

An Aural History

Before I was born, my uncle made a mix tape in honor of my birth; it was filled with every version of “My Funny Valentine” he could find: Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, Ella, Barbra Streisand, Miles Davis, even Sting. But my favorite version – the one I begged my mom to put on repeat during endless L.A. car rides – was Chet Baker. Along with “My Funny Valentine”, there were several versions of Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings”.

“Adagio for Strings” was the only thing that calmed me. Later, when I was rifling through my parent’s CD collection, I heard it again. I instantly felt as I had when I was a baby – haunted, pressed into silence, almost disturbed by melancholy. It only took a few seconds of violins to transport me back to those nights of lying in my crib waiting to fall asleep.

I feel as if my parents gave me an artistic “starter pack” – complete with their favorite books to read, music to listen to, and movies to watch. I am now an amalgamation of all of these phases, and can appreciate the music for what it is, separate and apart from myself, decontextualized from my own journey of self-discovery. But those phases were integral to eventually finding myself, and through all of that discovering and exploring, I took little pieces of what I found, and made them my own.

The first album I heard in its entirety was Rubber Soul. I became obsessed with John Lennon – I knew he was gone, I think I even knew that he was “dead,” but I insisted on grilling my mother about where he actually *was*, where I could find him. We decided that he lived on in his music.

I wanted to touch the music, to feel it, so I pulled the ribbons out of the cassette tapes in the family room, only discovering later that I had destroyed *Automatic for the People* by R.E.M. or my mother’s rare copy of Ennio Morricone’s soundtrack for “The Mission,” all because I needed shiny string for an art project.

I got the idea that my parents were fighting when my dad accused my mom of liking the Rolling Stones more than The Beatles. And, he scoffed, “every Stones song is about sex or drugs or both.” But my mom told me that he was just jealous because he “didn’t see them at Shea Stadium or on the Ed Sullivan show” like she did. She showed me a black and white photograph from Halloween, 1967 – four thirteen-year-old girls dressed up as the Beatles, featuring my mom as George Harrison.

Then my dad escalated the stakes by telling me that he might not have been privileged enough to see The Beatles on Ed Sullivan – but that he saw Jimi Hendrix play guitar with his teeth at The Garden. And The Doors... and The Dead... and Jefferson Airplane. He told me stories about growing up in Little Neck, Queens & how he and his brother used to bring girls over, and one of them would yell from the other room when it was time to flip the record.

I got my first music device when I turned 11. It was an iPod Shuffle that could only hold 100 songs. I would prance around the house listening to “Sexyback” and “Irreplaceable” and one day at dinner my dad said, “Sariel has really changed ever since you got her that thing.”

My parents divorced – and not because of their disagreements about the pre-eminence of the Beatles or The Stones. My mom and I moved to a house on the bluffs and she would cook dinner and listen to Joni Mitchell and Janis Ian. These days, I can’t listen to “At Seventeen” without crying – but back then I didn’t get it.

My parents started to worry that I only listened to music made by people who had committed suicide. At thirteen, I became obsessed with Kurt Cobain. I built a shrine for him under my bed; I read his biographies, his journals. I was convinced that I was somehow the literal reincarnation of him, since we share the same birthday, our parents got divorced at the same age, and he died the year I was born. In retrospect, it doesn’t really make sense, but back then I believed it.

Once I got to high school, I started to relax. I began exploring the L.A. music scene – going to shows, making new friends. At the beginning, my mom would drive down the 405 to pick me up, but I soon figured out how to get there on my own.

When I moved to New York, I got involved in college radio. I have had a radio show every semester, which has brought music into the context of my other passions & interests. It has now become part of my experience as a student, as well as a consumer and fan.

Gradually, I have grown to appreciate music that comes from a wide spectrum of emotional experiences, perhaps because music was an emotional tool for me growing up. It articulated and validated what I was feeling. For a long time, under the shadow of my parents, I think I was a musical elitist. But because I spent so much time delving into musical history and training my ears and discerning what I like from what I don’t, I have a wider context in which to appreciate what is currently out there – including the Top 40.

Because of this musical education I’ve had, I’m able to understand history and art in the context of music, and music in the context of history. As an artist, I appreciate the emotional power that music has to transport me back to a specific memory or feeling within the first few seconds of a track – just as “Adagio for Strings” still does for me.