

MUSIC AND LYRICS

Directed by Marc Lawrence
Produced by Martin Shafer and Liz Glotzer
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
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It's always a pleasant surprise when Biblical truths find expression in secular films. *Star Trek III* and the *Back to the Future* movies do a credible job outlining the significance of a man laying down his life for his friends (though neither Doc nor Marty have to die, when it's all said and done). *Presumed Innocent* feels like a modern updating of the graphic warnings regarding fornication/adultery in the book of Proverbs. *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* abounds with Christological typology, from the creature's sacrifice to spare his friend (cutting himself off from Elliott just as Christ, while saving humanity from the curse of sin, was cut off from the Father on the cross), to a subsequent death, resurrection, and ascension. (Additionally, E.T. is able to perform miracles [levitation, healing Elliott's finger]; and E.T.'s final declaration, "I'll be right here," connotes Christ's provision of the Comforter—the Holy Spirit.)

Music and Lyrics, believe it or not, speaks to the parable of the talents.

The parable of the talents is found in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 25. It may be summarized thus: A master entrusts three servants with money and goes away on a long journey. The master gives to each man "according to his several ability," meaning, he gives to each what he knows he can handle. One gets five, another gets two, and the last gets one. The servants "trade," while the master is away, working to grow his money. The master finally returns and rewards the first two servants, for they doubled their respective stakes ("enter thou into the joy of thy lord"). But the third servant is punished, for he hid the master's money. In the end, that man is "cast out."

In the parable, 'talent' means money, derived from the Latin *talentium* and the Greek *talanton*, meaning weight or sum of money. Because of this parable we derive our more common understanding of a 'talent' being something given to a person in the form of a skill or disposition that cannot be learned (but can be fostered/developed).

The most troubling portion of this parable may be vv. 24-27:

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

If this parable has a non-monetary application (with anything given to us as stewards, even talents [in the modern sense of the word]), then it has far-reaching implications. The master goes away. He does not help with the labor. The servants who are left behind must carry on, knowing nothing about how long they are to endure, or even if they will be compensated for their efforts. In the wicked servant's excuse the use of the words 'sown,'

‘gathering,’ and ‘strawed’ imply that toilsome farm labor was involved here. The trading was probably the result of using the seed money to buy...seeds. And it is only after several harvests, and subsequent trading, that enough time passes for the talents to be doubled.

The servants did not have it easy. Indeed, life can be confusing, and figuring out how to manage, wondering when we’ll get the answers we long for, wondering when our labors may finally cease, these uncertainties can take a toll. The servant with one talent probably figured that there’s nothing much he could do with what he’d been given, and it would be best to hang on to what he has rather than lose that, too.

But—and this is crucial—he won’t even bother to put it in the bank, where, with no effort on his part, it will increase. He acts like he’s afraid of his master, but, more likely, he is bitter, and does not want the master to profit when he’s not doing any work. He wasn’t given as much as the other servants, *and that’s not fair*.

Verse 29 is a warning to all those who have been blessed in this life: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

(And any of us that has breath in his lungs has been blessed.)

Alex Fletcher has two things going for him. First, he has a platform. He was the second fiddle of Pop, and this exposure permits him a modest career of nostalgia-fueled performances. Second, he is talented. As he’s realistic enough to admit, he is no genius. For example, he really struggles with lyrics, and his chord patterns and melodies, while pleasant, are hardly revolutionary. But now, despite his limitations, he has another shot at the Big Time. Cora Corman has given him a chance to write her a new song. And he’s found a new lyricist, the quirky, emotionally stunted Sophie Fisher, who, like Alex, has dissipated her talent. But, unlike Alex, she’s not content—beneath the bubbly facade she is passionately angry. Yet, just like Alex, she doesn’t know how to leave the past behind, how to overcome crippling misconceptions about her role in life and what she is really capable of.

But they are different in one crucial way. While enjoying a humble muffin breakfast at a bakery around the corner, Sophie explains how she was seduced and discarded by a towering intellect, a professor who has twisted their errant romance into a smash best-seller. He now dismisses Sophie as a parrot without an original idea. Alex says she should forget the guy—he’s just a big jerk. She challenges him, asking how he would react if one of his heroes trashed him the same way, and treated him as being worthless. He admits that this would be devastating, but he would channel his frustration and disappointment into a song that wrestled with the very feelings he was having. He refuses to be “self-indulgent.” He will not let anyone dictate his future. (And, indeed, this is what Sophie ends up doing with her lyrics for “Way Back Into Love.” They speak to the anxiety [and hope] engendered by Sloan Cates and Alex; each person is—in effect—a locked door, and each person offers his trust. They exchange their rusty keys with a tenuous faith.

Sophie has artistic integrity, but she uses it as a crutch. Alex has no artistic integrity. He thinks that’s the way to success, to treat the music business as mere butt-kissing, butt-slapping vacuity. But Sophie is right to point out that his lone solo album flopped because it was

“soulless”—he had nothing to say. This exchange regarding identity and motivation, when the two begin their collaboration, is highly relevant:

Sophie: “What would you sing about?”

Alex: “Whatever gets me the job, really.”

