

# Stories of Ghosts

A new album by Deborah Conway and Willy Zygyier

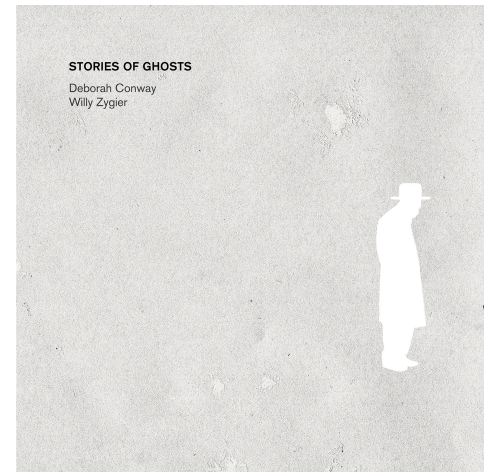
Release date: Friday 15 February 2013

★★★★ - *Rolling Stone* review, March 2013

★★★★ - *Fairfax Press* review, March 2013

Album of the Week - *ABC Radio National*, February 2013

Album of the Week - *ABC Radio Gold Coast*, February 2013



**Stories of Ghosts** is an unbeliever's examination of Old Testament themes from a Jewish perspective, exploring the connections between ancient practice and modern life. **Stories of Ghosts** sees Conway and Zygyier treading a path through vengeance, forgiveness, grief and acceptance, examining existential uncertainty in the face of unchanging beliefs and coming to terms with the endless trade-off that life is full of – loss leavened with happiness, tragedy with humor, and sadness with joy.

Building on the acoustic instrumentation of 2010's acclaimed *Half Man Half Woman*, **Stories Of Ghosts** adds layers of wood, strings and air, creating a sound that veers from delicate and melancholy to savage and fierce. Deborah said "The songs on this album are a carefully honed collection reflecting on a long history of composing and living together, infused with memories and the influences of our heroes; we think of it as like our Friday night family dinners, full of ferocious debate, sometimes hilarious, sometimes political, sometimes full of venom & sometimes in agreement. For me this is what Jews do best, they challenge, they argue, they explore the extensions of an issue, the critical, the polemical and no debate is ever really settled, just rested. It is part of the culture that I love, that has shaped us, that we celebrate and acknowledge in every song we write, whether overt or otherwise."

## THE SONGS

**The Writing's On The Wall** - It's the cliché that means everybody else knows but you, you've been blind to the bleeding obvious. The phrase originates from an episode in the Old Testament, Book of Daniel, where the Babylonian King Belshazzar was entertaining his courtiers on the eve of battle, getting drunk from cups stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem, instead of being with his troops. The hand of G-d appeared and proceeded to write on the wall, words of judgement about not measuring up to expectations. Belshazzar was dead by dawn. He never saw it coming. None of



us see it coming. The record business still doesn't see it coming. What don't you see?

We toyed with putting strings on this song but kept it raw & sparse. It also meant not writing out an arrangement in D flat Major.

**G-D** - The song "G-d" is pronounced God. It is customary in Jewish practice not to write the word God as a sign of reverence. It then doesn't matter if the word G-d is erased or disposed of or indeed if the song is not listened to.

A Christian God is a god to surrender to, to seek forgiveness and understanding. The G-d we grew up reading about is more vengeful and exacting, but who is also someone to argue with as frightening as that might be. Jews are taught to question G-d in order to learn more deeply.

(Zephaniah 3:6-10) *"I have wiped out many nations, devastating their fortress walls and towers. Their cities are now deserted; their streets are in silent ruin. There are no survivors to even tell what happened. I thought, 'Surely they will have reverence for me now! Surely they will listen to my warnings, so I won't need to strike again.' But no; however much I punish them, they continue their evil practices from dawn till dusk and dusk till dawn." So now the LORD says: "Be patient; the time is coming soon when I will stand up and accuse these evil nations. For it is my decision to gather together the kingdoms of the earth and pour out my fiercest anger and fury on them. All the earth will be devoured by the fire of my jealousy."*

(Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion) *"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction:*

*jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."*

Dawkins is using this as an argument against G-d but in our world where inexplicable catastrophic things happen, the idea of that kind of G-d is a powerful symbol. And in terms of human justice there is too much tolerance of behaviour that is clearly wrong, ill thought out, evil. Sometimes a strong hand is needed, something our post modern thinking is quick to recoil from. But you will be defeated by a strong hand if you can't wield one yourself. The fiddle in the tune is a nod to the Klezmer sound & there are echoes of some of our favourite songwriters who happen to be old Jewish guys - Zimmerman, Cohen & Newman (sounds like a law firm we'd like to represent us)



**Book Of Life** - *"And he couldn't do it. He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here."* - Philip Roth, Sabbath's Theater



What holds you here?  
 Family, religion,  
 community, ambition,  
 greed? From a scientific,  
 atheistic viewpoint  
 nothing matters. What  
 we are, what we believe  
 is an accident of birth.  
 Ultimately in our  
 scientific, godless  
 universe, nothing can  
 matter since the  
 universe is amoral. Not  
 even the existence of  
 the Earth itself matters.  
 To a mere mortal this is  
 terrifying; only a god can  
 have the luxury of  
 having a scientific,  
 atheistic view of life.  
 What holds you here?  
 While writing our record  
 a few people we knew,  
 sadly decided that not  
 much held them to this  
 earthly existence. Just  
 another death, the universe went on, but a terrible hole in our lives.



