

Dear Hozier,

Dear Hozier,

My best friend is made of music. She loves it enough to have made a career out of it where so many others have failed. She's not a musician by trade, but rather is the type of magician that makes music possible. She puts together shows, finds artists, books venues, makes deals, cuts checks, fights in the ugly trenches of the industry each day to ensure musicians find microphones and crowds find places to be together. To me, her job sounds impossible and intimidating, but she is, again, a magician. She makes the impossible happen, pulling something as ephemeral as music out of thin air and into four walls for a few hours at a time. She makes pockets of magic. Pockets of joy.

I'm not classy enough to listen to jazz. You probably wouldn't say it's classiness that makes you a fan, but it's obviously not a generational thing either, since we are only a few years apart. It might be exposure. In my house, growing up, we didn't listen to Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Chet Baker, or any of the other musicians you reference in "Always." We listened to what my parents liked, and since neither of them are musicians, nor are they particularly discerning in their taste, that pretty much whittled down the world's vast library to what I think of as white people music. You know, Sting, R.E.M, U2, and whatever was on the radio. It's difficult to be proud of the fact that I can recognize "Englishman in New York" from just a few bars and through several walls and doors. I wish I could reference Duke Ellington in casual conversation; I wish I knew Nat King Cole as more than just a name that occasionally appears in crosswords.

To me, she is the most amazing person in the world. We met in the sixth grade, when she and her family moved to Utah, and though we had a similar circle of friends, she and I didn't become close until the following year, in our seventh grade English class. In the seventh grade, age twelve or thirteen, I was afraid of my own shadow. In the midst of my parent's divorce and ever-changing home life, I became a creature of anxiety – jumpy, nervous, prone to crying, stressed out about nothing and everything all at once. (To be honest, I'm not sure I've changed much since then). My best friend was so much bolder and so much cooler than me – a dancer, a smart kid, a girl who knew how to do eyeliner and talk to other people and stick up for herself. Someone with more than two friends, who had her pick of companions. If I had to cast us as animals, she'd be a tiger and I'd be a rabbit. Rather than eating me alive, she became my closest friend. What she saw in me during those long hot hours in Mrs. Koritz's class, I'm not sure, but she's also the one person in my life who I've never doubted truly loves me.

Perhaps I should be less derisive of the soundtrack of my childhood. Sure, it's not winning me any trivia games, and I'm never going to be the type of person who swirls wine while listening to old records, but that wasn't a possibility anyway. I mean, I don't drink. It brings up a philosophical quandary, a sort of chicken and egg question: did my parents' musical sensibilities – or lack thereof – turn me into the sort of person who prefers Capri Sun to red wine, or is my

staunch no-alcohol rule what made me the sort of teenager who never really branched out from my parents' music sensibilities? Did I miss a window for musical rebellion? Get this, the first concert I attended was U2's stadium tour, and I was accompanied solely by my mom. Maybe I should embrace it. Pour myself some grape juice and listen to the U2 album that automatically downloaded to everyone's phones back in 2014.

Maybe it's because I don't think she'd spend one hour talking to a person she didn't like, much less fifteen years, or maybe it's because she met me at my worst and still picked me out of the lineup. My nervous, traumatized brain has been convinced at various times in my life that everyone hates me. Family, friends, people who reach out to me over and over again wanting to hang out. It doesn't matter what logical proof there is of their love, it's just how my brain, saturated in anxiety, works sometimes. But not with my best friend. She's always there, in the back of my mind or the back of my heart, steady as a drumbeat. I adore her. God, I adore her, and I don't know if our friendship would have survived high school if it weren't for music.

I'm joking, mostly. I know the sorts of people who equate a broader intellectualism with hundred-year-old musical taste aren't right, just insufferable. I know, also, that a person's artistic taste is as inexplicable as everything else about our personalities, some combination of nature and nurture that we could spend all day parsing and never get closer to the truth. I think what I'm trying to say is that if someone were to write a song like "Always," full of references to the music that makes me most nostalgic – because "Always" is a song about nostalgia, and yearning for something that's gone, a sort of bittersweet grief – it wouldn't be nearly as coherent or beautiful as yours. Musically speaking, I wouldn't make an attempt even if I could. But I will write it out in the best and truest words I can find and leave the rest to your imagination. After all, nostalgia and imagination are twins.

