

Brief reflections on random tunes (1992-1999)



History lesson from the kids' songbook:

"Sing to us, dad."

In lieu of a bedtime story, I led the girls through selections from their *'Kids Songbook.'* The offerings in the brightly illustrated volume ranged from *'Old Macdonald'* to *'Frosty the Snowman.'*

In her momentary interest in train songs, MT was particularly interested in *'Wabash Cannonball'*. Propped up in bed, guided by my moving finger she warbled out the final lines:

*'Hear the mighty rush of the engine
hear the lonesome hobos call
You're traveling through the jungle on the Wabash Cannonball...'*

"OK, girls," I said, clearing my throat. "That's enough for tonight."

"What's a hobo, dad?" asked MT still sitting up.

Looking back from the lamp I was about to turn off, I sat back down on the bed.

"You want to hear this, too, T.?" I asked my 5-year-old. With quilt pulled to chin, she blinked her assent.

I picked up the song book again and turned back to the cartoon picture of the steam engine smoking along under a smiley-face sun.

"Well, a long time ago— even before I was born— there was a really tough time called the Great Depression."

"Like pressing on a big button?" asked MT.

"No, just the name of a time when it was hard to find a job— even hard to get something to eat. Some people had to move keep moving around the country, looking for work. Because they had no money they had to sneak onto the trains. They had to hide in boxcars." I paused, pointing at the illustration. "Because they had no place to wash or change their clothes— they got dirty. The people in the towns called the poor people who travelled around the country in boxcars 'hoboes.'"

"Is 'hoboes' a bad word?" asked MT.

"Maybe it started as a bad word, but some hoboes didn't mind being called that. Anyway, they usually camped in the woods on the edge of the town. Their camp was called a 'hobo jungle.'"

"They had to stay with the monkeys and the tigers?" MT pointed at the page.

"No, the picture's not right. The hobo *jungle* wasn't like a tropical jungle with wild animals. It was a name the townspeople gave to the camp where the hoboes' stayed. Anyway, even in their jungle they had to watch out for the cops: especially the ones who worked for the railroad cops. The hoboes called them 'bulls.'"

"Bulls. That's funny!" MT looks at her little sister who also giggled. "Why were they called that?"

"I guess because they were like angry bulls... Sometimes the bulls beat up the hoboes. Sometimes they pushed them off the trains when they were trying to jump on."

"That's so mean!" said MT.

"It sure is," I said. "Hoboes really had a tough time... You want to hear a song about a hobo?"

"Sure, dad," said MT, in no hurry for turning off the light.

"I could play it on my harmonica— but I'll just sing a few verses." Rolling eyes upward, I launched into a mournful version of Dylan's: *'Only A Hobo.'*

...Through the 2 ½ minutes until the final dragged-out line (*'He was only a hobo- but one more is gone...'*) the girls were silent.

"Didn't you like that song, girls?"

MT sighed. "It was awfully long."

"Anyway, girls. Most of the hoboes are gone— but you still see a lot of homeless people on the street. You remember that poor guy sitting out Safeway with a cardboard sign in front of him? The guy with the brown dog?"

"Yeah, said MT, I "I felt sorry for that dog."

She nudged her younger sister.

"I wished I had a bone for the dog!" piped up TE.

"Girls, whenever you see a homeless person asking for money never think that he's lazy. Remember that a poor person is just unlucky that's all. *Anyone* can be unlucky."

"Can we sing *'I've been workin' on the railroad'* again?" chirped MT. "That's a happier song."

Rightly nudged in having wandered so far from the usual bedtime story fare, I turned the pages back to the upbeat number.

“OK, just a few verses before I turn off the light.”

MT swung her arms like a conductor as we sang through the first verse. In the *‘someone’s in the kitchen with Dinah’* chorus, she bellowed along.

As we sang together, a dark image crossed my mind of the racist minstrel shows in which the ‘cute’ little song had its origin. It would be a few years before my fledglings would be ready for that history lesson...

1992, Nov.

fwt

Missing the Queens Hotel:



My wife looked from around the kitchen doorway as the infectious rhythms of Thomas Mapfumo and his Black Unlimited Band spilled from the living room speakers.

At the same moment, our 5½ year old daughter was pulling me up from the sofa.

