

# Music Memories

I will start off by saying that I don't have a first memory of music. Music has always been a given in my family. I was babbling to songs before my first word, dancing in mom's lap before I could take a step. However, I do have early memories.

One is being in my violin teacher's studio, probably six, and I'm holding my violin, a deep molasses, scarcely as long as my forearm now. The little rug I was standing on was green and the carpet below was beige, so were the walls. A bookshelf was behind me. I was so excited to play. I didn't know I had this memory, stored somewhere deep in my subconscious, until I sat down to write this. I look back on that memory with a sort of bittersweet sadness. That tiny child didn't know what was coming to her, innocent of the stress and trauma violin would bring. The screaming matches over practicing, the accusations that I didn't care, that I was a liar and lazy. I did care, this snapshot of my tiny self is proof, I just didn't care as much as my parents.

Few of my music memories are bad, most are good, the traumatic ones simply dominated my attention. Throughout my younger years my parents would project this ABBA music video collection in the middle of our house, and we would all dance and sing along. Sometimes we would have music playing and my dad would start playing the piano along with it. Other times, we would have Ella Fitzgerald or Frank Sinatra or Louis Armstrong on and my dad and I would swing dance in the kitchen. I was small enough then for him to lift me up or slide me through his legs until I was laughing.

My father considers himself to have excellent music taste. I'm less sure about that. My problem is that in some major ways our tastes diverge, and since I know for a fact that I have excellent musical taste it means that he must be wrong. I can't say precisely what my first memory of music was, but I am sure that it would have to do with him, in some way. There's always music when he's around. He has told me many times that it's a constant in his life. From the moment he wakes up to the moment he goes to sleep - music. You can tell if he's home or not based on whether or not the speakers in the kitchen are playing something.

There are many songs and bands that float through the fog of childhood past when I think of the music he would play when I was young. I remember the backseat of a Subaru Outback. Trees going by on Springmill as we drove uptown. My older sister in the seat next to me. Some songs still have the ability to transport me back to those otherwise unremarkable days when my musical taste was being formed without me even knowing it. Manhattan, by Cat Power. Lariat, by Stephen Malkmus and the Jicks. Milwaukee, by the Both. Window Seat, by Erykah Badu. I still love all of these songs to this day. For years now I have been paying close attention to what my father plays, and I shazam and the music that I remember from my childhood, the songs that will always be playing somewhere on the backroads of my memories. I have never told my father I do this.

His taste influenced mine. I love jazz, and I will always have a special appreciation for some of his favorite artists - Chet Baker, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, and Dave Brubeck. Steely Dan and Pavement have become some of my favorite rock bands of all time. I remember when, during my junior year, covid year, I started listening to the solo albums of Donald Fagen (½ of the Steely Dan lineup). I'm not sure if he ever told me he liked those albums or if I found out from looking through the records that he would keep in his office, the room where I sat for my classes on zoom. I do remember when I heard the title track of *The Nightfly* for the first time. Wow. Jesus. Woah. To this day, when I hear that song I'm transported; up up and away from zoom Spanish class to a smokey radio station in Baton Rouge where a little part of my soul has taken up permanent residence. My father had a habit at the time where he would prop up an album that he was listening to so everyone on zoom could see and he could show off his excellent taste to his coworkers. I remember that it was *Take Five* at the time, an album he listened to every morning for a year. For my zoom classes I adopted this practice, knocking *Take Five* for the one and only: *The Nightfly*. I left it in the place of *Five* that day, and when my dad got home from work and saw that I had left it there, he tweeted something like, "found my son listening to *The Nightfly*, my favorite album from my high school years!" We never discussed it.

We have often argued over music. The Rolling Stone top 100 songs is often a point of contention. My aunt once really got made at us for discussing it at dinner, as no one else in the family could get a word in with us arguing back and forth. I am proud to say the influence is not completely one-sided - I got him into Bob Dylan, my favorite artist of all time. Since I was about ten, my dad has been telling me and my older sister that he had a playlist prepared for his own death, which she and I should play at his funeral. I plan on honoring his request. Very little, I think, means as much to him as music.

### My earliest memory of music

It is difficult to think of just *one* memory of music, because it is unclear which memories precede one another. My childhood is all one big blur of sounds, most of them unmusical (well, maybe they are musical. What makes a sound musical?): playful children yelling in backyards, crickets, mosquitoes bouncing off the walls, vegetables being chopped on a board. But my parents played CD's often too, especially as they prepared dinner. The *Girl from Ipanema* by Antônio Carlos Jobim I associate with the smell of sizzling shallots, and Bjork's *Gling-Glo* is a song my sister and I always begged my parents to skip—it got on our nerves for some reason. In retrospect, it is fascinating to think why these songs are associated with not only certain memories, but certain feelings.

