

The Songs of My Youth

This essay accompanied a CD with downloaded songs, as indicated by the numbers. Alas, I discovered that I could only do this seven times, and then copyright stepped in.

I grew up with music, because my mother, a good soprano and pianist, seemed to sing all the time. She would sing or hum while she did the housework and, from time to time, sit down at the piano and accompany herself. All this seemed quite natural to me. My father claimed to have no voice, but had his favourites among Mum's songs (mostly the simpler ones), and would occasionally burst out into a rendition of one himself; he would be embarrassed if anyone noticed. Her repertoire was wide: Hebridean laments, Schubert Lieder, English and French art songs, folk songs from everywhere, Gilbert and Sullivan, musical comedies, hymns — anything at all that appealed to her. She had a role in organising a concert held at the end of the war in the Albert Hall in Canberra, where we then lived, a concert entitled 'Songs from Many Lands', and she wrote out the music for some of the songs sung on that occasion. I will hear a song on radio today, and recognise it instantly as one I first heard my mother sing.

I was blessed (and to a degree cursed) with a quick retentive memory for melody and harmony, so I can play her songs more or less as she sang them. And as I grew up I found that my head was always 'in melody': unless I was studying or writing there would be a tune there. That has remained true through my life, and I have been struck with the variety of tunes that live in my head, and pop out without prompting. Often the clue will be verbal, as when a friend will say that he went to Spain and enjoyed Granada. Instantly I will hear someone singing the song of that name. If I hear a well-remembered piece of music on the radio, some aspect of it will stick in my head for the day and I will find myself humming it, whistling it or singing it — to the point where my wife will ask me to find another tune. I will hear a piece of Bach, and will tap my feet on and off for hours thereafter to the powerful beat that I hear in it — and hum, or whistle, or sing to accompany the tap. It can be boring for others, but Bev, at least, is generally forbearing.

Apart from my mother's songs, the earliest pieces of music I heard would have come from the radio, and from the movies. I saw 'Annie get Your Gun' when it appeared in 1947, and absorbed all its songs, the best remembered being Annie's 'You Caint Get a Man with a Gun' [1], sung on that occasion by Betty Hutton. Somewhere around that time came George Formby's ukelele and his highly suggestive (but not very informative to a 10 year old) 'When I'm Cleaning Windows' [2]. Another was 'Open the Door, Richard' [3], which I haven't thought about or hummed for many years, but which came instantly to my head when I saw that it had been a hit song of 1947. Radio 2CA in Canberra ran a serial on Sunday afternoons which I listened to (I think it was 'The Scarlet Pimpernel', though the NFSA does not mention it in its collection). It had some galloping music that I found irresistible, and asked Mum what it was. She asked around and came back with the suggestion that it was from a symphony by someone called Dvorak. It was indeed: the galloping music comes early in the 4th movement of the New World symphony. I also listened to 'Dick Barton, Special Agent' and it had a most distinctive and dramatic theme at the beginning. That too became fixed in my head — and not only

in mine: the Goons used it for dramatic effect in their series, and in the script the FX simply refers to 'Dick Barton theme'. The theme itself is 'Devil's Gallop' by Charles Williams, and you can hear it by Googling 'Dick Barton theme music'. A later Australian serial, 'Dossier on Dumetrius', began with a most effective little theme, only two bars long. When I bring it out I can hear Major Gregory Keen, Coutts his batman/assistant, the delicious and doomed Hedy Bergner, Jotti Blum and the rest of the crooks, especially the suave and deadly Dumetrius himself. Great stuff, and that little theme was perfect. You can hear it, and the first three episodes free, through the courtesy of Google.

