shorter.

The crucial turning point of the song in terms of its message comes in verse three (mm. 39-47). It begins with O'Dell informing the listener "you had better lift up your eyes, for your life it soon will end," but immediately after warning the listener to adhere to his advice before it's too late, he breaks off from the theme of death and foreboding by telling the listener "and please don't worry, sing along, and take sweet Jesus for your friend." This sudden twist in the text can be found in many of O'Dell's songs. He often will take a serious or tragic theme and try to lighten the mood by offering a feeling of hope, peace and tranquility. This feeling of hope, peace and joy during troublesome times can also be found in his own personal life.

The song ends with a repeat of the chorus (mm. 47-55). This time the energy level of the song is at maximum level. Several voices can be heard along with O'Dell's in this robust ending. Once again O'Dell's cousin Elbert can be heard providing responses in a call-and-response performance style. Instead of ending the piece on a high note, O'Dell ends the piece by gradually slowing down at the end, and elongating the last few words of the chorus, "just beyond the heaven's door."

In this song O'Dell expresses the religious beliefs that he was taught in the Primitive Baptist Church that he attended as a child, especially the "emphasis on the individual and his personal ability to achieve salvation."[39]

It also summarizes his outlook on life, and the world in which he lived. His philosophy was simple, as related by his daughter, Ann:

> You may be an unbeliever, a sinner, and your life is about to come to an end; even though you are faced with death, you can still turn your life around, accept Jesus Christ as your savior, and be saved. He did not believe that it was too late for any person to accept Jesus; although a person will be plagued with fear, stress, pain, anguish, disasters, or illnesses, in God there exists a plan. If you accept the teachings of the Christian church, you do not have to fear or worry. You should shrug off the daily cares and problems in life, sing, be happy, and know that a better life awaits you when you die.[40]

O'Dell thoroughly believed in what he was trying to tell the listener. He himself was plagued by countless illnesses and accidents that nearly cost him his life and by financial troubles, but he did not give up; he continued to praise God and the blessings that He had bestowed upon him, through his music.

He believed that a Christian ought to be humble, offering everything one had up to God. In the second verse O'Dell sings "We are saved by the grace of God, we should live it every day, by humbling our old dirty selves, and kneel down and pray." He did not believe that a person's wealth or good deeds could assure them a place in Heaven, and he often asserted that people who

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[39]Howard Wright Marshall, "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life: Patterns and Religious Expression in Bluegrass Gospel Music," *New York Folklore Quarterly,* vol. 30, issue 1 (1974):20.

[40] Ann O. Davidson, interview by author, Draper, Virginia, March 14, 2013.

go to church regularly are not necessarily exempt from damnation. He stated that sinners were saved by God's grace, and that just because a person attended church weekly did not mean they were living a Christian life. O'Dell would often criticize local churches in the area, even vocalizing his frustrations and denouncing them on his weekly radio shows. O'Dell denounced churches that used the house of God for anything other than worship. He was against a minister being paid, a belief long held within the Primitive Baptist church, and he was opposed to members gathering at churches for social gatherings, to eat, drink, have bake sales, etc. He strongly opposed churches that felt like they had to have the latest sound equipment, game rooms or gyms located within their churches to entice younger members.[41]

O'Dell felt that "Live for Sweet Jesus" was one of his best songs. He sang it often on his radio shows over the years and it was featured as the opening theme song on the radio station WBLB in Pulaski, Virginia from the mid-1970s until his death in 2002. It mirrors the bluegrass/gospel style that O'Dell was trying to imitate. Although in the original recording of 1965 O'Dell uses only three guitars as accompaniment, which is uncharacteristic of the bluegrass style, later in his career he would often have banjo, two guitars, harmonica, and on a rare occasion a violin and mandolin as accompaniment. This accompaniment is more traditional of the bluegrass/gospel style.

[41] Richard Taylor, interview by author, Draper, Virginia, July 24, 2013.

Chapter 4: "The Tragedy of Pulaski"

On April 27, 1956, a terrible tragedy struck the little town of Pulaski, Virginia, when an explosion caused by a gas leak destroyed Valley View Apartments, a three floor building built in the 1800s. It was a "central part of the town before the turn of the century," [42] first as home to the Pulaski Loan and Trust Company, later the Pulaski National Bank. At one time the former Pulaski Post office was also located at this site on the first floor, and a clothing store located in the building's addition was once the site where citizens of Pulaski saw the first motion pictures in the early 1900s. [43] The building's structure was of an ornate design that reflected the town's gilded past, made of clay bricks with a "deep set of oval topped windows and fancy scrolled cornices" (see Figure 4).

At approximately 6:00 a.m., the owner of a restaurant located on the first floor went down to light a water heater. The *Southwest Times* stated that the owner "did not smell any gas as he opened the restaurant and only left the gas on for a few minutes before attempting to light the jets."[44]

Witnesses described the incident as the most horrific event they had ever seen. A woman who worked at the nearby Jefferson Mills plant stated to the authorities at the time that she heard a loud explosion, and she immediately thought one of the boilers at the plant had blown up. It was at this time that she witnessed the "roof of the building rise in the air and then settle back down. The structure then crumbled to the ground like a match box house" (see Figure 5).

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[42] Larry Schoenfield, "Long and Colorful History of Valley View Building Recalled by Radio Man." *The Southwest Times* vo. 51, no. 58 (April 1956) A-5, http://ww.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed March 14, 2013).
[43] Ibid A-5.
[44] Evelyn Sorrell Hall, "W.J. Mehaffey Tells Reporter How Apartment Blast Occurred. " *The Southwest Times* vol. 51, no. 57 (April 1956) A-6, http://www.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed March 2, 2013).

A young man named Bobby Spicer who lived in an apartment across the street had just gotten out of bed and was getting dressed when the explosion occurred. The blast shattered his window and "sprayed his face with glass."[45] A young girl about twelve years old was thrown from her window out onto the street, and he immediately ran out the door and across the street to help, barefoot and with glass slicing his feet. He picked the young girl up off the ground and carried her to a nearby apartment building, where an ambulance was called. Spicer recalled that he heard: "screams of the injured and dying ringing in his ears." [46]

A resident who lived down the street from the apartment complex said "the ground shook under my feet and a brilliant light flashed before my eyes." The explosion not only destroyed the Valley View building but also shattered windows in businesses and houses within a three mile radius, and shook them violently within a thirteen mile radius, the force of the blast so powerful that many people in their homes and apartment buildings nearby were reportedly thrown from their beds.[47]

The explosion of the Valley View apartment building killed eleven people, including three children, and injured at least eight other people. The blast also made national headlines, and the National Guard of Virginia was called out to help with the recovery operation. The tragedy shook the town and its citizens for months, and was described by the local paper as the worst disaster that had ever occurred in the town of Pulaski's history.