While I don't dislike *Gling-Glo* as much as I did as a child, it is immediately clear upon relistening why my past self was so frustrated by the song. Bjork has a very unique, almost ethereal way of singing. It feels wispy, dusty, constantly changing between a light sound and an almost guttural one. The rhythm of the song is very consistent, like a ONE-(pause)-ONE-TWO-THREE, but it sounds to me like her voice is not fully aligned with the beat, and it is certainly not consistent in terms of the shapes of sounds she makes. The more upbeat, jazzy moments feel complete, while the quieter, more vocal parts seem to miss something. There is certainly a tone shift, at least if we disregard the words (which I do, having no knowledge of Icelandic) between these two parts of the song. I wonder if the lack of word-context made the story unclear to me. I didn't understand why there was a shift between a quiet ethereal sound and jolly jazz, and that was frustrating. This makes me wonder what the role of words are in a song, and how they contribute to a story. Are they necessary for a story? Why do I crave consistency in the song? What feelings can arise from inconsistency, or breaking the rhythm?

Another song my mom would play for us in the car was on a French CD, this particular one about a litter of kittens who were abandoned by their mother. This one had a much clearer story, even if the words were taken away, because of the consistency of the scale it was in. Relistening to it now, I think it was in an upper C major scale, which tends to illicit feelings of sorrow and grief. The singer's voice also had a nasal quality to it that reminded me of a cat's meow. What emotions can come to the surface when we combine the shapes of sounds (nasal, guttural, a-e-i-o-u) with the scale it is in. How does music tell *a story*?

## Words and Music Week 1 – Memory

One of my earliest memories of music is of singing Christmas carols with my family. Every Christmas Eve, we gather in my grandmother's living room, each grabbing a book of carols and squeezing onto her sofa, then each member of the family, from youngest to oldest, chooses one song for us to sing. The first time I remember doing this, I sat on my mother's lap, not able to read the lyrics on the pages she held, not having learned most of the songs yet, just listening and being there. Many members of the family had a song they chose every year and continue to choose to this day - my mother chooses O Holy Night, and I have never seen her get through it without crying; my grandfather chooses Good Kind Wenceslas and always insists on dividing us into vocal parts, the high voices singing comically high, the low voices comically low; My grandmother goes last and chooses Silent Night, which her mother used to choose while she was still alive.

Looking back, I'm struck by how much is stored in this simple musical tradition. None of us are singers, nor do we identify strongly with the religious aspect of Christmas, but we gather every year anyway, not really to sing, but to tell stories, revisit inside jokes, remember ones we've lost, and pass all these things on to new additions to the family. And somehow singing serves as a gateway into that in a way that conversation rarely does. I think there's something about the honesty of singing without skill, and for no other reason than to be together, combined with the beauty of the songs themselves, combined with the age of the tradition, that makes a special invitation. It's a blessing for which I am deeply grateful.

## **Sophomore Music 1.**

I am interested in the difference between pentatonic, known as oriental scale, and heptatonic, known as western scale. The main difference between the scales that I noticed is that one is quite completely symmetrical, but one is asymmetrical. What I mean by this is that oriental scale is comprised of twice the two whole step and whole and a half step. Meanwhile, the western scale is comprised of two whole step and half step, and three whole step and a half step. One thing I have noticed about the western scale is that, because it is not completely symmetrical, when we play the scale, certain notes urge, or makes us want to go to other notes. Thus, a lot of music based on this scale are often easy to recognize when the music starts and end. On the contrary, music composed using pentatonic is often hard to tell the starting point or the ending point. The reason that I am assuming for pentatonic having a ambiguous starting and ending point then heptatonic is because, the distance of pentatonic notes are symmetrical.

## First Memory of Music

My evolving strategy for discovering the earliest memory...First, thinking of songs I've listened to. I recall from stories (which don't count) that I had a fondness for Bon Jovi and the Beastie Boys and Bjork. A few videos of my toddler self have become omniscient, godlike memories. A real memory is hard to place...perhaps my friend singing *We Are The Champions* after we won an important basketball game. I thought it was embarrassing and repressed a genuine feeling of being a champion.

Shifting to my experience with instruments and singing. I think of elementary school, recorders and xylophones. My teacher always had a large, beaded maraca. I refused to dance the macarena for our concert, my friend sat on the front of the stage with me, revolting as a league of 13 year olds did the macarena behind us. I also think of church, and a lingering fondness for contemporary gospel which my cousin and I used to belt out. My Uncle sang and played guitar. My dad drummed with his headphones on (I found out he was listening to the service of another church, he was cheating).

I can't seem to reach anything deeper than the 3rd grade. My memories and family videos and strange dreams blend together and blink in and out. Perhaps I could offer up some recent memory, just twist the prompt. My most recent memory is listening to *Fade* by Kanye West which I had intended to write about for another possible prompt ("Pick a song and explain why you like it').

