Soundtrack

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Introduction

Our taste in music can incite violent reactions. A song or work isn't interesting enough, is too sentimental, is too raw, is too slick, is derivative. I look back at so much of what I loved in childhood and recognize that the flaws I overlook would make some people not only hate the music, but even condemn me for owning up to still liking it. When we deem some piece of music bad, the judgment carries moral weight, notwithstanding the adage, *De gustibus non est disputandum*—there's no disputing taste.

I came to the idea of a music memoir from frustration at being unable to make pieces of music vivid in my conventional memoirs, where such references can mean little or nothing to a reader unfamiliar with them. In "Soundtrack," each story and development is marked by the music then going around my head. Thanks to the Internet and my website, I can direct readers to that music.

As I thought about representative pieces and searched the Internet for copies, I was pulled into the effect the music had on me at each stage and the person I was at the time. And not just me. Playing live concert clips from the sixties, I witnessed with the old bewilderment the insanely screaming teenage girls drowning out performances by the Beatles. Those girls are five decades older now, and many will be grandmothers. We become such different people as we go through life's stages, but a core of each of us remains from back then. There's surely more than a trace of the lovesick teenager in those grandmothers.

"Soundtrack" is like a photograph album, except that unlike photographs, music doesn't record details. It isn't about facts, and it doesn't make arguments. It doesn't represent anything. Also, the music we hear may or may not evoke the feelings we might expect. A sad song doesn't

necessarily make us sad: reflective, perhaps, but that's different. Music can stimulate or heighten emotions, but it goes further. It engages some core part of us beyond words.

"Soundtrack" tells a story, but details are spare, just enough to give an idea of the someone or the situation. Many people and events are missing. My conventional memoirs are more nuanced, and my fiction more nuanced still. A critic might deem "Soundtrack" sanitized, although not all the dust and debris have been swept away. But, as Anthony Storr contends in his book *Music and the Mind* (1992), music gets to our essence. To the extent music dictated this memoir, I hope it was faithful to that task.

"Soundtrack" is only fifty-four pages long, as contrasted with the hundreds of pages of conventional memoir I've written. On the other hand, some anecdotes here, driven by musical associations, don't appear in my conventional memoirs. A life is many stories that can be told from many angles.

At each moment, any number of works demand our attention, but we latch on to just a few. In his book, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (2006), Daniel Leviton investigates, among other things, why some people respond to this or that piece of music, while others don't. Music affects our brains in detectable ways, so there is a physiological component. Levitin also explains that the brain is needed to interpret the different rates at which molecules vibrate against the ear's fine hairs in response to different pitches. Without the brain, there's no sound. (The answer to the riddle about the tree falling in the forest and no one being around to hear?) But as Levitin is the first to acknowledge, much remains unknown. Like fellow scientist Oliver Sacks in *Musicophilia* (2007), he happily concedes that music is magical.

Readers interested in more conventional accounts can find on this website excerpts from my childhood memoir, *Spiral to Edinburgh;* the complete chapter covering my four months on hospital eye wards, "Courage Comes to You"; excerpts from my high school memoir; and other posts cited in the text. I give the people in my life the same pseudonyms here that they have in those memoirs. I wish I didn't feel compelled to use pseudonyms, but neither the people mentioned nor I can know in advance how they'd feel about their portrayal, here or elsewhere.

I'd like to dispose of a stereotype that all blind people are musical. I lost my vision at the age of thirteen: Music was important to me before, and has remained so. However, I've had only rudimentary musical training. Even so, while I forget all too much about a book a month after finishing it, the songs I like stay note-perfect, fully arranged in my head.

1. Childhood

In an early memory, I am sitting on the stairs in our home in the London suburb of Harrow, where we moved when I was four, and dragging out bedtime while in the living room, Dad played Caterina Valente's "If Hearts Could Talk" (1956). I'm still moved by Valente's singing and even the lush orchestration, along with that distant fond memory. Unfortunately, the beginning, middle section and ending of the recording are marred by high-pitched female ah-ing, an arrangers' addiction at the time. Each musical phase has its own quirks that can spoil it for future listeners. In Valente's case, I do my best not to hear them.

Before I was seven, most of the music I liked was what we call "classical," which Dad played on our gramophone. There were the English composers, such as Elgar and Vaughan Williams; the German Brahms and the French César Franck; the Russians, such as Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov (really, the still exotic *Scheherazade*); and the Scandinavians Grieg and

Sibelius. Come to think of it, I grew up with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century romantic composers.

My parents' classical records had the blue covers with white hands holding a conductor's baton that signified the World Record Club, which they had belonged to back in Darlington, our hometown in the far northeast of England. For essentially economic reasons, neither had attended university, and the WRC was part of their self-education.

Each movement of Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (1898-1899) represents an important person in Elgar's life. "Nimrod," the famous ninth variation, made me think of Dad. So, even more so, did Ronald Binge's "Elizabethan Serenade" (1951). Four decades later, Mum and Dad bought me a copy of "Elizabethan Serenade," surprising me that they remembered my association. I couldn't have named either the work or the composer, but it brought out feelings of love for Dad, just as it had in my childhood. How? Apart from some no doubt long-forgotten moments of connection, the strings play a powerful melody, but the steady rhythm and the flutes' constant refrain keep emotion reined in.

Until several weeks into the first writing of this project, I was unable to identify a certain piece that used to make me think in much the same way of Mum. I knew only that it was the orchestral version of an operatic aria. After searching through dozens of arias, I finally located it: Jacques Offenbach's "*Barcarole*" from *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1880). How warm and cheerful it sounds. During my most recent listen, I was struck how the flutes hold the line as the strings threaten to break out emotionally, just as they do in "Elizabethan Serenade."

Dad installed an old 78 gramophone in the bedroom where my brother and I slept. Lucky for me, my brother didn't like any of our family's 78s, so I had little competition. I played

Edward German's "Shepherd's Dance" (1892) over and over, despite having to wind up the machine for nearly every side.

My first day at London's John Aird School for the Partially Sighted was in January, 1959. I set off so early in the morning that it was still more night than day. For the next five years, my combined taxi and bus journey to school was between two and two and a half hours.

If luck was with me, I arrived home in time for the evening's science fiction programs on children's television. In recent years, my best friend from that school, Neil, sent me the themes to several of them, including Fireball XL5 (1962). My favorite song from those shows was the soppy closing theme to *Stingray* entitled "Aqua Marina" (1964). Neil despises it, as he should. It does reveal in me a deficit in character.

Two records, one American and both hits in 1961, captured my sense of England's zeitgeist in the early sixties. Not that I had either that word or concept in my head. One was the Dave Brubeck Quartet's cosmopolitan "Take Five." It created an image for me of smart people walking confidently in modern office districts. I may have made this connection from television footage while the song was playing, but Dad worked in an office in central London which, though I never visited it, was prominent in my imagination.

The second of those records was "Stranger on the Shore" by a clarinetist with the unprepossessing name, Acker Bilk. Listening to it, I saw a young woman, the song's stranger, standing against a backdrop of a gray sea and dramatic sky. Was I imagining that I myself was a stranger, far away from those daily four-hour bus trips and a five-month hospital stay for Achilles tendon transplants?

"Stranger on the Shore" became the theme song to a short-lived children's television series with the same title. Hearing it now reminds me that I thought the beach was in France,

though I can recall nothing that makes it distinctly French. A Wikipedia reality check tells me that the series was actually set in the English seaside town of Brighton. True, the main character was a French teenage *au pair* living with an English family, but my confused memory suggests I was already in love with France, or my notion of France, even though we never went on holiday outside England.

By the time Dad let me graduate to a gramophone that played 33 and 45 RPM records, I was also listening to folk music. My very first pocket-money purchase, of a record or anything else, was of Peter, Paul and Mary's "Blowing in the Wind" (1963). (It was only after we moved to America that I understood the song's civil rights context.) Then there was the Countrymen, an English folk trio. One of the Countrymen had a soul-touching tenor whose harmonizing distinguished them from other folk groups, except (as I discovered decades later) for Scott Mackenzie's too-infrequent tenor harmonies with the Journeymen. Some record producer inflicted an infuriating orchestration on the Countrymen's best known record, "I Know Where I'm Going" (1962), but I still take pleasure in their voices.

Although resistant to vocal pop music, I was drawn to pop instrumentals. The sound effects and title of the Tornados' "Telstar" (1962) caught the outer space preoccupation that I shared with the rest of the world at the time. It also had an irresistible rock beat, very different from Brubeck's and Bilk's.

I hated the Beatles' early hit singles—"Please Please Me," "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (all released in the UK in 1963). But then Dad bought their first LP, *Please Please Me* (1963), and despite the title song, my attitude changed. The Beatles were a whole different world from Brubeck's sophistication or Bilk's lyrical romanticism. True to form, I fell for the pretty songs, such as "Ask Me Why," but to my surprise, what really got me going was

John Lennon belting out "Twist and Shout." By the time of *A Hard Day's Night* in the summer of 1964, I was hooked. The track I liked most from the UK release was the non-soundtrack, rarely-played "I'll Be Back."

Still, it didn't occur to me to call the Beatles a favorite. The rock performers I treasured most were either hardly known (the Countrymen) or given little respect. My first favorite group was the Searchers ("Sweets for My Sweet," 1963), and later, Unit 4 + 2 ("Concrete and Clay," 1965).

I wonder why, after having disliked pop music for so long, I responded to the songs coming out from 1963 on. It was as if I'd been born to like them. How could that be? Maybe it's enough of an explanation that I'd reached the age of peak susceptibility to music. With so many kids arriving there at the same time, it made sense that enthusiasm for a new song, like the spread of that year's verbal tick, "fab," would snowball and become fashionable.

But questions remain: Why that particular thing or idea, and why at that particular moment? In my case, the bridge to vocal pop music was probably the sound and infectious rhythms of the Tornadoes' instrumental "Telstar," along with another instrumental group, the Shadows (for example, Atlantis, 1963). Then again, Nick Hornby writes about our taste in music being hardwired. I did feel my brain had been wired to respond to this new sound.