The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah is a time to blow the Shofar, a ram's horn, and celebrate with apple and honey for a sweet New Year. Ten days later the sombre day of atonement, Yom Kippur, is a day of fasting and repenting for your sins of the previous year. On Rosh Hashanah you will be inscribed in the book of life and on Yom Kippur you will be sealed. Your fate for the next 12 months is written. "... who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by upheaval, who by plague, who by strangling, and who by stoning. Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquillity and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degraded and who will be exalted."

We tried a number of versions of this song, James Black played a beautiful piano part, but ultimately the song needed to sound like a solitary prayer.  
 May you be written into the book of life.

**East Of Eden** - Adam & Eve chose free will rather than perfection. Our lives are full of choice, each decision resulting in an alternative reality. Why people so often take the difficult path rather than a path that from the outside would appear to make them happy is mysterious. We are unfathomable creatures. East of Eden is not a place, it's an endless forking road.



When we recorded this song the mood reminded us of an Australian film *Samson & Delilah*, another biblical couple. The feeling of lonely expanses & the struggle to escape a kind of predestined outcome. That film had a sort of happy ending, our bus travelers destiny is less certain. We avoided the desert style slide guitar of Ry Cooder (*Paris Texas* is unbeatable), tried some strings but opted instead for chromaticism from the piano, an other-worldly sound.

**Third Time Down** - A few years ago Queensland experienced severe flooding. One of the worst hit areas was in the unlikely of places.

Toowoomba is 700 meters above sea level, a pretty little town with 2 slender creeks running through it. On the 10th January 2011 those creeks turned into raging torrents, a deluge that became a tsunami engulfing the Lockyer Valley destroying lives and cutting a swathe through property. It is hard to find redemption or sense in extreme disasters. For us mortals an indifferent universe or the unknowable acts of G-D are equally opaque. This is one of those



songs that was actually very difficult to write. It has been a process of years to get it to its recorded state. Strange how three & a half minutes of moving air can be so hard to tame.

(Genesis 6:17) *For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.*

**Nothing Tastes The Same** - Getting old. You've learnt what you've learnt, you've seen what you've seen, you've heard what you've heard. The idealism of inexperience replaced by the reality that you've lived. There are memories of the first time, but you've earned the right to cynicism. Every disappointment turned into a shield, the joy of *schadenfreude*, the thought that you have all you're ever going to have and everything is shit anyhow. And what is left? - just to rage against the dying of the light?

*"With one long breath, caught and held  
in his chest, he fought his sadness over  
his solitary life. Don't cry, you idiot!  
Live or die, but don't poison everything..."*

— Saul Bellow, Herzog





We recorded the song but then recorded it again a tone lower to put it more in the shadows. The character in the song inhabits one of those crumbling French Quarter houses, staring down at the dark gas-lamp lit streets of New Orleans, like a vampire envious of the truly alive.



**Outside Of Zion** - Moses, a hero, a Jewish prophet, the guy who brought down the 10 commandments from G-D and still he couldn't get into the Promised Land. It's the bittersweet ache of being able to see perfection but not able to achieve it.

As songwriters we feel the ache acutely, and often, and we spend a lot of time striving for our notion of perfection. Sometimes you think you have it but down the track you can only hear what you would like to change. Outside Of Zion endured 16 separate rewrites; that's 16 completely different sets of lyrics on different topics.

It's not clear why Moses was not let into the Promised Land; because he didn't follow G-d's instructions to the letter? Because he was just a person & shouldn't have been some sort of Divine Redeemer? The lack of clarity is what makes it a perfect story.

**Too Loud** - some people just give you too many reasons not to like them. And then some people get blamed for everything.



**At The Western Wall** - The Western Wall is in the Old City of Jerusalem at the bottom of the western side of the Temple Mount. It is all that remains of the Second Temple. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in around 70AD who ended Jewish control of the land. From the Roman Period to the 20th Century the land was occupied by various colonial powers until the United Nations Mandate to create Israel & Palestine. This resulted in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War when the wall came under Jordanian control & Jews were forbidden to visit for 19 years until Israel captured the Old City in 1967 in the Six Day War.

It is the holiest place for Jews to pray & they have made pilgrimage &

prayed at the Wall for centuries. It is common to press prayers & hand written notes into the cracks in-between the stones.

This song is about the living but more about the dead. Sometimes the stories of ghosts will come to you in a dream & this is how they get to be with the living once more. And it is there that they tell you that all our stories are ultimately just the stories of ghosts.



realities that are occasionally glimpsed. Still, even though a major chord can be soured by a minor note, it is far sweeter than no note at all.

**I Used To Know You** - As we've already told you, during the writing of this record a few people we knew tragically took their own lives, one as young as 15, one a perfectly physically healthy 50. This record has been an attempt to understand the fragile connections that keep us here. In a broad sense it doesn't matter if we live or die but we all know that we are going to go through the latter; it is the living that is the hard part.

This song is a lament. The consonant chords are the people we think we know; the small dissonances are the

