

Bad news on the doorstep, I couldn't take one more step.



*I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride,
But something touched me deep inside
The day the music died. – Don McLean*

I love music. My undying affection has its roots buried deep inside my family's ancestral appreciation of a good tune, passed down from grandparents, to my parents, to my brother, sister and me, now residing in iPods that silently transmit tunes through ear buds hidden in the folds of my niece's and nephew's ears.

My paternal grandfather, Fortunato – Forby to coworkers and drinking buddies – played the accordion, a favorite musical instrument among many eastern Europeans. I never understood the magical construction of the weighty squeezebox with its black and yellowing white keyboard on one side, rows of little black buttons on the other, and the zigzaggy bellows of cloth and cardboard that pushed air across reeds, creating the music of Polish weddings and baptismal celebrations.

My maternal grandmother, Marie, never had a music lesson in her life, but would sit for hours at a small electric organ in her dining room playing the chords of "Danny Boy" or "Ebbtide." Close by, Grandma had a Magnavox stereo, a top of the line music console that would belt out the crisp riff of Herb Albert's trumpet mellowing in "A Taste of Honey" on Sunday afternoons. During the early part of my parent's marriage, my dad went to night school at the University of Pittsburgh. His record collection of classical music and Spanish flamenco surrounded his studies and my mother's pregnancies until his graduation when I was four years old. The following Easter, the bunny not only left me Brach's jelly beans and crystalline sugar eggs with candy scenes inside, but he mysteriously delivered my mom's portable record player that her mother gave to her, beside my Easter basket.

And then it happened. During one of my grandmother's tours of duty as my favorite babysitter, she took me to G. C. Murphy's 5 & 10. On the wall decorating the music section were 45 rpm recordings of "My Boyfriend's Back," "Blue Velvet," and "Sugar Shack." But the one we picked, my very first record that I had a hand in selecting, was "I Want to Hold Your Hand" by the Beatles. I still know the lyrics off by heart.

Today, music is the salve of my soul. The pace, bad news, and contention of everyday life can be redirected by silence or melody and although I cherish both, more often than not, I choose music. The other night, after a long week of disastrous financial news and more political controversy, I drove from my home to the new ARTworks Center on Boundary Street and back again in preparation for a Saturday morning seminar. Cat Stevens sang full blast from a tape deck in my 1998 Toyota 4Runner through the windows and sun roof, and I sang right along with him at the top of my lungs. You cannot beat lyrics about hard-headed women, peace trains, and the fact that it is a wild world.

My husband Mac, my mom, and I were at AJ's on Tybee Island celebrating my husband's birthday a few days ago. After the sun set, a lone guitarist crooned James Taylor songs about fire and rain and going to Carolina, and we were happy eating crab burgers, and shrimp and oyster po' boys as the threat of Wachovia's demise dimmed under the increasing glimmer of inlet starlight. On Sunday morning, after great cheesy omelettes at The Breakfast Club, where

Melodies to Soothe the Savages

Written by Vivian Bikulege

our waitress wore an Elton John World Tour tee-shirt, church hymns lifted our spirits to trust in amazing graces and I hoped to be made into a channel of peace as the Prayer of St. Francis was transformed by music.

Somehow, through it all, music has permeated and continues to seep through all of the routine and important times of my life. I learn from it. It makes me creative. I find rest in music and a certain settling of daily anxiety. Music is spiritual and artistic. It binds my family and stirs sweet, sweet memories of our most precious moments together. Music brings us to our feet, and drives us to embrace one another in dance. Even our beagle Toby will howl in an excited serenade of pure happiness.

Maybe the choice of “I Want to Hold Your Hand” when I was five held a significance I have yet to comprehend as the Beatles led me to Cat who sent me to Neil and Joni, and then to Rimsky-Korsakov, Montoya, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, to the Rolling Stones and Dire Straits, to Stevie, Dylan, and Eminem, to Coldplay and Alison Krauss.

If I am invited to stand in line for tickets to the sellout concert at the Pearly Gates Arena headlined by the Seraphim and Cherubim harpists, I hope the pre-show starts off with Harry Belafonte singing a resounding rendition of “Day-O,” followed by a raucous round of polkas by Frankie Yankovic so that I can have that dance I turned down with my dad so long ago because of my clumsy self-consciousness.

I will pass away, but music will never die, and that it is something to cling to in good times and bad.

This article is dedicated to Sara Harrell Banks, a dear teacher and mentor, whose lyrical southern voice graces her writing and her friends. She leaves Beaufort for the “other Carolina” and will be greatly missed.