Written by Jeff Ignatius
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New York City legends The Holmes Brothers bring a preacher's fervor and faith to boogie blues, something apparent in the music and vocals as well as the lyrics. These guys believe, and you will, too, damn it. The tight trio – with Holmes brothers Wendell and Sherman along with drummer Willie "Popsy" Dixon – will be making a stop this week at CSPS in Cedar Rapids, but even if you can't make it out Wednesday night, you shouldn't miss an early candidate for the best album of 2001: Speaking in Tongues, on Alligator Records.

Perhaps only Lyle Lovett does it better: The Holmes Brothers fashion their songs out of familiar elements but elevate them through perfect use of voice and the fine art of arrangement. There's nothing shocking or revolutionary about what you're hearing, but it's so sharp and finely tuned that it's revelatory.

Yet while Lovett runs the stylistic gamut (and perhaps nobody has suffered more commercially by being pegged wrongly to a single genre), The Holmes Brothers pretty much stick to thick soulful gospel poured over rollicking rhythm-and-blues tunes, with a few breathers thrown in.

Produced by Joan Osborne, who largely stays out of the way except for backing vocals, *Speaking in Tongues* is vintage Holmes Brothers, and a joy from beginning to end. A generous sampling of covers mixed with originals – most having something to do with Jesus – the album is energetic, soulful, and infectious, all of which makes it easy to overlook that you're basically listening to church music.

There's a disconnect between the lyrics and the funkier music that creates an interesting tension. The Lord is everywhere in the songs, but their spiritualism seems far removed from religion. It's personal, deeply rooted, and undogmatic, praise meant for smoky bars, straddling the sinful and the divine.

The two brothers walk that line too, with Wendell the fire of the group and Sherman the cream. (One senses a pattern of fraternal dynamic; Wendell plays a mean guitar, while his brother takes the lower-key bass duty.)

The album kicks off with Ben Harper's "Homeless Child," and the song is barely recognizable in its harmonica-fueled groove abetted by Wendell's straining throat.

The title track is a grand condensation of the Holmes sound, written and sung beautifully by Sherman, catchy beyond belief, and easily the album's best track.

The quiet Harper cover "I Shall Not Walk Alone" stands out as one of several tracks that would easily feel at home in the sanctuary, with Dixon's noble, heartfelt singing mingling with the choir-like work of Osborne and Catherine Russell over Wendell's sparse, elegant guitar. "King Jesus Will Roll All Burdens Away" features Wendell as a pulpit-pounder crossed with Louis Armstrong.

"Jesus Got His Hooks in Me" is a cleverly screwball addition, a butt-wiggling bluegrass ditty (and "ditty" ain't thrown out lightly) with uncharacteristically subdued vocals. It's followed by the

solemn and laconic “I Want to Be Ready” (another Harper cover that invokes the chorus rhythm of Osborne’s “Man in the Long Black Coat”). And that’s followed by the happy, rocking praise of “Thank You Jesus.”

The Holmes Brothers know how to keep listeners paying attention, and *Speaking in Tongues* is smartly sequenced. The generous warmth and fun of the rowdier, celebratory tracks dissipates quickly in the album’s quieter songs. Those sonic contradictions – which in lesser hands would create a fractured record – are reconciled through the album’s thematic concerns; they seem to represent the different aspects of faith, more complementary than conflicting.

That’s one reason that if Christianity is looking for recruiters, they couldn’t do much better than The Holmes Brothers. Of course, the brothers might make one demand: Dancing must be allowed.

The Holmes Brothers will play at 8 p.m. on April 4 at CSPS in Cedar Rapids.