

THE DARKEST ABYSS IN AMERICA

William Morris

“Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.” —Joseph Smith

SAN FRANCISCO

Mormon Pioneers of Sound

With The Darkest Abyss set to launch a US tour, can a popular, groundbreaking noise band made up of Mormon musicians lead to a thaw in US–Nipponese relations?

—head and subhead from the lead article of the *San Francisco Evening Post*’s Culture section, May 19, 1989



Honri, the first elder of The Darkest Abyss, answered most of the questions at the press conference. He still wasn’t sure if he had been anointed

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My thanks to commenter Stan on the *Juvenile Instructor* post “The Mormon Reserve” (Nov. 20, 2013) for introducing me to the initial idea that sparked this story. See <http://juvenileinstructor.org/the-mormon-reserve/#comment-348648> and Sandra T. Caruthers, “Anodyne for Expansion: Meiji Japan, the Mormons, and Charles LeGendre,” *Pacific Historical Review* 38, no. 2 (May 1969): 129–39.

first elder because the Brethren trusted him more than the other elders of the band or because he had the best English. He had prayed for confirmation. The only answer had been: seek not the why—seek the how so you may fulfill the duties to which you are called.

It didn't matter the reasons, though. The Americans saw him as the lead musician of the band, which meant it was only natural that he be the one to do the talking.

Thankfully, between his efforts and the interventions of Jim, the tour manager they had been assigned by the US State Department, the reporters soon came to realize that any questions intended to read the tour as political tea leaves would be deflected and so they moved on from the politics of the situation to the pleasant mundanities of the tour itself. Honri was happy to get through the onslaught unscathed. His primary instruction from the Brethren had been: "Don't start an international incident." He joyfully explained the logistics of moving a fifteen-member band and all its equipment, expressed the band's eagerness to see America, and explained their surprise at their popularity in the West.

When those topics were exhausted, the reporters moved on to personal questions. One even expressed surprise at this ability to speak without a translator and asked, "How is your English so good?"

"Many years of study," Honri replied. "And countless hours listening to American and British rock music as a teenager."

The laughter that followed wasn't unexpected, but he still found it nonsensical. Why wouldn't he have listened to rock music as a teenager?

After the press conference, there was a whirlwind photo-op tour of the city, including all of the members of the band posing around a small, worn plaque marking the arrival of the ship *Brooklyn*.

After the performance at the Warfield, Satoshi asked if he should send the message to the shinobi brethren.

Honri prayed silently in his heart. His mind reached out and met only confusion. “Not yet,” he said. He felt frustration and relief. He knew more of those same feelings were to come. The tour had just begun.

LOS ANGELES

On the LA tour stop, they visited a children’s park named after Fort Moore. One of Sister Emi’s ancestors had served in the Mormon Battalion. Once this was discovered, the *Los Angeles Daily Times* requested a photograph of Emi sitting by herself in one of the swings with her arms folded and head partially bowed.

“No individual photos,” Honri said. “We are a band and ask to be treated as such.”

Jim pulled him aside and explained the importance of working with the media, especially an outlet as important as the *Times*. But after a quick glance at Emi, who frowned and shook her head, Honri held firm.

On the ride back to the hotel, he discussed the request briefly with Emi and Chiko, both of whom served in the presidency of the sister musicians. They spoke in Nihon-go but in whispers because Honri suspected that some (or perhaps all) of the members of their security detail knew the language.

“Maybe we should let them,” he said.

“No,” Emi said. “We are not here to feed their stereotypes.”

“Maybe if they had built a museum to the battalion brethren instead of a play park for children,” Chiko said. “Maybe then.” A smile spread across her face. “Especially if they let Emi pose with a Winchester rifle.”

“Pointed at the camera,” Emi said. “Yes, I would do that. That would be punk rock.”

“Maybe too punk rock,” Honri said. “We’re not here to cause an international incident.”

“Why not? Why shouldn’t we?”

Honri grimaced.

“I’m not being serious,” Emi said. “But doesn’t it make you angry? They drove us out and now they want to make nice?”