There's an additional possible explanation. In *Spiral to Edinburgh*, I depict my increasing interactions during this time with the children at my school. Although introverted, I was becoming more open to the world around me.

In April, 1964, just short of my tenth birthday, we moved to Sheffield. My commute to the city's tiny school for partially sighted children was much shorter, but as in London, all my classmates lived far away.

By contrast with the seemingly endless suburb in which we'd lived near London, the countryside was nearby. I would cycle on my eighteen-inch Raleigh down to the woods at the end of our street and, in another direction, along a road bordered on both sides by open land.

Dad bought a little gramophone for my brother and me that sat on the formal dining room's floor, under his cabinet-supported player, which had much louder sound. When on my own, I'd listen to my records while staring through our diamond-patterned leaded glass windows at one of Sheffield's valleys, which was sometimes green, sometimes purple.

At the record shop on The Moor, Sheffield's main shopping street, I bought Gustav Holst's *Planets Suite* (1914-1916). Before the LP, I'd been familiar with the two famous movements, "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity," with the rousing anthem planted in the middle, and "Mars, the Bringer of War." Now I had five more movements. I'm not sure if knowing that the planets were named for Roman gods and that Holst had those connections in mind influence my hearing of the suite, but the depiction of the solar system on the cover must have. In the concluding "Neptune, the Mystic," the ethereal women's choir and gently jangly orchestral chords transported me far away into outer space and simultaneously to some mysterious place deep inside me.

Six months after our move, I was hospitalized again for ten days for precautionary operations on my left eye. Although I couldn't see with that eye, the surgeon said the surgery was needed to protect the right eye, with which I could see. I was the only boy on a men's ward in the middle of the city. Although the nurses and patients couldn't have been friendlier, I felt

separate from everyone—from everything normal. The song I listened for on my tinny hospital pillow speaker was Sandie Shaw's "There's Always Something There to Remind Me" (1964), with the lyric, "I walk alone the city streets…" I either didn't hear or ignored the rest of the line: "… you used to walk along with me." That "you" didn't exist for me.

At school, I was in Mr. Frasier's class for the older partially sighted children, ranging in age from ten to sixteen. Mr. Frasier taught geography, history and other subjects that we learned together, despite the gaps in our ages, and he explained everything from how post-war smokeless zoning laws had put an end to fog in Sheffield to how soap acted on water. During playtime breaks, he tutored me in preparation for the eleven-plus exam, which determined whether a child went to a grammar school for academically-minded students or a secondary school, where children should expect to enter one or other trade.

I passed the exam. My reward was to be sent to boarding school.

I began at Exhall Grange in April, just before my eleventh birthday. Eighty miles away in Coventry, it was a school for "gifted" (in today's parlance) partially sighted or physically disabled, as opposed to blind or wheelchair-bound, children.

During evenings and weekends, the school required all children to stay out on the playing field and forbade us to take books with us. Walking aimlessly, I occupied the hours by replaying in my head the moody songs of that spring, 1965, such as Donovan's acoustic "Catch the Wind," with the opening lines: "In the chilly hours and minutes / Of uncertainty / I want to be…" I couldn't make out the next line ("In the warm hold of your loving mind"), but I substituted my own yearnings. I did that a lot with half-heard lyrics.

Then Petula Clark's cheerful "Thank You" (1964) would take me back to Mum's kitchen and our back garden at home. Perhaps I'd heard it on her radio as we ate breakfast. Today I'm

irritated by the corny backing vocals and the frequent key changes contriving to stretch out the song for a salable two minutes, but I can shut out all that distraction and still hear Petula's strong but gently expressive voice. And I love the harpsichord.

I twice ran away from Exhall Grange, the second time almost making the eighty-mile trip home by free-riding two trains. The second time, it wasn't until I was leaving the station in Sheffield that I was caught. My rebelliousness made me a pariah not only with the teachers, but also with the students, ultimately convincing the authorities to let me leave at the end of that term.

In recent years, I came across a letter my mother wrote to me at Exhall Grange in which she mentioned she'd just heard Holst's "Jupiter" on the radio. I'm touched by her gesture of connection, despite her knowing I resented Dad and her for having acquiesced to the experts who urged them to send me to that place.

Back home, still at the tender age of eleven, I proposed to a girl named Sarah while she and I were standing in a cupboard at her house during a game of hide-and-seek with her sisters and my brother. I didn't remember when Sarah recently told me, but I don't doubt her memory. I'm relieved that it amuses her. I do remember going with her to *The Sound of Music* and wishing I could hold her hand. A song from that film seems both apt and cautionary: "Sixteen Going on Seventeen." Sarah was only ten going on eleven, and I eleven going on twelve, but I doubt we were any less prepared than the innocent Liesl and the Nazi Rolf, who later betrays the Von Trapp family. In our case, it seems no harm was done.

In September, following the summer holidays, I returned to Mr. Frasier's unit for partially sighted children. However, it had moved to a school, Brook Secondary (later Brook Comprehensive), on the other side of Sheffield. It was England's first experiment in

mainstreaming partially sighted children, leading to nationwide integration some decades later. Even though Mr. Frasier had been instrumental in the decision to send me to the boarding school, I took strength from his belief in me, an intangible that would carry me through my two years at Brook and beyond. I started each day in his homeroom, which did feel like a kind of home. But after that, I took almost all my classes with Brook's mainstream students.

The entire school participated in the daily morning assembly, where we were given announcements, recited prayers and sang hymns. It was the custom at all my English schools, but I best remember Brook's: a spacious hall, sunlight streaming in from three sides, with rows of girls in royal blue jerseys on one side of the aisle and we boys in navy blue blazers on the other, the headmaster at front center, and the bearded religion teacher at the piano in the far left corner. Throughout my childhood, God was in the same category as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, but I didn't have to be religious to be touched by many of the hymns.

One was "He Who Would Valiant Be" (original text 1684 by John Bunyan), which glorified pilgrims. I liked it even though I was sure none of us in the assembly hall had any intention of following in their footsteps. Each autumn "We Plough the Fields and Scatter" (German original 1782, English appearance 1861) celebrated harvest, a word whose sound and spelling I liked. Yet even though our beloved Uncle Mike ran a dairy farm near Carlisle, I was fuzzy on what exactly "harvest" meant.

The "either/or" question in England during the mid-sixties, culturally and spilling over into politics, was Beatles or Rolling Stones, decent blokes versus crude layabouts, harmony versus raw. Despite my antipathy to the Stones, I never tired of Keith Richards' growling guitar riff and the driving beat of "The Last Time" (1965). I grudgingly accepted that Mick Jagger's crude voice suited the song. I couldn't see Paul McCartney packing that angry intensity.

McCartney's idea of raw emotion was an over-the-top recording like "I'm Down," which Sarah's family had and ours didn't, making me envious. I liked the backing vocals and strong rhythm, but McCartney's Little Richard-like yelling sounded more hammy than agonized. He'd established himself too firmly on television as a nice guy.

To me, the music coming out of America was more sophisticated than ours: the Ronettes' "Do I Love You?" (1964), Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "Trains and Boats and Planes" (1965), Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" (1965), the Four Tops' "Reach Out, I'll Be There" (1966), Tina Turner's (forget Ike) "River Deep, Mountain High" (1966).

And in 1966 the Beach Boys released the single "God Only Knows" in the United Kingdom, the B side to "Wouldn't It Be Nice" in America. I have a haunting memory of sitting in the back of our Vauxhall Victor as "God Only Knows" played on the car radio while we drove south to Cornwall through an evening lit by a reddish harvest moon. Growing up in England, I'd been spared the surf craze of the early sixties, and I might have been a lot less receptive to the Beach Boys had I first heard "Surfin' Safari" and the ilk. Or maybe not.

I saved up enough to buy the LP from which the song came, *Pet Sounds*, in the spring of 1967, a year after its release. Green was prominent on the cover and also as one of the colors on the label in the record's center. Whether for that reason or the synesthesia I sometimes experience, I see deep green when I hear the album.

On the LP, Brian Wilson produced and mixed sounds to create what Levitin calls "sonic colors" unlike any ever heard before, beginning with the harp-like arpeggio opening to "Wouldn't It Be Nice." Only later did I realize that the instrument pushing the body of the song was an accordion. There was the penetrating saxophone or harmonica (I could never decide which) on top of a banjo on "I Know There's an Answer," the violins and violas whose lines

ended with a lovely electronic guitar figure on "Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)," the forlorn percussion leading into "Caroline No." Then there were the harmonies and, though overlooked in Beach Boys' music, the intricate rhythms.

Even the lyrics made sense, more than Beach Boys lyrics ever did before or since. They called to me. I'd experienced longing, friendship, loneliness, happiness, and it was all there in *Pet Sounds*. "You Still Believe in Me" spoke to the guilt I felt over a slew of failings, beginning with running away from school. In "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times," Brian Wilson said I wasn't the only one.

2. Life Changes

In the spring of 1967, Dad accepted a job offer in New York. We'd be moving in November. The number one record on Thursday night's television show *Top of the Pops* that summer was Scott Mackenzie's "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)." His anthem, though a little tedious, opened up vistas of freedom and geographic beauty that made England feel walled-in, if not squalid. Even so, I had misgivings about emigrating to America, or rather, about leaving England.

Aside from sophisticated records, America was slick contemporary television series, led by *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.,* which the BBC broadcast at the same time that competing ITV aired Basil Rathbone's Sherlock Holmes films. My reaction to American television shows was in hypocritical contrast to my admiration for their records. It seemed to me that through television, Americans were encroaching on our cultural territory. That word "cultural" again. Not that I used or even understood it.

And not that the British couldn't be slick. At the cinema there were the James Bond films, notably *Goldfinger* (1964). Straying from chronology, my favorite Bond music is Shirley Bassey's performance of the theme from *Moonraker* (1979). As with so many of John Barry's arrangements for the Bond movies, as well as other films, the song moves from sinister to tender to passionate. Many composers had written sinister songs, and Henry Mancini had melded the sinister to the humorous (the theme from *Pink Panther*, 1963), but to me, Barry's marriage of sinister and romantic was new and mesmerizing.

