MY MUSIC

Along with books and movies, music has brought an abundance of joy, pleasure, and relaxation to my life. On my laptop computer and iPad, I have over 3500 songs from all genres. Music is my tonic and my escape into emotion and daydreams. For you too, I'm sure.

The first song I can remember liking is called Ebb Tide, an instrumental from 1953 by Frank Chacksfield & His Orchestra. In my childhood home in Chicago, we had a plug-in radio that was kept on the top of our refrigerator in our tiny kitchen. My mother would leave it turned on, softly, for most of the day. Whenever I was indoors, and heard the music of this particular song, I would run and stand on a kitchen chair and lean my ear close to the radio so that I could hear the strains of the music’s mixture of ocean waves, seagulls, harp, strings, and haunting oboe. It filled me with such longing and melancholy!

Next, I remember getting my own 2-transistor portable 'pocket' radio. It was miraculous! I felt like a junior Marconi. I used to sneak it into bed and listen to it under my blankets, using its single earphone. My favorite station was WLS, which had a powerful signal out of Chicago. (Later, as a teenager, I would prefer another Chicago station, WCFL.) Under certain weather conditions, late at night, my little Japanese marvel could even pick up music and news from faraway Detroit or St. Louis.

The heyday of my popular radio usage was during the summers in the early to mid-1960’s, at Rainbow Beach off Lake Michigan, about a six-block bicycle ride or walk from my house. There, the latest hits would blare out of multiple portable radios on the hot sands where sunbathers and swimmers lay on their beach blankets. Two songs take me right back to those carefree, innocent days of Popsicles and Coppertone: Hey Baby, by Bruce Channel, and We’ll Sing in the Sunshine, by Gale Garnett.

The incomparable Beatles had the most broad-reaching effect on my early musical life. Such an amazingly talented quartet! The first group from England in the so-called British Invasion (later to be joined by the Rolling Stones, the Dave Clark 5, Herman’s Hermits, the Animals, the Kinks, the Yardbirds, and others), the Beatles premiered on the Ed Sullivan Show on February 9, 1964. Seventy-three million American viewers (over 40% of every man, woman, and child in the country) tuned in, along with me and my family. Their youthful performing energy, vocal harmony, and 'mop-top' hairdos electrified the nation. They went on to appear three more times on that popular variety show, as ‘Beatlemania’ swept across the land, and later, all around the globe. But some of the older generation were unimpressed by the 'Fab Four.' I still recall my father’s comments after the Beatles did their rousing song, She Loves You: “Yeah, yeah, yeah? Those aren’t real lyrics!” he groused, shaking his head in dismissal.

Here is a list of some of my favorite Beatles songs, the majority from their finer early days: I’m Happy Just to Dance; I Feel Fine; Do You Want to Know a Secret?; If I Needed Someone; It’s Only Love; The Night Before; I’ll Be Back; I’ll Get You; and You Never Give Me Your Money.

The first vinyl 45 rpm record I ever bought was That Sunday, That Summer by Nat King Cole. (He had a pure voice like honey, especially when he sang The Very Thought of You.) I still recall hearing this song for the first time. It was on a sunny Sunday, which was warming nicely in late spring after a typically dreadful, cold and gloomy Chicago winter. There was an afternoon movie on the television (I forget which specific one), on a program called Picture for a Sunday Afternoon. The screen logo was a black etching of a classic ‘gingerbread’ Victorian mansion from the turn-of-the-century, with a beautiful woman holding a sun parasol, standing in front of it. The background was entirely bathed in a creamy pink color. The image and the rendition of the song simultaneously filled me with sublime happiness and even a kind of nostalgia for some unknown reason! So I went out and bought the record, and played it over and over. Even today, hearing that song still brings back that unique thrill.

The first vinyl LP record album I purchased was the Days of Future Passed by the Moody Blues. How I love the sunrise to night-themed fusion of the London Symphony Orchestra with the dreamy, emotional, contemporary songs of the Moody Blues! Their second album, In Search of the Lost Chord, had transcendental cover art. (Santana later had my two favorite album art covers -- Caravanserai, and Borboletta.)

In high school, I absorbed the timeless poetry in the songs of that special musical duo, Simon and Garfunkel. Every day, upon returning home from classes, I played their Bookends album on my compact room record player. The songs Fakin’ It and Punky’s Dilemma were my staples.