“That was a long time ago,” Honri said. “I still feel the wounds. I think we all do. But I think our best response to that pain is the music.”

The two other sisters nodded.

“The music is good,” Chiko said. “The chance to play it here is a blessing.”



Things went better at the meeting with Monte Cale. At Honri’s suggestion, Jim had tracked down a copy of the May 1987 issue of *New Musical America* in which Cale had reviewed *This Tabernacle*, the band’s first album. Honri read the review out loud for the TV cameras:

Numinous clamor that reminds you that the Mormon landscape—whether it’s the Colorado Plateau or Hokkaido—is always one of rugged, sparse, operatic spaces. This is noise that even pop music fans can grow to love. The second side almost sludges toward devotional choral music but never quite reaches the syrup of the milquetoast US Midwest version, cut as it is with the searing drone of Honri’s electrified samisen and the incessant drive of the immense rhythm section, especially Josetsu’s mosquito drumming. Much more than an orientalist curiosity. Difficult to find for obvious reasons; try your favorite underground Nipponese importer.

He then thanked Cale for introducing The Darkest Abyss’s music to America and asked him to sign the page with the review on it so it could be framed for presenting to Prophet Hunter when they returned to Hokkaido. After the photo op was over, Cale insisted on being introduced to every member of the band. Honri obliged. The other fourteen musicians lined up to shake the critic’s hand and say a quick thank you. When it was his turn, Josetsu pretended to play a rapid-fire air drum solo on Cale’s outstretched hand. Everyone laughed. Silence descended after the introductions were complete. Honri wanted to fill

it with questions: how did you first hear our album? What made you decide to review it? Is it true that you have Mormon ancestry? But Jim quickly broke in with a steady patter about the state of the American music business, and the moment slipped away.

SALT LAKE CITY

The band members barely spoke all the way from Vegas to Salt Lake City. They pressed their foreheads against the bus windows and watched the desert landscape fly by.

Jim kept asking if they wanted to get out and take pictures. Honri finally told him that they weren't just being shy when they demurred. They were anxious to get to Salt Lake. He nodded as if he understood.



Their first stop was the tabernacle. The press had turned out in large numbers. The click of camera shutters opening and closing filled the air. Honri wondered if seagulls would appear and carry the photographers away.

The tabernacle's furnishings were worn, but the woodwork was still beautiful.

"They hold Rotary Club annual meetings here," Jim said as they walked in. "Great acoustics."

Honri wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

The members of the band crowded around the pulpit and sang "Come, Come, Ye Saints" in English to a crowd of local dignitaries and their spouses and then were served a late lunch of barbecued chicken, corn bread, and cowboy beans. Honri found himself oddly unmoved by the whole thing. He didn't even feel any ghosts. It was as if the Saints had carried all of them with them—along with the granite blocks that had formed the temple—when they had been relocated to Hokkaido.

The tabernacle was the one thing they had left behind. Perhaps it had been in gentile hands so long the consecration had worn off of it.

Would he feel the same about the Nauvoo Temple cornerstone? He wouldn't have the chance to see it in person. It wasn't close to any of their tour stops. He would have to make the decision based only on his intellect and the communications of the Holy Spirit. He quietly mentioned to Satoshi to let the shinobi know that they should put together the first phase of the plan.



The concert later that night had sold out the day before, but the seats at the Salt Palace's concert hall were only half full. Honri asked Jim about it after the performance.

"Our friends in the State Department made sure all the tickets were sold," Jim admitted. "An effort was made to give the tickets away, but to be honest your music is a bit of an acquired taste. You play much better on the coasts."

"Please tell our friends at the State Department that we would rather they not afford us such graces," Honri said. "We are here to connect with our fans—we're not worried about revenue."

"Of course," Jim replied. "No problem. We can always move the concerts to smaller venues if ticket sales are sluggish. But I don't think it's going to come up again. Things are looking very good in the rest of the cities."

"That is good to hear."

"They're looking very, very good," Jim said. "To be honest, if it wasn't for the, uh, the historical connection, we never would have booked SLC in the first place. We should have just bypassed it entirely and gone straight to Red Rocks."