Meanwhile, Britain was going psychedelic. The Beatles released "Strawberry Fields Forever," with John's megaphoned voice, the slowed-tape tempos of the backing track, the calculated energy of Ringo's drumming. A similarly wonderfully weird recording was the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows." To my delight, Dad loved them both. The Stones produced transformative tracks of their own on *Their Satanic Majesty's Request* LP, such as "She's a Rainbow." For their single "2000 Light Years from Home," *Top of the Pops* showed what today we'd call a video with waves of white light coming toward you from outer space.

For me, psychedelic music had nothing to do with drugs or the counterculture. I was too young, of course, but even as I later came of age, it was always about the music. What did "psychedelic" mean for me? Original sonic colors, unforced and unaffected singing, new and interesting forms, and appealing melodies. Wikipedia has useful observations about psychedelic music and the related progressive rock.)

On September 23, two months before our scheduled departure, it was determined that the retina had detached in my functioning right eye. I was hospitalized immediately and made to wear an eyepatch over it, lie in bed without moving and undergo surgery.

Aside from visits by my parents and chatter in the eight-bed ward, my only distraction was the radio piped through the hospital's system into a pillow speaker tied to my bed's iron railing. It carried only three channels: the BBC's Light Program, renamed Radio 2 at the end of September (a mixture of present and past popular music); the Home Program, which became Radio 4 (news, radio plays, stories); and a third channel used solely for Saturday local football broadcasts. No Radio 1, the new station dedicated to contemporary pop music, or Radio 3, the classical music station.

Now the song I always hoped for as I listened to my pillow speaker was Traffic's "Hole in my Shoe" (1967), with its lyrics about a hole letting water into the singer's shoes while a girl flew on an albatross's back. It had a romping rhythm and prancing Indian instruments, while the singer's calm voice belied the song's absurdity.

The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* had been released, but the BBC banned "A Day in the Life," and when they decided "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" was code for LSD, they banned it, too. Yet all the disc jockey chatter on my hospital earpiece made me want to hear the whole album for myself. That's how it was when you weren't grown-up: Adults hid things from you but talked all around them anyway. The BBC was inflicting that same frustration on everyone.

At the beginning of November, I was transferred to London's Moorfields Hospital to be placed in the care of the eminent retina surgeon, James Hudson. Both my parents and brother stayed in Sheffield until Dad and my brother left for America in December, at which point Mum came down to stay near me with relatives in a London suburb. Preoccupied with my own concerns, I had little sense of the herculean tasks my parents confronted, on top of their worries for me.

The patients on Moorfields' 22-bed ward were a mix of young and middle-aged, trendy and old school. Except for a week when another lad was admitted for surgery, I was the only boy. After two weeks and a second operation, I was allowed to remove the eye patch, and still later to walk around the ward. My vision wasn't as sharp as before, but serviceable.

On the street called High Holburn, Moorfields was in the heart of 1967's swinging London. Although the young, animated nurses all wore staid uniforms, the 23-year-old ward secretary, Pamela, was required to wear only a long white coat over civilian clothes. When she took the chair at my bedside to read letters I'd received, her white coat would splay open to reveal her miniskirt and long legs stretched out before her. Pamela told me about a Jimi Hendrix concert she'd gone to. I'd liked Hendrix songs played on the radio in the previous year ("Hey Joe," "Purple Haze" and "The Wind Cries Mary," available on YouTube only as uneven live performances), but the only reason I wished I could have gone to that concert was to be with her.

Dad and Martin returned for a visit at Christmas, and I was allowed to join them for a few days at our relatives' home. It was only then that I heard *Sgt. Pepper's* on my cousin's gramophone. My vision, which would turn red after a few hours due to blood spreading through the vitreous humor, created a psychedelic place from which to hear "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds": "Picture yourself in a boat on a river /With tangerine trees and marmalade skies." Well, I could, and did.

New Year's Day had me back in Moorfields. That winter brought new records from the Beatles, the Beach Boys and others, but much as I looked forward to them being played through my hospital's pillow speaker, they weren't groundbreaking the way music had been in the previous year or two. The song that affected me the most was the Jimmy Webb-composed and arranged "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" (1967), in which Glen Campbell's character laments

his decision to leave a woman behind. As I lay in bed in the quiet of the night ward listening to the lyrics, the lonesome flutes and anguished violins, the western United States place names—Phoenix, Albuquerque, Oklahoma—rolled through my head like road signs to alien places. My life just then seemed to be all about goodbyes: to my schoolfriends months before; then to my father; soon to England, though it meant I'd rejoin Dad in America; and to the patients and nurses of whom I'd grown very fond. And, like the man in the song, I wasn't just saying goodbye, but turning to a future with huge unknowns. Would my sight get worse? What would it be like in America? What would it be like in America if my sight got even worse?

3. America

On January 26, 1968, our family was reunited in New Jersey, where friends, who had moved temporarily to Japan, lent us their house. For the next four months, forbidden to attend school because of the risk of shocks to my head and eye, I was stuck at home. I had another eye operation in March, this time at Columbia Presbyterian in New York City. I entered the hospital with vision but left with only a tiny corner aperture capable of detecting color, and that little would soon shut down.

Unable to read (until a talking book player arrived weeks later) or get much from television, my only entertainment was AM top forty radio, and eventually progressive rock: New York's WNEW-FM and WABC-FM. I discovered from these stations that mid-sixties rock stars Eric Burden and the Animals had gone psychedelic with their pulsating, Tina Turner-adoring, wolf-howling version of "River Deep, Mountain High" (1968). Jonathan Schwartz, then on WNEW-FM, introduced me to the Free Design's childlike "Kites are Fun" (1967), showing that psychedelic music could be mostly acoustic.

The quintessential FM rock band was the Doors. I never tired of following every guitar and organ note and every drum beat during the instrumental middle section of the album version of "Light My Fire" (1966). But most of the Doors' tracks unfolded too slowly to hold my attention. What I mostly liked was the feel, really the idea, of their music. Maybe this was music you needed drugs for. I was tempted to follow the Doors' Jim Morrison, not by resorting to drugs (as if I had that option anyway), but by drifting away from what Americans called "reality." I was tempted, but that was all. Separation from the world was ultimately a frightening place.

Dad bought a house in Darien, Connecticut, and in May I started the last five weeks of eighth grade. I was the junior high school's first blind student. I myself was the first blind student I'd known. Working with tapes, students who volunteered as readers, and my parents who both read and took my dictation for papers, I got the grades I needed to move on to ninth grade in September.

During ninth grade, two classmates invited me to their homes and played records to fill awkward gaps in our conversation. Brad introduced me to Herb Alpert's "Flamingo" (1966), while Rob played Richard Harris singing Jimmy Webb's "If You Must Leave My Life" and the rest of the album *A Tramp Shining* (1968). Perhaps they always played records when they had company over. Either way it worked for me. I was suppressing talk about my life before America, partly because no one was really interested and partly because it was about the time I'd had sight, inevitably leading to what, to me, was the highly personal question of how I'd lost it. The music spared me from such emotional terrain. Besides, I liked the records.

I mostly encountered musical friction in Darien. The Beach Boys were despised, and Ringo Starr was deemed a third-rate drummer. For my classmates, as well as my brother, the best in music was Cream, with their wild drumming, and Jimi Hendrix, the showman. (Even my

memory of the miniskirted ward secretary's love of Hendrix didn't sway me, now that I'd heard more of his work.) In England, I'd liked Cream's first record, "I Feel Free" (1966) and here in America Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower" (1968), but these were songs. What people got into now were long tracks that highlighted virtuoso electric guitar playing. Virtuosity by itself didn't do it for me. I needed order in my songs: not formulas, but adherence to some design. To me, tracks where musicians ripped free felt disjointed.

Not that I saw "order" as a virtue, even less something to argue over. I wasn't particularly proud of it; I'd often felt embarrassed by it. It was about temperament. It was who I was.

A disappointment was that Traffic had gone through a similar evolution that got them noticed by my American classmates. No one here knew "Hole in my Shoe." I wasn't only out of touch with current music in Britain, but also so much of the music I liked had never made it here, notwithstanding the so-called British invasion.

I experienced a similar feeling of being cast adrift when Cat Stevens' version of the 1931 British hymn "Morning Has Broken" got airplay in America in 1972. It took me back to morning assemblies at Brook in Sheffield, another memory I couldn't share with my American friends. What was morning assembly, they would have wondered. And if I explained, they'd think how un-American it would be to begin each school day with prayers and hymns. The English were no more religious than Americans—less so—but the trappings of tradition dictated certain customs.

Then again, schools in America enforced a semi-religious rite called the pledge of allegiance, which you had to recite standing, hand on heart. For me, not yet committed to this country, the pledge of allegiance was awkward. My allegiance, if any, was to the country I'd left, if not necessarily the Queen. But failure to participate would have been conspicuous, and I had no desire to offend the people among whom I now lived.

This feeling of not quite belonging also kept me at a distance from the events of the day. Three months after my arrival in America, Martin Luther King had been assassinated, as was Robert Kennedy two months after that. I was distressed by these two calamities, and then frustrated when Richard Nixon was elected in November, seemingly against the tenor of the times. But I felt as if I were looking at another country's tragedies and feeling bad for the people there. I'd also feel uncomfortable participating in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam or the 1969 moratorium that high school students coordinated with college students.

Still, protest was in the air at school and on the airwaves through the radio, as in Eric Burden and the Animals' "Sky Pilot" (1968). Burden's singing switched between contained anger and empathy, while a contagious bass line held the piece together through the build-up toward a battleground soundscape and, beyond that, an elegiacally orchestrated conclusion.

