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# The Universe Invoked in Pantheist Hymns

*By Harold Wood*

Poetry and music have long been a part of pantheist practice. Today, we sometimes tend to think that versions of spiritually focused songs that celebrate the Universe and natural forces are rare and unusual compared to those that emphasize supernatural beings and deities. Yet, as early as 1830, pantheist and universalist Abner Kneeland published a hymnbook titled *National Hymns*, with the explanatory subtitle reading: “For The Use of Those Who are Slaves to No Sect.”

Among the hymns that Kneeland revised for a Pantheist and Universalist celebration was the following, using the tune for “Amazing Grace”:

## THE UNIVERSE INVOKED

Hail Universe! Capacious good  
To thee our songs we raise  
And Nature in her various scenes  
Invites a song of praise.

At morning, noon and evening mild  
Fresh wonders strike our view  
And while we gaze, our hearts exult  
With transports ever new.

See glory beams in every star  
Which gilds the gloom of night;  
And decks the smiling face of morn  
With rays of cheerful light.

The lofty hills, the humble vale,  
With countless beauties shine:  
The silent grove, the cooling shade  
Proclaim a power sublime.

Great Universe! Still may these scenes  
Our leisure hours engage;  
Still may our cheerful hearts consult  
Thy works’ instructive page!

And while in all these wondrous works  
Thy varied good we see  
Still may the contemplation lead  
Our Hearts, o Truth! To thee.

We need more songs like this that celebrate the reverence Pantheists hold for the beautiful and mysterious Universe in all of its glory.

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Another song that might be rehabilitated, just as Kneeland did with “Amazing Grace,” is the lullaby, **“All Through the Night.”** Today, the most often heard lyrics of this melodic lullaby begin:

Sleep my child and peace attend thee,  
All through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee,  
All through the night;

It turns out that this version of the song, so well known today and recorded by many popular artists, is actually an English variant of the original Welsh folk song lyrics. This Christianized popular variant was written by Sir Harold Boulton in 1884. And in fact, there are many other variants of this song, set to the same melody, many offered as hymns rather than as a lullaby.

This should be contrasted with the original Welsh song from which “All Through The Night” actually began, titled *Ar Hyd y Nos*, which originally had much more universal and less supernatural lyrics. It was published in 1784, written by John Ceiriog Hughes. The Welsh lyrics have been translated into several languages, including English. Interestingly, these original lyrics adhere much more closely to a pantheist sensibility than the 1884 Christianized version of the song, depending on the translation.

One English translation that is said to adhere more closely to the original Welsh meaning than the popular version heard so much today, was written by A. G. Prys-Jones:

Ev'ry star in heaven is singing  
All through the night,  
Hear the glorious music ringing  
All through the night.  
Songs of sweet ethereal lightness  
Wrought in realms of peace and whiteness;  
See, the dark gives way to brightness  
All through the night.

Look, my love, the stars are smiling  
All through the night.  
Lighting, soothing and beguiling  
Earth's sombre plight:  
So, when age brings grief and sorrow,  
From each other we can borrow  
Faith in our sublime tomorrow,  
All through the night.

This version removes some supernaturalism, but still retains some anthropomorphism, but that could be forgiven perhaps since NASA scientists have recently turned light signals from distant stars into sound. By analyzing the amount of hiss in the sound, they can work out the star's surface gravity and what stage it's at in its evolution from dwarf to red giant. “It is a giant red concert,” says the astronomer who made the recording. “They have many different frequencies and overtones. Stars at different stages in its evolution from dwarf to red giant emit a different “note.” So, in a way, it turns out that stars really can sing! To be compatible with modern science, even the reference to “our sublime tomorrow” can be interpreted to support stellar and biological evolution on its long journey!

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Whether we can rehabilitate such old songs, or write new ones, we need more Pantheist hymns with truly scientifically-compatible lyrics. Indeed a number of people have been writing such songs, for quite a few years.

