

The Soundtracks Of Our Lives

What fun this was to see which songs Guild members would choose as prompts to write about their own history. Could Simon and Garfunkle ever have imagined “The Sound of Silence” being used to inspire an ode to a mouthguard? (thank you, Cay Cutright). Who would have guessed our own Kevin Fidgeon harbored such disdain for Pat Boone? And what song would our Guild musician, Stuart Vining, choose?



Of course, what makes any RBWG compilation wonderful is the variety of responses—songs bringing back memories of parents, of falling in love, of people we have lost, dreams we once had. And the creativity! A number of you wove the lyrics into your pieces, while Dick Piet used lyrics from two groups to create a dialogue between two people that couldn’t be more different—a father and his teenage son.

To those who contributed, thank you. While I loved seeing each submission as it showed up in my email—often after numerous revisions (thank you, editors!)—it was in reading this document as a whole that I felt, as I so often have at our “Nights of Songs and Stories,” that it’s in the mixing, merging and juxtaposing of our individual voices where the alchemy truly happens.

Enjoy reading!

*Maribeth
RBWG Executive Director*

I Know Why the Uncaged Bird Sings

By Mary Ellen South

“The Lark,” Haydn, 1790

Sitting on the screened-in porch
Watching the drifting cotton clouds
I hear the sound of the bird
Aloft in the pink blossoms of the crepe myrtle tree.

I listen to the high pitched twirl
Try to find the blues or operatic phrase.
My son appears with his guitar
“I know that cadence; let’s write a tune.”

Suddenly the crow offers a caw of its own
Creates a harmony with an orange feathered friend.
Nature’s mixture with our stringed box
All finding valued freedom in our pent up world.

I know why the uncaged bird sings
It provides melodic sound to a still world
Bringing a rhythm to the natural place
Teaching us the value of listening.

We put words to the chords and riffs,
Write a song for our own reprieve
Not one to share or to provide fame
Just a shared melody with creatures who taught.

Canada Remembers

By Robert Fleming

“O Canada,” Calixa Lavallee, 1880

the Canadian flag is as red as the blood of the first 1608 Arcadia settlers
& white as the first bloomed fleur-de-lis flower
in fall, maple tree leaves fall orange & moose rut
in winter, snow covers the prairie rose
in spring, maple tree saps & beavers leave their lodges
in summer, July 1, 1867 Canada became a nation

Hopeful

By Renay Regardie

“Blue Skies,” Irving Berlin, 1926

Four pairs of pants, two black, one white striped, one grey, elasticized waist of course. Four baggy tops, grey, white, beige, black. My uniform since mid-March when this pandemic nonsense started.

Lancome eyeliners, blush, mascara, unused. Too bad. That gal at Neiman Marcus could use my business, if that store even stays in business.

I was blue, just as blue as I could be

Why dress up when there's no place to go?

Then [Saks] came a-knocking at my door.

So many pretty things. Designer duds. But no, why dress up when there's no place to go?

Then the deals started. \$200 to \$500 off. 20% off that dress. Those boots I like, hurry, they're almost sold out.

No, no place to go. The elastic around my waist is comforting. I grab another piece of dark chocolate.

Last chance. Shoes on sale, dress and jacket big dollars off. I bite. I can return them after all.

Cost? Over \$1,000, but I haven't bought a stitch since February.

They arrived today, the dress and jacket in a hanging bag, the shoes in a lovely box. The dress is so flowy, and the jacket, such vibrant colors. The boots, more cream than white, but wow, they feel good.

Blue days, all of them gone

Nothin' but blue skies from now on

There'll be a vaccine soon, I know it. I'll be out. 'll have places to go.

Play It Again

By Stephen Groo

“Adagio in Strings,” Samuel Barber, 1938

I remember when I heard those first low, mournful notes, can't forget it. Sitting in a darkened theater, watching a soldier step onto the tarmac in Viet Nam, helicopter rotors blowing tarps off the body bags, the hollow look on his face as he realized he was there to replace one of the fallen soldiers. It seemed so strange at the time—such melodic beauty blending with such dark imagery. Throughout the movie those low notes—bass I think, maybe cellos—ascended to higher, more penetrating mixtures of sound, rising ever upward to crescendos of powerful, sorrowful beauty. And then they'd die back down, only to slowly rise again, taking me up and down with them like swells rolling across an open sea. I went home after the movie and downloaded the music—the only piece of classical, instrumental music I have.

When I was dating my wife, holed up on a showery afternoon, I played “Adagio In Strings” for her. As she gazed out into the rain, tears began rolling down her cheeks. When it was over, eyes staring through the rain-streaked window, she whispered, “play it again.” And I did. Every so often now, years later, we'll be sitting on the deck as twilight gives way to night, and she'll say, “play my song.” And I do. Those sad, aching beautiful low notes begin again, take hold of us, and pull us into the darkness.