During ninth grade and all the way through high school, a friend in a neighboring town shared many of my interests in music and steered me to new records. Al was surely pretending he wasn't fed up when I kept asking to hear once more his copy of the Incredible String Band's "First Girl I Loved" (1967), which had me wondering what it would be like to have a girl to love and be loved by. Then Al would take me to an overcast day in northern California with Simon and Garfunkel's whimsical "Cloudy" (1966). On the psychedelic Rotary Connection's "Turn Me On" (1968), Minnie Riperton (later famous as a solo performer) harmonizes with one of the group's male singers in an arch, medieval-sounding style that is striking over the sitar, strings and throbbing bass. In "The Last Time I Saw Her" (1968), the Canadian folk musician, Gordon Lightfoot, recalls his loss in a strong voice bent on pushing back despair. The few times his voice seems to falter, the orchestra rises up like inner strength.

Al was also blind, which didn't explain our shared tastes. However, we listened closely to music. People at school mostly seemed to have it on in the background at parties or while doing homework. Then again, I'd always listened to music with intensity.

I did wonder how much of my musical taste had been influenced by television and other images before I lost my vision and how much by the absence of fresh images afterwards. From the summer of 1967, when I last had good vision, I remembered the Beatles performing "All You Need is Love" on the first-ever global satellite broadcast. Seeing the four of them in a recording studio with a small orchestra and other people around them in a celebratory atmosphere added something to the song that wasn't inherent to it. Likewise, I knew that a reason I'd been drawn to the Young Rascals' "Groovin'" (also 1967) was the images shown on *Top of the Pops* of the group rowing a boat on what appeared to be a river. (I now know they were filmed on the lake in Central Park.) Had I seen Cream performing tracks from *Disraeli Gears* (1967) or Jimi Hendrix in concert, would I have felt differently about their music?

Without vision, I also couldn't read titles and lyrics as I listened to records. I'd always had difficulty hearing lyrics. Even when they weren't obscured, I'd lose the thread because the music kept distracting me. Would I have better appreciated Bob Dylan, for example, if I'd been able to read the words along with his records?

I'd heard the Zombies' "Care of Cell 44," sung to a prison inmate about to be released, while I'd been in hospital in 1967, but I knew nothing about the album on which it appeared until high school. It was their last album, originally titled *Odessey [sic] and Oracle* (1968), a radical departure from what they'd done before. Another song on the album, "Beechwood Park," transported me back to my bike rides through the woods in Sheffield. Here I was, an adolescent, prematurely nostalgic, though the reasons were obvious enough. I missed England, missed being

able to see, missed the ability to read print, missed the relative independence that came with vision, whether riding my bike around the neighborhood or taking the bus on my own into town.

Françoise Hardy, the French pop star, had had a hit in England with "All Over the World" (1964). An English-language album of hers turned up in one of Sears' record stacks which my parents would help me look through. On her "Why Even Try" (1969), over a contemplative guitar turning into firm strums, a muted choir over soft strings and two dramatic arpeggio piano sections, the singer urges her lover to bear the pain of love ("Our two hearts are the same, they could turn out untrue") rather than "stay in your ivory tower / Grow in peace like some secret flower." (The French original is "*A Quoi Ca Sert*.")

The words made me think about my own currently cloistered existence and fed into my fantasies of one day, with high school behind me, venturing out into the world. I'd heard of a blind high school student in neighboring Westport who left his home and wandered the town until someone stopped him. What could he have expected to accomplish with no public transportation in our area, never mind without a driver's license? But I understood.

Until that time, all the music I knew recorded by black artists had been either targeted at white audiences (the black girl groups controlled by Phil Spector) or designed to bridge the gap between black and white (Motown). Darien was almost exclusively white. Of course, we'd all read books by black authors, above all Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, and I was troubled by the rifts that had existed between Martin Luther King and more radical black leaders. In social science, we discussed such contemporary events as the racially-charged riot and massacre at Attica prison in 1971. (I couldn't then know that eight years later, a century on my internal clock, I was to be a lawyer representing clients confined there.) But James Brown and other black R&B

artists weren't played at our parties, and so practically all my experience of black culture was through reading.

My first foray into soul music was Isaac Hayes' "The Look of Love" (1970). Dusty Springfield had recorded her sultry version of the Bacharach/David song for the 1967 film *Casino Royale*. But Hayes' arrangement on ... *To Be Continued* revealed a whole new interpretation. The line, "don't go" has much more weight in Hayes' version, suggesting fear of ultimate desertion in place of Springfield's awestruck anticipation. For nine minutes, the wind instruments, brass, strings and drums flow around a large interior, even though anchored by the bass and wah-wah guitar.

I'd read somewhere that people don't make fun of their sincerest beliefs. I was one of those people, but holes were being poked in my sanctimonious armor. One of those prods came from the Bonzo Dog Band, which showed me a song can be funny but still enjoyed musically, such as their satires on the blues, "Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?" (1968) and on 1920s crooning morphing into Glenn Miller, in "Tubas in the Moonlight" (1969). I bought a Bonzo Dog record on a trip back to England at a shop where my Essex cousin went on reading aloud the suggestive song titles even as she whispered that some guys were staring and snickering.

For much of my junior year, I spent Saturdays with a girl whom I now associate with the folk songs that a friend of hers performed in local coffee houses. I wasn't fond of the folk songs popular at the time, but Jose Feliciano plays a lovely guitar on one of them: "The Last Thing on My Mind" (1968). Maybe my dislike of that folk music reflected the detachment I felt in that relationship, as I think she did, too. Come to think of it, that's what this song is about. And the song is better than I remembered.

During my last year and a half of high school, I fell in with a group of academically-minded, mostly non-jock students who called themselves, not exactly originally, "The Group." At their parties, they played The Who's *Tommy* (1969) over and over without either they or I ever talking about the rock opera's lead character's handicaps. The idea of a disabled kid with fantastical powers discomforted me. It troubled me just as much that no one knew that one of the best riffs on the album had already appeared in "Rael 1 and 2," the concluding track of *The Who Sell Out* LP (1967). On that album, my favorite by The Who, Pete Townsend's acoustic "Sunrise" reveals a range, vocally and (I think) emotionally, that is sublimated in his better-known recordings.

A friend from that same Group, Doug, called me a "chicken atheist" when I told him I'd realized that just as you can't prove the existence of God, neither can you disprove it. His friendship was a challenge, sometimes maddening, and it undoubtedly went both ways. The Group's encouragement of honesty led me to embarrass myself, and surely Doug, when I made literal the metaphorical lines in the Bee Gees' "Holiday":

> Millions of eyes can see,
> Yet why are mine so blind?
> When the someone else is me
> It's unkind, it's unkind.

After a Group party, I'd go home and play Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* (1944). (Leonard Bernstein conducts this performance on YouTube, as he did on my LP.) It took me to a Garden of Eden, imaginary but with geographical coordinates, in mountains I'd never visited a few hundred miles southwest of Connecticut.

4. College

My high school guidance counselor drew up a list of colleges for me to look into. The one that kept tugging at me and that I eventually chose was Amherst College, in western Massachusetts, a three-hour drive north of Darien. Is it too much to speculate that part of the attraction was the Massachusetts group, Orpheus? They had only one semi-hit, "Can't Find the Time" (1968), but several of their songs conjured up what to me was the bracing northern air of that part of the world, most of all "As They All Fall" (1969).

One of my two Amherst roommates, Ken, would roam around the suite chanting, "War, huh, good God y'all, what is it good for?" echoing Edwin Starr in "War" (1970). Ken, though a white guy from a New Jersey suburb almost as white as Darien, had somehow been more exposed to black culture than I. He loved to play tapes of Martin Luther King's speeches, and like King, and just about everyone else at Amherst, he was upset by America's involvement in Vietnam. But even though "War" was a serious protest song, when Ken chanted Edwin Starr's line, it was impossible not to smile.

My other roommate, Peter, sang and played guitar. When he wasn't performing at parties, he was doing so in our suite, attracting fans from all around the campus and beyond as Ken and I melted into the background.

An Amherst alumnus and musician who later adopted the name Mason Daring would return to the college to perform his compositions. I still hear in my head his song, "Marblehead Morning," set in New England sailing ship days, with the man and woman saying farewell as his ship is about to depart. Here again was that atmospheric appeal that Massachusetts had for me, in this case accentuated by the song's subject, which took me back to such British folk songs as "Blow the Wind Southerly." Unfortunately, the only performances of "Marblehead Morning" I

can find on YouTube are recent and disappointing. Still, when his singing partner, Jeanie Stahl, joins in, the song regains some of its power.

Listening to Stahl accompany Daring brings to mind "Take Me Home, Country Road": not that John Denver version, despite the link, but one sung in the Amherst College cafeteria when Bonnie, a woman who preoccupied me for more than a year, sang harmony for a friend of hers.

Bonnie and I had searching conversations that meant as much to her as they did to me. Some years later, as I record in my blog post "A Lost Writer," she was to tell me in a letter: "In those days, it made me feel more real—it made my feelings real, and me feel less crazy—to be able to talk to you. You were the only one I could be open with and trust to understand."

Indeed, when we talked, it was almost as if we were lovers. Except in reality, I was a callow freshman and she a senior who had literally seen the world.

Bonnie was, and no doubt remains, a thoughtful and kind person. It's said that what we love in others is what we hope to find in ourselves. Such a comforting, self-flattering way to look back at one's obsessions.

During college my interest in classical music was reinvigorated, this time true classical music, from the late eighteenth century, and specifically Mozart. Early on, an upperclassman from Edinburgh briefly took me under his wing and introduced me to Mozart's 40th Symphony, the G Minor. It's an expressive departure from the constrained music usually associated with that era.

During second semester, our gentle "Introduction to Music" professor urged us not to listen to music for sensory associations, but rather for the music itself. Stravinsky and others have said something similar. By way of example, he played a 1922 piano-roll recording of

Maurice Ravel racing unsentimentally through his composition, *Pavane Pour une Infante Défunte* (1899). It certainly has a different feel from the usual slow, sorrowful interpretation, and yet it was Ravel who gave the piece the romantic name, rendered in English as "Pavane for a Dead Princess." "*Infante*" connotes "princess" in French. (Apparently, Ravel told a friend: "I simply liked the sound of those words and I put them there, *c'est tout*.")

