“I’m On My Long Journey Home”: Rhetorical Identification in the Bluegrass Gospel Singing of Ralph Stanley and the Stanley Brothers

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Summary/Abstract: The gospel songs of Ralph Stanley offer solace by means of identification with the singer’s losses and struggles, but they also offer a metaphoric framework of journey and homecoming found in many folk and country songs. The framework gives shape and meaning to the troubled aspects of life that make up much of the content of bluegrass songs, sacred and secular. Referencing Kenneth Burke’s early theories of rhetorical identification and symbolic appeal, this study reads the inclusion of gospel songs in stage and recorded performance as a secularized means of self-definition: singers and listeners are linked as people with common origins and destinations. While expected themes of repentance and faith run throughout these gospel songs, the progressive form of home that is lost and then recovered sets up a secular analogy to the story of sin and redemption so common in American Protestant Evangelicalism. By scattering these songs throughout a bluegrass performance, the journey toward home becomes the pathway by which all the troubles of betrayal, heartbreak, conflict, and hard times are borne and transformed. In place of creed or practices of piety, all are invited to find common purpose in the experiences of disappointment, regret, and loss in the knowledge that they are on the “Long Journey Home.”