"It was good to see the tabernacle," Honri said.

Jim nodded. “Just a blip,” he said. “A minor miscalculation. We’ll put this behind us and go on to better things, I’m sure of it.”

“Good,” Honri said. “We look forward to the rest of the tour.”

NEW YORK CITY

New York City was like a shabbier, more desperate Tokyo. All nervous, barely bridled energy poised to express itself creatively or recklessly or dangerously. He liked it. It felt like the real America. The America his home government distrusted. Not that he trusted it either. But he liked it more than the other cities they had toured since Salt Lake City. Those had all seemed busy but single-mindedly so with no weird edge to cut against the unfettered commercialism. No gaps for an underground (music, art, religion).



The band and their minders took the ferry to Ellis Island, where the tour guide promptly led them to a small display case in the immigration museum that held a small exhibit on the “Mormon Danes” of the 1860s and early 1870s—the last wave of Mormon immigrants that came to America before the resettlement.

The band listened attentively to the tour guide. They asked no questions, made no comments—even when prompted to by the guide. Honri thanked her when she was done and gave her a copy of their album on digital audio tape. The press who had tagged along seemed disappointed when it was over. Perhaps they had expected tears.

There had been tears, especially as the tour had worn on. But they were private tears shed silently late at night in hotel rooms when no press or minders were there to witness. Honri had done what he could but much of the burden of comforting those sister vocalists and drummers who were having a difficult time had fallen to Sister Emi and her

counselors. The brethren had been less open about their feelings, but he had noticed Satoshi and Josetsu having quiet conversations with several members of their quorum. He felt guilt over this, but Satoshi and Emi had gifts for such service that he did not. And the overall dynamics were easier as well. Honri's status as the presiding priesthood holder, the leader of the band, and the best speaker of English created a distance between him and the others that he did not like but accepted as necessary. The most he could do was help them channel their feelings into the music. That night at the Bowery Ballroom, the band played with a ferocity and speed that delighted the crowd—that Honri had no choice but to ride the crest of. They, as the Americans would say, left it all on the stage.

But after the lights dimmed and curtains fell, something lingered in Honri's soul. It trailed him through a post-concert performance/appearance at the Knitting Factory—the one thing he had truly been looking forward to on the tour—where he, Josetsu, and Chiko played Beatles, The Clash, and Angry Disco covers along with American musicians into the wee hours of the morning. It was still with him back at the hotel and on the long bus trip to upstate New York. He tried not to identify it—that dislocated feeling. Some allergic reaction to the lush, rolling hills. To the tidy farms and small towns. To the American-ness of it all. It was a cousin to what he had felt traveling through the desert to the Salt Lake Valley. It was as if he were coming home from his mission again: coming back to a place that had moved on without him, that he knew only from memory. Familiar, similar, but without a clear place for him.



It wasn't until the visit to the Smith homestead that Honri realized that the feelings that had been building up inside him throughout the tour had flared into rage. It wasn't the sensationalized account of the Prophet Joseph's life. Or the condescending attempt to present an even-handed view of the literary and theological merits of the Book of Mormon (com-

plete with Mark Twain quotes). Or the quaint and folksy costumes. Or the fact that the history abruptly stopped with Brigham Young entering the Salt Lake Valley. It was that the Sacred Grove wasn't mentioned at all. That the farm house had been preserved as a curiosity but the actual place that changed the course of human history was elided—no nod at all to the event that precipitated the entire Restoration. After the tour and the photo ops, Honri abruptly strode to the west edge of the parking lot, Jim nonchalantly following, and scanned the landscape. There were a few small stands of trees here and there, but they all looked to be attached to hobby farms.

“Looking for something?” Jim asked.

“No,” Honri replied. “Just looking around.”



Later that night, Honri turned that rage inward—let it condense into sorrow—and from there he felt the Holy Spirit confirm the decision. Even if the Americans were willing to give the cornerstone to the Church, something would be lost in the transaction, the sacred tangled up in negotiations and political posturing. The temple cornerstone belonged to them. They should take it in secret. This land had long ago become full of slippery treasures. It would not miss the cornerstone. If, of course, The Darkest Abyss could smuggle it out of the country. He gave Satoshi permission to give the signal.