Having learned that you could find out about music on the radio I pursued that to discover a listeners'-request program, and wrote in to hear my favourite of the time, 'The William Tell Overture', not by the London Symphony Orchestra but by a Midwest hillbilly outfit called Spike Jones and his City Slickers [4]. I was astonished that a simple letter from a ten year old could possess such power, and wrote in again at once. Nothing happened, and my mother pointed out in a kindly way that there would be others like me waiting their turn. OK, I thought, and wrote on behalf of my two brothers, my father and my mother, each apparently requesting another of my favourites. Since I was the only person in the family who listened to this program I felt fairly safe, but had forgotten that Canberra did have other people living in it. My mother was not deeply impressed to learn from amused friends that she had apparently requested another Midwest hillbilly song called, wait for it, 'I can't get offa my horse, because some dirty dog put glue on the saddle', a memorable ditty composed and sung by the Korn Kobblers, a recording of which I have not yet been able to obtain. The Kobblers also brought out a great lament called 'Horses don't bet on people, and that's why they never go broke', another favourite of mine from that time, and a third that lives on in my head called 'The Whistler and his Dog'. The text of the first song deserves at least some reading, in order to understand my mother's pain at the thought that she would have asked for such stuff to be played for her:

Oh, I can't get offa my horse
 All day and night I ride among the cattle.
 I can't get offa my horse
 'Cause some dirty dog put glue on the saddle.

On the saddle! On the saddle!
 Some no good ornery, low down, sneakin', thievin'
 Cussin', cattle rustlin', dirty dog
 Put glue on the saddle

I don't recall listening to a Hit Parade in any regular way, and am not sure if there was one on 2CA. But popular songs were out and about, and I think the first that stuck itself in my head was Vaughn Monroe's 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' [5]. That was 1949, and I was 12 and in my first year at Canberra High. 'Ghost Riders' was to be popular for several years after that, but I know I heard it in that year because Ted Richards, one of my good friends, had composed a rude version of it. Given our age, the rudeness was

fundamental, not sexual. Ted had earlier developed another version of Newbolt's 'Drake's Drum', which we had learned and sung in primary school. I can still remember some of it:

Drake is in his bath-tub
A-blowing soap and froth.
'Captain, did you wash behind your ears...'

That tune (a good one, too) is firmly in the mind.

In 1950 we moved to Armidale, NSW, which possessed a powerful local commercial station in 2AD and a weak ABC one broadcast from Tamworth, 110 km away. The 2AD hit parade began to be compulsory listening, because my peer-group culture focussed on what was new and tuneful, and Armidale did possess at least one jukebox. Given that we were in the bush, a country and western focus was understandable, and one of the first songs I remember from then was Hank Williams' lachrymose 'Wedding Bells Will Never Ring For Me' [6]. From the same year came Teresa Brewer's 'Music, Music, Music', whose text is of course built around the jukebox experience. A third was Al Jolson's last hit, 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?', which Elvis Presley made millions out of. I think Al Jolson's is better, because of that deep voice. In Armidale I discovered The Weavers, a folk group that included Pete Seeger and possessed a woman singer, Ronnie Gilbert, with a magically dark and powerful voice. 'Goodnight Irene' [7] came from 1950 but there were lots and lots of others, all of them in my head. A well-remembered song, not from the Weavers but from a similar group called Sons of the Pioneers, was 'Cool Water' ('All day I face the barren waste without a taste of water, cool water, water ...'). From that time also came 'Put Your Shoes on, Lucy', the most popular version of which was by Petula Clark, and 'Mule Train' by Frankie Laine [8], whose energy grabbed me.

The Weavers, in my mind, were very much better, in what they presented and how they presented it, than most of what came to air in the early 1950s. That time is the time of Guy Mitchell, Doris Day, Mario Lanza, Tony Bennett, Perry Como, Al Martino, Rosemary Clooney, Jo Stafford, the Andrews Sisters, The Ames Brothers, and Percy Faith and Mantovani and their Orchestras. Most of it is easy to listen to, and unmemorable, though I got to know some backwards, like an Andrews Sisters song, 'One Meat Ball' [9], because there was a recording of it in the house that we moved into in Armidale — and because it spoke of the Depression, about which I had heard dark family tales. If I scan the hit charts of the early 1950s I only have to look at the titles to be able to sing them through, or play them, but the melodies don't haunt my mind. I did like the sound and style of Nat King Cole, and his 'Too Young' [10] was a signature tune for my age group as we began to 'go with' one another in high school — our preparation for later adolescent serious 'relationships'. I discovered that Nat King Cole was an excellent jazz pianist, and my memory is that he thought he was much better as a pianist than as a singer, but he made buckets of money through his pop songs.