O'Dell happened to be on his way to work that morning at Coleman's Furniture, a local furniture factory, when he came upon the chaos that filled the streets of Pulaski that April

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[45] Ibid A-6.
[46] Ibid A-6.
[47] Ibid A-6.

morning. He immediately started to help with the rescue operation, and then later the recovery operation. "…I helped get the bodies out. We got them out in pieces, arms, legs and all. There were little children in there. I'll never forget it."[48] Later that night, after the recovery operation was over, O'Dell went home, exhausted, and went to bed. In the middle of the night, he woke up with a melody and lyrics to a song describing the events that happened that day. He titled the song simply, "The Tragedy of Pulaski" (see Figure 6). It was not recorded until almost ten years later in 1966. O'Dell continued to sing the song for many years after the tragedy, in memory of all the people who were killed in the explosion. He frequently received requests to sing the song on his radio broadcasts.

In the early 1990s, O'Dell was contacted by the town of Pulaski about placing a copy of the original recording and lyrics to the song in the newly renovated Pulaski County Courthouse museum. It was at this time that a local historian, Lloyd Mathews, contacted O'Dell about some discrepancies in the song. The historian claimed that O'Dell's song was not historically accurate, arguing that the story of the young man, Bobby Spicer, running out into the street to catch a twelve-year-old girl as she was blown from her third floor bedroom, as O'Dell claims in his song, was invented by O'Dell. Mathews used newspaper clippings from the local paper to make his argument that it was impossible for Mr. Spicer, as the blast occurred, to run out of his apartment and catch the young girl in his arms. O'Dell informed Mr. Mathews that he was an eyewitness to the Valley View explosion and that a young man did come along, catch the young girl in his arms, set her down on the sidewalk, and walk away. O'Dell claimed that the boy who

[48] Wayne Quesenberry, "Singers Feature Gospel in Bluegrass, Group Named for Mountain in Hiwassee," *The Southwest Times* vol. 84, no. 44 (February, 1987) A-5, http://www.pclibs.newspaperarchive.com (accessed March 5, 2013).

caught Miss Norma Jean in mid-air was not Bobby Spicer, who later came by, picked her up from the sidewalk and rushed her to a neighbor's house. He said that the identity of the boy who caught the young girl was a mystery as no one ever saw him again. O'Dell assumed that the mysterious young boy was an angel from God who saved the young girl from death, and referred to him as such in his song.[49]

The recording of "The Tragedy of Pulaski" made in Davis, West Virginia by Cozy Records features two acoustic guitars, played by Elbert N. O'Dell, Charles C. Marshall, and one electric guitar, played by Tony Smith. It opens and closes with a chorus, relating the events of the day via spoken narration in the middle section. It is in G major, which is very odd for a song about a disaster; however, O'Dell uses the facts of the story as a narrative for relating his religious philosophies, as will be discussed below. It features a medium tempo in triple meter, and follows a simple chord progression of I-IV-V-I. The structure of the refrain is a-b-b-a form.

The song does not fit the traditional bluegrass music style, as bluegrass music would never use an electric guitar as part of the accompaniment; however, the use of it in this song adds to the upbeat feel of the piece. The song is also in 3/4 meter, which is not typical of bluegrass music, since bluegrass for the most part consists of fast rhythms and much faster tempos. The vocal style is also atypical of bluegrass music, in which the voices usually sing in thirds, fifths, or octaves; however, in this song all of the voices are singing in unison. No layers of vocal harmony are provided as O'Dell and his band sing this repetitive rhythm. The song also includes a long, un-pitched recitation, which is found occasionally in gospel music but rarely in bluegrass music. The only part of this song that shows any characteristics of the bluegrass/gospel tradition

[49] Ann O. Davidson, interview by author, Draper, Virginia, March 18, 2013.

lies in one of the five characteristics that can be found in gospel music: a song that recalls or reflects upon the loss of a loved one, or a tragic event. [50]

The harmonic accompaniment plays a significant role in this piece, as it can best be described as having a dirge quality – a slow harmonic progression with the same chord progressions being repeated throughout the piece – providing a hypnotic, stunned effect as background accompaniment to the song. The theme is constructed of a short-long rhythmic pattern, with the use of syncopation in many measures, and a use of repeated notes and pitches. Each phrase of the song begins on a high note and descends by step, only to ascend on each succeeding phrase and descend again at the end of it.

The song begins with an opening chord on the guitar as all of the voices enter simultaneously to sing the opening lines of the song. "There was a building, in a town one day." The voices sing in unison a kind of trance-like melody of shock and disbelief. "The Tragedy of Pulaski" does not contain any layering in the voices or use four-part harmony; instead, the voices continuously sing the same repetitive rhythms and pitches.

The first phrase of the song (mm. 1-5) begins on low D, and slowly descends by step, arriving at a cadence on low G on the word "day." Here O'Dell is using a descending phrase to indicate what is about to happen to this building, when it explodes and comes crashing to the ground. He immediately begins the next phrase (mm. 6-9) an octave higher from low G, on the words "it blew, it blew, it blew away," before coming to a half-cadence on D in measure nine.

In the second phrase (mm. 10-15), O'Dell leaps up a perfect fourth higher than the opening phrase, on the words "so many people were in that crash," with the same rhythmic

[50] Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History,* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2005) 250.

structure and shape as the previous phrase. He starts on high G, rising only briefly to high A, one of the highest notes in the song, then slowly descends by step until measure 14, when he arrives at a half-cadence on D. He then leaps down a fifth, and back up and down for the next three measures, creating a disjointed, frightened sound in his voice on the words "when down came fire, smoke and glass."

O'Dell then starts narrating the events of that tragic day in Pulaski, while the other vocalists and instrumentalists continue playing and humming the theme behind him. O'Dell tries to recreate the scene for the listener as he recites the events of that day, and speaks of why such a disaster would happen to a "little town in which we live."[51] He describes the town as a quaint little place that everyone is "very, very fond of." O'Dell then tells about the explosion that "woke so many people up" and how the town was turned into a chaotic scene as neighbors began to rush to the scene to help with the rescue and recovery operations. O'Dell describes the scene as being like one from a war zone, and places special vocal inflections on certain phrases and words, such as, "the fire whistle began to blow, the sirens began to scream." O'Dell is trying to recreate the moment in time that the blast occurred, and the frantic rush of people who were in a state of shock but who managed to come together and help others in a time of despair.

O'Dell then shifts his attention to a little girl who was standing near a window when the explosion happened, and was thrown from the apartment window and caught by a young man in mid-air, saving her from death. O'Dell uses this scene of the girl and boy as a symbol of the sinner and God's devotion to ensure mankind's salvation. Of all the scenes that happened that

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[51] Daniel Rudolph O'Dell, *The Tragedy of Pulaski,* Elbert N. O'Dell, Charles C. Marshall, Tony Smith, Cozy Records no. 554/38367, 1965, 45 rpm.

day during the tragedy, O'Dell chooses to illuminate this particular scene, which was probably romanticized by O'Dell to get his message across to the listener that this young girl would have died that day had God not intervened by performing a miracle and making sure someone was there to catch her before she hit the ground. He ends the recitation by stating "we know not why it was brought along, only God knows."