Nocturne on a Sunday Afternoon

By Carl Frey

“Harlem Nocturne,” Earle Hagen, 1939

Graduated from college, landed a job in The City, found a two-room Greenwich Village apartment, started a marriage that continues, took my first airplane flight—to a Bermuda honeymoon—and returned to begin a work career that lasted 41 years. It all happened in the space of four weeks. With the economy in the dumps I could not be picky about the starting salary but at that time in New York City a little money went a long way. We had grown up in the heyday of The Beatles and did not explore the radio dial beyond rock 'n' roll but in the Village we found a wide variety of live entertainment that cost next to nothing. We heard plenty of rock but also folk and ragtime and more. One day we stumbled into a corner bar where on Sunday afternoon you could listen to a seventeen-piece band for no cover and the cost of a single beer. Every Sunday we enjoyed their music—our introduction to jazz. When the sax player started his soulful solo of Earle Hagen's “Harlem Nocturne” the place

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went silent. It was like being in church. Many sax men recorded it but Illinois Jacquet did it best. I listen to it often. When it comes around on the CD player I stop whatever I'm doing and I'm transported to nursing a beer in a Village bar on a Sunday afternoon. Try it: Click [here](#) to go to a YouTube recording.

Background: "Harlem Nocturne"—written by Earle Hagen in 1939. Recorded by Illinois (Jean-Baptiste) Jacquet in 1956. Jacquet recorded from the '40s to the '80s. Hagen had much success writing TV show music themes—*Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Danny Thomas Show*, *I Spy* ...

Toora, Loora, Loora

By Walt Curran

"Toora, Loora, Loora," Bing Crosby, 1944

Toora, Loora, Loora

Toora, Loora, Li

Toora, Loora, Loora

Hush, now don't you cry.

My mother lulled me to sleep every night as a baby, and occasionally, as a young boy after a nightmare, by clutching me tight and singing "Toora, Loora, Loora." I don't remember the times as a baby, but the nightmares, and subsequent soothing, remain vivid.

We were of Irish descent, but didn't dwell on it. Neither my parents nor my grandparents talked about Ireland, ever. My interest in Ireland arose from the serenity my mother's voice provided when she whispered *Toora, Loora, Loora* in my ear.

I believe nothing in life just "happens." There's a cause and effect to everything; we just don't always see it.

James Royce Shannon, an American, wrote "Toora, Loora, Loora, That's an Irish Lullaby." Bing Crosby made it famous with his version in 1944, the year I was born.

Mom loved Bing Crosby songs. Bing's songs made my mother smile and gave her peace. She passed that peace to me when I was terrified. I passed that peace to my children, crooning to them.

The lilt of the lullaby drew me to Ireland. In Ireland, I found my roots and started writing, first poetry, then prose.

Mom's been gone some twenty-five years and I feel the same today as I did when she passed.

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And I'd give the world if she

Could sing that song

To me this day.

The Sound of Solitude

By Sarah Barnett

“Solitude,” Billie Holiday, 1952

Maybe it's my imagination but “Solitude” sung by Billie Holiday shows up more often on my Ipod shuffle than the odds dictate. It's become the theme song for my pandemic existence. *With gloom everywhere/I sit and I stare.*

The song speaks of lost love—*memories that never die*. Listening now, I think the singer's solitude calls up all of life's losses. Billie's voice *is* heartache, a slow, somber dance between performer and lyrics.

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In 1957, fresh out of high school, my friends and I rode the subway from Brooklyn to Central Park for “Jazz Under the Stars.” The crowd murmured when Billie appeared, looking frail. She would die two years later—her losses behind her, mine still ahead.

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After four months of sitting and staring, I tackle my “pandemic project.” Afternoons I sit on my screened porch and while the fan twirls above, I sort through shoeboxes filled with photos—a jumble of ocean sunsets, kids' birthday parties, long-dead pets, beach vacations, picnics and playgrounds. Toss, toss, toss, keep...

What to keep?

My son Michael hugs his cat, his face so full of love I want to cry.

Me, a young mother—white-framed sunglasses, shoulder-length dark hair—strolling the Rockaway boardwalk, hand-in-hand with my 18-month-old daughter.

Countless photos of my daughter Michele with her children. Each shows the joy she felt in their presence.

I touch the photos that touch me the most. I want to feel the cat's fur, my daughter's hand in mine.

A Lyrical Legacy

By Kathleen L. Martens

“Que Sera Sera,” Doris Day, 1956

Her beautiful bell-of-a-voice echoed from the kitchen like a Doris Day sound-alike singing lyrics I’d never heard.

Que sera sera,

Whatever will be, will be,

The future’s not ours to see,

Que sera sera.

Tugging at my mother’s apron, my-seven-year-old-self inquired about the strange words.

“It’s Italian.” She turned the flame down on the crackling Sunday bacon. “Whatever will be, will be, Kathleen.”

How could she have known those uplifting words she repeatedly sang over the years would burrow deep inside me? That message affected every challenge, every disappointment and roadblock I would meet. Mom’s song taught me acceptance—the key to surviving the emotional turmoil of cancer, divorces, miscarriages, and myriad moments of mayhem that filled my life.