I don't recall how the professor elaborated on his claim for music as something pure in itself. However, others have made the case. Anthony Storr, in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 of *Music and the Mind*, starts from the premise that music is non-representational. Thus, at a performance of a piece such as Beethoven's 6th symphony, we shouldn't listen for echoes in nature, despite the invitation in its familiar subtitle, "The Pastoral." The whole notion of "program music," he argues, negates the value of music.

That's probably where my old professor stopped, as did such famous figures as Schopenhauer and Stravinsky. However, Storr goes on to argue that music must "touch the heart." Citing the composer Michael Tippett, he writes: "listening to music makes us aware of important aspects of ourselves which we may not ordinarily perceive; and that, by putting us into touch with these aspects, music makes us whole again."

The professor had us tinker at creating short twelve-tone "serial" compositions. I found the exercise pointless: placing notes arbitrarily next to each other in sequences that had nothing to do with melody or anything else I recognized as music. Since then, I haven't so much as tried to listen to twelve-tone's most famous exponents, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern.

But the course also influenced my music listening in positive and lasting ways. I learned how a traditional classical symphony's first and last movements start with an exposition,

followed by the development, and conclude with the recapitulation; how there are primary and secondary themes; and so on. Here was order, what I'd always craved in music.

By sophomore year, if not before, I'd established I could handle college. Even so, on the April evening of my twentieth birthday that year, I sat alone on the steps leading down Amherst's Memorial Hill. I rued how I hadn't achieved anything worthwhile: a lot of going-nowhere poems, my inability to get college women interested in me beyond confiding, my feeling that I lacked control over my own destiny. My gloomy inventory at last exhausted, I got up to leave for my dorm room.

I arrived to find friends waiting to celebrate my birthday. They passed around a joint, a rare event for all of us, and played Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), which I hadn't heard before. When all the clocks went off several minutes into the first side, I laughed uproariously.

Dark Side of the Moon came toward the end of psychedelia, whose reputation was undoubtedly damaged by drug and counterculture connections. Yet other styles of music survived associations with various kinds of addictions. Left-wing political activism faded as people felt less threatened by military service, and psychedelic rock seemed to follow with it. Or psychedelia may have simply run its course, just as the eighteenth-century classical symphony reached a plateau where many tedious works were written in that mold, as too many recordings attest. Still, psychedelia's time was short, hardly more than half a decade.

To combat the sense of futility I'd confronted during my birthday evening sojourn on Memorial Hill, I arranged to go to summer school in Montreal. Although I'd never been there, the city had long attracted me because of my romanticized feeling for the French and thus Montreal's mixed Francophone and Anglophone population. I planned on teaching English at the

college level, and in order to win a place in graduate school, I would need two foreign languages. I was already studying French. My Russian literature professor, despite knowing my love of that nation's works, urged me to choose German as my second, and so I set about finding an intensive German summer program. The one I chose was at McGill University precisely because it was in Montreal.

On my arrival, I befriended a Quebecois couple with separatist views who regularly welcomed me to their home. There, I heard Veronique Sanson's "*Besoin de Personne*," (1972) which I translated in my head as a defiant "I need no one." An online translator with legitimate knowledge of French corrects me: "It took no one / to help me meet him one day / … to help me see that it was love." In love with the city, I fell under Sanson's spell, even though her quivering vocalizations could be distracting.

In the German program, I met Andrea, an American woman who had adopted Montreal as her home. She spoke with a pleasing blend of American, Anglo-Canadian, French and even English-English that reflected her openness to experience and all kinds of influence. She introduced me to Vieux-Montreal, the city's hills, and the many friends of hers who were as deeply involved as she in the city's cultural life.

One hot afternoon, a pleasant breeze blowing through her apartment's open windows, Andrea played the Alfred Deller Consort's recording of Henry Purcell's *Come Ye Sons of Art* (1694), one of the most joyful musical performances I know, despite the somber opening. The basso continuo on two movements has a groove (thank you, Dr. Levitin, for making that word respectable) that's as catchy as any rock rhythm from three centuries later, and the imaginative use of instruments fits my admittedly idiosyncratic notion of psychedelic.

Another afternoon, she confided to me her hopes and worries, and I gladly listened. Then she asked why I didn't hold her. So I did.

Seventeen years later in Paris, I was to be introduced to the recordings of a true Quebecoise chanteuse (Sanson is French), Fabienne Thibeault, whose "*Les Filles Comme Moi*" (late 1970s) brings Quebec to life for me more than any other song. There's a poignancy in the electric guitar notes that makes me think of those French settlers cut adrift thousands of miles from their home, while I find the plaintive feel of Thibeault's voice reminiscent of a yearning among the Francophones that I'd sensed in 1974. If Thibeault is known at all in the English-speaking world, it's for her beautiful recording of Michel Berger's "*Le Monde Est Stone*" (1978).

After leaving Montreal, I spent the autumn at an English University (coincidentally Sheffield) with a view to resolving which country to make my home. While there, I went to a Fairport Convention concert, with Sandy Denny in the lead. Here they are on "Fotheringay" (1969). As I listen, I picture a solitary bird flying through a vast sky. The image is obviously suggested by the title, but the insistent acoustic guitar and melodic bass line, under Gregorian chant-like backing vocals, do convey motion and vastness.

Certain music feels quintessentially one nationality or another, and Sandy Denny and Fairport Convention were indisputably English. Their music tugged at my English (for want of a better word) soul. So did the distinctively English conversations I had with old friends and the new friends I made at university: a particular sense of humor, enjoyment of regional accents, witty political discussions.

Yet on the plane flying home for Christmas, I resolved to stay in America. By abandoning England, I'd be giving up a sense of belonging I doubted I could ever gain as an

expatriate in America. But by then there was so much that I'd miss about America. In either country, I was bound at times to feel like an exile.

Besides, I was already well through my American education and on the way to a career. I knew the system. I had contacts. Anywhere else, even England, I'd have to start over.

If America had been all about its suburbs, I might have decided differently. But Amherst changed everything. I loved the college, and the people there gave me hope for much more when I was ready to make my own way in the world.

5. Charting a Course

My plan to enter graduate school and aim for a position teaching college English ran up against fiscal reality. Such jobs are hard to find today, and they were back then as well. Others with a similar ambition might rely on other jobs to tide them over. Without vision, my options were limited. I didn't want to be dependent on my parents, and even less so on government largess.

My career decisions were influenced by my stint at a community action agency in rural northwest North Carolina, a job I'd taken after my college junior year in order to experience first-hand what to me was a mysterious region with a disturbing history: the South. While there, I lived and worked with committed liberals in a larger conservative society permeated by religion.

Recalling that summer, I hear in my mind the Allman Brothers' "Jessica" (1973), already an oldie in 1975. It evokes both the open countryside in that area and the Blue Ridge mountains, forty miles to the west, where a friend and I went each Sunday for brunch. Then I recall the friendly pig in a field who came to greet us each week when several of us from the office went for lunch at a restaurant that made the best peach cobbler. They said it was the best, and since it

was the only one I'd ever had and loved it, I had to agree. Then more memories come flooding back, reminding me that after that summer, the South could never afterwards be an abstraction.

I don't recall thinking of Copland's *Appalachian Spring* in North Carolina, despite the fantasy world it had helped create for me during high school. I still loved the music, but I no longer needed the make-believe world it had conjured up in my mind.

That job showed me I'd need to make enough of a salary to cover my reader wages and other accessibility requirements. For my first few weeks, I could contribute little except meet everyone involved and observe their various jobs, from teaching Head Start to operating a cannery. Eventually, I conducted a survey for which I called all the employers in the region to determine their openness to taking on our clients in need of on-the-job training and the terms they would agree to, and then I typed a lengthy document with the results. But without adequate reader support, I felt I couldn't do my share.

In those days, there was no Americans with Disabilities Act forcing employers to provide reasonable accommodations. For that reason, social work, among other fields, didn’t seem realistic. So I opted for law school, a finite three-year program with paying job prospects at the end.

Harvard Law proved to be many hours in isolated study and many other hours spent with friends, old and new. Current Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts was in my class, but if I ever encountered him, I have forgotten. I also don't recall meeting Russ Feingold, the widely-admired, former liberal U.S. Senator for Wisconsin. Just to namedrop two classmates.

During those years, a number of college friends migrated to the Boston area. One of them, Carl, was a poet, composer and amateur pianist who lived on Beacon Hill. Back in the spring of my college sophomore year, after he'd graduated, he'd shown up at my dorm and

suggested we go for a walk in Amherst's bird sanctuary. There, he astonished me by telling me he was gay. I'd spent lots of time with him, including a week at his family's summer home in Maine, and it had never occurred to me. It wasn't just that I hadn't suspected, but that I hadn't even anticipated ever encountering a homosexual in person. Yes, how naïve. But if ever anyone needed a gentle introduction to that world within worlds, I got it that morning. I liked Carl and the setting in which he chose to tell me. Considering how initially shocked I was, I've wondered if, under different circumstances, it was in me to have been homophobic. I doubt it, but I only know that my acceptance of his announcement wasn't just a relief for him, but also fortunate for me. Prejudice is a heavy burden to bear.

At Carl's Boston home, I never tired of him playing on his piano Claude Debussy's "*Clair de Lune*" (1905, here performed by Kun Woo Paik). Some dismiss French music as "pretty," as in merely pretty. "*Clair de Lune*" blurs the distinction between pretty and beautiful.

One afternoon, Carl put Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Gerald Moore's tender rendition of Robert Schumann's lieder cycle, *Frauenliebe und Leben* (1840) on the turntable. I settled into an armchair and started to read my braille course notes. I was always studying. Carl asked if I couldn't just listen. I put aside the notes. He was right. As I'd once known but forgotten under the pressure to study, listening isn't being divided between two tasks. It requires attention. Afterwards, I'd still put music on in the background, but I understood it wasn't truly listening.

My bird sanctuary moment with Carl prepared me for the moment when a law school friend, Mel, told me over dinner that he was gay. It was the second semester of our first year. I was just as surprised as I'd been when Carl told me. But this time I could handle it with humor: "I always knew you were perverse," I said. It took a moment, but then to my relief, he laughed.