Years later, O'Dell would add several more stanzas to the recitation, as he became frustrated with a local historian, Lloyd Mathews, who confronted him about possibly romanticizing the events of that day. During one of his weekly radio programs in January 1986, O'Dell sang this song again, as an elegy for the astronauts killed in the 1986 *Challenger* explosion; however, this time in D major, and with the added stanzas "this song is not a story that has been made up, but a song that is very, very true and I am singing it with grief and sorrow for the ones that lost their loved ones in this crash. God sends a lot of things our way just to wake our town up, and we should all pay attention to them and try to live for him and keep down a lot of tragedies in our town."[52]

"The Tragedy of Pulaski" was described by O'Dell as not being a religious song; however, it does contain religious overtones. The most important aspect of the song has to do with O'Dell's account of a little girl being thrown from a window. Whether the events actually took place as O'Dell describes them will forever be a mystery; however, the message is clear. O'Dell uses tone, key, rhythm, phrase structure, and lyrics to inform the listener that even though tragic events happen in one's life, God is still in control, and through His grace, He saved this

[52] Daniel Rudolph O'Dell, *The Tragedy of Pulaski*, Bessie O'Dell, Jack Surratt, Francis Surratt, Jack Lunsford, Peggy Handy, 1986, cassette tape.

young girl from being killed. He used a tragic event to show God's humility, compassion, love and power, and to state his belief that mankind should treat each other with respect and dignity by helping those who cannot help themselves, who are suffering or in pain. It is assumed that O'Dell altered the song in later life not only to express his personal religious beliefs as to why the tragedy occurred, but as a warning to the town and the citizens to obey God's law and keep Him in their lives or else face possible dire consequences.

The events of that tragic day in April haunted O'Dell for the rest of his life. Later in his career, he would reuse "The Tragedy of Pulaski" theme and weave it into a new song that also contained feelings of grief and melancholy; however, this song would offer hope, comfort, and a sense of resolution.

Chapter 5: "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven"

O'Dell composed "There'll be no handkerchiefs needed in Heaven" later in his career, in the mid to late 1980s (see Figure7). The recording was made in a studio at the O'Dells' home in 1990. It featured Jack Surratt on lead guitar, Navy Lambert on rhythm guitar and Richard Taylor on banjo, with O'Dell and his wife Bessie as vocalists (see Figure 8).

While the majority of O'Dell's song output contains upbeat rhythms and a sense of refreshment and happiness, this song is tinged from the very opening with a sense of sadness and melancholy, and a heavy feeling that permeates the entire song. And while it is unclear what circumstances led O'Dell to compose this song, it may reflect the turmoil of this time in his life. His health was rapidly deteriorating, and he had been involved in several near-fatal accidents. His wife was suffering from severe depression and started showing early signs of Alzheimer's, which at the time was undiagnosed. O'Dell also was plagued by other family issues, as well as legal and financial difficulties.

The song is in triple meter and is in strophic form, with four verses and a refrain with some of the same music being used in both verse and refrain. Each verse contains four phrases. The first phrase (mm 1-5) opens with a series of three repeated high D's on the words "Someone will love me," conveying a sense of restlessness and anguish. The first two phrases then descend a seventh from the high D to cadence on low E, the dominant (m. 7). At the beginning of the song, O'Dell disrupts the meter by abruptly shifting from three-four to duple (m. 3). This abrupt shift in the meter occurs only twice in the entire piece, in measures three and eleven. Each time the duple meter is used, the downbeat always falls on the word "me." O'Dell purposefully chose

to accentuate the word “me” instead of the word before it “love,” emphasizing the song’s very personal appeal to the individual believer.

O’Dell wanted to grab the listeners’ attention at the beginning of the song, so they could realize that he is singing about them. It is possible that O’Dell may have been referencing himself, with all the heartaches he had been going through recently, but it is obvious that he is speaking about a heavenly love to those that feel hopeless.

In measure four, O’Dell uses another set of repeated notes on A to emphasize the place that he is speaking of “up there around that bright throne,” leaping down to the tonic in measure seven for only one beat before leaping back up to the A and arriving at a half cadence in measure eight.

Like the first phrase in verse one, the second phrase (mm. 9-16) begins with a series of repeated notes on high D and the words “Someone will love me,” and descends by step, concluding with an authentic cadence (m. 16). O’Dell shifts the meter from triple to duple again (m. 11), so the word “me” falls on the downbeat of the measure for more emphasis. However, in this phrase, O’Dell changes the ending as he inserts “with Jesus at home,” instead of “round that bright throne,” at the end of the first phrase. O’Dell also makes sure that the word “home” falls on the downbeat of measure sixteen on the tonic chord.

O’Dell then begins the refrain on the third beat of measure seventeen with the words, “there’ll be no handkerchiefs needed in Heaven.” The refrain mirrors the opening of verse one, beginning with a quick succession of repeated notes, except this time O’Dell has skipped down a fourth to begin on A instead of high D. The phrase structure is almost identical to the phrase structure of verse one, as O’Dell steps up on the word “handkerchiefs” using a pattern that is

found in the two-four measure of verse one. The entire refrain can be seen as a kind of free development, as he uses certain motivic ideas from verse one to construct the refrain. The first part of the refrain provides the listener with a calming feeling, as O'Dell replaces the leaps of thirds and fifths with a stepwise motion for a more legato sound as he describes for the listener the kingdom of Heaven with "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven." The second half of the refrain (mm. 22-34) is very different from the first. The second half leaps back up to high D, replacing the legato sound with leaps of fifths and thirds to describe the words "no tear drops from your eyes." The phrase continues this pattern for nine measures as O'Dell insures the listener that no tears will ever fall from their eyes in Heaven, "no tears will be falling on your feet, no tears, no tears, no crying up there," and comes to a cadence on the tonic (m.34).

Verse two is like verse one and the refrain (mm. 35-51), with a series of quick repeated notes on several words; however, this time the verse does not begin on high D, but a fourth lower on the dominant. Verse two mirrors verse one in its phrase structure but with some variations. First, O'Dell has inserted the words "Thank God" at the beginning of verse two, the word "love" this time falling on the downbeat instead of the word "me" (m. 37), with no change in time signature. In this second verse, O'Dell alters the words a bit from the first verse. Instead of singing "around that bright throne," he sings "around that great throne." The second part of verse two is similar to the first part, except O'Dell leaps back up a fourth to a high D on the words "Thank God no handkerchiefs." Here (m. 45) we find the highest pitches of the entire song so far, two high E's, which fall on the word "handkerchiefs." The melody slowly descends mostly by step, until it arrives at a cadence in the dominant on measure forty-seven on the words "up there." O'Dell then finishes the verse with the words "around that bright throne," which echoes

the ending of the first verse (mm. 7-8). This time; however, the melody comes to a cadence on the tonic.

The refrain then comes back (m. 52), and is exactly like the first refrain. O'Dell reinforces the tonic note with lots of repeated notes and the yearning image he evokes when he ascends by step in measure 66 on "no tears, no tears." He then skips down a fifth, creating an arch shape structure, which evokes a rocking, comforting feeling as he ascends by step and then cadences on the tonic on the phrase "no crying up there."