At nearly ninety, in my mother’s last year, she confided, “Do you know 99% of the things I fretted about in my life never even happened.” Her lilting laugh made me realize *que sera sera* was not only her mantra of acceptance, but also her tactic to escape her persistent fears. Unbeknownst to me, she was a chronic worrier, and thanks to her, I wasn’t.

Mom’s lyrical legacy lives on from generation to generation as my daughter bravely recovers from the terrorizing, long-hauler version of COVID-19. With each wave of the mysterious symptoms, she learns to keep the faith, let go, and accept.

I still hear my mother’s melodious voice; *Que sera sera*, what will be, will be.

Click [here](#) to see Amy channeling Doris Day and singing “Que Sera Sera” with Stuart.

I Almost Lost My Mind

By Kevin Fidgeon

“I Almost Lost My Mind,” Pat Boone, 1957

Pat Boone had walked into our backyard and my mother almost lost her mind. It was 1957 and he was the third most popular singer in the United States. We were celebrating my eighth grade graduation and my mother, a frequent babysitter for Pat’s children, had invited him.

The girls from my class did lose their minds circling Pat with squeals of adoration and affection. It didn’t last long and neither did Pat’s singing career. His biggest hits were pasteurized cover versions of unaccredited Black artists. The British invasion put the final nails into his career as a crooner and he moved on to movies. “State Fair” was the biggest hit and he was admired for his refusal to kiss anyone in a film. His career followed an obvious path moving on to Christian music. It didn’t matter; all his music sounded the same, soulless and without a drumbeat.

Pat facts: He is a “birther” who supports right wing politicians. He loves basketball and tried to buy a professional team. He carries a toothbrush at all times.

Pat is now 85 years old and frequently walks into my living room digitally, warning me of an imminent economic collapse and that I need to invest in gold. In another commercial, he hawks walk-in tubs. Pat still looks good sitting in the tub. I hope he has his shorts on.

I feel as though my mother dropped a Pat Boone Albatross around my neck and it’s still there.

What Do You Want to Start With?

By Stuart Vining

Song TBA, Artist TBA, 1958

For the past 56 years, I’ve asked this at the beginning of every show I’ve played... seems I go brain-dead on stage. It’s become a joke—I may have the phrase etched on my gravestone. However, where and when the music *really* started was at my junior high sock hop in the spring of 1963.

A band (ninth graders who seemed so old to my seventh grade mind) was playing rock and roll: bass, drums, a singer, microphones, loudspeakers, an *electric* guitar! I couldn’t believe it. Real people, playing real instruments, making real music. This was nothing like the music I’d heard on TV or records, not the small, thin sound coming

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from a transistor radio. This was REAL music, LIVE music, LOUD music where the air thumped, hit you in the chest. Music played by people, created on-the-spot from thin air. It was like magic, and I was hooked.

That winter I watched the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*. The next summer I saw *A Hard Day's Night*. George Harrison played the intro to “And I Love Her.” When I got home I picked up the guitar my brother had gotten for Christmas, and by pure luck, plucked out the melody I'd heard in the movie. WHAT?! I actually *played* the guitar!

I got my own guitar in '64, my first *real* guitar in '67. I've been playing guitar ever since. It's the one thing—maybe the *only* thing—that has *always* been in my life.

Click [here](#) to listen to that intro from George Harrison (the first song Stuart played), followed by the song he heard LIVE at the sock hop more than half a century ago.

Nel blu, di pinto di blu

By *Barbara Hames*

“Volare,” Domenico Mudugno, 1958

In my memory it is dusk at the end of another warm summer day, and I am outside our large white house on the river that flows into Ipswich Bay—I can't recall my sister or others being with me, but it would have been typical of me to search out a quiet place, as even at age 11, I cherish my alone times. I am daydreaming, perhaps, when I notice a man walking across the field next to the cottage across the road, and suddenly he begins to sing, loud and clear in the gentle evening air: *Volare, oh, oh ... Cantare, ohobobo*. It was the song on everyone's radio in the summer of 1958.

That memory has stuck with me, so that even now, when I hear “Volare,” whether in its original Italian or English version, I am carried back to my summers growing up by the ocean: the cold swims, fresh tomatoes and corn, my mother's mint iced tea, fans whirring in stuffy bedrooms, games of Red Rover on the lawn with neighbor kids, the cool living room where I lay on the old couch in the afternoons and read books above my age level (did my parents know?). And I wish I could fly up, up, through the blue sky, as Domenico Mudugno so beautifully expressed, and spend just one day in that lost world again.

Unbroken

By Mary Jo Balistreri

“Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley,” The Kingston Trio, 1959

How did a murder ballad, the story of a love triangle, a woman knifed on a mountain, and a man hung for his crime, morph into something other than one of the Kingston’s Trio’s top hits?

I first heard Tom Dooley inside a crowded pub in Detroit. I was 21. The trio sprung me right out of my body. They sang the story in a soft, moderate tempo, but oh, that rhythm, the catchy tune. The audience clinked glasses, pounded on tables. One of our guys hoisted himself on a tabletop, waving a white handkerchief. I still remember how giddy I felt, a girl again with nothing to lose.

