

gospel singers buchanan brothers atomic power

Atomic Power: The Buchanan Brothers [1946]

Atomic Power, written the morning after the bombing of Hiroshima by North Carolina country artist and radio personality Fred Kirby, is without a doubt the most popular of the country Bomb songs (the lyric referencing Nagasaki was presumably added the morning after that bombing). Kirby immediately began singing his new song on his radio shows including a program called 'Hillbilly Star Time.' According to Kirby, in a 1977 interview with country music scholar Charles K. Wolfe, a representative from Leeds Music Corporation traveled from New York to negotiate publishing rights for the song. Leeds then apparently showed the song to Bob Miller, who was the Buchanan Brothers' manager. Miller offered Kirby a contract with RCA in New York, but Kirby turned him down and instead chose to work with Sonora, a much smaller company that contracted with him for eight sides and \$2,000. Miller then had his act, The Buchanan Brothers, record the song around the same time that Kirby entered the recording studio to lay down his cut of Atomic Power.

As a result of the near-simultaneous recordings, the May 1, 1946 issue of 'Billboard' contained an announcement for both versions of the song. But it was RCA Victor's promotional clout that got The Buchanans' record featured in the trade paper's 'Reviews of New Records' preview section:

BUCHANAN BROTHERS

(Victor 20-1850)

Atomic Power—FT; V.

Singing an Old Hymn—FT; V.

During the three verses of Atomic Power, the Buchanan Brothers (Chester and Lester) trace the history of the atomic bomb and issue a warning that all of us will be blown to Kingdom Come if the power is misused. It's a fast hymn-like tune and keeps you listening.

The Buchanan Brothers are popular enough to make both sides pay off.

The Buchanan Brothers, though they hated the song ("Atomic Power...stunk" said Chester Buchanan in a 1973 interview with 'The Journal of Country Music'), had a hit with it on the 'Billboard' charts. In fact, Leeds Publishing purchased ad space in the May 25, 1946 edition of 'Billboard' to further trumpet the tune's success: "The whole world is talking about 'Atomic Power,' the Greatest Folk Song in Twenty Years." Leeds would later place weekly ads in the publication under the title 'Atomic Power News' to continue tracking news of their hit.

The Buchanan Brothers' version proved to be so popular that Kirby's composition was then quickly covered by at least five other country artists including Riley Shepard (for Musicraft). Rex Allen and the Prairie Ramblers (for Mercurv). Red

Foley (for Decca), Rufe Davis (for Mastertone), Red River Dave (for Continental). Riley Shepard's cover was the only one to gain much traction, however, and was the only other version to be previewed by 'Billboard' (in its June 20, 1946 issue). 'Billboard' called Shepard's take "a Western favorite with hymnal qualities."

Atomic Power contains a number of the popular themes that would reappear in other Bomb songs such as that of revenge ("Hiroshima, Nagasaki paid a big price for their sins when scorched from the face of earth their battles could not win"), the divine origin of the power of the atom ("Atomic power, atomic power was given by the mighty hand of God.") and the oft-repeated reminder that God's will trumps that of the Bomb ("But on that day of judgment when comes a greater power, we will not know the minute and we'll not know the hour.").

As a testament to the song's continuing popularity, Fred Kirby stated to Wolfe that when he was invited to ride in the inaugural parade for President Harry Truman in 1949, a fan (who happened to be the chief of police from Charlotte, North Carolina) shouted out "Atomic Power!" at the moment Kirby's car passed Truman who was seated in the reviewing stand. Truman, Kirby recalled, just smiled and waved.

The Buchanan Brothers, Chester (born 1924 in LaPorte, Indiana) and Lester (born 1920 in Canton, Ohio), were raised in rural north Georgia in the 1930s on a farm that their father, Ephraim Shadrack Buchanan, moved the family to during the Depression. The brothers listened to Carson Robison records as children and later learned to play mandolin and guitar. They performed locally and at nearby fiddle conventions, but it wasn't until they traveled to New York City in search of welding work at Bethlehem Steel that they were discovered and became professional musicians.