In verse three (mm.70-85), O'Dell uses the same approach that is found in verses one and two and the refrain, by leaping up again to the dominant with a series of repetitive A's that he holds for four and a half measures; however, this time the text is different and the rhythmic values more complex on the words "were going to that city." He then leaps up a fourth again to the words "Jesus promised us," staying on D for five notes. Again O'Dell uses repeated notes on the same pitch as a way to emphasize the text and draw the listener into its emotional content. In measures 79 through 82, the rhythms are more complex. It is not as straightforward and simple as before, which leads the listener to believe that this is the climax of the song. The consequent of the first phrase in verse three becomes more rhythmically recognizable in measures 83 and 84, as it cadences on the tonic.

Instead of going directly to the refrain as O'Dell did after the previous verses, he proceeds to sing another verse, which is exactly like verse two, except that the text has been altered at the end. He sings at measure 97 "I will not be there all alone" which is different from what he sang at the end of verse one ("around that bright throne"), verse two ("with Jesus at

home"), and verse three ("he'll prepare us a home up there"). O'Dell then repeats the refrain (mm.101-118) one more time in the same format, both in text and rhythm.

This song contains a few elements that can be traced to the bluegrass/gospel music that O'Dell emulated, but also contains significant differences from the style. In traditional bluegrass/gospel music, most bands contained at least two guitars, a banjo, violin, mandolin and string bass. In this recording, O'Dell uses a varied form of traditional instrumentation with two guitars and a banjo, but no violin, string bass or mandolin.

"There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven" focuses on two main foundations of gospel music as identified by Joti Rockwell in his article "What is Bluegrass Anyway? Category, Formation, Debate and the Framing of Musical Genre:" individual salvation and life's "rocky road."[53] O'Dell primarily uses the second of these characteristics, life's "rocky road," as the basis for this song, as well as the individual salvation theme, which can be found in measure 78 in the second verse: "if we were created in his footsteps behind him, he'll prepare us a home up there."[54] O'Dell preached almost weekly on his radio programs that the only way to end the misery and pain on Earth was to "get on your knees and ask God to forgive you of your sins." [55]

However similar this song is in some regards to bluegrass music, it also differs from it substantially. O'Dell's song is in three-four time, a feature which is not common in bluegrass/gospel music because most artists wanted the tempo to be much faster – either in duple or common time – and three-four time signature has a dance feeling associated with it, which

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[53]Joti Rockwell, "What is Bluegrass Anyway? Category, Formation, Debate and the Framing of Musical Genre," *Popular Music* vol. 31/3, (2012): 377.
[54] Ibid 377.
[55] Daniel Rudolph O'Dell, *The Max Mountain Gospel Singers.* Bessie O'Dell, Jack Surratt, Francis Surratt, Jack Lunsford, Peggy Handy. January 1986, Cassette tape.

purists of bluegrass would have forbidden. O'Dell's song also features a sudden shift in the meter in measures 3 and 11 from three-four to duple, then back to three-four, another characteristic that one does not find in traditional bluegrass/gospel music style. True, the duple meter appears only twice in the entire song, on both occasions at the beginning of the song, but it remains an uncommon characteristic that would rarely if ever be found in bluegrass/gospel music.

Another feature that makes this song different from bluegrass/gospel music is that it does not contain any virtuosic passages for the instruments. Bluegrass songs usually contain a lot of virtuosic, improvisational interludes for the instrumentalist to play, as in the Stanley Brothers' renditions of "Rank Strangers," "Mother's Not Dead She's Only A-Sleeping," and "Angel Band."

In "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven," the banjo just plays single notes and is barely audible against the homophony of the two guitars. The piece is also very heavy-sounding throughout. The repetitive use of D's and A's that adds emotional meaning to the words also provides the listener with an unsettling, restless feeling as O'Dell and his wife try to reassure listeners that their troubles, fears, and pains here on Earth are only temporary, and their grief will end once they reach Heaven.

"There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven" is almost identical to another song he wrote twenty-five years earlier, "The Tragedy of Pulaski." O'Dell either consciously or sub-consciously reworked the theme of "The Tragedy of Pulaski" into "Handkerchiefs." The tragic events that happened in Pulaski in 1956 haunted O'Dell, and it is obvious that this song must have been on his mind when he composed "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven."

The two themes are almost identical, with one song beginning on low D, the other on high D. Both songs are in 3/4 time, except that "Handkerchiefs" contains two measures of 2/4 time and "Tragedy" does not. Both are sung in a very slow, reserved manner, which is not typical of O'Dell's other songs. There is no sense of joy in either of the two songs, and no upbeat rhythms or medium- to high-pitched singing. They both begin on a pick-up note, and both descend to the dominant in measure five of each song. While it is obvious that "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed In Heaven" does not contain a spoken recitation, both songs deal with a sense of grief and melancholy. "The Tragedy of Pulaski" deals with grief, chaos, and shock over the explosion that killed and injured so many people in 1956, and the melancholy and reflective yet hopeful "Handkerchief" song is seen as the conclusion to the "Tragedy" song.

This may in fact have been the last song that O'Dell ever wrote, and therefore may be his way of saying goodbye to his family and friends. O'Dell became increasingly ill during the late 1980s, and suffered a series of near-fatal accidents. He possibly felt that his time on Earth was short. He knew there would be many family members, friends and listeners that would be stunned and saddened by his death, so it is assumed that this song is meant for them, to give comfort to those he loved.

O'Dell did live another thirteen years after this song was probably composed; however, it is doubtful that he wrote any more songs. It became increasingly difficult for O'Dell to record his weekly radio show, so it is doubtful that he had the strength or will to compose any more songs. No other songs were recorded after this one, and his family has no record of him mentioning any other songs.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Rev. Daniel Rudolph O'Dell dedicated his life to serving God through music, broadcasting his weekly radio stations throughout the New River Valley area for nearly fifty years. O'Dell sought to offer his radio audience, through music, a glimmer of hope and reassurance to those that were sick, bedfast, or elderly, or who felt the world had forgotten them.

Many of O'Dell's songs fit the traditional shape of bluegrass/gospel music style, as we have seen in "Live for Sweet Jesus." This song exemplifies the traditional bluegrass style with its use of traditional instrumentation, upbeat rhythms, medium to high vocal range, and a sense of drive that permeates it from beginning to end. It also reflects his light-hearted, easy-going personality as well.

Both "The Tragedy of Pulaski" and "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven" break from this pattern in interesting and revealing ways. Indeed, "The Tragedy of Pulaski" is one of the most unusual songs in O'Dell's songwriting career, reflecting the deep, personal, and lasting impression the tragedy made on him. It is the only song that makes explicit reference to events from his life, and it is the only song that includes a spoken recitation that relates those events. The song is atypical of bluegrass style in its use of slow triple time, unison vocal singing, avoidance of virtuosic instrumental interludes, and odd instrumentation. Not only did O'Dell continue to sing this song throughout his career, he did so in response to other tragedies, such as the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion of 1986 and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

"There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven" was composed late in his career, and may very well be the last song he ever wrote. What is striking is the similarity between "There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven" and "The Tragedy of Pulaski." Except for minor

differences, the songs are nearly identical. The message, however, has been fundamentally and crucially transformed: there will be no tears in Heaven, no sorrow, grief or pain, but instead, everlasting joy and peace. It is a message of redemption and healing, and a promise that death is not the final chapter.

