

Pop Time

...Back then there where the four of us spinning “something new” down in my room. John played “When I Get Home” and Brian sang “Shut Down,” and “I Get Around”...

“Whirly Town”

Remember a time pre-Pet Sounds & pre-Pepper, when the songs were two ½ or three minutes long, when songs were filled with hooks, harmonies, and hand-claps? The lead vocals were sometimes double-tracked, the lead guitar breaks were short and simple, and the lyrics were about love. Remember when melody and harmony was king?

Every summer my parents herded us into the station wagon for a weekend visit to Grandma’s in the Shenandoah Valley. This particular trip it was announced that Gene, the oldest, would get his own room for the first time. This meant that I could sleep in the big bed he always slept in. The bed was high off the floor and had a clean, cotton bedspread over it. Rob was graduated to my old bed. An open window was at the head of the bed, letting in the cool night. The windowsill held an old fifties-style plastic radio, pale pink with curved corners. The dial was clear plastic grooved with the station numbers. Gene used to fiddle with the radio on earlier trips, but I could never hear it because he kept the volume too low so our dad wouldn’t hear it. Now it was my turn-- For some reason we rarely listened to a radio at our home, even in the car. After we put on our pajamas I lay in bed with my head by the window, the cool night smelled like barns and cut grass. I waited until I knew my parents were asleep. My brother Rob's breathing was steady and deep.

I turned on the radio very low. The disc jockey kept me company; I liked staying up with him and felt a kinship with the people in town listening with me. He spun three songs that night that I never forgot: The Cascades “Rhythm of the Rain,” “Cathy’s Clown” by the Everly Brothers, and an instrumental by Young-Holt Unlimited called “The Soulful Strut.” These songs were probably released around 1962 or ‘63, so I was seven or eight years old. Seconds into each of these songs I was thrilled. I curled up to the radio with my pillow in the window and fell asleep.

One day soon after this, while playing up in my sister’s bedroom, I discovered a record player and some 45's buried in one of the closets. My mother climbed the stairs to show me how the machine worked. When I set that needle down on “A Bing Bang Bong” (from the film “Houseboat” starring Cary Grant and Sophia Loren) I was a gone guy. I played it over and over. Mom and I sang it in the kitchen while she was cooking. Another single I found was “Let’s Go to the Hop” by Danny and the Juniors. In that number the lead singer sings with cool nonchalance, like he doesn’t really care. “Do the dance sensations that are sweeping the

nation at the Hop...lets go!" Other favorites we spun: "Sounds of Silence," "Green Tambourine," "Time of the Season," and "Penny Lane." The day after my son Boon's birth, when we first brought him home from the hospital, I played the Zombies "Time of the Season" in the car. I was his first pop song.

My brother Gene has had a great influence on my life musically, continually exposing me to new music, even today. His steady introduction of bands began one winter in 1964. Gene kept announcing we *had* to watch the Ed Sullivan show. He had me curious, but "beetles...gross," it sounded wrong to me, and I was sure I wouldn't like it. When Sunday night finally arrived my father announced at the dinner table that *he* wanted us to watch Ed Sullivan, he'd been hearing about the Beatles at work. I was amazed.

My brothers and sisters lined up on the living-room floor in front of the television, my dad and mom sat on the couch holding the babies. Finally Ed Sullivan, waving his hand in their direction, shouted "The Beatles." Their faces were cool. Their hair, the boots, and their suits made them so different. They were happy and the songs were happy. Rob and I looked at each other and made a face when the camera showed all the girls in the audience screaming. Gene excitedly identified Paul, John, Ringo, and George. My sisters called out who they liked the best. Mary liked George; I did too. Their songs ripped through our living room, and into my life. That was the first time I ever heard "I Want to Hold Your Hand," still one of the greatest pop songs ever recorded.

When it was all over, instead of going to bed Gene, Rob and I snagged some badminton racquets out of the basement and pretended they were guitars. Gene showed Rob and me how each Beatle held his guitar. We stood the way they stood and sang in imaginary mics the way they sang. Gene made me be Paul since I am left-handed. Rob got to be George.

Getting Mom to do anything for us was difficult-- there was just too much chaos, too many kids in our family, but Gene was a master at wearing her down and one day we were piling into the station wagon to get his first Beatle album. Mom drove us to Giant Music in Falls Church. Gene literally vibrated with anticipation; his speech was rapid. He told everyone who'd listen the album was called "Meet the Beatles," describing the cover, rattling off the names of the songs on the record. I remember walking around the store; the fresh ink on the record jackets smelled like baseball cards. The sales person informed my mother that they were all out of "Meet the Beatles," but they did have a Beatle record called "Introducing the Beatles." Mom bought "Introducing the Beatles" after discussing it with Gene. My brother must have felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach because when we all piled back in the car he burst into tears. I started crying too, and so did Rob, though we didn't know why.