Bob Miller, a songwriter, and his wife Esther VanSciver, were representing country acts in New York and caught wind of Chester and Lester through a record store owner who had come to know the brothers and their talents through their record listening habits. Miller wasted no time and signed them to the Bluebird label in 1944.

The brothers recorded between 1944 and 1947 28 sides for Main Streets Records, Bluebird and RCA Victor.

After a falling out with their management and a general dissatisfaction with being pushed toward a more pop form of country, Chester and Lester returned to Georgia where Chester became a successful businessman (trailer parks and shoe manufacturing) and Lester went back to welding. Lester retired to Florida in 1973 and continues to live there to this day. Chester remained in Georgia and passed away in 1992.

LYRICS/TRANSCRIPTION:

Atomic Power: The Buchanan Brothers [1946]

Oh this world is at a tremble with its strength and mighty power

There sending up to heaven to get the brimstone fire
Take warning my dear brother, be careful how you plan
You're working with the power of God's own holy hand

Refrain: Atomic power, atomic power
Was given by the mighty hand of God
Atomic power, atomic power
It was given by the mighty hand of God

You remember two great cities in a distant foreign land
When scorched from the face of earth the power of Japan
Be careful my dear brother, don't take away the joy
But use it for the good of man and never to destroy

Refrain

Hiroshima, Nagasaki paid a big price for their sins
When scorched from the face of earth their battles could not win
But on that day of judgment when comes a greater power
We will not know the minute and we'll not know the hour

Refrain

The Buchanan Brothers [1946]
Atomic Power
(Fred Kirby)
RCA Victor 20-1850

See Also There's a Power Greater Than Atomic

There's A Power Greater Than Atomic: The Buchanan Brothers [1947]

After The Buchanan Brothers scored a hit with their version of Fred Kirby's Atomic Power in 1946, two friends and co-workers of Kirby's decided to pen a sequel that paid particular attention to the just completed Bikini Atoll tests in the Pacific. Arval Hogan and Roy Grant, better known by their performing name of Whitey and Hogan, were so impressed by the fact that some of the ships at Bikini didn't sink that they decided to write a thematic follow-up to Kirby's earlier song. In a 1977 interview with Charles K. Wolfe, they recalled their inspiration:

"We just got to thinking about that big test out in the Pacific; those ships still standing after the blast, that's what gave us the idea," said Hogan. Grant added: "Just prior to that (test), Fred Kirby had written his song, 'Atomic Power,' so Hogan and myself, both being children of devoted Christians, the idea came to us one

night going to a personal appearance. And I said 'Well, gee whiz, somewhere in the world there ought to be a power greater than atomic,' and we started putting two and two together and starting writing words that night and in a short while the song was completed. We didn't do anything with it until Fred's song started dying down..."

LYRICS/TRANSCRIPTION:

There's A Power Greater Than Atomic: The Buchanan Brothers [1947]

Man may talk about his power
And his will to have his way
How he can take the lives of men
And rule them all someday
There's one thing he's forgetting
In the great plan he just made
That God gave to him everything
And everything can take

Refrain: There's a power (power) greater than atomic
It's a power of the One that sits on high
If he strikes us (strikes us) with His mighty power
Not just some, but everyone must die

When this power that I tell of
Falls upon this sinful land
Every rock within the mountains
Will melt at His command
So when you're planning power
That will sweep away the sod
Don't forget there is no power
To equal that of God

Refrain

To the island of Bikini
Great men came and plans were laid
To prove to all the people
What a power He had made
But after it was over
Even through the blinding steam
The sea and sky unchanged should prove
That God is still supreme

Refrain

The Buchanan Brothers [1947]
There's A Power Greater Than Atomic

(Whitey-Hogan)
RCA Victor 20-2553