This transformation of one song into another, and from sorrow into joy, is emblematic of O'Dell's personal story. The songs that he wrote were used as the foundation of his ministry, but he also used them as a guide to live by. For one as acquainted with grief as he was, the music not only served the role of informing his listeners and comforting them, but it also provided a significant daily therapeutic release for O'Dell as well.

O'Dell's music will never win a Grammy award, and may never be recorded by famous musicians, but his legacy did not die with him. He touched countless people's lives throughout the years that he was on radio, his music speaking not to the entire world but to the rural audience of Southwest Virginia. Certainly, the especially close personal connection he had with his songs, evidenced by the three songs discussed here, played a major role in his ability to connect with and minister to his listeners. Although O'Dell has been gone for twelve years, his music still speaks to those who listen now as it did many years ago.

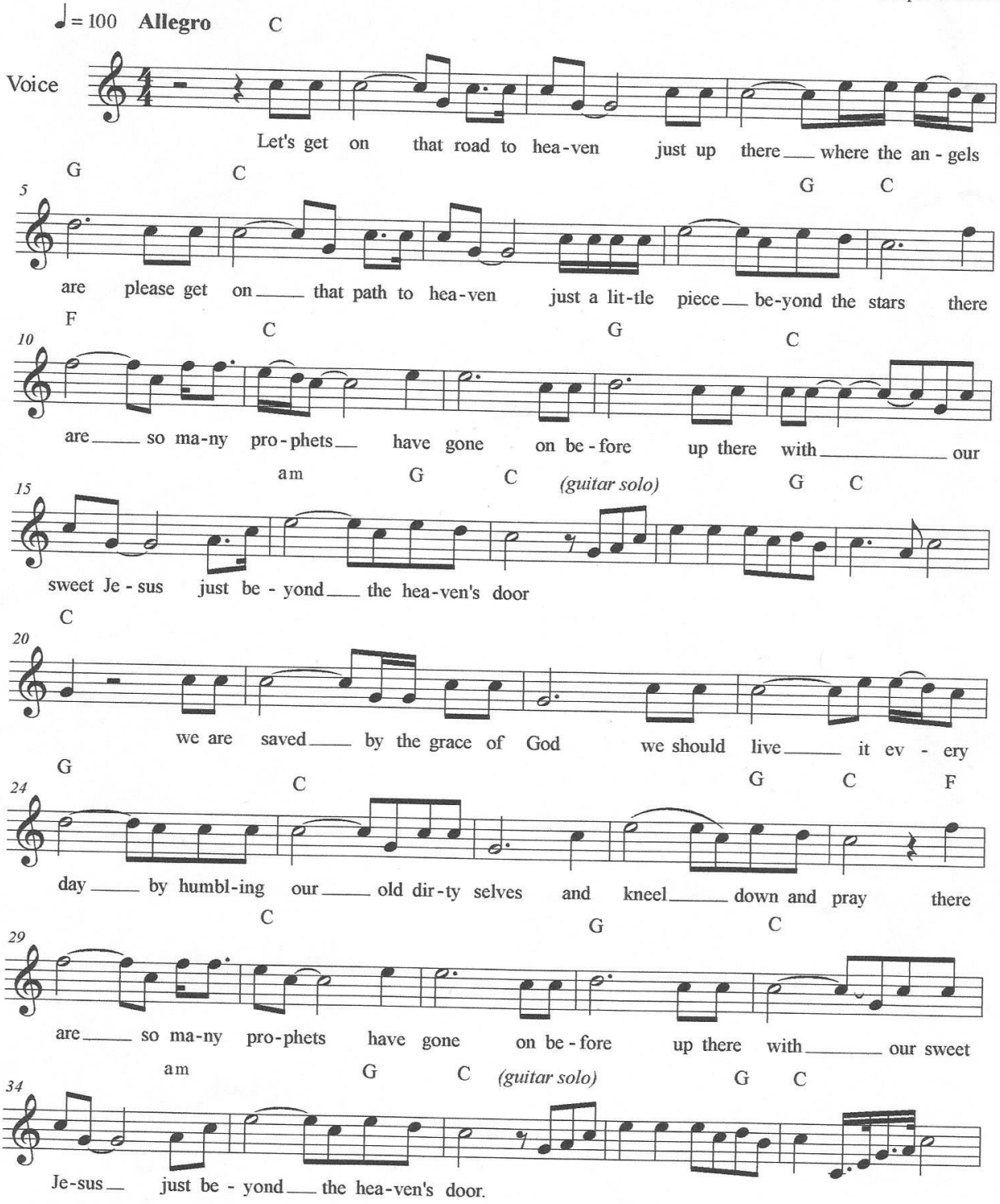
Figure 1: Rev. Rudolph and Bessie O'Dell