When I next heard The Trio, I was in my 60s—in the hospital. They began singing Tom Dooley and never stopped. Even after I came home. Easy listening but still...

It was then my husband gently told me: “You’ve lost your hearing. The music’s in your head.”

I’ve often wondered why this particular song returned. Was it that in losing what I most loved—music—the brain compensated with a ballad of permanent loss to match mine? Or did the brain select Tom Dooley with its upbeat cadence to keep me choosing life over and over; choosing life until I could deal with the staggering loss: I’d never again play piano or hear a symphony.

I’ll never know what the brain had in mind, but I’d like to think it was my survival. There was a whole other life out there to live.

Click [here](#) to listen to Stuart sing “Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley”

I’m Thinking of Something Blue

By Don Challenger

“So What,” Miles Davis, 1959

Trapped between my father’s scuffy copy of Johnny Cash’s *At Folsom Prison* and my stack of Beatles 45s, I was my own musical prisoner, doing 4/4 time on a pentatonic scale. One day in study hall, a hip kid—gone these many years—slid me a platter of something called Miles Davis and said, “So what.”

Not a promising opening. I said, “What?”

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He said, “So what.”

“Say what?”

He said, “Play ‘So What.’”

I looked down at the placid brown face on the album cover, eyes shuttered, lips kissing a trumpet, Sistine fingers catching stray light. I would learn the word a decade later: *Beatific*. I tucked the album under my fascinating history textbook, *The March of Civilization*, marched home, pulled “Ticket to Ride” and “I Feel Fine” off the turntable, braked the speed to 33, dropped *Kind of Blue* onto the spindle, cued up the first cut—“So What”—and discovered a new, implausible continent while sitting amid the moldy walls of my suburban basement.

More than a half-century later, *Kind of Blue* and “So What” are still as mesmerizing as then. Miles’s genius sonic calm, the young Coltrane’s sax flowering behind it, Evans and Chambers layering sly, rhythmic counterpunches in the depths: dance and meditation, body and soul, reconciled. I’ve never fallen in love to it. It marks no milestones in my life. But it speaks to the reach of human alchemy, to our capacity for magic. We have miles to go, but then, we have Miles.

The Words of the Prophets

By Nancy Walker

“The Sound of Silence,” Simon and Garfunkle, 1964

I was eleven when “The Sound of Silence” made the hit parade. I lived in a middle-class bubble in a Midwestern town. The profound lyrics intrigued me, especially the part about the words of the prophets being written on the subway walls and tenement halls. I had never seen a subway or a tenement.

Years later, I found myself searching for the prophets’ words each day as I rode Chicago’s L train to work. Some appeared in the prolific graffiti along my route, but most were written on faces of people around me. On the deeply crevassed face of the paraplegic gentleman at the top of the subway stairs, a scrap of paper in his lap: “Peez hep me.” On the anxiety-ridden face of a pregnant woman in a jacket far too light for a Chicago winter. In the furtive glances of a brown-skinned couple in raggedy sweaters, whispering in Spanish. On the melancholy face of a young man with a missing tooth who limped down the subway aisle in an army jacket. The paraplegic’s plea for help floated silently around them all.

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Silent pleas floated around my neighborhood too. I lived across from an eight-story halfway-house for the mentally ill. One day, a patient leapt from the rooftop and landed on my neighbor's car. Miraculously, both patient and auto survived. My neighbor continued driving his body-slammed vehicle. He had no choice. The song played in my head every time he drove by.

Sounds of Silence

By Cay Cutright

“The Sound of Silence,” Simon and Garfunkel, 1964

Hello Mouthguard, my old friend
I've come to sleep with you again.
Because of you, there's no more pinching,
no more T.M.J. clenching.
I no longer snore,
and there's more.
Thankful for the sounds of silence.

With my dentist, I agree
healthy habits are for me.
Wear my guard and breathe right;
that's how I make it through the night.
The words of my dentist
are written in a little book.
Take a look.
Echoing the sounds of silence.

No more grind, or click or lock
Everytime I try to talk.
Pain is starting to dissipate;
jaw tension will soon abate.
I'll be normal again.
What a win!
And bless the sounds of silence.

Help, I Need Somebody (After the Beatles)

By Shelley Kahn

“Help!” the Beatles, 1965

When we were so much younger than today—
We felt we needed friends in oh so many ways.

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Now every tiny change in quarantine routine,
Exponentially magnifies our gathering malaise.

In the “before times” we had interests and pursuits,
Swiftly shuttling our children to their many games and schools.
We spent time working for the time to rest and play.
We planned reunions with friends and family far away.
Those times to hug our “peeps” so close are sadly gone,
And we still can’t fathom where it all went badly wrong.
A mask may yet help us get to where we want to be.
Won’t someone please, please help us cope, and *get us that vaccine*.
We need more than a little hope and all your heartfelt prayers.
We once had a diverse spread of friends made everywhere.
But now we either risk our lives to brave the crowds,
Or do the safe thing sitting lonely in our house.

