

Book Review

James Baldwin

and the

Heavenly City

—Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Doubt

By Christopher Z. Hobson

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Review by Ron Tabor



Our comrade, Chris Hobson, has written a wonderful book about the great African-American and gay writer, James Baldwin. Although the volume is primarily addressed to scholars of Baldwin, it can be read with profit by all those who have enjoyed reading any of Baldwin's writings.

In the context of Baldwin's overall concern to depict and analyze the concrete experience of being Black and gay in the viciously

racist and homophobic society that was the post-World War II United States (and to a lesser extent, Western Europe), Chris has constructed his exposition around several discussions/controversies that have characterized past and present Baldwin scholarship. These are:

1. Many, perhaps most, commentators consider Baldwin's legacy to rest primarily on his essays (such as those in the collections, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time*) rather than his novels. Against this, Chris argues that Baldwin's novels are at least as important as the essays; in fact, the novels are, in Chris's words, the "core of his legacy."
2. Among those Baldwin scholars who share Chris's belief in the centrality of the novels, most give greater weight to the early books - *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country* - than to the later ones. In contrast, Chris contends that the later works - *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just Above My Head* - are as significant as the earlier ones.
3. Many students of Baldwin have stressed the role of the uniquely African-American musical genre, the blues, in Baldwin's work, along with the corresponding religious/philosophic outlook that it represents. While not denying the importance of the blues in Baldwin's vision, Chris insists on the significance of the Black gospel tradition, and the contrasting religious/philosophical standpoint that it embodies. (As far as I can tell, Chris is the first, or one of the first, to make this case.) This requires some explanation.

As one might expect in any realistic portrayal of African-American life, music, especially Black genres such as the blues and (African-American) gospel, plays a major role in Baldwin's novels. To Baldwin, these musical forms represent distinct, and contrasting, attitudes toward life and society, differing stances toward the oppressive social circumstances that Black people faced in 1950s, 60s, and 70s America (and still face

today). The attitude represented by the blues might be described as "grin and bear it", that is, the view that the world, especially the cruel racist reality that Black people suffer in this country (what Amiri Baraka in his book, *Blues People*, calls "dis mess", as in "Ah'm so tired o' dis mess"), is never going to change significantly. As a result, all one can do is grit one's teeth, try to get as much enjoyment and fulfillment out of life as you can wring from it, and endure it as long as you can.

In contrast to the outlook represented by the blues, gospel music envisions the spiritual transformation of society and, in fact, the entire world. Gospel, to put this in traditional religious terms, looks toward the establishment, through the second coming of Jesus, of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth, and the spiritual redemption of the universe. Moreover, as Chris demonstrates, these contrasting musical forms and spiritual outlooks are the contemporary embodiments of two distinct modes or traditions of religious thought that appear in different parts of the Bible and which Baldwin references in his novels. To put this briefly, Chris argues that Baldwin portrays Black life as embodying the dialectical interplay of these two different, and very distinct, attitudes and outlooks toward life.

More narrowly, Chris argues that, through his references to gospel music, Baldwin presents, and argues for, a modern, partially secularized and socially informed, version of the traditional apocalyptic vision, specifically, a vision of an economically, socially, politically, racially, and sexually liberated society. Moreover, this vision is not to be fulfilled through the work of God alone; it requires the active participation of humanity.

Although I am no expert on Baldwin, as far as I can see, Chris has established an extremely strong, and perhaps definitive, case for his position on the three controversies listed above. After studying Chris' intricate and thoughtful analyses of Baldwin's novels, particularly the later three, I do not see how anyone can seriously challenge his position, except perhaps over nuances.

Beyond this, Chris's book is extraordinarily well written. Although he often utilizes long, complex sentences, I found his exposition to be extremely clear. There were only two or three sentences in the entire volume that I felt I needed to re-read in order to understand Chris's point. In addition, Chris demonstrates supreme mastery over all aspects of his material – the specifics of Baldwin's life and career; his writing, especially the plots, characters, and the settings of his novels; the social, political, and cultural context of the time; the details of the musical traditions Baldwin references; the biblical passages Baldwin cites and the religious traditions they represent.

I only have two areas of possible disagreement with Chris's presentation. The first is really a quibble; the second is more substantial.

In contrast to gospel music, which is collective in nature (think of a church choir and the vocal participation of the congregation), Chris describes the blues as individualistic. While this description is certainly true of (most) blues performance, it is questionable when it comes to audience participation. One has only to imagine what the "juke joints" in small towns and cities in the South in the 1930s, 40s and later, or the blues clubs on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s and early 60s, must have looked and felt like on a Saturday night, to call Chris's characterization into question.

More important, Chris makes a two-fold argument about Baldwin's ultimate message. First, he argues that Baldwin is asking his readers to decide between the two competing musical and religio-philosophic outlooks that Baldwin presents in his novels, that is, between the blues and the "grin and bear it" attitude that it represents, on the one hand, and gospel music and the (as Baldwin interprets it) apocalyptic, socially and sexually liberating, vision that it embodies, on the other. Second, Chris contends that, of these two contrasting world-views, Baldwin wants us to choose the second and to actively work for it. Despite his impressive efforts, Chris has not managed to completely convince me of his position. Based on the material that he presents, I can make a case that what Baldwin might be saying is that life - Black life, gay life, the life of all of us - is actually the interaction, the oscillation, between the two points of view. Sometimes, we listen to, and feel, the blues. Other times, we hear, and are inspired by, gospel. I suspect that

throughout his life, Baldwin himself moved back and forth between these two positions.

Despite my question on this point, let me conclude by saying that, in my opinion, Chris has written a brilliant book, which all who have a serious interest in Baldwin ought to read. Of particular note, is the beautiful dust jacket, based on a painting by the now-deceased African-American artist, Aaron Douglas.