Score

Live for Sweet Jesus

Daniel Rudolph O'Dell

♩ = 100 **Allegro**



Live for Sweet Jesus

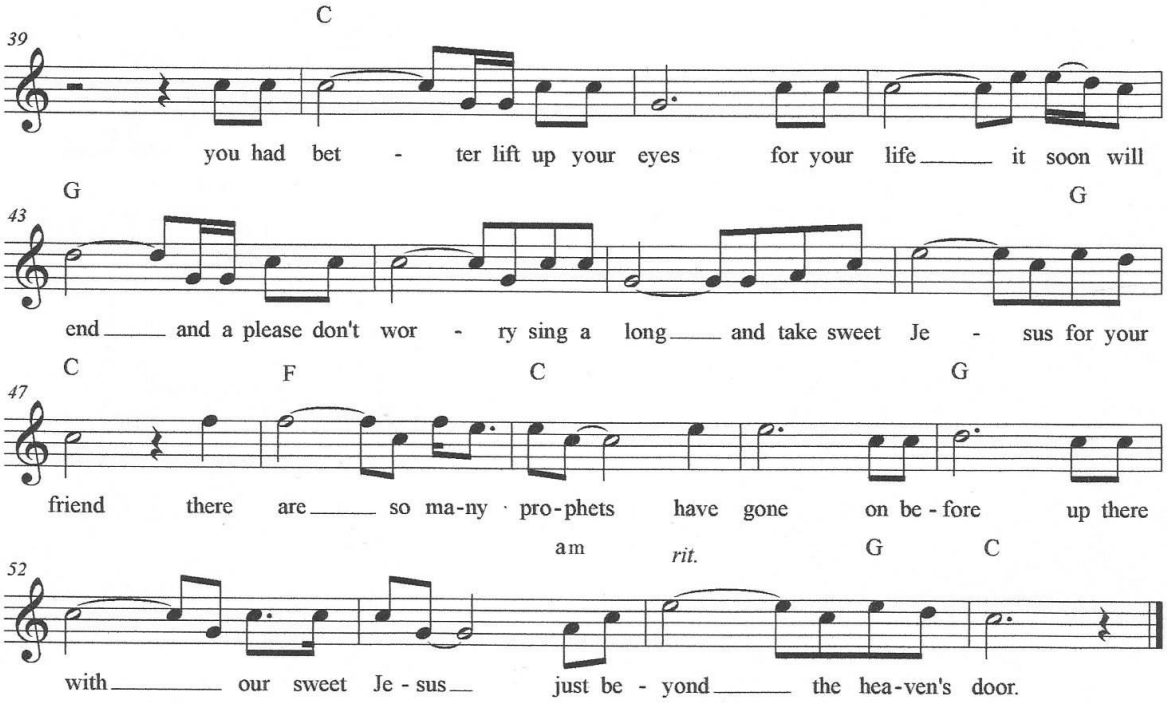


Figure 2: Live for Sweet Jesus

Figure 3:Elbert and Rudolph O'Dell

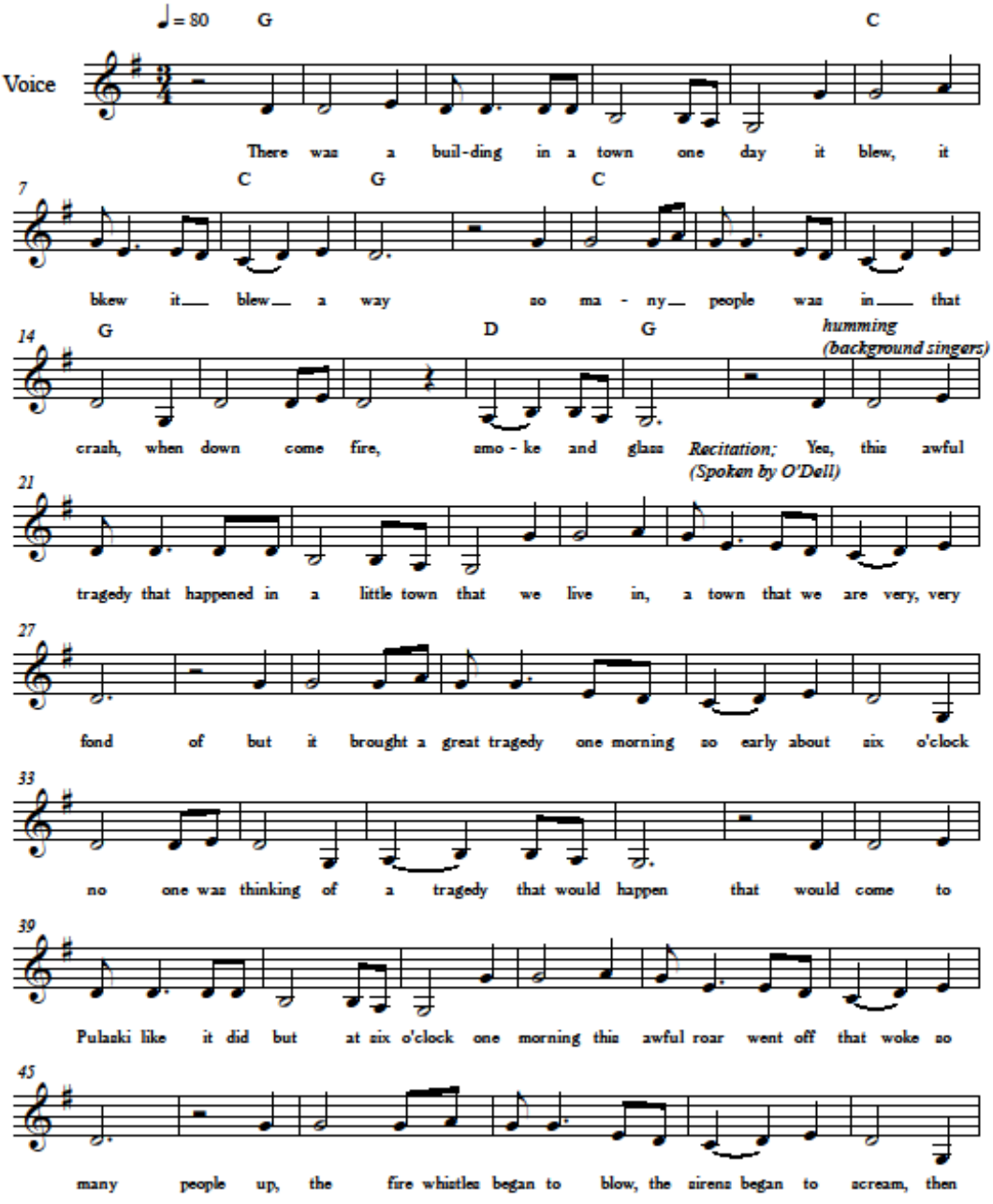
Figure 4: Valley View Apartments

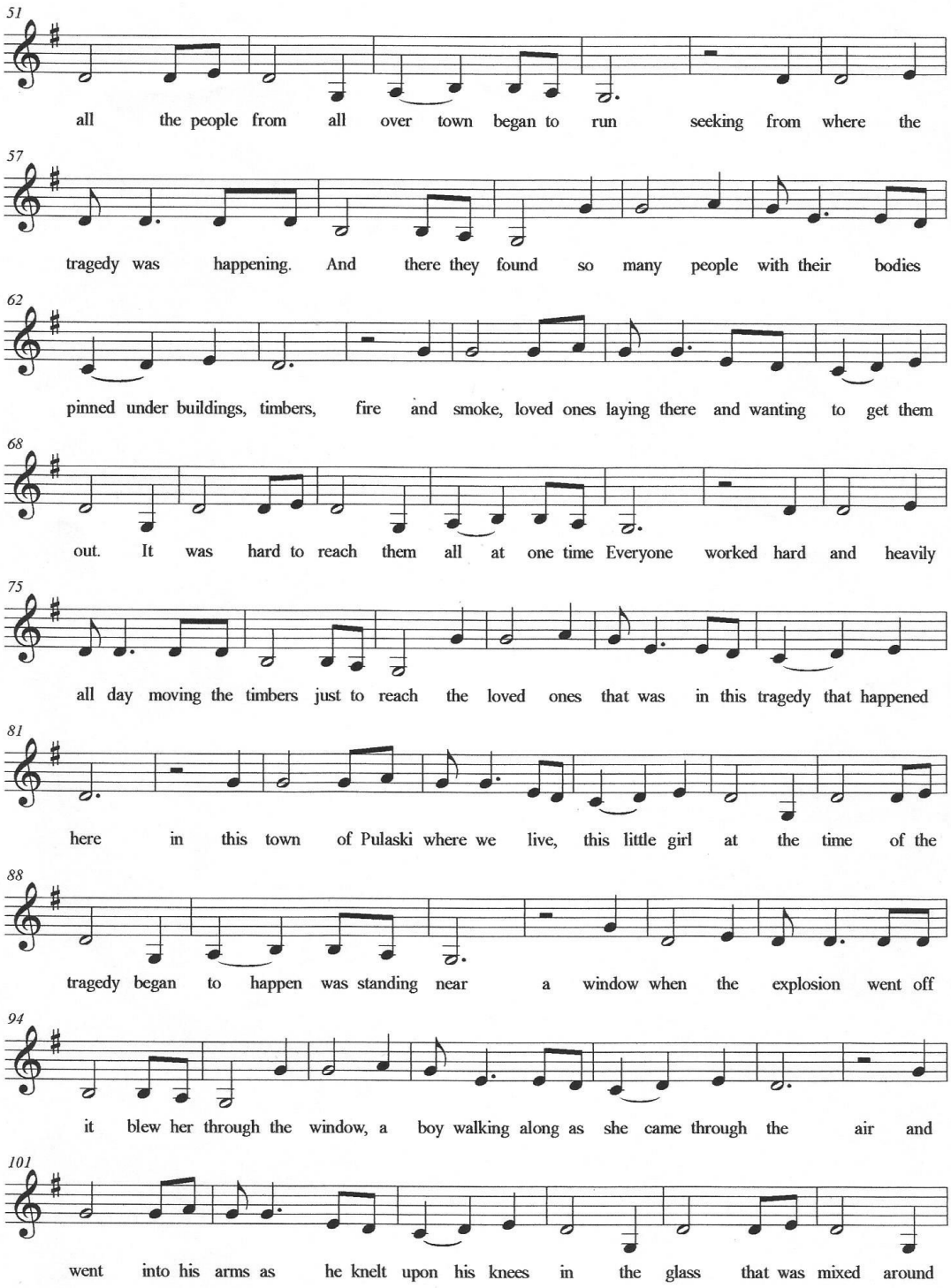
Figure 4: Valley View Apartments on fire April 27, 1956