Then, thinking about children and the logical first interaction with music. Humming? And I think of my mom who sang Patsy Cline. *Crazy. Walkin' After Midnight*. That's it. Falling asleep to that. I still know the timbre.

My father, brother, and I are in the car together. We are driving back from a mountain. It's winter, and there's snow covering the ground as we drive past. Tribute by Tenacious D is playing through the speakers. The three of us are singing along. I am wearing a demon balaclava (what I now believe to be a waq'olla mask) which I had brought for the cold, but only put on recently, for the sake of the song. This has not improved my ability to sing the demon's part.

I don't remember much else. The scenery bleeds together, the time before and after is gone, I don't even know what age I was. I only know it's early because we were in my father's old car, with its manual windows. The same manual windows he cut his thumb tip off trying to fix, my brother and I in the car. I don't know what happened to that car, or how long ago, but I know I was young.

And I remember that it was a good moment. Singing, with my brother, my father, a song that I've held on to, that I still love.

It's a feeling, and a story more than a scene. A cold room, an early morning. I'm old enough to have to go to school, but young enough that I don't have an alarm to wake me up yet. Instead, my mom has put Abbey Road in the CD player sitting on my bookshelf. It's far enough away that I would have to get up to turn it off. I don't move. Instead I lay, awake and still, as Come Together plays. The opening makes me feel cold, though I don't yet have the words to explain it.

It still makes me feel cold.

There were these summer time performances called "shindig on the green" that were held at a local college, where I remember dancing and running about as people fiddled. I loved dancing and still do. With feeling and absolute silliness. Primarily in groups and most hopefully when everyone else feels free and wild and ridiculous. In this way I think of music as an invitation to gather, and a way for collectives to exist for a while, comforted by the same backdrop. We all hear the music. It sets the tone. And we have one more thing in common.

I am thinking of music as a very external thing that seems to want to leak out of people. I remember becoming conscious of my underlying humming in 6th grade art class when Marietta (stern, beautiful, gray) asked the hummer in the class to stop humming a number of times. Though I couldn't hear it, I thought it was ridiculous that someone kept ignoring her request. When she threatened to drop someone down a letter grade, I was elbowed (with both force and care) by a friend and I realized that there was music coming out of me without my knowledge or permission.

At the same time it seems like my body really wants to hear music even when it is not around intentionally. The rumbles of refrigerators, air conditioners have rhythm at least. Flutes come calling from woods if I am quiet enough and fires are so demanding of drums that they create their own crackle.

Music doesn't seem to be one thing, but I am grateful that it exists. It feels innate to the world internally and externally. Maybe even connective. IDK



“These are the toys in the toybox! Let’s pretend to be each toy. Here is the top; it spins round and round. Can you spin around like the top?” Stretching my arms out, I dance and spin across the room to the whirling music. I am the top in the toy box. I’m starting to get dizzy when the music fades and the bright voice returns, inviting me to glide around the room on ice skates. A calming lilting waltz plays as I soar over the carpet in sock feet, moving through and through to every corner of the room. I’m taking a walk through the park now, bright clapping soles against the pavement now, mumbling chatter in the distance now, stopping to smell the yellow marigolds and peering through trees at the nestling birds. I’m in the car, being carried bump bump bump down the road past the gate to the animal garden. I gaze at the noble padding lion, the rising graceful giraffe, the faithlessly proper strutting peahen. My favorites are the fish. I am exactly like them, arching through the water to the somber glissando of Saint-Saëns’ *Aquarium*. Each time I journey through my musical dancing landscape, I am more exactly like them. The fish return to their sea beds and I’m tired now; it’s time to go to sleep. I too bed, on the floor, tucking my head, breathing in the restful sounds from the speakers above me. I can’t wait to be the top again, to ice skate and walk through the park again, to plod along with the animals again. I can’t wait to see the fish again.

Does music become a part of our soul?

I have never thought of this question seriously before. However, whether music reaches our soul or becomes a part of our soul has recently become a genuine inquiry for me. After finishing high school when I was on a gap year I did nothing but listen to Tagore songs and read Bengali novels the whole time. I don't have any proof to show what I have achieved through spending that year listening to Tagore and reading novels but something has changed inside me. I don't know what that change is but it has reached deep into my soul.

I listened to the same song again and again and again until I was able to sing along with the song that was playing. The first thing that trappes me about a song is its melody. Melody has no language yet it is the universal language. However, when words are added, it becomes more powerful. I got attracted to Tagore through his melodies and slowly started understanding the words which are not just words but rather philosophy of his life. These songs of Tagore which are considered backdated and old have shaped my early thinking and gave me power in life whenever I needed it. At one point it felt like the songs of Tagore and my life are synonyms. I felt there was nothing in my life that Tagore had not expressed through his music.