Mel recalled that dinner conversation in an interview years later for a law school publication in which he talked about how gays at the law school in the late seventies felt they had to conceal their orientation. It got me thinking about the kinds of prejudice different groups encounter. For gays, it takes the form of hostility. But in theory, and (as in Mel's case) often in practice, gays can choose to hide. People with physical disabilities can't hide, but when we encounter prejudice, it's a matter of avoidance based on pity and a conscious or unconscious fear of contagion. Thus the discrimination we experience is less likely to stem from hostility. Rather, it comes from skepticism that we can work as well as people without obvious disabilities. In those days before technology opened a whole new world of access, I recognized I'd run up against my disability-related limitations at my North Carolina job. Yet at Harvard, I was warmly welcomed and supported by classmates, faculty and administrators, as I'd been at Amherst.

Following my first year of law school, I got a job as law clerk with the State Public Defender's office in Madison, Wisconsin. Just as I'd taken a job in North Carolina to experience the South, I chose Madison because of its location in the Midwest, another region I hadn't visited. I chose Wisconsin because I was intrigued by its back-and-forth history of progressivism (the La Follettes) and extreme right-wing activism (Joe McCarthy).

I associate that clerkship with the infectious rhythm and summer-warm melodies of the famous Adagio from Mozart’s Serenade No. 10 for winds in B flat major, which I first heard at an open-air concert at Chicago's Science and Industry Museum. I'd taken a bus down from nearby Madison to spend the weekend with law school friends and that Sunday afternoon with a college friend, a scientist and amateur opera singer. Recalling that moment is to bring back the sense of buoyant well-being I got from working at my first law-related job.

Back in Madison, a woman I call Karin, an even worse insomniac than me, would show up at my apartment any time of day or night. She introduced me to saxophone player Stanley Turrentine's "Salt Song" (1972) the first time she prepared dinner for us. Some jazz is too complex for me, other jazz puts me to sleep. Turrentine and his supporting musicians hold my attention throughout. However, I never ate that elaborate dinner. I was so charged with desire that I had no appetite for food. Ever since, I've felt bad about being such an unappreciative guest, at least of her cooking.

Our relationship foundered on her conviction that everyone in the world, even in places where Christianity has hardly made a dent, must accept Christ in order to be "saved." My views of God and religion had gone from the tooth fairy phase to my high school agnosticism (you can no more disprove God's existence than prove it) to my confirmation in the Episcopalian faith at Amherst's Grace Church my last year of college. By my Madison summer, I'd fallen back to agnosticism, but now touched by a religious sensibility. I didn't pretend to know, and I certainly didn't wish to argue, about such things. However, dogma that elevated one religion over all others incensed me. I'd wonder how any intelligent person could take such notions literally.

Then I'd ask myself how I could have let this quirk, hardly worse than the variety of quirks we all have, come between Karin and me. She was spontaneous, imaginative, quick-thinking, loving, considerate and ultimately, thanks to my dogmatic anti-dogma, hurt.

Returning to law school in September, I promptly fell ill with mononucleosis and was placed in the infirmary for ten days, where I'd listen for Bob Marley's comforting voice and the Whalers' mild reggae rhythm on "Waiting in Vain" to play on the radio. I heard the sadness in Marley's projection of a frustrated lover as empathetic with my different frustration at being too ill to function.

After that, it was an academic year of mono-induced intense dreams and working around exhaustion. When not in class, I'd accompany my studying with WGBH's "Morning Pro Musica" whose host, Robert J. Lurtsema, often played Johann Sebastian Bach. Under Lurtsema's influence, I spent some precious cash on a box set of Bach's initial four cantatas, which is how I originally heard the opening choral movement to the first, "*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*" ("How beautifully the morning star shines," 1725). It still strikes me as a full-throated, openhearted gesture toward heaven.

Braille has long been a frustration because I've never gained fluency despite years of practice. Partly thanks to that, studying law was a grind. Mired in the process of reading, it was hard to absorb the big picture and concepts. Subjects like Civil Procedure and Administrative Law raised stimulating questions, such as who makes government decisions and how that power is restrained, but in the abstract, the details were tedious. Tedium on tedium.

Bach (for some reason more than any other composer on Lurtsema's shows) recalls those lonely hours plodding through casebooks. His music has remained with me as a pairing of opposites: spiritual inspiration but also spiritual desert.

The opportunities my law degree gave me would make it all worthwhile, beginning with the New York job offer I accepted for the fall following graduation. But it was painful to leave behind my Cambridge and Boston friends. To extend my stay beyond graduation, I sublet an apartment in Cambridge for the summer and studied for the New York bar at the law school.

For the previous semester, I'd been involved with a woman, Heather, who worked in the school's administration. One afternoon as I was walking with her on Massachusetts Avenue to her home, a classmate ran up to us and asked her out to a movie. It seemed he couldn't imagine

she might be dating the blind guy at her side. As I simmered in silence, she gently put him off. Then, after he'd gone, she had to calm me down.

Heather gave me an Ella Fitzgerald double album. I like Ella's voice, but her songs have the unfortunate effect of making me sleepy, the last thing I needed in Heather's company. How apt that the album included Ella's beautiful, though still sleep-inducing, "Every Time We Say Goodbye." The very next morning, we did just that.

Heather was tethered to the married man she saw once a week. I'd accepted it when she told me early on, but my tolerance declined as my feeling for her strengthened. That morning, I forced the issue. The outcome wasn't so much a fight as firm declarations on both sides. We embraced in farewell. Listening to her heels clop down the several flights of steps from my sublet to the exit, I wanted to reverse time and take back my demand. But I knew, as did she, there'd been no alternative.

Yet musically, I associate that apartment with a Françoise Hardy album I bought during a short, pre-graduation trip Mel and I took to Montreal and Quebec City. During the intensive bar preparation, I'd take a break from studying and play the album's seven-minute title song, "Star" (1977). With a row of west-facing windows, the living room of the top-floor sublet was bright and airy, and I imagined the song's arpeggio guitar chords floating through the room like sunlight over the bobbing surface of the sea.

6. New York

Soon after I moved to Brooklyn, I met a woman on a subway platform who was a fan of an Italian singer I'd never heard of named Mina. For a time, no piece of music was more exciting than "E Poi," from Mina's richly-textured *Frutta e Verdura* LP ("Fruit and Vegetables," 1973). It

must have been getting airplay in New York at the time, six or seven years after its release in Italy. Once I even heard it over a clothing store's sound system. It was the backdrop to my early days in the city and that short-lived relationship.

I remain hooked on the albums Mina recorded in the seventies: not before, and little afterwards. "*Parole*" (meaning "Words," 1972), has two lovers fighting like cats and dogs: Mina insistently singing "Parole, parole," as if to say, "Words, it's all just words," as the man keeps entreating her. At any rate, that's what it sounds like to me. All of it against a gorgeous orchestration.

Mina turned out to be a favorite of my law school friend Mel's partner, a Cuban exile, who would mail me tapes of European singers he loved. Mel's partner's English was still a work in progress. When they visited from San Francisco or I visited them, putting a Mina recording on the turntable spared all of us a constant compulsion to make conversation.

My first full-time job in New York was handling the appeals for people who had been convicted of serious crimes. I justified the work to myself on the grounds that since practically the whole world condemned our clients, it was only right that they have at least one advocate. Few clients could claim innocence, but there were other legitimate issues. Sometimes the sentences imposed were unfair. Other times, the system of justice cheated. As any fair-minded parent or school principal knows, for punishment to have any beneficial effect at all, it must be administered justly only after all the circumstances have been considered.

That criminal behavior was much more widespread in low-income neighborhoods than others convinced me that poverty played a role. Prosecutors loved to point out that people with similar backgrounds didn't commit crimes. In fact, the majority didn't. But it still made sense

that people trapped in harsh economic circumstances might feel less compunction about violating the social contract.

On December 8, 1980, John Lennon, whose voice touched me more than just about any other singer's, was assassinated. His loss felt personal. Had I been called on to defend his killer, I couldn't have accepted. I was too emotionally involved. But it didn't cause me to question my commitment.

Even so, the work was bound to risk awkward social situations, none more so than when my childhood friend Sarah's youngest sister, Vicky, was inexplicably murdered. I'd become fond of Vicky during my term at Sheffield University, when she was fourteen. Each time I'd arrived at their home, she'd taken a running jump at me in the hope of knocking me over. She thought it was hilarious, and though I tried to hide it, so did I. When I visited the family a year or two after her death, I worried about what the family would say about the work I did. I should have known better: They graciously refrained from asking me to justify it. (My website post about that episode, which also refers to my Wisconsin summer, is called "Heart and Mind.")

Just before Lennon's murder, A woman I saw off and on during my first years in New York gave me his "Just Like Starting Over" one of the times we got back together. Jauntily early-sixties in style, the record couldn't help but make me smile. These days, I hear the song with grief for Lennon, yes, but also for itself and with affection for my old girlfriend. Such is the complexity of memory and emotion that passing time can weave into a song.

I bought my albums at J&R, a jerry-rigged store across from City Hall Park that required customers to walk up several flights of a rectangular staircase walled by what appeared to be Sheetrock. It was absolutely not prepossessing. When I went on my own, a certain salesman

invariably noticed my arrival, asked what I wanted, told me to wait while he went to find it, then jumped me to the front of the sales register line, saying to the clerk, "Look after this guy for me."

One musical infatuation that J&R satisfied was Milton Nascimento. In 1984, a *Newsweek* article alerted me to this Brazilian singer and songwriter, along with his new album at the time, *Anima*. I took a risk and bought it. (It may have been the first, and was definitely the last time a written review led me in the right musical direction.) Nascimento's voice was another acquired taste for me, but his distinctive songs and arrangements won me over. In time, I came to love his voice, capable of powerful emotion and joyful falsettos. "*Comunhao*," from *Anima*, gives an indication of his energy and range, already amply evident in "*Tudo O Que Você Podia Ser*" on his 1972 breakthrough album, the first *Clube da Esquina* (Corner Club). Then there's his moving "Canção da América" (Song of America, 1980).

