

FRIARS' BOOKSHELF

THIS LAND IS GOD'S LAND

Hillbilly Thomists. *Holy Ghost Power*. Washington: Dominicana Records, 2022. 59 mins.

Is there a cure for wanderlust? How many trips do we need to take before we return home with more than just a few photos and nostalgic memories? On their new album, *Holy Ghost Power*, the Hillbilly Thomists invite the listener to join them on a roadtrip to a place where the soul can find rest. With triumphs, struggles, and grit, the album firmly sets its course toward its final destination: the Beatific Vision.

The band comes from humble origins, starting with a few brothers playing Irish and American folk music at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Before long, the jam sessions turned into recording sessions, and a new opportunity for preaching emerged. Today, their work remains centered around the fun of the music, while rooted in evangelization and truth. Even more than their previous two albums, the harmony of recreation and apostolate is loud and clear this time around.

Holy Ghost Power excites the listener from the blues-y opening riff of the title track. Slide guitars and fiddles set the tone, as if this were the start of a classic Western. Throughout the song, the narrator is in a malaise—or a “zombie town,” as he calls it—looking for a way out. The song then explodes with its brazen

chorus, setting the theme of the Spirit's triumph throughout the album: "Just when I faced the capital hour / That's when I found the Holy Ghost power." In all situations—the good, the bad, and the ugly—God's work is done.

The band escapes the confusion of the exterior world by going on an interior journey in "Good Tree." The song builds and builds, until a large coda wraps the listener in sound, representing the personal resolve needed for the journey's first steps. "Love is Patient" follows, pensively praying for grace at the outset of this road trip. As fingerpicking patterns flutter through the ears, blanketed by delicate harmonies, one can imagine the light of daybreak as the band sets out on their way. But this gentle morning is soon caffeinated by the next song, "The Power and Glory," where the boldness of the title track returns.

The album's road trip theme shines through in the next two tracks, "Old Highway" and "New City." The former, steeped in Americana, references Chevrolets and Johnny Cash. It evokes a pilgrimage across the country's open roads to "start my life again."



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The latter then seeks to pinpoint the destination. While its verses describe Baltimore, Nashville, Los Angeles, and Washington as potential cities of refuge, the narrator walks away from them dissatisfied. Only in the chorus does he visit the "new city lit by the Lamb"—the heavenly kingdom! The music reflects this contrast: the verses are weighed down to the earth, while vocal harmonies and a rising chord progression lift up the chorus to celestial heights.

"Satisfied Man" highlights the gritty and authentic vibe of *Holy Ghost Power*. Its opening

chatter and instrumental noodling comes across as a demo given just to the listener. It soon progresses into an epic Grateful Dead-esque jam session, with the listener's personal recording suddenly feeling more like a private concert. This blossoming is also evident in "Veronica," where banjo, mandolin, and soaring vocal lines build upon the initial gentle guitar and piano melodies.

"Way Down in New Orleans" leans on the Catholic roots of Louisiana's largest city, where the narrator says his "soul got saved." The frenzied lyrics and music illustrate grace's presence in the midst of absurdity. God works through an unexpected cast of characters (a heartbroken drifter and a long-haired barfighter are among the narrator's muses) and through our own vagabond ways, as if we were freighthopping tramps in search of a home and in need of guidance. In his providence, God seizes the narrator's life, its tribulations included, to bring him to salvation.

Like any journey, the Christian journey the Hillbilly Thomists take us on has its roadblocks. Three tracks on the album's back end ("Floodwaters," "Sweet Prospect," and "You") are somber reminders of the difficult journey the Christian faces along the road to heaven. "You," featuring vocals accompanied by a lone guitar and the occasional backup voice, is a pilgrim's interior monologue on the final leg of his journey. He meditates on all the consolations he has known in his life, both small (sunny weather, a café, central heating) and substantial (good friends, family, good health), and questions his dependence on God: "Do I rely on you, only you?" Although he leaves the question unresolved, it paves the way for the jovial and consoling final song of the album, "Sing Redeeming Love."

As the journey ends, the verses of "Sing Redeeming Love," charged with faith, hope, and love, look to the other side of eternity. After a fake-out ending, a chorus of brothers joins the narrator, singing, "Give me that old-time religion!" The band co-opts the title of a southern gospel hymn to preach the deep roots and tradition of the Catholic Church, the vehicle of the band's journey.

So it is that, with the release of their third studio album, the Hillbilly Thomists continue to cleverly unite the small-t tradition of Americana with the capital-T Tradition of the Church. While *Holy Ghost Power* marches on with that project, it also takes the listener on a new journey across mountains and plains, through streets and struggles, to that sweet by-and-by, where joy shall never end.

Reviewed by Thomas Mary Nee, O.P.

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ECSTATIC LOVING: MOVING TOWARD THE DIVINE

Peter Kwasniewski. *The Ecstasy of Love in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2021. 432 pp.

What does it mean to experience a moment of ecstasy of love? Ask someone this question, and you will receive a spectrum of vivid answers ranging from levitating mystics to out-of-body experiences. Perhaps a moment of passionate emotion is thrown in the mix as well. All of these explanations perceive ecstasy as something extraordinary and reserved for the few. But, is this true, or is the ecstasy of love an ordinary expression of progress in the Christian life? In his book, *The Ecstasy of Love in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Peter Kwasniewski sets out to explain St. Thomas's definition of *extasis amoris* (ecstasy of love) and show its implications for the Christian life. As a product of his doctoral dissertation, he gives numerous citations from St. Thomas that show how ecstasy emanates from an act of love, specifically,