

Roots, Rock'n Roll & Reggae

As I mentioned, my mother's taste in music (gotta love her) ran towards Liberace, Lawrence Welk, and Julius LaRosa on the Arthur Godfrey show. But she also watched Perry Como who was not bad, loved Rosemary Clooney who was great and Bing Crosby who has been called the first hipster. And when the networks briefly gave Nat King Cole a show she loved him too, even thought he was gorgeous. I don't recall my dad ever listening to music. He preferred comedy shows; Jack Benny, Fibber Magee & Molly, that sort of thing. The closet routine suckered him every week. "What a guy," he'd say, week after week, when Fibber opened the door.

My oldest brother Joe bought himself a \$10 guitar from Sears & Roebuck when he was a teenager; taught himself to play by ear and embarked on a brief musical career. He played around the neighboring counties with a few bands and had his own band for a while.

Country music and polkas were popular in the Midwest and that's what Joe played. Hank Williams, Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, The Carter Family were the royalty. Then there was The Six Fat Dutchmen who came from just over the border in New Ulm, Minnesota (sort of the Nashville of polka music). Joe had a dream, at one time, to move to there. Not a huge move or dream; the equivalent today would be if you lived in Brooklyn and dreamed of moving to Manhattan.

Joe eventually got a better guitar, then converted that to electric and then traded that in for one of the first 100 Stratocasters ever made. My oldest sister Sybella and the next oldest, Lorcy used to sing along whenever Joe set up his amp in the parlor. *Sioux City Sioux* and *San Antonio Rose* were two songs I recall learning by the time I was five. Joe also played *Jambalaya*

and *Cold Cold Heart*.

Last year I found out that Sybella once got up on stage and sang with Bob Wills on a dare. I was in Austin last year and my brother Daryl took me to see his pal Dale Watson sing at Jennie's Little Longhorn as he does every Thursday night that he's in town. Daryl had once told Dale about Sybella singing with Bob Wills and as Daryl left the club one night, Dale announced over the mike, "You see that guy leavin'? Ahm'onna tell ya his sister once sang with Bob Wills".

Even though I adored my big brother and was proud that he could play music, (actually he could do almost anything he set his mind to) I was a bit embarrassed because the music he played was "hillbilly music". And at that time I hated anything to do with hillbilly. I've since learned a bit and love classic country, bluegrass, hillbilly almost as much as jazz. But I hate the new brand of polyester country; Garth Brooks, Brooks & Dunn, Shania Twain and that ilk. They're as bad as hip hop

Soon enough Joe got practical, had six girls and put away his guitar for 30 years. When he retired, he took it out and started playing again. I asked him once why he quit playing and he said, "Well, I learned as much as I could from everybody I knew and then I just sorta got stuck. I wasn't getting any better so I got discouraged." Maybe he should have made that move to New Ulm. Or better yet, Austin or Lubbock.

Luckily, I had lots of brothers and sisters and they all liked different kinds of music. Mike and Daryl both liked jazz and found reason to argue over who was best on clarinet: Mike said Artie Shaw and Daryl said Benny Goodman. I couldn't tell the difference. Later, I came to prefer Artie Shaw but who cares. They both swung. Then Mike and Daryl both went into the navy and I was on my own. Mike still listens to jazz and Daryl is now mostly a country fan.

The first records I bought were 45s. *Satch Plays Fats* was one and I can't remember anything else. Then along came LPs at 33 1/3 rpm and (either) Columbia (or Capitol) Records Club. What a deal! They offered you a few albums for a few bucks with the proviso that you buy a few more at regular club prices. I selected Dave Brubeck *Jazz: Red Hot & Cool*, Doris Day *Day By Day*, The Four Lads *Standin' On The Corner*, Four Freshmen *Freshmen Favorites* and this is where memory trickles away. The only one of those I still listen to frequently is the Brubeck. On a nostalgic impulse I will sometimes crank out the Four Freshmen and they are still fun. Doris Day and The Four Lads got lost somewhere along the way but I still have the others LPs.

Around this time, the mid 50s, the new concept of stereo arrived. Before that the sound was called Hi-Fi but now they split it into left and right channels to more closely emulate a listeners live experience. Whatever. Now we all had to trade in or trash our record players and get stereos. Music marketing had arrived and we were the first generation.