There are so many "bits" in our friendship connected to music. Trying to remember all the words to Katy Perry's "California Gurls" at lunch in middle school, giving our other best friend a theme song for her track meets (Europe's "The Final Countdown"), or singing Wheatus' "Teenage Dirtbag" as we walked the halls of our high school during the forty-minute lunch break before our biology and astronomy classes. The inside jokes you collect during childhood friendships? Ours always seemed to take on a musical element, meaning certain songs still instantly launch me into a better mood. In our senior year of high school, we both got into One Direction and, like millions of girls before us, our friendship deepened over a shared interest in a band. We'd listen to their music as we drove around, we watched videos and shared jokes, and we went to see One Direction when they played in Salt Lake City, just a few weeks before she moved to Washington D.C. for college. I stayed home, attending the local university, making us 2,080 miles apart for four years.

The first song I remember liking, getting excited when it played, asking my mom to play it again, was "Shiny Happy People" by R.E.M. With the benefits of adulthood and the website Genius Lyrics, I now know that this song was originally written as a response to the Chinese

government's propaganda campaign following the Tiananmen Square Massacre. I wonder if my parents knew that and were exchanging looks over my head every time I asked for a repeat. Actually, regardless, I know they were exchanging looks, because around the same time I was obsessed with "Shiny Happy People," they'd deemed me melancholic enough to require therapeutic intervention. It must've been a trip, carting their depressed four-year-old to the so-called Happy Doctor (their words, not mine) with that upbeat, repetitive "dit, dit, dit, dit" bridge playing in the background. I imagine I stared out the window, already casting myself as the lead in an angsty music video but not yet sure what angsty music was supposed to sound like. Honestly, I think I just like that I understood all the words.

Our contact became sporadic during those four years. Rather than speaking every day, we'd speak occasionally during the semester and then spend our breaks on her parents' couch watching bad tv and music videos when she flew home. I was worried about losing her but found that it didn't matter how much we spoke. It could be days, weeks, or even months, but we'd always come back together as easily as magnets. What sort of magic is this, that makes friendships so comfortable and warm they don't need constant maintenance? Is it history, just a factor of years behind you? Is it us, just the odd couple capable of loving each other across months and miles? Or was it the music?

In the years 1999 and 2000, two more-or-less one-hit wonders were released by Vertical Horizon and Nine Days, respectively. I say more or less because I still listen to other songs by both artists, but I think I might be the only one. Their big hits, though, were "Everything You Want" and "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)," both of which embody the moody, alt rock genre which was so popular at the time. In those days there were no mP3 players, and if there were, my parents wouldn't have spent the money on them, nor were their systems to hook up outside music players to car stereos. We were at the mercy of the radio. And as a six-year-old, I was at the mercy of my mom's demanding schedule. As she dragged me and my siblings to the grocery store for what felt like the eleventh time that week, these catchy, upbeat songs were bright spots in the otherwise Dickensian drudgery of waiting in the hot minivan for Becky to finish talking to the neighbor she'd run into in the milk aisle. Of course, here the irony of vibes vs. lyrics continues: "Everything You Want" is about yearning for someone who's out of reach, and "Absolutely" is about a girl who just can't stop crying.

Music was an instant connection to her, to us as a pair. At eighteen, nineteen, twenty I didn't know how to say, "I miss you and I'm worried I've been a bad friend because we're all selfish and messy at eighteen, nineteen, twenty so I just wanted to let you know that I love you and I'm here for you, even if it doesn't always seem immediately apparent." Instead, I'd text her asking what she was listening to these days, listen to the same, and share my – very uninformed and unintelligent – opinions about the new 1975 album. Or when a major artist dropped a new song, I'd text her to see what she thought. She'd share her – very well informed and very intelligent – opinions. She taught me what a "concept album" was and got me thinking about recording artists as businesses and political actors and the ethics of the music industry. We continued to share jokes about One Direction and often she'd just share songs that were good and fun and loud.

Whether she's ever known this consciously, songs that are fun and loud are my favorite; they seem to rattle the anxiety out of my brain, and I've loved every one she's ever sent to me.

