

Smoke on the Mountain -- From the Dramaturg
by Roxanne Ray

“There’s nothing better than being together, when we’re singin’...”

Most of us are familiar with various American singing families, such as the Osmond family singers, the Jackson 5, or the fictional Partridge Family. Whether we encountered them in their heydays, or have only glimpsed them in re-runs on the WB television channel, the Jackson 5’s promise that “I’ll Be There” and the Partridge Family’s call to “C’mon, get happy” have become unshakably well-known in American culture. The Sanders Family Singers in *Smoke on the Mountain* follow in this strong tradition, joining these recent pop stars in the American institution of singing kin, as well as standing amidst earlier singing families in the bluegrass gospel custom of making music without reliance on amplification. Authors Alan Bailey and Connie Ray place the Sanders Family in the context of bluegrass history alongside the historical Monroe Brothers of the 1920’s, Ernest V. “Pop” Stoneman & Family in the 1920’s and ‘30’s, the Carter Family of the same era, the three Morris Brothers of the 1930’s, the Ritchie Family of the 1930’s and ‘40’s (as chronicled by Jean Ritchie in *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*), and the Clines of the Lonesome Pine Fiddlers in the 1930’s through the ‘50’s -- plus too many pairs of 20th-century bluegrass Brothers to list.

All of these groups of singing relations have been motivated by the call of the music they played. But most of them also had important stories to tell. Several members of the Stonemans eventually left the group to pursue religious ministry work, while Charlie Cline alternated many years of service as a Pentacostal minister with his lengthy musical career. Other bluegrass musicians strove to recount the lifeways of the Appalachians, as well as the vicissitudes of love, celebration, and mourning.

The Sanders Family likewise communicates the complications of what might seem to us today to be a simpler time: using their stringed instruments without electrification, as well as their voices without benefit of microphones or studio-style audio polishing, these six individuals spanning two generations speak to us in verse and in dialogue about the trials of living as a family in 1938 small-town North Carolina. At the intersection of the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of the catastrophes of World War II, each member of the Sanders family testifies both to the joy of ensemble music as well as to the ethical challenges posed by poverty, insecurity, anger, and ambition. One by one, they

overcome shame and awkwardness to disclose their stories of learning, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

But beyond the particular journeys of Bud, Vera, Stanley, June, Denise, and Dennis, as a whole their testimonies to events that have tested their mores – and reaffirmed their Christian faith – align the Sanders with a wide range of religious adherents who have placed great weight upon individual anecdotes and personal revelation. At the same time, authors Bailey and Ray have also situated the Sanders’s cultural work alongside other great traditions of testimony, both legal (wherein a witness offers evidence as a declaration of fact), and literary (in which a survivor testifies to an experience of violence or trauma, on behalf of her/himself as well as those who did not survive). While legal testimony emphasizes specific facts, both faith-based testimonies and literary (or narrative) testimonies find their commonality in their reach for the larger truth of a given experience. Both kinds of testimonies ask us to really *listen* to the witness, and to open ourselves to the truth conveyed not only in word, but also in sound, image, and emotion. The gospel music offered by the Sanders Family Singers extends yet a further invitation to engage ourselves in this transmission of knowledge, with tapping toes and nodding heads as well as with our ears and our hearts. Thank you for joining us for this exploration of the multitude of ways of sharing and listening in *Smoke on the Mountain*.