It wasn't long before Gene bought "Meet the Beatles," but before he did we wore that first record out. "Introducing the Beatles" was the living end. We learned every song by heart. I especially loved "Do You Want to Know Secret" and "Ask Me Why." Gene liked "Twist and Shout," and Rob liked "There's a Place." That record set a precedent for the three of us. When Gene would arrive home with his next Beatle record, we'd disappear into the bedroom, huddle around the record player and explore the lovely melodies and sugary harmonies.

When he brought home "Something New" I was lying on the lower bunk, with my head closest to the record player, an old sixties model with gray housing and a heavy arm with a cheap needle attached. I loved staring at the covers of the albums. This one was a long shot

of the Beatles playing live on the Ed Sullivan sound stage. There were multi-colored rectangles hanging from the ceiling. They wore the dark, matching suits and Beatle boots. They looked sleek-- like thoroughbreds. John, Paul and George were up front with their guitars, and Ringo was in the background on a raised drum kit. *Beatles* was spelled out on the kick drum. Rob sat like an Indian next to the record player. When "Slow Down" came on we waited breathlessly for the vocals to begin. The song has a long intro, a twelve-bar blues progression that needs to resolve before the vocals begin. "Is it an instrumental?" We each looked at the other. Would the Beatles record an instrumental? Rob and I couldn't believe it. Gene threw up his hand, holding back, perhaps instinctually sensing the musical progression. When John's vocals kicked in we all let out our breath, smiled and shook our heads at each other. To this day I'm not sure if we were happy or disappointed.

One summer evening the station wagon pull into the driveway while Rob and I were playing flashlight-tag with our pals in the neighborhood. Gene called to us, holding up a new one, "Beatles 65." We were standing across the street on a hill. I was having so much fun I didn't want to go in. Gene yelled he wasn't going to wait. I told Rob we could listen to it later. My friends begged me to stay. Gene stood like a statue with the album raised above his head. The neighborhood kids stomped and waited to see what we would do. Rob broke ranks and ran inside. I stayed, but somehow the game wasn't as fun anymore. I kept picturing the two of them in our room. I became anxious. Finally I quit and ran in the house. My brothers were already deep into the second side, and when it was over Gene wouldn't play the record again. Instead they talked about how cool the songs were. He made me pay for my defection.

For my ninth birthday party my friends and I walked up the stairs to the balcony in the State Theater to watch the Beatle movie *A Hard Day's Night*. For my tenth birthday I reprised my party to watch *Help: hands down*—the best two birthdays of my life. Albums like *The Beatle's Second Album*, *Rubber Soul*, and *Yesterday and Today* became part of who I am today. Those first listens were glorious; it was like discovering treasure.

About this time Gene was also buying Beach Boys records. The Beach Boys sing the *best* harmonies I've ever heard, even today. I used to put the record player on top of a box next to my bed, and rock myself to sleep listening to the album *Little Deuce Coupe* and side one of *Beach Boys Today*. Though the Beatles take top honors in my heart, the Beach Boys are just a breath behind them. Brian Wilson's crafting of the vocals on songs like "Don't Worry Baby," "Keep an Eye on Summer," and "Kiss Me Baby," is still unsurpassed today. A long time ago I made two ninety-minute mix tapes: "Beatles vs. Beach Boys." The tunes can still jack me up. When I hear "Spirit of America" back to back with "Not a Second Time" it's like taking a happy little pep pill.

John Barrett, my friend Tom's older brother, gave me a guitar when I was nineteen years old. The guitar was cordovan colored, with a hollow body and terrible, lovely sound. I don't remember the make, but I believe it was Italian. The finish on the body was nearly gone. The neck was cracked at the base, so the higher you slid up the neck with your fingers, the farther away the strings were, making it nearly impossible to play bar chords.