Then there are the songs I heard in my dad's car, watching him drum his hands on the wheel, like to the beat of U2's "Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." I am still a little bit devastated by the third verse of that song, which goes: "I believe in kingdom come, that all the colors will bleed into one, but yes, I'm still running." My dad had an old gray car filled with cassette tapes, and driving with him was a chance to look at them, unfold the little track lists that were slotted into the plastic covers and demand track 3 or 7 or whatever. I remember the worn, fuzzy texture of the backseat and the rhythm of the manual gear shift, which my dad treated like the cymbals in his improvised drum solos. I remember the Best of Bananarama cassette and how evocative the song "Cruel Summer" was, which I could relate to, or thought I could, because July in Utah is fucking hot. I remember the specific rarity of watching my dad be momentarily lost in the pleasure of good music, the albatross of ten-hour work days lifted briefly off his neck. Having his full attention was so infrequent that usually I craved it, but even more than that, I liked just being in his company, singing along to the same song like we were not just family members who saw each other occasionally in the evenings and on weekends but friends.

One summer when she was home visiting her parents, she found us day of tickets to Lady Gaga's ArtRave tour. She seemed to manifest those tickets on sheer willpower, herding me and another of our friends into the crowded, glittery, sweaty floor of the Delta Center to watch Lady Gaga perform in blue and white polka dotted latex tentacles and seashell bikinis. I was never much of a concert goer before this, and I'd never stood in a general admission crowd for five hours. I was uncomfortable, my feet hurt, and I felt out of place in my tee shirt and jeans while everyone around us dressed as you do for a Lady Gaga concert – latex and bikinis and eight-inch heels. But then the music started. It was loud, loud, loud and, like, a reverse Pandora's box, it got rid of all the bad feelings until the world around me was joy and pleasure and laughter and dancing. During the finale, they dumped confetti from the ceiling and on our way out of the arena, I scooped up handfuls of that confetti, which I still have stashed away with other precious memory-items like tickets and photos and cards from my nieces.

My sister told me once that "Drops of Jupiter" by Train makes her think of me. It made me think of her too, and I remember telling her that, the surprise and delight that we had this thing in common, but I don't remember why we shared it. There must have been a moment in our mom's minivan, one of those times when she was trapped in the milk aisle, when we both heard it and liked it, linked it to each other in our brains. I think that because we had that conversation before she'd even left high school, before either of us had left, and Drops of Jupiter is a song about someone leaving. It asks, "Did you miss me while you were looking for yourself out there?" and at separate times in our lives we have both asked the same, and provided the same answer: yes.

As the years progressed, I've only gone to a handful of concerts with my best friend. Our lives collided again after college, when we moved to New York City and were roommates for the first

and only time in our lives. We only lived there for a year before both deciding to leave because New York City was not kind to us or our bodies. (Despite the exhaustion and the poverty, my New York year was beautiful, because she was in every single day of it.) We haven't lived in the same city since, making face to face time hard to get. So, we've only been to a few concerts together since Lady Gaga – Kesha in Manhattan, BTS in Las Vegas – but these shows, where she and I were sweaty and hoarse and covered in confetti, are some of the happiest moments of my life.

Other songs always make me think of other members of my family. My little sister had a One Direction phase, back when every other fourteen-year-old girl in America had a One Direction Phase. She had a particular talent for harmonizing to their bright, poppy songs whenever one of us played them in the car. She used the music video for "One Thing" to teach me the names of the members. Meanwhile my brother was using the sheet music I'd printed off the internet to play Coldplay's "The Scientist" on our family's digital piano, first at a stumbling rate and then, as he gained skill and confidence, fluidly and beautifully. Though Coldplay has long since been relegated to the category of "cringe" for reasons I don't fully understand – being appealing to people older than twenty-three, I guess? – this song still has my heart, both for the echoes of my brother's relentless practice and for the line "Tell me you love me; come back and haunt me." What is nostalgia if not being haunted by one's own ghost?

I've been to concerts with other people. Even when it's the same general vibe, like Lizzo, the experience is not the same. I'm happy, I've had a wonderful time, I've danced, I've sweated, there might even be confetti, but something's missing. It's the *her factor*. She inflates experiences with a type of joy that she alone among my friends can bring. It's especially potent when we're at a concert since she loves live music so much and is so energized by it. It's especially potent when we're at a pop concert, since colorful, silly, slutty music makes my nervous system disengage. We're, I don't know, in our element, I guess.