But the easy sound of most of the hits had one important consequence. I can remember sitting at the piano some time in 1952 and picking out the tune of Al Martino's 'Here in

My Heart' [11], and then finding that the harmonies were just as easy. Suddenly I could play it. I had had only one year's experience of learning the piano, and though I got a credit in the exam, my teacher asked politely that I find another teacher (they were quite rare in the 1940s). So now I was playing by ear. A few of my friends heard me play, and suddenly I had a status in the group. No one I knew had a radiogram, although we were about to buy one, and no one had the money to buy records anyway. So to be able to play the current pop song in a recognisable way was a distinct social asset. I began to listen more intently to the hit parade and memorise the songs I liked best. I hadn't noticed it at the time, but most of the pop songs were between one and two and three minutes long, and they still are (Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is a great exception). I now think that this is by and large the limit of attention most of us can devote to listening to music without getting impatient. Classical music's symphonies and concertos are of course much longer, but the market for all types of classical music, world music and film music is about five per cent of the whole, and that for classical music makes up about three of the five per cent. It does require an effort, but the best composers made it relatively easy by repetition, repetition and more repetition — and of course that is true of pop music too (think of 'Tea for Two').

The remainder of my high school years passed with an increasing attention to the Hit Parade, and by the time I went to university I could play most of the current songs, though at dances I needed a competent drummer to keep my dance-time steady. But things in the music world were changing. It was easy enough to pick up laments like Patti Paige's 'I Went to your Wedding' [12] more or less at one hearing, but new sounds were appearing that I could not duplicate at all. At much the same time as Patti Paige was making her run to the top came a clever duo called Les Paul and Mary Ford, who later combined, on a tape recorder, tracks made individually on something called an electric guitar, plus Mary's multi-part singing, so that they sounded like a big group. Their 'How High the Moon' [13] came out in 1951, and it intrigued me every time I heard it. The singing was familiar close four-part harmony, but the sound of the guitar accompaniment was rivetting. I had no idea what an electric guitar was, and might not even have seen an acoustic one. Yes, I could play the tune, but I could not produce those sounds on a piano.

In 1955 appeared the film 'Blackboard Jungle', starring Glenn Ford as the teacher and a young Sidney Poitier as the rebellious student; it attracted great crowds. Its soundtrack included a new sound and a new song — 'Rock Around the Clock' by Bill Haley and his Comets. Most of us had never heard anything like it, but we were to hear much more of that sound in the years to come. The next year someone called Elvis Presley combined the electric guitar with a strong voice, some great accompaniments and, apparently, hip-twitching and pelvis-thrusting. Doris Day this wasn't. Three of his early songs were simultaneously at the top of some hit parades. I loved them all, but, again, I couldn't make those sounds on the piano. 'Heartbreak Hotel' [14], 'Hound Dog' [15] and 'Don't be Cruel' seem to me as good as anything he later did. The next year came Buddy Holly, at first as the Crickets, and then as Buddy Holly and the Crickets, then Buddy Holly *tout court*: 'That'll be the Day', 'It's So Easy to Fall in Love' [16] and especially 'Peggy Sue' [17]. This was memorable, raw, dramatic stuff, and it stuck at once in my head. If you compare 'Peggy Sue' with Pat Boone's 'Love Letters in the Sand' [18], released in the

same year, you'll know what I mean. Another from that year which pops up regularly without warning in my head is The Diamonds' 'Little Darlin' [19]. It is probably the deep-voiced spoken central verse that took my fancy.