That was my second guitar. My first guitar was given to me on my eighth Christmas. My sister Mary and I used to watch Roy Rogers and Dale Evans on Saturday morning. I *loved* Roy Roger's cowboy guitar. It was covered with fancy trim and had an elaborate shoulder strap. This time I wore my mother down, and on Christmas morning a small flat-top guitar lay under

the tree. It was the color of a Siamese cat--black around the edges that dissolved into a soft olive-gray interior. I picked it up and strummed—but the sound that emerged was something like "klruunchthangk." I couldn't believe it. It had never occurred to me that I would need to *learn* the guitar. It wasn't long before the guitar was tossed in the toy box, nylon strings broken and the body cracked.

Twelve years later John Barrett's guitar fared better. After he passed it on to me I couldn't wait to get home to my bedroom. He'd already taught me a few chords. Years later my brother Rob told me that from his room he could hear me strumming the same chord progressions over and over for hours. I remember coming home from work and sitting cross-legged on my bed and practicing all the time. One day my pal Tom Scroogie stopped by and taught me how to play a few songs: Grand Funk's "Closer to Home," the Beatles "This Boy" and "For No One," and a Tommy James and the Shondells song called "I Know Who I Am." Being able to play a whole song and sing at the same time was the coolest thing in the world. I felt just like Roy Rogers or John Lennon. Soon I built a repertoire.

One day during a family gathering over at Mom's Rob skipped downstairs and asked if I wanted to hear a song he'd just written. He'd been practicing the guitar for a few months, and it astonished me that he would even consider writing a song when he could barely play. I'd been playing guitar for years, *I* always wanted to write a song. My chest felt like it was going to burst. I can't remember his song or whether I liked it, but when he finished and walked away it was like I had a fever. The next day *my* first song popped out--it was 1984 and I had just turned twenty-nine years old.

The first fifty or so songs poured out of me at an alarming rate. I had to start a list of all my titles because I was beginning to forget some of the songs I'd written. I played them enough times to memorize each one. My brother was writing more so we would get together and swap songs. It became a healthy competition. Then we started working out harmonies for each other's songs, and even played some open mics and eventually got a few gigs at some local clubs. We called ourselves Blue Caller. Jim Opeka played drums, Mark Kelley took the bass, and Tom Lowry played guitar and keyboards. But Rob had his own agenda and stopped short before we had generated much of anything. The writing never stopped. It's been both cathartic and plain fun, but after a while singing a handful of songs in my bedroom just wasn't enough.

In the spring of 1989 I said a prayer and drove straight to Cue Recording Studios. At least a dozen times I had sheepishly cruised by the studio, and once even stood in front of the door. But this time I pushed the door open, climbed the steps and introduced myself to a young guy at the desk. The rest was easy. I'd always heard how my songs should be produced in my head, hearing background vocals and lead breaks, and now I was going to actually build one. "Cherry Girl" was chosen, and I was paired with a talented musician/ engineer/ producer named Jimmy Dugan. We created a nice little demo in a couple of months for about seven hundred dollars, and when I walked out the door with the final product I was flying.

Making the "Cherry Girl" demo gave me the courage to take the next step, recording a CD, a record with full-blown production and all original material. Mike Melichone, Scott Shuman and I started *Sugarland Run* in 1995, and finished in 2000. I worked steady, four or five hours a week (that's all I could afford), for nearly five years. Though I never thought about it when writing, over half my songs are about three minutes or under—just like the Beatles and The

Beach Boys! The songs are not particularly revelatory or groundbreaking (themes of love, lust, and escape), they're just little pop songs hot for car play.

Whirly Town, my next CD, was a WD Miller / Jim Opeka collaboration. I can hear the improvements in sound, mixing, and production. "Whirly Town" took about five years to make as well (Jim was very patient). We threw the CD release party in November of 2006. I'll be starting a new CD soon: working titles: *Whiskey Talk*, *The Virginian*, *Daytona Blue*, *Everything's Jake*, *Peter Locke and the Keys...*

Laurence Fishburn once said that music is the highest form of art (and architecture the lowest). Though debatable, music has had a profound effect on my life. Music requires only the sense of hearing, so we have a kinesthetic freedom not found in any visual art form—the freedom that creates dance. I am grateful for the three-minute pop song. A good song triggers the little bones vibrating inside my inner-ear, sending synaptic messages to the brain, releasing endorphins or serotonin or oxytocin... Perhaps in my case it's genetic: Germans are said to have invented harmonies, and I'm half German. The fact is I experience true, fine pleasure when I listen to music. Someone once told me that trying to identify or understand God is futile. God can really only be experienced. That's how I feel about music. For some reason I can't remember large chunks of my childhood. My brother Rob, who seems to forget very little, tells me stories about our past that amazes me. But I never forgot the songs.