Please open the Zoom Door, I’m feeling down,
And I do appreciate my comrades tuning round.
Please do not mute my microphone sound,
I feel your Facebook posts that do surround—
And won’t you please, please, friend me?

Friend me, Friend me?

What A Wonderful World

By Sherri Wright

“What a Wonderful World,” Louis Armstrong, 1967

“What a Wonderful World” was the song we chose for my father’s memorial. Like him, the words are uncomplicated, straightforward, positive. *I see trees of green and red roses too*. In his 99 years my father expanded his world from a small farm with horse-drawn plows to John Deere tractors, milking machines, and big modern barns. It was in insurance, though, where he found the larger world he craved. Good with people, honing his smile and friendly handshake, he learned he could sell. He won trips. And the travel gave him a taste of *a wonderful world* out there for my mother and him to see. *The colors of the rainbow* over lush mountaintops in Maui, *skies of blue* over the Grand Canyon, *the bright blessed day* that lasted all night in the Arctic Circle. He captured every trip in grainy Kodak snapshots that he labeled in albums on the coffee table for all of us to enjoy. But when my father talked about their trips he spoke of people they met—*the faces of people going by*. People who would invite them back to Finland or to

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New Zealand or to play golf in Scotland. People who would visit their home and remain lifelong friends. *I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do?* I think of my father's smart smile, his shrugging shoulders, his quick laugh and his knack for seeing the best in everyone he met. *I think to myself* he made this a wonderful world.

Sweet Sir Galahad

By Ellen Collins

"Sweet Sir Galahad," Joan Baez, 1969

In the late 60s, my mother loved that song,
and I didn't know then
that the words were her wish, she
five years a widow, she
living alone
in that three-bedroom home,
wondering at the possibility
of a modern knight
landing at the foot of her bed.

What did I know of grief?
What did I know of love?

Last week, my daughter, five days
a widow, watched a dolphin
sleekly breach a rolling wave,
sending white foam into a blue sky,
and she said it was her husband
come to tell her
she wasn't alone after all.

I thought I knew something of grief.
I thought I knew something of love.

But seeing her salt-stung eyes
as she scanned for the next wave,
I learned about both as if for the first time,
and I saw through my own tears
that knights can shed their armor
and slip through moonlight and sun,
can rise from the running tide
to land right
where they are needed.

Memory Trail

By Beth Ewell

“Wild Horses,” The Rolling Stones, 1971

My life has a soundtrack that calls up a memory trail and stretches back to the summer of 1971 when my best friend Pam invited me on vacation with her family. We traveled 100 miles from our homes on Long Island to Lake Walton Park, “a 300-acre property in Hopewell Junction, New York,” described on the flip side of my only memento—a yellowed postcard I kept stashed in a King Edward cigar box.

I was thirteen—my first time seeing mountains, my first time camping, my first time wading in a spring-fed lake filled with schools of striped perch.

**

Pam showed me her only memento when we were thirty-something.

“Look,” she said, handing me an old photo cube.

I squinted at the tiny picture tucked beneath the plastic. “Who’s that?”

“Us,” she said.

“You’re kidding.”

We cracked up.

Two girls lingered by the lake, sitting with legs stretched out on the sand of a man-made beach. I wonder if our waist-length brown hair smelled like *Lemon up* shampoo. We turned our heads toward the camera and smiled. Which brother snapped the picture?

Perhaps we left through the tall pines, passing crackling bonfires, heading straight for our campsite, cursing our age, cursing the rules, cursing a stupid curfew, stealing one last look at the boathouse—the late-night hang-out that was hopping with teenagers as the jukebox played and Mick Jagger sang,

Wild horses couldn’t drag me away.

Wild, wild horses we’ll ride them some day.

Road Trip

By Willie Schatz

“Thunder Road,” Bruce Springsteen, 1973

*There's magic in the night, as in all those when my sister, my brother and I staked our claims in the front yard to track the stars and constellations (a long, long time ago, when you could see them) through our father's homemade telescope and argued whether Arcturus is brighter than Vega (it is), debated whether we'd rather be Orion, the regal hunter, or Cassiopeia, the proud and shiny W (a plethora of split decisions), and discussed how Ursa Minor really felt about being the runt (horrible, as would we!) A few (okay, maybe a few more than that) decades on I grow wistful for those carefree nights when *I'm thinking that maybe I ain't that young anymore*, a state of affairs in which My List of Lists, an object I had not possessed until recently, expands exponentially despite my Herculean efforts to shrink it, e.g., leave my footprints on Antarctica before it melts, hit at least one ball on a grass tennis court (Wimbledon, ideally, but your back lawn will work), and see the Aurora Borealis. Yes, *I know it's late*, and this !*&\$#@ pandemic makes it later. But, I also know *we can make it if we run*.*

So Molly climb in

It's a town full of losers

I'm pulling out of here to win.

Good Time Charlie's Got the Blues

By Paul Dyer

“Good Time Charlie's Got the Blues,” Danny O'Keefe, 1973

Everybody's gone away

This time I believe they've gone to stay

Nearly fifty years of friendship. We got so close. September 1970. Freshman year. A college dorm called the Zoo. A roommate. A friend for life.

