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“Children of the Damned”: An Indie Band Remembers Andersonville

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Abstract

When alternative band Quiet Hounds released *Megaphona* in 2012, they presented an album peppered with an impressive range of styles, from folksy ballads to pseudo-manic hipster club tunes. The album’s most unexpected choice, though, came in the form of its closing song, “Beacon Sun.” In it, the band’s lead singer carries a mournful melody. A hypnotizing rhythm runs through the track, underscored by the tattoo of a lethargic tambourine. Indeed, the track is more akin to a jazzed-up hymn than anything else, an impression that is not surprising to listeners once they heave themselves out of the indie haze long enough to catch the song’s lyrics. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Indie, Quiet Hounds

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“Children of the Damned”: An Indie Band Remembers Andersonville

February 16, 2015

by Heather Clancy '15

When alternative band Quiet Hounds released *Megaphona* in 2012, they presented an album peppered with an impressive range of styles, from folksy ballads to pseudo-manic hipster club tunes. The album’s most unexpected choice, though, came in the form of its closing song, “Beacon Sun.” In it, the band’s lead singer carries a mournful melody. A hypnotizing rhythm runs through the track, underscored by the tattoo of a lethargic tambourine. Indeed, the track is more akin to a jazzed-up hymn than anything else, an impression that is not surprising to listeners once they heave themselves out of the indie haze long enough to catch the song’s lyrics.



Quiet Hounds, in a promotional shot for their album *Megaphona*.

With “Beacon Sun,” the members of Quiet Hounds pay somber tribute to those 45,000 Union prisoners who were held in captivity at Camp Sumter military prison in Andersonville, Georgia from February 1864 to May 1865, nearly 13,000 of whom would never see freedom again but instead lie buried in the national cemetery at Andersonville

National Historic Site today. Between the lyrics and the visuals presented by the song's music video, the band explores much of the prisoner of war experience, from capture to captivity within the prison stockade to separation from family and loved ones. Lost identity stands out as a significant theme of the piece, presenting captivity as a system of robbed personhood and dehumanizing conditions in which men are no longer fathers, husbands, or sons but merely prisoners. The power of place is also emphasized, even to the point of personifying the "nowhere land" of Andersonville.



A shot from the "Beacon Sun" music video portrays a Union prisoner held in captivity at Andersonville.

Throughout the song, ambiguous lyrics allow for interpretive flexibility. In particular, point of view becomes a matter of interpretation. For example, is "we" meant to represent the prisoners held at Camp Sumter? The prisoners who died there? Modern Americans? Americans across the centuries? In some lines, the lyrics function on multiple levels depending on which definition of "we" that you assume, creating additional nuance and poignancy. Such is the case in verses like "Taken to a nowhere land/I can't even understand/Where we're going/Better yet where we've been." Understood as the lament of an imprisoned soldier, these lines are a comment on one man's personal life trajectory. Assumed to be the words of a lost nation, though, they come to express a modern loss of direction as a people. This duality of meaning is also true for the chorus, which with a conflated "we" ascends from personal nostalgia to a direct comment on historical memory: we can never escape history or its memory—it haunts us.

Ultimately, "Beacon Sun" charges listeners with a Lincolnist mission: that we as modern Americans have the duty to remember those men held at Camp Sumter and carry on their fight. By taking in the song's solemn and thought-provoking message and acting to preserve the memory of thousands of interned Union soldiers, we "come to face the fight with our brothers at the table" and dedicate ourselves to their unfinished work.



A member of the band offers a silent salute to those who suffered within Camp Sumter's infamous stockade.

Among my generation—those caught in their quarter-life crises, rather than experiencing the midlife variety—the memory of what transpired at Andersonville is often watery-thin, if not fully absent. According to a recent visitor survey conducted by the National Park Service, 66% of the visitors to Andersonville NHS are 51 or older. This steady aging of park demographics in the post-Centennial era has resulted in what former Chief of Interpretation Eric Leonard has referred to as “the quiet crisis of the Civil War parks,” namely the waning interest that such interpretive sites seem to hold for young Americans. So long as Civil War NPS sites continue to let the expectations and demands of the Centennial generation shape their interpretation, that isn't going to change any time soon. Changing how federal institutions operate can be a glacially slow process, I know. But public historians ought not to let the grind of bureaucracy stamp out their creative inclinations.

There are thousands of NPS employees out there with groundbreaking ideas on how to prod the slumbering beast that is outmoded historical interpretation. And my plea to them is this: don't let the flame die out. Don't let what's easy come in the way of what's important. Because if we do, there won't be any future visitors to interpret for.

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