CHICAGO

Honri paced backstage at Cabaret Metro in Chicago. The shinobi brethren would soon arrive with the cornerstone. He resisted the urge to help Satoshi re-check speaker 6—one of a stack of eight the band always traveled with. The receptacle was not the issue. It was fine. Satoshi would see to it. Honri should not draw attention to it. No, the issue he needed

to deal with was the guards and techs and roadies and managers and personal assistants and journalists that swarmed the backstage. There were many of them. The shinobi brethren were capable men with many gifts, physical and spiritual, but even they had limits to what they could achieve. All it would take was a roadie noticing a strange shadow and the whole plan would fail. If the shinobi brethren were discovered, it would stall the First Presidency's plan to finish and dedicate the replica temple in Hokkaido. It would also surely deal a blow to the thawing but still frosty Nipponese–American relations, which then could lead to a backlash against the Church's increasingly prominent position in Nippon. The Brethren had said no international incidents, but they had also made provisions for certain covert actions should Honri decide they were worth the risk. This is the one he had decided on. Now it was up to him to mitigate the risk.

So what to do about all the people? He had been taken aback by the number of them when the band had arrived for their opening gig in San Francisco. He soon realized that that was just the way Americans do things.

As he had all tour, Jim lurked nearby, all bland American nonchalance in his dark suit and loosened tie. He would be the key to creating an opening for the shinobi. Honri nodded at him.

The minder took the gesture as an invitation to talk. "Big night," he said. "Last show."

"Yes," Honri said. "I understand the venue is sold out—truly sold out."

"Chicago is a great music town. It's a pity you can't stay longer and enjoy it."

"Yes. That would be nice. Maybe next tour?"

Jim laughed. "No promises," he said. "But if your government continues to play nice with my government, then another tour is certainly possible."

"I have no control over that."

Jim laughed again. “Neither do I, son. Maybe your prophet can ask a higher authority than us to intervene and keeps things calm.”

“He already has.”

Jim straightened up. “Of course, of course,” he said and wandered off to talk to one of the publicists.

As much as he disliked Jim, Honri had not meant to create discomfort between them. He had not meant to be so literal and serious when clearly the man had thought they were joking around.



Satoshi emerged from the stage. Honri waved him over. “Did you get the amps fixed?”

“All good.”

“Now about that chord change on ‘Butter and Honey; Briars and Thorns?’” Honri slowly lowered his voice to a whisper.

“It’s ready. And I made enough of a fuss about the equipment that the roadies won’t be messing with it,” Satoshi whispered. “How far away is Nauvoo, anyway?”

Honri shrugged.

“What do we do when it gets here?” whispered Satoshi.

Honri shrugged again. “We didn’t plan this part beforehand. We didn’t exactly know what we would face here.” He swiveled his eyes toward their security detail. The faces had changed throughout the tour, but somehow a full pack of four always showed up—bulky men with close-cropped hair who projected interested disinterest and gentle menace. He suspected that at least one of them spoke fluent Nihon-go. At one point, Josetsu had suggested they use Deseret AINU, but Honri had rejected the idea. He had wanted to raise no suspicions needlessly. But time was running out. Perhaps now was a moment for boldness. They had been compliant all tour. In fact, several of the crew had remarked

on the lack of drama. Some in a tone of relief; others disappointment. Yes. It was time to act like a rock star.

“Satoshi! Get Josetsu. And sisters Emi, Chiko, and Minori. They were all off in rehearsal.”

Satoshi nodded crisply and then rushed off to round up the third elder and the presidency of the sister musicians.

Jim sidled up. “Everything okay?” he asked. “You go on in thirty minutes.”

“There was some disunity in rehearsal,” Honri said. “I need to speak to some of my band members alone.”

“Well, now, I’m sorry to hear that. Anything I can do?”

“Find us a quiet, private place to meet. We don’t wish to alarm the rest of the band, so we can’t kick them all out of the green room or the costume room.”