Fifty years of beaches, European vacations, ski trips, countless bars, three marriages between us, children, mostly living life along the edge of sheer enjoyment. So many good times that nights drinking on the top deck now should be spent reliving those memories.

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But my old friend slipped away sometime over the last few months. Here but not here. As if he checked out of life without notifying anyone. Sitting with him feels like looking at a boarded-up building with a vacancy sign.

Some caught a freight, some caught a plane

Find the sunshine, ease the rain

Should I have seen it coming? Were there warning signs? Should I have been a better friend? Mostly I want someone...something...to blame—a pandemic, a president, society at large, anything.

There's not a soul I know around

Everybody's leavin town

But I fear the answer may lie much closer—in that reflection in my own mirror—the price of fifty years of good times—the toll of the accumulated years. I hear the drumbeat not far in the distance. How long before I am my friend?

***The best version of this song is on the album *Breezy Stories* from 1973**

Linda Sue, the Eagles and the Turkey

By Irene Fick

“Take it to the Limit,” the Eagles, 1975

Florida, 1976: Linda Sue and I, reporters at the local paper, were on our own for Thanksgiving—far from families in Alabama and Illinois. We opted to celebrate in style at one of Tampa’s priciest restaurants.

In my red Gremlin, we careened over the causeway, dolled up and decked out in platform shoes and new polyester pantsuits accented with silver glitter. Linda Sue’s platinum bob and my sable-brown perm blew wild as we flicked ashes from Virginia Slims out the window. We were tanned, svelte and full of ourselves.

We pushed the cassette player and sang along to our favorite song—“Take It To The Limit” by the Eagles. *So put me on a highway and show me a sign...*

Unfortunately, we never thought to make dinner reservations. Each jam-packed ritzy restaurant turned us away.

Much later, egos deflated yet ravenous, we drove into Denny’s parking lot. The place was brightly lit, filled with ordinary folks. Not a speck of glitter in sight.

We couldn’t face the humiliation: Thanksgiving dinner at Denny’s. As we approached our booth, Linda Sue grabbed my arm, whispered, “If you order turkey, I’ll kill you.”

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We settled for pie. The humble kind.

The following year, Linda Sue moved in with her new fiancé. I returned to Illinois after Mom's lung cancer diagnosis. Our soundtrack changed. We never did *take it to the limit*. But 44 years later, we laugh about the turkey that never touched our lips.

Vienna Waits

By Elise Seyfried

“Vienna,” Billy Joel, 1977

Billy Joel's *The Stranger* was the cassette tape playing when her Datsun hit that electrical pole at 3 a.m. in Atlanta, almost 40 years ago. My sister Mo loved that album so. The song “Vienna” was her favorite:

*You're gonna kick off before you even
Get halfway through
When will you realize, Vienna waits for you*

But see the thing is, Maureen never got to Vienna. She died that night, and with her died her dreams, all of them: Travel to exotic places. A houseful of children. Meaningful work. A husband who would make her laugh. At age 23, she did indeed kick off well before she got halfway through.

I think I have lived my life with Mo in the back of my mind, checking the boxes: sweet and funny husband. Work that matters. Five incredible children. And, finally, in my 60s, travel. These had been my goals as well. But they were all the more poignant when I thought of Maureen lying on her bed in our shared bedroom, scribbling her life list in her generous, loopy handwriting, flipping her long red hair when it got in her eyes.

Steve and I were bound for Vienna, finally, in April, before COVID-19 scrambled everything. Rescheduled for September, now postponed once more. I have no idea when we will get there, but I have faith that we will. We will walk those magical streets, with my beautiful ghost sister beside us.

Vienna, wait for us. Please.

You Light Up My Life

By Rita B. Nelson

“You Light Up My Life,” Debby Boone, 1977

Not my best year. 1977. Beaten, desperate, wanting to escape the terrors of my life. *So many nights I'd sit by my window, waiting for someone to sing me his song.* I was in the process of leaving my husband of nearly twenty years. I had recently obtained a position at a Fortune 500 company, was making good money, and had the guts to end my nightmare.

And then he walked into my life. In a bar. It was at our CB Radio group's monthly gathering. He was tall, handsome, with sapphire blue eyes that sparkled love when he looked at me. His CB handle was “High Tension,” and mine was “Free Spirit.” We talked for hours. *Rollin' at sea, adrift on the water, could it be finally I'm turnin' for home?*

“You Light Up My Life” was at the top of the charts, and it described our lives perfectly. *You give me hope to carry on. You light up my days and fill my nights with song.* It gave us hope to get out of our miserable, unhappy married existence. We knew the lyrics by heart. We danced along, sang along with Debby Boone, and cried. The song sustained us through two crushing and challenging divorces.