When I came to America, I got detached from Tagore to some extent. My life was not revolving around *Rabindra Sangeet* Tagore songs anymore. But whenever I played his song again it would trigger me from inside. I feel like my soul recalls something. Sometimes it brings joy, sometimes it wets my eyes, sometimes it's a beautiful melancholy. The more I hear the more it perpetuates. It makes me wonder what is about music that moves the human heart that powerfully. Even though the same music does not move everyone similarly. It can be said that music stays inside us. Perhaps our soul is musical and craves music that soothes it and gives fulfillment.

Describe your earliest memory of music...

When you ask me to describe my earliest memory of music, I run into two problems. First, I don't have many memories of music, and I definitely can't place the memories I have into a chronological order. What is music if it isn't memorable? Second, I don't know what constitutes music. Do my mom's lullabies—poorly sung with butchered lyrics— qualify? But maybe the way to understand the overlap between these two questions is to understand the quality of music as dictated by preference as much as by its compositional quality or the musician's talent. That is to say the most memorable music is not necessarily the best sung or composed. The memory of my mother (admittedly not an artist) stepping out of her comfort zone to sing me a lullaby is meaningful and memorable. It is an action which must come from the heart. She is a speaker. As an academic she tends towards words to express herself. If she is moved to sing it says something.

I've determined that sometimes the music of my memories isn't necessarily what others would consider music, or at least not good music. But the sentiment of the moment may be more important to me than the music itself. Music can be a moment, a feeling, an experience, not just a composition of notes. What my mom sings to me is as significant as the choice she makes to sing rather than speak the lyrics. But does my preference for the moment mean I cannot experience well-composed music in a similar way? Through this class, I want to redefine my assumption that well-composed, well-sung music is lacking momentary pleasure and only has abstracted value, while personally meaningful music, whether butchered, or poorly sung, has too much sentimental value to simply characterize it as music.

### Music and words

My earliest memory of music is my mom's flip phone 's ringtone when I was about 5 years old, which is 'Für Elise' by Beethoven. My mom is not a lover of classical music, even of music in general, so it is kind of mysterious why her flip phone's ringtone is classical piano music. Both of my parents were quick busy with their profession back then, thus I usually saw my mother once a week. Even during those rare moments together, our conversations were frequently interrupted by the ringtone. Consequently, I became quite familiar with this melody.

Therefore my attitude to this music is very contradictory and variable: I felt delighted to listen to such a beautiful melody; to be more precise, the edition I heard, according to my blurry memory, was very soft and smooth. Additionally, whenever I heard the music, it signaled the start of an adventure of looking-for-mom's phone, which seemed the only thing that I thought I was able to help my mom with. After all, it was just a ringtone. Once my mother and I found the phone, the ringtone would cease and my mom started talking on her phone for the next ten mins or longer. Then, I would smartly leave my mother alone with her phone and hum the unfinished melody of 'Für Elise'

One evening before bedtime, I was listening to the radio with my grandma as usual, but suddenly the radio started playing the song "Für Elise". That was my first time listening to this melody from a source other than my mother's phone. Strangely, it sounded quite different at that moment, evoking a subtle and complicated feeling that I had never had in my young heart, which I had not learned an appropriate word to catch then. So, I kept telling my grandma "I miss my mom". After many years, now if I rethink this memory about 'Für Elise', I'll say it is a melancholy song of missing.

## My Earliest Memory of Music

My earliest memory of music is not easy to pinpoint. To me, music is more of a feeling than an action, and it is difficult to chronologize in my mind. I came from a musical household and do not know whether it was my dad humming around the house, or perhaps hearing people chant in the church on Sundays, that I heard first. My earliest memory aside, the most prominent memories I have of music were late at night when I was tucked into bed. My parents would say goodnight and sing me a song, *"Holy Saint Emilia, pray for the handmaiden Emily, that God will guide her and protect her."* It was a short prayer they had set to a tune, and it reminded me that I was not alone, even as I drifted off into sleep. As I started to close my eyes, I could hear the sounds of the piano floating down the hallway and into my room through the open bedroom door. *Raindrops* by Chopin. It started out light and airy, like the patter of the rain it was trying to embody. Slowly the thunder would build up as my father crashed his fingers against the keys. The rain would pour, and then lighten up. Just as the storm sounded like it was coming to an end, the thunder of the low black and white keys would boom again. It was so familiar to me, I could sing along without even opening my mouth or making a noise. Although my fingers couldn't have pressed the right keys, I felt as if the song was coming from me. I knew it like a muscle memory, except instead of my fingers it was my mind. The notes would fall into place and send me to sleep. One of my sweetest memories from my childhood is laying in bed and listening to my father play the piano.