Television, seeing the popularity of the new young sounds (and knowing there was money to be made on related advertisements), offered up two contemporary programs on rival networks: Hullaballoo (NBC) and Shindig (ABC). Previously mentioned Ed Sullivan (CBS) also offered the latest music sensations, as did the original youth music show, American Bandstand, hosted by Dick Clark (ABC). These programs were wonderful, because you could see your favorite groups perform their newest songs every week – even if some of the singing was ‘lip-synched,’ or the band instruments pre-recorded, then played back.

Meanwhile, singers from the older generations were still rather popular, some even with their own TV shows or specials: Andy Williams, Johnny Mathis, the previously mentioned Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Tony Bennett, Bobby Vinton, Robert Goulet, Dinah Shore, Connie Francis, Brenda Lee, Julie Andrews, and others. As I get older, I am re-appreciating these musical giants.

Although I was never a fanatical fan of The King – Elvis Presley -- I have visited his home at Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee twice, and I do admire his versions of Don’t Cry Daddy, Kentucky Rain, Suspicious Minds, I'll Remember You, Crying in the Chapel, Don’t, and his triumphant An American Trilogy. His TV concert specials showcased (and preserved for the ages) his performing charisma when he was in his vigorous prime.

Here is a good place to list my twenty-five favorite songs of all time, in random order (with the exception of my #1, which must top the roster): A Summer Song – Chad & Jeremy; Wouldn’t It Be Nice – Beach Boys; Venus – Frankie Avalon; Suspicion – Terry Stafford; My Cherie Amour – Stevie Wonder; Go to Pieces – Peter & Gordon; Sealed With a Kiss – Brian Hyland; Beautiful – Gordon Lightfoot; Everyone’s Gone to the Moon – Jonathan King; By the Time I Get to Phoenix – Glen Campbell; California Dreaming – The Mamas & the Papas; Year of the Cat – Al Stewart; I Only Have Eyes For You – The Flamingos; Dawn – Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons; Don’t Let the Sun Catch You Crying – Jerry and the Pacemakers; Like to Get to Know You – Spanky & Our Gang; Pretty World – Sergio Mendes & Brazil ’66; Don’t You Care – The Buckinghams; You Make Me Feel Brand New – The Stylistics; Hot Fun in the Summertime – Sly & the Family Stone; You Were On My Mind – We Five; It Hurts to Be in Love – Gene Pitney; All of My Life – Lesley Gore; Color My World – Petula Clark; and You’re My Soul and My Inspiration – The Righteous Brothers. I have heard each of these songs hundreds of times, yet I never tire of them! They are the core music sounds of my life.

Favorite ‘soft’ popular artists or groups of mine would include: The Everly Brothers, America, James Taylor, The Classics IV, Bread, The Association, Dionne Warwick, and The Carpenters.

Motown had, and still has, a powerful attraction for me. Classic acts I especially liked: The Temptations; The Four Tops; Diana Ross & the Supremes; Martha & the Vandellas; The Jackson Five; Gladys Knight & the Pips; Marvin Gaye; Smokey Robinson; Stevie Wonder; Aretha Franklin; Al Green, and more. Two other songs from this era that I never tire of are: Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie by Jay & the Techniques, and Cowboys to Girls by The Intruders. The Fifth Dimension also gets very high marks from me.

There is nothing to equal the thrill of seeing a favorite singer or group live and in person. Here are some artists I remember in concert: The Moody Blues; Bob Dylan; Santana, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; Petula Clark; Chubby Checker; The Turtles; Frankie Valli (of the Four Seasons); Bill Medley (of the Righteous Brothers); Gary Puckett (of the Union Gap); Gary Lewis & the Playboys; Gloria Estefan; Paul Revere & the Raiders; Dave Brubeck; and The Chi-Lites. I also once saw the Dave Clark 5 when they were on their American Tour bus and were lost, trying to find Chicago’s Avalon Theater where they were to perform. I was on my bicycle, waiting at a stop light. The five popped their heads out of the bus windows and asked me where they should go, so naturally I gave them directions. They cheerfully thanked me afterwards in their melodious British accents!

1967 brought America the so-called Summer of Love in San Francisco, with hippies and flower power and drugs, and this continued into 1969 with the Woodstock Music Festival in upstate New York. Social protest songs and psychedelic rock also became popular at this time, but seeing as I was only minimally interested in politics, and never involved with the drug scene, those musical genres had little lasting appeal for me.

