

Devil or Angel, Bobby Vee Knew Which

Lately, I've had an ear worm playing old Bobby Vee songs, especially "Devil or Angel got you on my mind." To re-run my old connections with Bobby Vee, his sister-in-law, Monica Bergen, was my classmate in one of Rufus Bellamy's post graduate Modern Lit classes back in 1963. Some in the class wanted Monica to reveal when Bobby and her sister would be in Detroit Lakes. I think they hoped to catch a glimpse of the popular rock star, but Monica kept that info secret to preserve their privacy.

My other connection involved through Pat Rassier's pals, Jim Myrah and Ellsworth Dollinger, two "hoods," (they smoked Camels and wore ducktails and Fonzie-style black leather jackets which endeared them to Pat who was Fairmount N. D.'s original "rebel without a cause." Pat often hunted with Warren Williams and me. Jim and Ellsworth, both with FM roots, told Pat they often hung out at the Velline residence when *The Shadows*, Bobby's band, rehearsed for gigs in the F/M area.

I mentioned in an earlier column how Bobby Vee's star rose just after Buddy Holly's plane crashed. Bobby beautifully carried on many of Buddy's songs and enhanced some, like "*Suzie Baby*," with his own unique style.

It was Bobby Vee singing "Devil or Angel," that reminded me that the biblical four elements, earth, water, air and fire, as well as themes and famous characters appear in several 50's rock and roll hits. Some made special use of devils and / or angels: like "You Are My Special Angel," "You're the Devil in Disguise," and "Domino You're an angel that heaven has sent me, /Domino, Domino, you're a devil designed to torment me." We could add to

those,” *Jezebel*,” by Frankie Lane and the very popular “*Old Master Painter*” who “painted the devil in my darling’s eyes.”

My last column spoke of the many places in the Bible where water appeared as a symbol of the power of the cleansing Holy Spirit. And the element of fire was also used to depict spirit, both in good people and also in evil people. Not all spirits are holy, some are devilish. There is God’s refining fire, and Satan’s hell fire.

Man is molded by God out of the dust of the earth, the element usually associated with sensuality. So the phrase “earth angel” hints that the girl in the song was physically attractive with heavenly qualities. But man’s great battle in life is to get our spirit man to control our soulish and earthy urges and impulses. “Our old man was of the earth, earthly, but our new man, (the reborn human spirit,) is from heaven, heavenly,” says James. And ironically, says Paul, “We have this treasure, the spirit, in earthen vessels,” meaning our bodies. Our sullen earthly bodies are animated by our spirit, our life force.

While I’m into the elements, I should also mention air. In Genesis we read, “And The Lord formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul.” (Gen. 2:7 kjv).

So the medieval belief that man is a microcosm of the earth itself, composed of earth’s same four elements wasn’t nonsense at all. It was a brilliant concept aimed at explaining the mystery of our own miraculous make up. Genesis tells us we are formed “in the image and likeness of God. That inspired David to write, “I will praise Him for I am strangely and wonderfully made.”(Ps. 139)

John Donne, famous 17th century poet wrote in a sonnet, “I am a little world made cunningly/ Of elements and an angelic sprite.” He goes on to detail the struggle between his spirit (“sprite”) and the other elements of his nature struggling for control.

And Shakespeare’s Sonnet 146, “Poor soul the center of my sinful earth/ Thrall to those rebel powers which thee array.” speaks of that very battle: our human spirit at war with “the shocks that flesh is heir to,” as Hamlet puts it.

Let me cap this off with Cleopatra’s sublime farewell death speech just after she is bitten by the asp: “I am fire and air,/ My other elements I leave to baser life.” It was Shakespeare’s genius that enabled him to transform a drunken failure and a royal slut into beings adored and envied by “ghosts” in higher realms. Sadly, they are featured in Dante’s *Inferno* as inhabitants of a circle of Hell reserved for the damned.

Which genius is right? You are welcome to your own opinion. After writing this, my flesh beckons me to retire. My spirit wants me to re-read Act V Scene II of “*Anthony and Cleopatra*. Guess it’s time for my nap.

Gene Pinkney for The Daily News/ 24-09-23-