“Sure thing,” Jim said. “Anything for band unity?”

“Thanks,” Honri said. He didn’t know if the security team reported to Jim or him to them, but he had to assume that they would have to be quick. Satoshi soon returned with the others. Honri led them into a small dressing room that Jim had asked the backstage manager to open. It smelled of stale beer and incense. Jim tried to follow the sisters in. “Band business,” Honri said. He shut the door in the tour manager’s face. Satoshi wedged a chair under the handle.



“We must meet with haste,” Honri said. “But we will begin with a prayer. Sister Emi?”

After the prayer, Honri explained the situation in as oblique terms as he could. The two presidencies discussed a variety of options. Each person spoke in turn. They quickly discarded—Josetsu most reluctantly—the more complex and violent ideas.

“We must use our foreignness to our advantage,” Chiko finally said. “And our faith.”

The plan came together quickly after that. When the details were set, Honri felt a warmth distill in his chest and well up to meet the newfound clarity in his mind. “The Lord is with us in this thing,” he said. “Let’s go. But first, and I’m sorry about this. . .”

The elders and sisters yelled scripture mastery passages at each other in Deseret AINU sprinkled with English music-isms borrowed from the rock documentaries they had watched as teenagers at the Zarahemla Cinema in Sapporo. Josetsu got too much into the spirit of things and broke one of the chairs against the dressing room counter. It was all intense enough that Honri wasn’t sure that the tears and flushed faces were simulated. They let Jim pound on the door for half a minute before they opened it.

The American had a look on his face that was part exasperation, part amusement. The security detail was arrayed behind him. “Everything okay? I was about ready to step in,” he said.

“Sorry about that,” Honri said. “But all is in order now. Sometimes it’s necessary to let your feelings out. We learned that from watching your TV sitcoms.”

Jim’s laugh was almost convincing. One of the security officers snorted, which got him dirty looks from the other three.



At fifteen till curtain, Honri insisted that every single person backstage join *The Darkest Abyss* for a prayer in the green room. The band members and crew and journalists crowded in. Honri worked the room, expressing thanks to the American crew members and telling them that he was pleased they were willing to join the band for a special pre-show ritual. The other members of *The Darkest Abyss* intermingled in his

wake, offering what thanks they could express in English and passing out cards printed with the Articles of Faith.

It took some diva-level loud whispering, but Honri and Chiko convinced Jim to herd the reluctant techs and security team in as well. Satoshi slipped off to meet the shinobi brethren.

Honri gave the prayer in English. With a loud voice, he blessed the instruments and the equipment. He blessed the band that they would find unity in rhythm. He blessed the crowd with safety and that they would be inspired to live more worthy lives. He blessed the crew that they would be protected and in synch with the band. He blessed Chicago that the gift of noise they were bringing it would dampen the violence that had been so prevalent on the city's streets that summer. He thanked God for Joseph Smith. He thanked God for the American president. He thanked God for Hunter Jiro Daikancho.

He prayed on—asking for more blessings, being thankful for more things—until Jim placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered, “Wrap it up. Five till curtain.”

Honri finished in the name of Christ. There followed a chorus of amens. Even some of the Americans joined in.



On the evening of July 23, 1989, The Darkest Abyss took the stage before a sold-out audience for the final concert of their first and only North American tour. The four drummers began pounding a driving beat. The two bassists thumped a pulsing line. The three guitarists chimed in with a buzzing drone. The five vocalists hummed eerily.

Honri waited until the crowd began chanting his name. They could barely be heard over all the noise his band members, his fellow Morumon, were creating. Honri nodded to Jim and walked onto the stage. The crowd got louder. So did the band. Honri raised both arms in the air, stretching his hands toward heaven. He stepped over to Satoshi, who

leaned in so close the fretboard of his bass thrummed against Honri's chest. "The cornerstone is in place," Satoshi yelled beneath the clamor. Honri clasped his second elder's shoulder firmly, gave a thumbs up to the other instrumentalists and vocalists, walked to center stage, plucked his electric shamisen from its stand, and strummed a dissonant chord.

The crowd went wild.