By now I was the musical director of university revues, writing pop songs myself, training four fellow students to sing four-part harmony, and even writing a song for them (the best one I ever wrote). The lead singer and I travelled to Capital Records in Sydney and recorded several of my songs at my expense (the librettist became a professor of geology and the lead singer a senior naval officer, though no causal connection is implied). In 1958 I formed a jazz trio, and we played Saturday nights at Tattersall's Hotel, the lead hotel in town, while I played the piano in several other pubs to support my lifestyle, which now revolved around buying long-playing classical records (all that is another story). Pub patrons wanted the familiar, things like 'Roll out the Barrel', 'Goodnight, Ladies' and the like. But some would want songs from musical comedies like 'South Pacific', 'Oklahoma' and 'My Fair Lady'. Each was a huge success on film, and the songs were everywhere. These were the last days in which we basically created our own entertainment. Television took a while to reach Armidale, and I had plenty of work. Some of my university friends formed a skiffle group that also played the pubs and social events. They had plenty of work too, and their 'Careless Love', a Billy Holliday classic, is there in my head. The Tattersall's work, which went on until I left Armidale at the end of 1960, one night featured a younger and absurdly talented musician, dancer and singer called Peter Woolnough, whom we were instructed to look after and give space to. He went on to great fame later as Peter Allen. His time with the Don Aitkin Trio was, as 'This is Your Life' was to show a national television audience, his first paid gig.

I became a postgraduate student, and married in late 1958; our first child arrived in January 1960. My pub work slowed right down, and ended when we moved to Canberra in early 1961 so that I could take up a PhD scholarship at the ANU. No pub work meant that I did not need to follow the hit parades, and we had no television set until we went to England in 1964. That was the year the Beatles came into prominence, but I was not drawn to the early Beatles songs. I thought Roy Orbison's 'Oh, Pretty Woman' [20], which came out in the same year, was much better. In 1965 came the Righteous Brothers, whose 'You've Lost that Loving Feeling' [21] seemed to me an almost perfect song, in words, music and delivery. Later that year we went to the United States, where I was a post-doc at the University of Michigan. One memorable Saturday in Ann Arbor I waited in the car while my wife and elder daughter were in Kresge's, turned on the radio, and picked up the number one and number two on the Windsor, Ontario radio station hit parade. They were by a group I hadn't heard of before, the Rolling Stones. 'I Can't get no Satisfaction' [22] and 'Get off of my Cloud' [23] had the Buddy Holly feel. I wished I had learned the guitar, but time had moved on. That year provided me with the first Beatles song I really liked, 'Yesterday' [24], and introduced me to the Beach Boys, whose 'Barbara Ann' [25] stuck in my head (along with many others — what a great capacity they had for song-making). In 1966 came Simon and Garfunkel, two more great song-makers, and in the year later, The Supremes, who had another great sound. But by then I was thirty, and my youth had in some sense ended.

The early reference to Spike Jones reveals another aspect of my musical memory. I was always attracted to music that was fun, funny or connected with something funny. So I loved Danny Kaye's offerings, Spike Jones, Stan Freberg ('St George and the Dragonet' [26], but there were many others), the Goons together and individually and, rather later, P. D. Q Bach. The English comedian Max Bygraves, to round this all out, did a great spoof of the country and western genre in his 'Cowpuncher's Cantata', which brought together the music and words of some of my old favourites. One verse was just delicious:

The riders all came by him
 He heard one call his name:
 'If you're looking for the wild goose
 He's on the mule train —
 So cowboy mend your ways today
 Forget your life of sin,
 And you will be in time to see
 The shrimp boats comin' in ...'

When I got into jazz, my musical hero was Dave Brubeck, whose 'Jazz Goes to Junior College' I almost wore out. I tried hard to be a Brubeck at the keys, but soon realised that no matter how hard I tried, I would never be close to his class. Brubeck was classically trained, and had studied with Darius Milhaud. Maybe that was why I liked him. By now I was well into classical music, and discovered the keyboard music of J. S. Bach, and the jazz rendering of the same by the Jacques Loussier trio, at much the same time. Oscar Peterson was another who took the classical form very seriously in his jazz. There was no way I was going to be up there with the likes of them.

Fortunately, there were other things I could do with my life.

Don Aitkin
 15 December 2009
 rev. 6 March 2010