A “Monty Python” song from the movie “The Meaning of Life” called “The Galaxy Song” was intended as parody, but nonetheless the lyrics are delightful and easily adapted to be more inspirational, as musician Dana Lyons and rainforest activist John Seed do here in these slightly adapted lyrics:

### EXPANDING UNIVERSE

by Dana Lyons and John Seed,

adapted from the Monty Python “Galaxy Song” by Clint Patrick Black and Eric Idle

Remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving  
And revolving at nine hundred miles an hour  
That's orbiting at nineteen miles a second, so it's reckoned  
A sun that is the source of all our power  
The sun and you and me and all the stars that you can see  
Are moving at a million miles a day  
In an outer spiral arm, at forty thousand miles an hour  
In a galaxy we call the 'milky way'  
The Milky Way!  
Our galaxy itself contains a hundred billion stars  
It's a hundred thousand light years side to side  
It bulges in the middle, sixteen thousand light years thick  
But out by us, it's just three thousand light years wide

We're thirty thousand light years from galactic central point  
We go 'round every two hundred million years  
And our galaxy is only one of millions and billions  
In this amazing and expanding universe  
Expanding Universe!

The universe itself keeps on expanding and expanding  
In all of the directions it can whizz  
As fast as it can go, at the speed of light, you know  
Twelve million miles a minute and that's the fastest speed there is  
So remember, when you're feeling very small and insecure  
How amazingly unlikely is your birth  
And sink your roots deep into the galaxy  
Dance of life, Planet Earth!

Note here that Dana Lyons and John Seed have substituted the last two lines above for the original satirical Monty Python lyrics:

*And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space  
'Cause there's bugga all down here on Earth*

Similarly, in 2012, the BBC got Eric Idle, who wrote the original “Galaxy Song,” to write and sing new lyrics in the same vein. But instead of singing about the massive scale of the universe and humanity's insignificance in it, this time Idle sings about the miracle—and weirdness—of life on Earth to introduce its “Wonders of Life” TV series. See and listen to “The Galaxy DNA Song” at: <http://youtu.be/uo6OCxwUPPg>

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Of course, there are many songs with the theme of Earth, Nature, and environment, but I for one would like to see more songs celebrating the wider universe as well - especially as sing-alongs. For example, Priscilla Herdman has a beautiful 2008 album **Into the Stars** which is an inspired collection celebrating the beauty of the night sky and the wonder of the universe that surrounds us, (which also includes a lovely version of “The Galaxy Song.”) The song “Fireball” from Earth Mama’s album **Under the Rainbow** celebrates our ultimate origin in a supernova. Cheryl Wheeler’s “Orbiting Jupiter” is an beautiful “space song” celebrating that planet and its moons. Peter Mayer’s “Blue Boat Home” sings of “the wide universe is the ocean I travel” and it is already a classic - a widely appreciated pantheist and Unitarian Universalist hymn. And there are in fact many other Pantheist hymns out there!

One newly written paean to the Universe is this one by Keith Mesecher and performed by the Cosmic All-Stars, which you can listen to here: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/songs/cosmic-all-stars.html>

### WE ARE THE COSMOS

*Refrain:*

We are the Cosmos  
We are stardust  
We are beauty  
We are love

Well fill me up  
With exultation  
Fill my heart  
And soul with song

We hold in our hands  
All that is sacred  
Earth below us  
Heavens above

And bless me with  
The thrill of living  
Make my will  
And spirit strong

I am feeling  
All this wonder  
All this beauty  
And all this love

I am open  
To the splendor  
The magnificence  
Of all that is

Well I am floating  
In the cosmic ocean  
Filled with starlight  
From above

Yes I am swimming  
In the cosmic ocean  
I am held by  
All that lives

For more “cosmic” songs, one of our members, Connie Barlow, has a website devoted to “Songs and Hymns of the Universe Story: The Epic of Evolution in Song and Music Videos” at: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/songs.html>

Do you know other songs or hymns that you think can be used, or adapted as part of our pantheist hymnbook - especially that go beyond “our spaceship Earth”? Please send us your ideas!

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Harold Wood, a co-founder of the Universal Pantheist Society and editor of *Pantheist Vision*, also hosts a website listing “Earth Songs” at: [www.planetpatriot.net/earth\\_songs.html](http://www.planetpatriot.net/earth_songs.html)