Stan Kenton played in three clubs within 75 miles of Sibley, Iowa. There was The Roof Garden in Arnold's Park, The Arkota Ballroom in Sioux Fall, SD and Shore Acres down in Sioux City. You could catch Kenton Friday night at one, Saturday night at the next and Sunday night at the third. And he had great bands; at various times he had Gerry Mulligan, Bill Holman, Art Pepper, Lee Konitz, Vido Musso, Conte Condoli, Al Perkins, June Christy and The Four Freshmen sometimes toured with him.

The Four Freshmen epitomized what white male quartets were before the Beatles came along. The Freshmen, were also accomplished jazz instrumentalists, played The Roof Garden too and I got their autographs.



THE FOUR FRESHMEN

My brother Larry had a buddy named Paul Brower who played trombone and had his own high school quartet. Paul somehow managed to befriend Stan Kenton and thus at age 16 I found myself sitting around a tavern in Arnold's Park, after a performance, with Larry and Paul and Stan The Man himself. I have no idea how I got in the place but there were glasses of beer being served and I was drinking some of them. He had a reputation for being a very decent man and he was. I got his autograph but I think Larry later stole it from me.

While everyone around was listening to top 40, white rock'n roll, Johnny Mathis and The Platters, my buddy Joey Chase and I stayed with jazz for the most part. Late at night we would drive around, smoking cigarettes, listening to Hobbs House from Minneapolis. Hobbs had one of those stereotypical late night FM voices and played a lot of West Coast jazz and a bit of be-bop. The signal would drift in and out but we didn't seem to mind. It was better than listening to Pat Boone or Gene Vincent.

Like Joey and me, but for different reasons, white teenage America was not ready for full tilt rock 'n roll. It took Bill Haley and The Comets' recording of Big Joe Turner's earlier "*Shake, Rattle and Roll*" to cross over. And it took Pat Boone's insipid cover of Little Richard's earlier "*Tutti Frutti*" to get play on white radio.

Elvis, who could hardly play his prop guitar became the big deal even though Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis actually played and wrote rock'n roll. Nonetheless, rock 'n roll began rolling across the country, knocking down barriers. Whites began to sound like blacks and blacks were often singing songs written by whites.

Jazz, after be-bop had passed into a 'cool' phase and integrated groups were quite common. All of this color blindness coming over the radio was one thing. But with the advent of television, people could actually *see* that Buddy Holly was not a black man but a white boy from Lubbock, Texas. (For the record, no one I know ever thought Buddy Holly was black even though the mythology had been spreading.) And Elvis's pelvic thrusts, though contrived compared to road house rhythm and blues singers, was too much for Mr. and Mrs. Front Porch America. Ed Sullivan playing both ends against the middle, framed Elvis from the waist up and his ratings soared.

Before this blacks played jazz and whites called their version swing; blacks played the blues and gospel, while whites played country and bluegrass (hillbilly). Now the civil rights movement was getting up a head of steam as musicians began to look across racial and musical boundaries. soon everyone found that most distinctions were imagined rather than real.

The blues became rhythm and blues and country crossed with r&b became rockabilly. Bob Wills played Texas Swing which was country vocal mixed with big band jazz. And people began to hear it all as music. The emerging hybrid was called rock 'n roll. The term itself was a coded expression for sex; another shady human activity never quite admitted to by the general public. Credit songwriter Clarence Williams with the coinage.

All and all, pretty tame stuff compared to Robert Johnson's "squeeze my lemons till the juice run down my leg" or Bessie Smith singing Clarence Williams's buck-naked lyrics. "*I crave your round steak, you gotta give me some.*" Or "*I love your all day suckers,*" or "*I'll let you peck like a pecker should*". Was America ready for Clarence Williams? It seems not.

Then Elvis pulled off the definitive cross-over with songs like *Hound Dog* and *Don't Be Cruel* written by a couple of Jewish boys from Brooklyn, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. It should be noted, also, that Elvis's had never heard Big Mama Thornton's more authentic version of the song about a prostitute telling off her pimp. His thinned down version was taken from a Vegas lounge act and Elvis somehow finagled the title King.

Today, even such giants as Merle Haggard, George Jones, Bob Dylan, you name 'em, inexplicably revere Elvis ignoring the fact that he turned himself into Liberace rather than Muddy Waters. I don't get it but occasionally I'll give Elvis a new listen and always come away unable to get it.

Maybe it's me but I don't think so. It's rather like those people who believe Ronald Reagan was a great man and an even greater President. I don't get that either.