Even today, forty years later, when we hear it on the golden-oldies, we stop whatever we are doing, move into each other's arms, sing along, cry, and kiss. *It can't be wrong, when it feels so right. Cause, you...you light up my life.*

Heads vs Deadheads

By Richard Piet

“Truckin’,” Grateful Dead, 1977, and

“Burning Down the House,” Talking Heads, 1983

A battle of the cassettes, my Grateful Dead against my son's Talking Heads while driving home after a week with me at Disney World, his eighth-grade graduation gift. Non-stop, Orlando back to Baltimore, *and nothing is better than this* (Heads).

Divorced, and she's got custody of this one. Our daughter is mine. *Sometimes the light's all shinin' on me. Other times, I can barely see* (Dead).

But high school? Fathers and sons?

I tell him, *“I see trouble ahead, trouble behind”* (Dead).

“Ha, ha, ha, no need to worry. Everything's under control” (Heads).

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I frown. *“Trouble with you is the trouble with me, you got two good eyes but you still don’t see”* (Dead).

He smiles. *“I think it’s right, better than this”* (Heads).

I’m not sure about that. He loves his mom, but I need to *Hold tight. We’re in for nasty weather*, so I say, “I don’t want you raising hell, acting out, like some teens. To me that’s as bad as *Burning down the house*. Any of that and I’ll say, *“Here’s your ticket pack your bag”* (Heads).

He shrugs. *“Don’t wanna hurt nobody”* (Heads)

I smile. Spot on, *“else you’ll be out of the door and down to the street all alone”* (Dead).

*

The other night I watched the Talking Heads iconic 1984 concert film, *Stop Making Sense*, a victory lap for my son. I needn’t have worried about him, but lately, it occurs to me *what a long, strange trip it’s been* (Dead).

Our Song

By Loretta Zsido

“You Decorated My Life,” Kenny Rogers, 1977

Our wedding date was set. All the arrangements were divided among friends and family, mostly friends. Both of our families are not bad as far as families go, but they made themselves scarce when it came to preparations. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, couples like us reserved the local fire houses for an economical way of having the perfect wedding reception. The top floor had lots of room for tables and a great space for dancing. And the food. Well there’s nothing like family-style meals for a large crowd—pass the mashed potatoes, please! Most of the reception costs were for the DJ—or a live group if you were lucky. We had a live group called “The Shadow of El.” I swear it was like the King himself accepted our invitation.

The song we chose as our wedding song was “You Decorated My Life,” by Kenny Rogers. He sings about colors, music and dreams, and this tells the story of how we walked effortlessly into each other’s lives like a gentle surprise. Whenever we hear about couples wanting to make it work, we glance at each other, shrug our shoulders and wonder—what work?

Our song was playing on the radio today, and I can still see you walking across that dance floor in your powder-blue suit, extending your hand and pulling me toward

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you. We gazed into each other's eyes, and, in that moment, on that day, I don't remember seeing anyone else in the room.

Dad

By Phil Fretz

"Leader of the Band," Dan Fogelberg, 1981

I was asked to read a eulogy at my dad's funeral service. The song that immediately came to mind was Fogelberg's "Leader of the Band." Although the song was released in 1981, seventeen years prior, I had always associated its lyrics with my father, not a musician, but a leader in his church his entire adult life. He taught Sunday School classes from the time he was in his twenties until a few years before he passed at age ninety-five. He was often called upon to be the Master of Ceremonies at service club functions. He had a way to engage the crowd whether it was the local Rotary Club or a father-son banquet. I was awed watching his performance, but that respect and admiration enabled me to speak at his funeral. I altered some of the phraseology from Fogelberg's lyrics, but retained the nature of the song.

In high school and college, my dad and I parted ways over religion, alcohol, sex, and politics. Perhaps that was not atypical for teens in the 1960s, but when I became a father, those differences became so unimportant that I was embarrassed at my earlier behavior. The one phrase of Fogelberg's that stood out for me then was *Thank you for the freedom when it came my time to go*. My dad was able to grant me that freedom, and for that I could echo the words, *Papa, I don't think I said I love you near enough*.

Drive

By Victor Letonoff

"Drive," The Cars, 1984

Summer, 1984. I was 24, dreamed of being a sculptor, and was apprenticing in the blacksmithing department at the Appalachian Center for the Crafts at Tennessee Tech University, a beautiful campus on a mountain top.

After assisting with day classes, another apprentice and I often worked in the "smithy" at night. Picture it: against a concrete wall were six forges powered by soft coal—a dirty burning fuel that, once the debris (a thick, smelly yellow smoke) has burned off, turns into "coke," a clean fuel for working steel. Four power hammers—hydraulic tools controlled by a foot pedal—beat hot steel into shapes. The process was powerful and frightening. We were making "Damascus Steel," three steels

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welded together and used to make exotic knife blades. The smithy was loud, smelled of coal, and sparks shot throughout the room as we forged that Damascus steel into billets. This was a violent process. We loved it.

On the other side of that wall was a glass studio. The glass blowers moved like ballet dancers. They slid gracefully across their floor as classical music played. We couldn't have been more different.

But on a deck extending from both studios, the glass blowers and the blacksmiths often stood together, smoking and drinking beer, watching the separate pageants. "Drive" by The Cars had come out that summer and always reminds me of that time: *Who's gonna pay attention to your dreams?* We, young people, standing on the back deck, paid attention to each other's.