Disco music was huge in the 1970’s, and the biggest stars were probably -- due to the success of the movie Saturday Night Fever -- the Bee Gees, three amazingly talented brothers from Australia. The repetitive, hypnotic beat and long-play of many disco hits was intoxicating! Although I was never a good dancer, disco music at least made it possible for me to passably move around (!) Tavares and Chic were two other disco groups I liked. Soul Train was on TV at this time as well, featuring mostly popular black music acts, along with disco dancing. Music always transcended any racial barriers for me. In fact, it's the closest thing to a universal language that I can think of.

My favorite classical music is anything by Mozart, but my favorite contemporary composer was Aaron Copland. His Appalachian Spring, Billy the Kid, Grover's Corners, and the Red Pony are pure genius. He evokes for me the grandeur, the essential longing, and even the loneliness at times, of the American spirit.

Who doesn’t enjoy a good choir? The human voice, multiplied by dozens or even more in perfect harmony, can up lift up our hearts and thrill our emotions. Nobody does it better, in my opinion, than The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, out of Salt Lake City, Utah. They are world-renowned, and deservedly so. I still look forward every Sunday to hearing their thirty-minute Music and the Spoken Word radio broadcast, and every Christmas season, they air an hour-long holiday program on PBS television. Absolutely the best! I enjoy singing, and have been told I have a pleasant singing voice, but I have never sung in a choir. I wish I had done so years ago. I also wish that I had learned to play a musical instrument, but that was not a financial option in my family when I was younger. I did take a required music education class in college, however, and learned how to very basically read music, and play simple tunes on the piano and recorder. Still, learning to play the drums or a trumpet would have been fun!

Movies often have inspiring soundtracks to add to the total viewing experience. My favorite film composers are: John Barry (Somewhere in Time); Ennio Morricone (Once Upon a Time in the West); Bernard Hermann (Vertigo); Miklos Rozsa (Ben-Hur); Jerry Goldsmith (Papillon); and Alfred Newman (The Robe).

Have you ever heard of the Mystic Moods Orchestra? They did fine instrumental music blended with the sounds of distant train whistles, crashing surf, rain storms with thunder, or other background accompaniments. Very moody, yet nicely romantic by firelight or candlelight!

I am a big fan of instrumental music. My favorite group is Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. Their Lollipops and Roses (which I consider my theme song, for its peppy and upbeat rhythm), The Lonely Bull, and Flamingo are all wonderful. My favorite Christmas instrumental is Sleigh Ride by Leroy Anderson, often performed by the Boston Pops. Other favorite instrumentals are: Our Winter Love – Bill Pursell; Canadian Sunset – Hugo Winterhalter; More – Kai Winding; The Hustle – Van McCoy; Windy – Wes Montgomery; Summer Samba – Walter Wanderley; Out of Limits – The Marketts; Cast Your Fate to the Wind – Vince Guaraldi Trio; Hang ‘Em High – Booker T. & the M.G’s; McArthur Park – Percy Faith; Love Theme from Flight of the Phoenix – The Brass Ring; Airport Love Theme – Vincent Bell; Theme from a Summer Place – Percy Faith; Theme from Route 66 – Nelson Riddle & His Orchestra; A Walk in the Black Forest – Horst Jankowski; and Moonglow/ Theme from Picnic – Morris Stoloff.

As for more recent music, I’m afraid I don’t care much for it. For me, music needs to mostly be dreamy and romantic, and I find those essential qualities sadly lacking in modern rap and hip-hop. The last songs (from decades ago now) I admired were: I’m Not in Love – 10cc; Who Can It Be Now? – Men at Work; Everybody Wants to Rule the World – Tears for Fears; Her Town Too -- James Taylor; Give and Take -- Santana; Kiss of Life - Sade; Gypsy, and Sara -- Fleetwood Mac; Take on Me – a-Ha; and Everything She Wants – Wham! As for Country music, it is alright, but I find it rather unimaginative and repetitious. Yet Hank Williams surely had a gift.

Over the years, we have seen an evolution of recorded music from 45s and LPs, to 8-track tapes, to audio cassettes, to CDs, and now to digital downloads and live streaming. Still, the beat goes on!

Looking back, I have come to believe that the music that has the most lasting impact on our lives comes from our teenage and early adult days. For me, it is those tender summer love songs of the 1960's that are forever etched in my soul. Like a time machine, they have preserved in my heart the dreamy and romantic memories of first love -- cruising with your special sweetheart while listening to the car radio. Ahh! Just close your eyes and listen to Wonderful Summer by Robin Ward, and you'll see what I mean...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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