By the time I was a teenager, I'd finally figured out what angsty music was supposed to sound like and was listening on repeat to "Over My Head" by the Fray, one of about five of their songs that gained traction in popular consciousness without being featured on Grey's Anatomy. I liked it for a lot of reasons but especially after reading somewhere that it was about the songwriter's complicated relationship with his brother. I knew – or thought I knew – all about complicated sibling dynamics, so being able to relate on that level was a real thrill. Yet my sister and I were never truly estranged, evidenced by how eager I was to scavenge parts of her personality, like her music taste: "Brat Pack" by the Rocket Summer was a song about friendship that she liked first, but I brought it to my friends as though I'd personally discovered it, and over ten years later it still makes me think of them, of driving to the store for Diet Cokes and snacks in one of our mom's cars, two or five or seven of us at a time. If I could get anything back from that time, it might be the Rocket Summer concert T-shirt my sister handed down to me, though I must have worn it down to shreds.

Almost (Sweet Music) is a song about jazz music, which is traditionally held up as a “purer” type of music. Or of a higher quality. Something people with good taste listen to where pop music is often seen as commercial, low quality, in bad taste. This song is also about nostalgia and how music takes you back. It often seems to me that they’ll play jazz to indicate a feeling is bigger than normal – in movies or tv or just people who have a record player. No art form is that simple; things enjoyed by the popular culture are not necessarily bad and things enjoyed by the literati are not necessarily good. I’m not saying all pop music is good or that jazz is bad, but as far as taste and nostalgia are concerned, I think it’s often just music, really, and whatever grabs you grabs you. Jazz can inspire or be shorthand for lots of nostalgia and big, complicated, beautiful feelings about love and friendship and time past and times to come. So can One Direction. We each get to pick our soundtracks, after all.

I once learned all the lyrics to “Semi-Charmed Life” by Third Eye Blind, including – well, especially – “Doing crystal meth will lift you up until you break.” Once more we encounter one of my life’s great motifs: songs that sound happy-go-lucky but are actually, lyrically, about the most depressing shit imaginable, from real-life state violence against civilians to debilitating drug addiction. I don’t know what that’s about, but I stand by my love for “Semi-Charmed Life,” because despite being riddled with highly specific references to drug use, it gained mainstream appeal for the sheer poetry of that line in the chorus: “I want something else to get me through this.” God, haven’t we all felt like life is an endurance race and that, whatever our coping mechanisms are for dealing with the tragically linear march of time, they could probably be healthier? Does survival always have to be about breaking off pieces of ourselves to fit through the fucking escape route? If it’s not a crystal meth addiction, it’s some other damn thing, and yes, Third Eye Blind, even though your band name is a dick joke, I agree: I *do* want something else. I have been wanting something else since I was fifteen, and so has everyone else, or this song wouldn’t be so popular.

We’ve changed a lot in the last fifteen years, my best friend and I, and thank God we have. But she and I are going to a concert together in a few months and I know we’ll slip easily back into that space we’ve carved out for ourselves, for each other. I will be happy the way I only am when I’m with her and music is loud in both our ears. I will laugh and I will be me again. She will laugh and it will sound like every wonderful day there has been or will be.

The line from “Always” that I think about most is “I’m almost me again.” That line and its follow-up (“She’s almost you”) are the only places where the word “almost,” the song’s title, appears. They are also the lines that, to me, most evoke nostalgia. Anyone who’s read or seen *The Lord of the Rings* knows that it’s not possible to return home. The place might still be there, on the same spot on the map, and the same people might still be there, but fundamentally your absence will have changed it. Its absence will have changed you. Those two puzzle pieces will no longer fit together the same way. Therein lies the root of nostalgia: there is no returning and no becoming what you once were. Through some strange emotional alchemy, there are transformative mechanisms like music that can get us – almost – there, but – not quite. It’s about context, I think. Music can drop us into the moments we’ve crystalized in our memories,

but it can't give back exactly what it felt like to *be* six, or ten, or sixteen. Time being linear, nothing can. We wouldn't know where to start.