Score

The Tragedy of Pulaski

Daniel Rudolph O'Dell




51
all the people from all over town began to run seeking from where the
57
tragedy was happening. And there they found so many people with their bodies
62
pinned under buildings, timbers, fire and smoke, loved ones laying there and wanting to get them
68
out. It was hard to reach them all at one time Everyone worked hard and heavily
75
all day moving the timbers just to reach the loved ones that was in this tragedy that happened
81
here in this town of Pulaski where we live, this little girl at the time of the
88
tragedy began to happen was standing near a window when the explosion went off
94
it blew her through the window, a boy walking along as she came through the air and
101
went into his arms as he knelt upon his knees in the glass that was mixed around

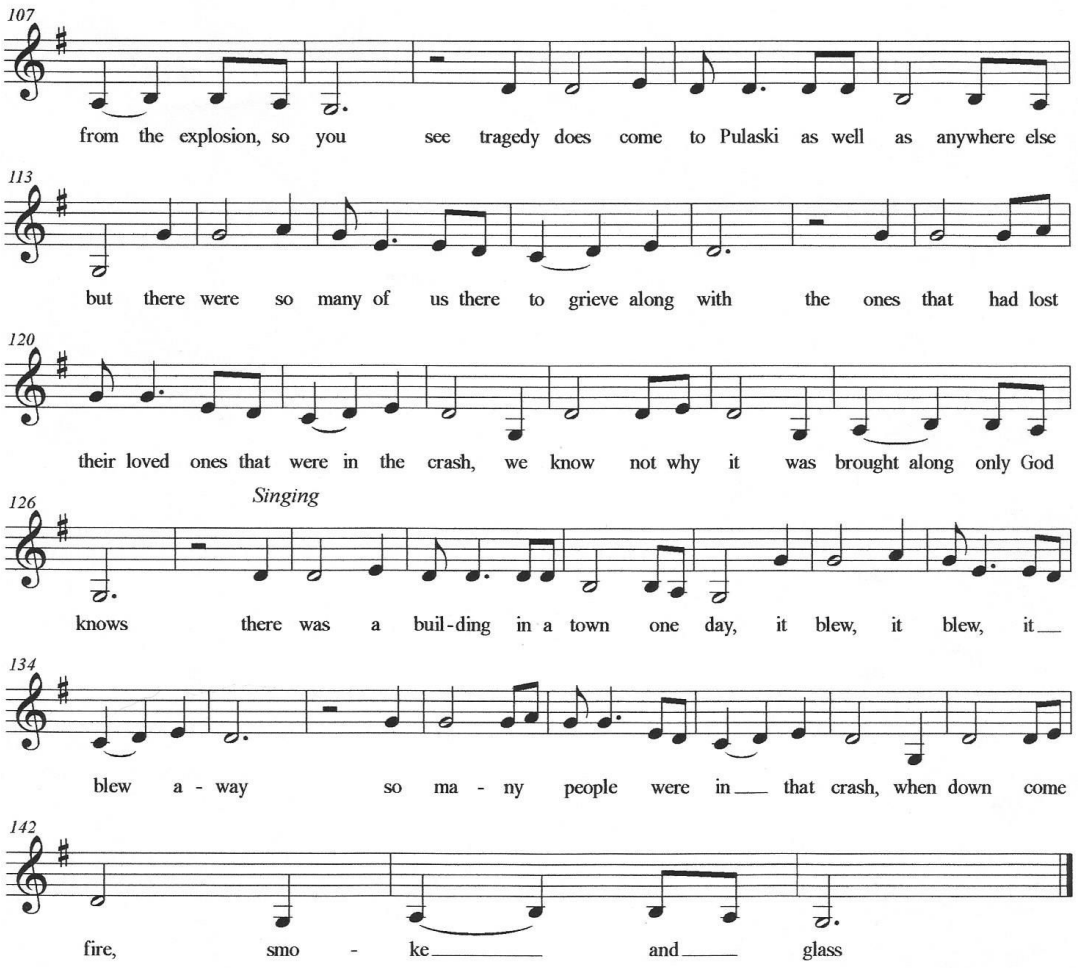
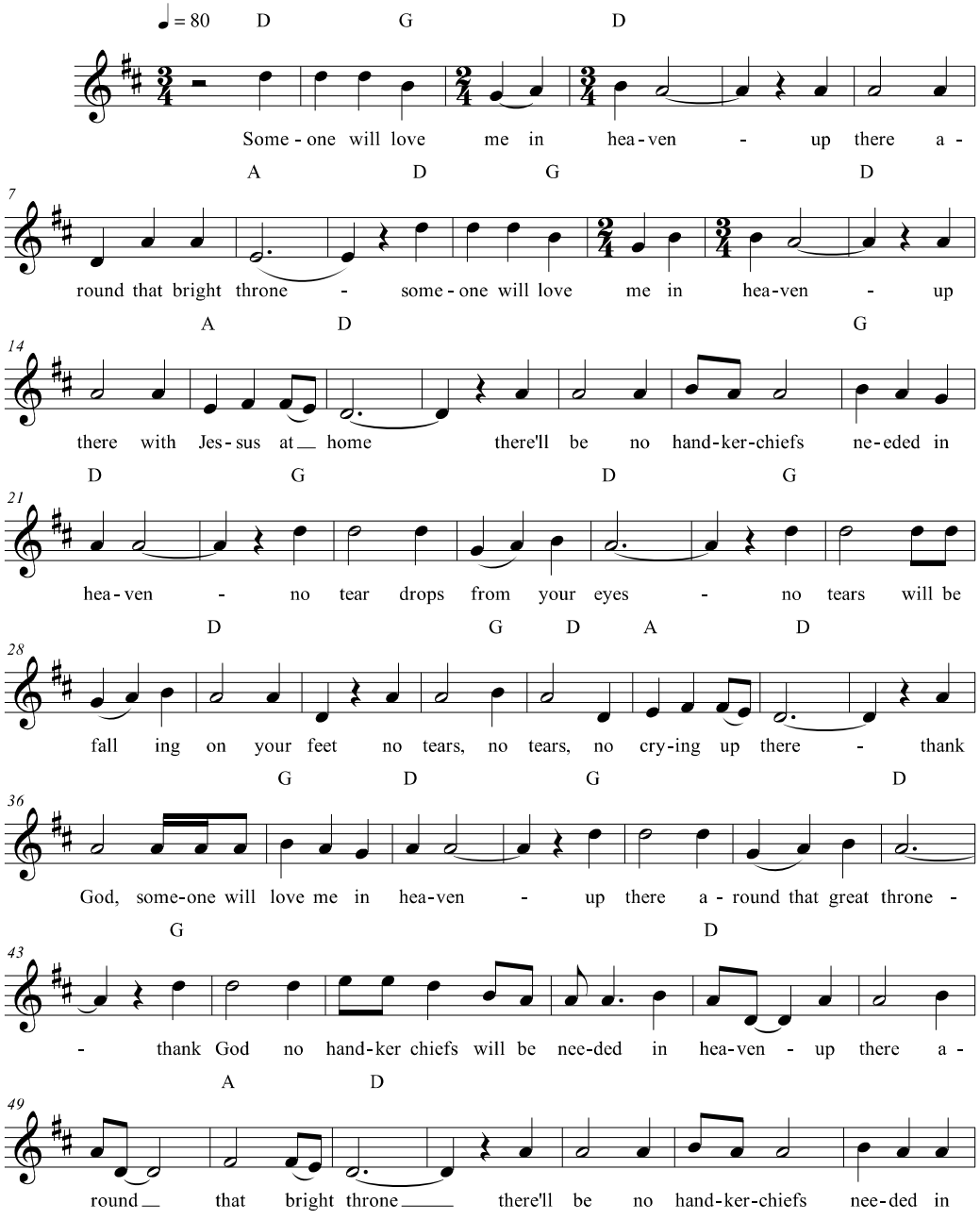