After two and a half years of criminal defense work, which I gave up not out of disillusionment but because of office politics, I moved on to consumer protection. Soon afterwards, I started a relationship with a woman I call Caroline in an unpublished novel based on our two years together. I came to associate the group Manfred Mann, whose recordings in the eighties were completely different from their sixties' hits, with her. Little did I know when she had me play their version of Springsteen's "For You" (1980) three times in a row that she was foreshadowing several months of her own psychiatric nightmare and hospitalization. It was only on the third hearing that the song grabbed me, but after that it never lost its power. It gained even more power when our relationship reached its tragic end.

Recalling the years of wandering the wilderness that followed, I hear in my memory Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time." It is playing on the Beekman Pub jukebox as I have drinks with one of the women who passed like a ship in the night during those years.

It was also during that time that, belatedly, I came to appreciate "Leyla" (1970), performed by Eric Clapton's then band, Derek and the Dominos. Another woman passing through the night told me that back in her home country, communist Poland, when she'd been convinced that emigrating was just a fantasy, she'd listened for "Leyla" when signals from Western radio stations penetrated the Iron Curtain at night. I was reminded how as a boy, when the BBC radio monopoly played contemporary music only sparingly, I'd tune into the offshore pirate radio stations and, at night, Radio Luxemburg, all of which beamed pop music to the UK. For my Polish friend, "Leyla" represented freedom. We had near-arguments over the complex meanings of that word, but I always backed off, recognizing that for her the meaning was understandably straightforward.

Reading "Leyla"'s lyrics online, I'm struck by the coincidence (at least I think it's a coincidence) that they express the man's love for a woman who doesn't reciprocate, the way my friend had loved the idea of an unattainable West. But just as Clapton eventually won the woman (Pattie Boyd) in his real life, my friend won her freedom in hers. (I still wish the guitars didn't whine so!)

Late in 1985, after four years of consumer-related litigation and negotiating agreements with companies we accused of misleading or defrauding consumers, I landed the job I was to find the most rewarding when I was asked to run the same office's mediation program. I'd struggled with an advocate's role because I often found some merit in the other side's position. Mediation gave me latitude to acknowledge a company's point of view, even though the focus remained consumer advocacy. In that sense, our work wasn't true mediation, since we had an announced bias, but the approach led to thousands of resolutions that both consumers and businesses deemed fair.

My closest colleague and friend in that program introduced me to a group I knew only by name, Squeeze, and their "Tempted by the Fruit of Another" is the song I most associate with that job. The song is partly to my taste, but not wholly satisfying: like the job, which engaged and even preoccupied me, but never stopped me from hoping one day to pursue my first love, creative writing.

In 1990, I took my third trip to Paris. The first week, I stayed with a Scottish cousin I'd never met before, along with her French husband and three Franco-Scottish daughters. It was that cousin who introduced me to Fabienne Thibault, who is for me the voice of Montreal. I stayed the second week in a hotel near the Argentine Metro stop. For several days, I roamed the city alone, proving to myself that I could manage with my inadequate French, along with my white cane. I even held a few conversations, but spoke to someone who suggested we meet again, naturally, only on my last evening.

But here I am, writing about my first decade in New York, and yet the focus has been foreign music. Ironically, it was my Paris cousin who introduced me to Sting's "Englishman in New York" (1987). But the song that captures New York City for me comes from 1941. Long before Paul Simon alluded to Joe DiMaggio in "Mrs. Robinson" (1968), Les Brown and his orchestra, with its brash big band sound, bouncing rhythm and Betty Bonnie's rich voice in the lead, recorded "Joltin' Joe DiMaggio," celebrating his 56-game hitting streak that summer, 1941. It's hard for a Red Sox and Mets fan like me to endorse the side of New York represented by the Yankees, but so be it. New York City has experienced endless changes in fashion, shifting priorities, and even 9/11. Despite it all, an almost arrogantly self-confident, and yet warm-hearted exuberance ceaselessly courses through the city, and it's captured by this record.

7. Settled

On July 29, 1991, I met Laura. She's an artist, photographer and formerly, as she puts it, keeper of the flame for Robert Moses, New York's partial answer to Paris's Haussmann. Her musical taste ranges from fifties rock to romantic classical, from folk to opera.

For nearly two decades, we had season tickets to orchestral concerts at Carnegie. Among the highlights for me were several performances of Gustav Mahler symphonies. I'd been introduced to Mahler's work back at Sheffield University, when I attended a performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* (*"Song of the Earth," 1908-1909*), a symphony (though not named as such) that concludes with a sixth movement of stern beauty. (The link is to a 1956 recording of this very long last movement, where an English translation of the words is reproduced.)

At one of our Carnegie concerts, we heard a performance of Mahler's Fifth (1902). As we descended the steps to the Seventh Avenue exit, I said I'd like the Adagietto played at my memorial service. Morbid, I suppose, but memorial services were on my mind after the one held not long before for my mother. A few years later, Laura expressed the same sentiment about the Adagietto, forgetting I'd done so some time before. Then déjà vu took over, insisting I'd heard or read someone stating the same desire long before either of us had. Such tricks of memory make me question the true originality of our thoughts. Maybe everything I've ever thought is already logged in Jung's collective unconscious. Or the collective forgotten.

Under Laura's influence, I've come around from despising fifties rock 'n' roll to enjoying it. The rhythm, the electric guitars of that time and the pervasive sax work for me now, such as on Bill Haley & the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" (1955). So does Bobby Darin's romping "Beyond the Sea" (1959) which might have been the last big-band swing hit.

I don’t share Laura’s love of opera, but there are arias and other operatic moments that go straight to the heart. We both love the duet from Georges Bizet’s *Pearl Fishers* (this version performed by Placido Domingo & Andrea Bocelli). The duet has even more significance because I first heard it when my father brought it to our home in Darien in the early seventies.

On October 7, 2017, after twenty-six years of not fixing something that wasn't broke, we were married. The ceremony was held on a clear, summerlike day on our terrace, overlooking a wide swath of lately fashionable Brooklyn, part of New York Bay and, off in the distance, the Statue of Liberty. Both our fathers participated, and Laura's brother and sister-in-law and some of our closest friends stood in witness. After an hour of champagne, we all trooped off to Henry's End, our favorite restaurant, whose gracious owner turned it over to us for the afternoon.

8. *De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum*, But We Do Anyway

Musically, I never truly adapted after the sixties. A millennial listening to the music from that decade would be the equivalent of me at that time looking back at the 1910s, whose music sounded to me ancient and often ridiculous. It tells me how someone at peak musical susceptibility today, meaning young, might regard the music I grew up with.

Conversely, if I pretended to like hip-hop or, say, Taylor Swift, they'd look at me askance. I make that assumption because one of the first Americans I met after moving to the United States was a middle-aged woman who waxed ecstatic about *Sgt. Pepper's*. I felt she was faking it, trying to make it seem she was in tune with the younger generation: trying, in short, to sound young.

This fixity of mine could seem close-minded. I used to feel that way about older people during the 1960s and 1970s who complained that the Beatles and the Stones, among others, were

merely imitating R&B from a previous era, which these critics called “authentic.” I often disliked that “authentic” music, while I really liked what the Beatles, for example, were doing. And now, here I am, finding much indie music merely derivative of sixties folk and rock.

An early indication of my declining open-mindedness may have been that attraction of mine to foreign artists in the seventies and eighties. I have a suspicion I heard European and South American music from that time as an extension of the Anglo-American music I’d loved in the sixties, even though those European and South American musicians incorporated some contemporaneous U.S. and British trends. But North American and British music moved far beyond to disco, punk, northern dance, hip-hop and rap. It also became fashionable to lay it all out emotionally. Laura and I complain about "broomsticks"—singers who wail away as though they had painful objects thrust up their behinds. Other singers revert to baby voices.

I can see how two factors in my receptivity to the music in 1963 were the stage in my brain’s development and my increasing gregariousness. But what about the reversal? Levitin cites the hardening of the hairs in the ears that stops us from detecting high-register tones, like birds singing. Also, I’ve noticed in myself greater difficulty in mentally processing sounds, which I’ve known other people to complain of as they get older.

Another factor might be developmental. In our twenties, we’re open to all kinds of ideas and demands, and because we haven’t yet set a true course, they all influence us, if in varying degrees. As the decades go by, our course becomes clearer, we grow into our chosen roles and shrug off distractions. I figure some parallel process occurs with music, pulling us increasingly back to the familiar.

At most Carnegie concerts that Laura and I attended, the orchestra would perform a contemporary piece. Almost every one was interesting, some were absorbing, and occasionally

one was moving. Almost all had novel sonic colors, and I was often astonished that the orchestra could make such sounds with traditional instruments. Even so, in each case, I knew that listening to a CD or digital copy at home wouldn't have been satisfying, and that if the piece had come on the radio, it wouldn't have taken me long to change stations.

While preparing this revised version of "Soundtrack," I came across the book, *Broken Beauty: Musical Modernism and the Representation of Disability* (2018), by Joseph Nathan Straus. A professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Straus is a proponent of an academic field, new to me, that is characterized in the "About the Author" section as "the study of music in relationship to disability." He contends that "modernist music" "claims disability." The following sentence may help explain:

> The sorts of qualities that make music distinctively modern—forms made of discrete blocks, stratified textures, immobile harmonies, radical simplification of materials, juxtaposition of seemingly incommensurable elements, extremes of internal complexity and self-reference—can be understood as representations of disabled bodies.

It's the kind of argument that takes me time to absorb, and I haven't read Straus's book with the care it undoubtedly deserves. But supposing the theory has validity, it may explain some of my resistance to "modernist music," by which Straus means twentieth-century classical music. Straus identifies two aspects of the experience of disability that seem relevant to "Soundtrack." One is "overcoming," as in overcoming disability. For Straus, a musical example is the compositionally satisfying conclusion to a traditional sonata. By contrast, a "modernist" sonata might go nowhere or end in chaos, thus, according to Straus, putting disability front and center.