Alex’s problem may not be that he refuses to be critical of Cora’s sensuous interpretation of the song, but, rather, that he lies, feigning approval. He feels that his talents are so slight that he cannot afford to have artistic integrity. Winning the job, then getting it done, is all that matters. If it’s done right, then that’s a bonus. He is happy to compromise, he delights in “pandering.” He writes ‘dessert’; the great artists write ‘dinner.’

As our story begins, Alex is content to be known as a “has-been”; he doesn’t shrink from who he is. And yet, he is wrong to assume that’s all he can be. This tension, between the positive side of his character (his kindness and humility), and the negative (his penchant for an equanimity bordering on groveling self-abasement), provides the real drama in the story. Anything Sophie is working through simply informs Alex’s character and magnifies in significance the challenges he’s facing during the most significant week of his life.

Two scenes demonstrate his worthiness, in the quasi-Biblical sense.

The first is when he’s embarrassed at the amusement park. He’s tired of playing hokey sideshows and shaking his bum. He would like to forego the encore (despite it being part of his contract) and preserve his dignity. But Sophie tells him the songs are great and he’s making people happy. He has nothing to be ashamed of.

Alex finishes the show, singing joyfully.

It must be hard for famous athletes, movie actors, and singers when their popularity wanes. Will they ride the bench? Will they take the bit part? Will they play the high school reunion? There is a degree of embarrassment there, especially if the person was insufferable when he was on top and took advantage of his lofty position. To humble oneself, to do the best work one can with what he has, is a quiet sacrifice in such circumstances. You don’t give up; you press on, content to know you’re being the best you can be right now. You don’t know if there’s any point to it; you don’t know if it’s leading to something better; you don’t know when it’s ever going to end.

But for Alex, actually, the writing is on the wall. His manager, Chris Riley, is blunt—he needs to get serious or it’s all over. Even nostalgia is forgotten in time. The gigs are getting cancelled, the money is running out. He needs to leverage his opportunity with Cora Corman.

The second scene is at Madison Square Garden. Cora likes “Way Back Into Love.” He is granted a huge opportunity to share the stage with her. Sophie arrives at the concert with her sister, Rhonda. Jumping to conclusions, they decide Alex is taking the entire credit for the song Sophie and he wrote together, and, basically, that there’s nothing they can do about it. (In effect, Alex can walk away, argue that it’s absurd that he’d collaborate with a such a flake, then rake in the cash.)

Instead, he has written a different song, “Don’t Write Me Off,” supplying the lyrics himself that are both a plea for forgiveness from Sophie for his dismissive reaction to her justified concerns as to the performance of “Way Back Into Love,” and a reminder to the public that he is more than a novelty act.

Sophie's going to move to Florida to expand the family business. He says she should be writing lyrics, not shaming insecure people into losing weight. She's tired of talking about business; she wants to hear that he loves her. But he chooses his words poorly, telling her he can't *compose* without her.

But he can. And his song—inspired by her—wins her heart. Her ability to get the job done, to overcome the crippling inferiority complex resulting from the betrayal of her old lover-mentor, inspires Alex to overcome his comfortable self-imposed handicap.

It's important to note, in the scenes leading up to the concert, how deferential he is to Cora, despite her youth and apparent shallowness. Part of Alex's solicitude is self-serving, as he doesn't want to antagonize someone as powerful as she (Sophie's interpretation). But he is being realistic, humble, and, most interesting, respectful as he, perhaps, suspects his career is hardly worthy of the fame he was granted back in his prime. Could it simply be an obscure working-out of the Golden Rule that compels him to treat Cora as he would like to be treated were he still at the top?

How can he dare look down on her?

But Sophie is furious that Alex would so blatantly compromise just to get back into the game. In the most agonizing scene in the film, when Sophie heads for the door, refusing to work on the must-have third verse, Alex blasts her for living in a "fairy tale"—"inspiration is for amateurs"; the job must get done, and she doesn't have the courage to see it through. She tells herself she can't do it, but, as Alex sees it, the reality is that she chooses not to, simply because she is not getting her way with Alex and Cora. She will hold the song "hostage" to get her way. Sloan Cates was right. But to his shock, come morning, she supplies the trenchant third verse, impressing Cora and securing for Alex the (second) chance of a lifetime. Did his words hit home, inspiring her to finish the job? Or was he wrong?

He was wrong. She has hang-ups, she's pouty, and she's quick to take her ball and go home. But she is not a "brilliant mimic." Those lyrics came from her heart, and they're very, very good.

And isn't it telling that, at the party on the rooftop, when Sophie confronts Cora, she defends her choices by saying her fans love for her to dance, and Shakira is "breathing down [her] neck." She is feeling the pressure to compromise, too!

Basically, Alex's story tracks the parable in two respects: If Alex had no big opportunities, and he wasn't quite as talented as he actually is, then forging ahead, doing the work, would be enough.

But because he has been given more, he must take the risk; he must give of himself, from deep within. Otherwise, even the little he has (Chris's warning) will be taken away.

He works hard. He composes well under pressure. And he finds a way to employ *honesty* to convince Cora to change the arrangement of the song, preserving Sophie's intent and giving the song a chance to move people by refusing to bury its message amidst the convoluted trappings of sexed-up Buddhism.

Alex has made the sacrifice to keep working even when it seemed pointless, even silly. And now, given a chance to save his career, he forges for himself a new identity as a capable artist, rather than a hack-technician content to rest on his laurels.

His reward awaits.