Figure 5: "The Tragedy of Pulaski

Score

There'll Be No Handkerchief's Needed in Heaven

Daniel Rudolph O'Dell



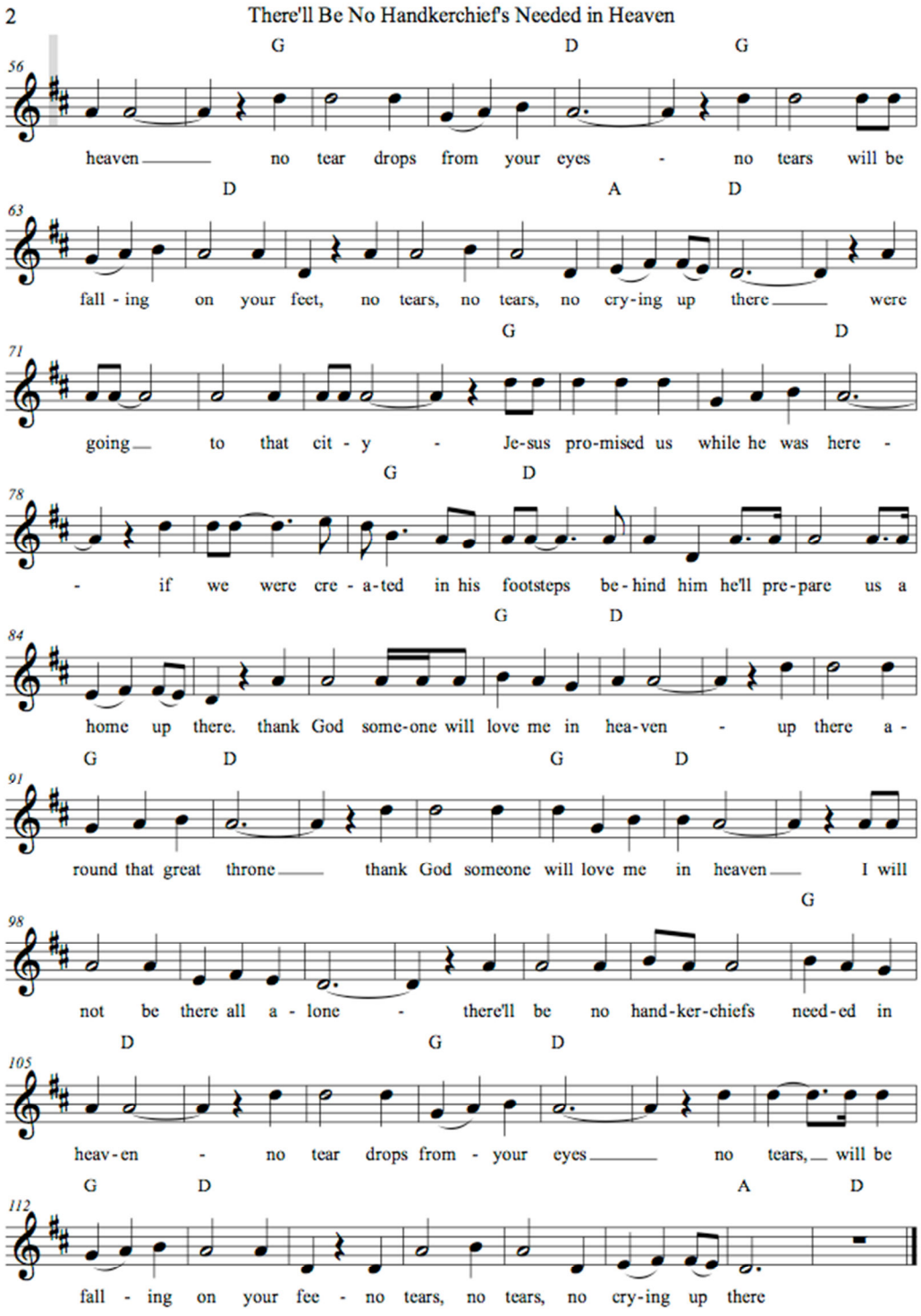


Figure6: There'll Be No Handkerchiefs Needed in Heaven

Figure 6: Band Members.

Front Row: (left to right) Rudolph O'Dell, Bessie O'Dell, Navy Lambert; Back Row: (left to right) Richard Taylor, Jack Surratt, Jack Lunsford

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