The second aspect is "fragmentation." An example Straus offers is the ballet performed at the original production of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, or *Le Sacre du printemps*, where

Nijinsky's dancers shunned ballet's traditional graceful moves in favor of "lurching and stomping." Such "modernist" pieces suggest the fracturing of the human psyche and body. Perhaps there are people with disabilities who would find catharsis in the music Straus describes, or at any rate, the way he describes it. I prefer, and hope for, another scenario that I haven't found in his book: adaptation. As Straus implies, disability can't be completely overcome because it places limits, but what Straus overlooks is that disability need not result in "fragmentation" because we have the capacity to make adjustments and reconstitute ourselves as whole beings.
I gather from a review of another of Straus' works that he elsewhere speaks of "accommodation," but the word connotes resignation: acceptance of something less than wholeness.
I choose to take from Straus' analysis that the music I listen to suggests a harmonized, non-fragmented essence. It doesn't mean my life is always harmonious and unified, but I like the idea.

Anyway, my phase of enthusiasm for truly new music appears to be over; not for lack of desire, but because my brain won't cooperate. I remain eager to try, above all in the company of friends who are passionate about the music they listen to. But sadly, it can feel like an intellectual exercise.

With all that said, how is it that I've come around to enjoying fifties rock 'n' roll? Laura's influence, yes. But does it suggest I've loosened up? A thought, perhaps, for Levitin to mull over.

9. Friendship

I gave up the active practice of law in 1999 to commit full-time to the solitary task of writing. Having been in school from the ages of four to twenty-five, I had no desire to return to the classroom. However, I've taken three semester-long writing courses since moving to New

York, and during the third, I became friends with Beth, a writer of exquisite fiction, though better known as a journalist and editor. Out of the blue one day, she sent me a link to Richard Hawley's "Born Under a Bad Sign" (2005) a song whose arrangement, she rightly said, is reminiscent of *Pet Sounds*. The album's title, *Coles Corner*, refers to Sheffield's city center, making for a double instance of serendipity: Beth making the recommendation without knowing I'd lived in Sheffield, and Hawley coming from the city where I first heard *Pet Sounds*, the album I most love.

Friendship comes in different cycles. Neil and I have been close ever since our London days, when we were six, and Sarah and I have stayed friends since I moved to Sheffield at the age of ten. Some college and law school friends have stayed, while some of my New York friendships go back almost to my arrival here.

For yet other friendships, there was a time and place. I might wish I could rekindle them, but the bond apparently required an office or classroom. We moved on, not from lack of affection, but loss of a shared activity. Musical associations can be a touching way to bring them back, if only in memory.

On the other hand, music that reminds me of someone with whom I ended on bad terms can spark a guilty conscience or flash of annoyance, except I find annoyance fades with time while guilt persists.

Many friends don't appear in "Soundtrack" because they don't evoke musical associations. Music is arbitrary that way. Also, music and friendship don't always go together. One girlfriend and I had a lot going for us, but I suppose we had little in common. She captured the nature of our differences when the Supremes came on the radio and I told her my favorite

track of theirs was the self-consciously psychedelic "Reflections" (1967). "Even when you like someone good," she told me with affection, "you like the wrong song."

Occasionally, a friend from the past returns. In 2009, a law school classmate I'll call Claire experienced a sudden deterioration in her sight, leading to complete loss of vision. In the midst of that crisis, she spent two weekends with us, the first to get some threshold mobility instruction and talk things over, the second so that I could teach her JAWS, the speech program I use with my computer. The day after that second long weekend, she was using JAWS on the job, a remarkable feat considering that it requires the adjustment from looking to listening.

Coincidentally as I've been revising "Soundtrack," Claire emailed: "In a few weeks it will be ten years since I lost all sight. So scary back then but now just a part of life."

It was Claire who alerted me in 2015 to a song celebrating the white cane written and sung by students at New Zealand's BLENNZ Music School. I generally dislike rah-rah rallying cries around blindness. The subject requires grounding in the recognition of loss, but also in the reality of possibility and affirmation. This song equates the white cane with sight, the kind of "lighthouse" metaphor that reinforces vision's pre-eminence and so defeats the goal of adaptation. Yet I delight in the song and the students' spirit.

10. Years Pass, Turn Back Around

I notice that while several examples of my father's music have come up in this memoir, only one piece of my mother's has. Mum kept so much inside, which she acknowledged as she lay dying in 2002, telling those of us around her bed that she knew she hadn't often expressed herself but that she'd always loved us. There never was any doubt about her love. But so much else was hidden. I did get some glimpses through music. Left to herself, she sang along to

Broadway and jazz standards on the radio. English music hall performances, of which there were a spate in Connecticut in the seventies and eighties, excited her. Sadly, my boredom at these events was hard to conceal.

One day when Dad and she visited my Brooklyn home, knowing that she, like Dad, was a Frank Sinatra fan, I put on a CD of his. After the third song, she said it wasn't right to string so many sad songs together. It was true: Whatever that album was, it had zero swing. I threw it out.

A slow song Mum did like was one my brother introduced us to: Sting's "Fields of Gold" (1993). I imagine Mum was influenced by knowing that Sting (like Eric Burden) comes from our home county, Durham, in England.

One other glimpse: She adored Andrea Bocelli and went to Jose Feliciano concerts. Both performers are blind, and I doubt it was coincidental. It points to something she thought or felt in connection with me, although I don't know what it could have been.

As I anticipated Mum's memorial service, Françoise Hardy and Iggy Pop's version of "I'll Be Seeing You (… in all the old familiar places)" (2000) kept going through my head. I thought of proposing it for the service, but although Mum would have loved the versions she heard during World War II (it was written in 1938), I doubted she would have liked Hardy's, with its heavy bass and electric feel. Looking up what I thought was Vera Lynn's original, I find that her recording wasn't the first, and I don't recall having heard it before. The song for which I do know Vera Lynn is "We'll Meet Again" (1940). Similar sentiment, but wrong song, a mistake that reinforced my sense that I never did get Mum quite right. Another person's mind, no matter how close we might be, is like a landscape in the night. Lights shine out here and there, but so much is in the dark.

Several pieces of music were performed at the service, mostly chosen by the people who led it. The only one I remember, selected by my father, is "Blow the Wind Southerly." It would have meant something to Mum.

My father died this past May. Dad rarely had "a chance," as he put it, to read my work, but he was excited about the previous version of "Soundtrack." I believe he didn't get much past the beginning, but I'm gratified that he got even that far. He was delighted to be reminded of "If Hearts Could Talk."

For his memorial service, I selected Ravel's "Pavane," which he always requested when a piano player was in the vicinity, regardless of the occasion, and a piano transcription of the middle theme in "Jupiter" from *The Planets Suite*. My brother chose the Beatles' "Golden Slumbers," from *Abbey Road*. This last choice was especially apt, and not just for the title. The song alternates between a gentle melody and a forceful refrain, reminiscent of Dad.

Nostalgia is for time gone by, for people who have moved on, for missed opportunities to advance or repair. For expatriates, it's also for a lost country. Neither Mum nor Dad ever shed their ambivalence about having left England, demonstrated by their subscription to the magazine *This England*, which asserts on its website: "*This England* is the perfect quarterly magazine for anyone that loves this green and pleasant land and is unashamedly proud to be English."

I am not immune. The stirring song "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times" (1916) is always sung the last night of Britain's annual summer concerts known as the Proms. When it plays via the Internet, I feel the patriotic emotion in the Albert Hall's audience's rousing singing of William Blake's words (1808), but the joy for me is inseparable from awareness that I am absent. It doesn't mean I would have been happier in England. Chances are I had more opportunities in America, and now I can't imagine living anywhere but New York City. But the

country of one’s origin is a clinging companion. Or rather, the country as it is remembered. The country the expatriate remembers is static, but the country itself hasn’t stood still.

11. Stranger on the Shore

Since Dad's death, four months ago as I write, "Stranger on the shore" often goes around my head, pulling me back to the last months of my seventh year.

In his last weeks, Dad's old-age, cynical right-wing extremism peeled away, restoring the loving father of my childhood. So did my judgmental frustration, exposing the child in me. At the very moment we were the closest we'd been in years, I lost him. Life is very much about loss.

But life is also very much about gain. Objectively, back when I was seven, I was unhappy, with my recent five-month hospitalization and long commute to school. Decades afterwards, I came across that school's headmistress, and she told me I'd been well-adjusted socially. I'd thought of myself at that age as withdrawn and resentful.

That seven-year-old me could never have anticipated the course his life was to take. Had he been given a sci-fi future viewer, he would have been distressed as his older self endured another long hospital stay leading to blindness, but then perhaps delighted as that older self navigated his adopted country's education system. He would have been fascinated to watch the ups and downs of his adult self's law career. After all, among his favorite moments that seventh year was riding his tricycle to meet his beloved dad emerging each evening from the Rayners Lane tube station.

When his adult self turned full-time to creative writing, the seven-year-old would have been bored silly watching his isolated hours at the keyboard. But with luck he would have recognized that the adult self was mostly content pursuing his avocation.

That introverted seven-year-old self would have been gobsmacked when his 37-year-old self won the affections of the lovely, accomplished and admired woman who was to be with him the next quarter century and beyond. Surely he would have been moved by the outpouring of affection the guests showed on the terrace that sunny day as his adult self joined her in marriage.

Even so, that seven-year-old stickler for the truth would have reminded his adult self that he still hadn't made a name for himself as a writer. The latter would have shrugged and, speaking from the lofty heights of hard-earned wisdom, explained that persistence is what matters most of all—the journey. For many writers, he would have said, paraphrasing something he'd recently read, the hope is that the work will one day touch a wider audience, like a message in a bottle reaching shore. Besides, fame is a double-edged sword. To which my seven-year-old self would probably have said, "What's a double-edged sword?"

I wrote in the introduction that judgments about music come with moral conviction. No one will like all, or even most of, the pieces I link to here in "Soundtrack," but I hope there are some finds for anyone who has made it here, to the end.

A Note and a Disclaimer

When assigning dates, I chose the year of release with pop and rock music, while for classical, much of it written before the advent of the record, I went with the year of composition.

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