Going to Graceland

By Judy Catterton

"Graceland" Paul Simon, 1986

My husband and I were on one of our post-retirement road trips. I love these trips where, released from an itinerary and time constraints, we make spontaneous decisions about where to go and what to see.

One day in the Mississippi Delta (Paul Simon's "cradle of the Civil War") we were "going to Graceland"—not one of my top 100 things to see before I die. I wasn't even particularly fond of Elvis. Despite his fame, I'd only first heard of him in 1956 from a girl in my sixth grade class who talked about him incessantly. I think the real reason she was infatuated with him was because her parents thought him lewd. Today, it's almost quaint to think Elvis' gyrating hips were controversial.

So, why Graceland? We expected Graceland to be kitschy and we loved kitschy. Why else would we have stopped at the Corn Palace in South Dakota and the sock capital of the world in Alabama? Also, to be honest, we figured Elvis fans making this pilgrimage would be cause for amusement. We expected they'd be what one Memphis journalist described: "hicks, freaks, and just a bunch of broads in poodle skirts."

Graceland was not what we expected: our fellow pilgrims weren't freakish or peculiar; the estate was not at all kitschy and we left there "all shook up" about Elvis. He was a generous and creative soul, well deserving of his moniker—"King of Rock and Roll."

Carrickfergus

By Maribeth Fischer

“Carrickfergus,” Van Morrison and the Chieftains, 1987

I hadn’t thought of “Carrickfergus” in 26 years—until now. Suddenly, I was 29 again, driving from the home in Baltimore my second husband had recently left, to the summer camp for gifted teenagers where I taught writing. Over and over, for 100 miles, I listened to that song: Every Sunday driving to camp; every Friday, coming home.

My heart was broken that summer, my life a mess of my own making—I’d pushed my husband away, and I didn’t know how to grieve or cry because I’d *wanted* this—to not be married, to not be living the life I had, to not be *me*. My second divorce, and I was scared I’d keep doing this—messing up, hurting people I loved, hurting myself. Wanting things I couldn’t even name.

*But the sea is wide and I cannot swim over
And neither have I the wings to fly*

I felt such guilt and loss when I thought of my professor husband, living in an old woman’s sublet—pastel walls; a frilly bedspread—so I could have “my space,” but I refused my own sorrow. I ran ten miles a day, lived on salad and yogurt, poured myself into work. *You deserve what you get*, I told myself.

Except in the car for those four hours each week listening to “Carrickfergus.” That beautiful broken lament about a man who has also messed up was both consolation and reminder: I would be okay. I wasn’t alone.

Everybody Hurts

By Rich Parfitt

“Everybody Hurts,” R.E.M., 1992

No one has a pain-free life. Just as surely as death will come, pain is a part of our existence. Yet, unlike death, pain is recurring. Loneliness after rejection. Self-disappointment after failure. Guilt after a war of words. Pain is something we struggle to conquer, then move on from.

But sometimes we don’t move on. Sometimes we linger on pain. We might hold on by reliving the injury. Or maybe we just shut down from a sense of helplessness. When I process pain too subjectively, it takes much longer to let go. Yet I didn’t fully realize that until I heard R.E.M.’s “Everybody Hurts.”

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The song's melody is hypnotically peaceful, like a lullaby for those in distress. But the song's title has helped me move on so many times. Those two simple words, *everybody hurts*, are a powerful reminder to look at the bigger picture. A reminder that pain, which can feel so specific to us, is felt by many others. Those two words minimize the feeling of isolation by maximizing the presence of pain across the masses. *Everybody hurts* nurtures healing through the comfort of fitting in, even when it comes to fitting in with the human experience of pain. That healing re-opens the doors we close.

Whether it's the loss of a loved one, the sting of confrontation, or the embarrassment of a mistake, remember you're not alone. Everybody hurts.

Choices

By Sandy Donnelly

"I Hope You Dance," Lee Ann Womack, 2000

When diagnosed with breast cancer while caring for my father with end-stage disease, I waddled in fear. When he died the day after my mastectomy, I swam in circles mired in grief and disbelief.

Clawing my way out of the muck I held on to the motto I'd preached to both my parents when given their terminal diagnoses: You can spend the rest of your days Dying or the rest of your days Living.

In choosing to live, I enrolled in nursing school. For seven years as an oncology nurse I continued to espouse the same advice to patients until a second cancer diagnosis interrupted my career.

Going through treatments for inoperable lung cancer in Washington, D.C., I'd spend my days between procedures resting by the ocean. One evening crossing the Bay Bridge I was stunned by the words in Lee Ann Womack's new song: *I hope you never lose your sense of wonder. I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean... Promise me you'll give faith a fighting chance. And when given the choice to sit it out or dance—I Hope you Dance!*

Through tears of recognition I sang along, letting the words settle into my soul. As the sunset's refraction of violets, pinks, and blues washed into the evening sky, a peace that passed understanding came over me.

For more than twenty years I've held on to that Hope. I've held on to that Dance.