Com'on, you guys, dance!" cried our 7½ year old, already cavorting before her reflected image in the switched-off TV screen.

"Wait a second, girls!"

Meanwhile, little MH, just 11 months old, was reaching across the coffee table for the tape cassette case. Before he put it in his mouth, I swooped it up. The song titles were hand-written on the label:

'Chimurenga Forever,' 'Dickson,' 'Pamberi Jairos Jiri'...

"You know what he's saying?" asked T., smiling from the doorway. "He's saying: 'I'm going to sleep in a hotel tonight and I'm going to drink white man's beer, not *Chibuku*.'"

"Com'on, you guys!" called MT. Both MT and TE were hopping in front of the TV.

"He has his November 'bonus'", said my wife, translating from Shona— "that's why he's so happy!"

She moved into the living room, twitching in the wailing vocals interweaving with the electric guitar and tinkling *mbira* [thumb piano]. While her smile hinted at tender memories, I was transported to a different realm:

The 'Afrobeat' was the background to so many of my Friday afternoons in Harare, *circa* 1982:

It was usually playing on the car radio of the fellow teacher who drove me into the city after my weekend at the mission school. Yet most exuberantly, it was spilling from the open door of the Queens Hotel on Manica Rd. where I was usually dropped off on the crowded sidewalk...

However infectious the music, I would still drift up towards the manicured city centre that retained echoes of old Salisbury. Even with the plan for a night of barhopping, a tamer hotel like the Jacaranda or the Bronte was more to my tastes...

"Careful girls," I said, "don't knock over the baby!"

I collapsed on the sofa, momentarily winded. Meanwhile the kids darted about—moving between a wild dance and a game of tag. Our toddler was edging around the coffee table towards

me, smiling in the vibrations from the speakers. I glanced over at the turning cog of the cassette. Mapfumo's '*Katarina*' had given way to '*Cheka Ukama*' by Oliver Mtukudzi.

Amid the happy plinking guitar, came a pang of regret for not being one of the handful of more adventuresome *vrungu* [whites] who dove into the maelstrom of the Queens Hotel. In wasn't that I was timid—it was just that the place was too loud. More than once on a long-distance bus, I'd stuffed wads of toilet paper in ears in order to block the screech of local music from cheap speakers.

Still, failing to see Mapfumo and Mtukudzi at the Queens Hotel in 1982 is no less a regret than having narrowly missed Woodstock in August 1969. To have gone to the Queens in Harare would likely have garnered novel-worthy impressions. Yet could a graphic account of the wild post-independence revels amid the yet undetected spectre of AIDs be anything but a horror tale?

"What are you thinking about?" asked T., now swinging the arm of our younger daughter.

"Great music," I said. "Don't know why I didn't appreciate it better when I was there."

"You were too busy chasing girls," 'tsked' my wife.

1993, April

fwt

The legendary goods, unadorned:

Dragging MT to a concert at the PNE coliseum that would end well past her bedtime was certainly not in the original plan. Until T. came down with flu symptoms, the plan was for MT and her siblings to stay with our Mormon neighbours and their kids, while their mom and I had a rare night out together.

Instead of wasting T.'s ticket and going alone, I thought that MT was old enough to remember the event. When I asked her if she'd like to go to the concert, she was excited. She even took an afternoon nap so she could stay awake.

The event featured two legends of the 1960s. The opening act was Carlos Santana in whom I had little interest. As for the headliner: even MT was aware of his fame. I imagined that 20 years from now she will enjoy telling her friends that when she was only 8 years her dad took her to see the legendary Bob Dylan. Now I'm wondering just how unpleasant the memory of last evening may be...

There could hardly be a worse venue for any concert than the Pacific National Exhibition hockey rink. Acoustics that amplify the roars for the Vancouver Canucks can hardly be expected to enhance music. Even a Megadeth crowd would be offended by the distortions.

"So, Bob Dylan is way down there?"

It wasn't until we took the seats that I realized we were in the smoking zone. There were dozens of empty seats in the top balcony, but we had no choice but to take our assigned numbers. Backed up against the concrete wall under the girders of the dome, the view of the stage could have been from an aircraft porthole. Fortunately, I'd thought to bring binoculars.

Sniffing from the fumes of the two chain-smoking lads with Beatle haircuts who sat in front of us, MT was still bearing up bravely. Through the bus ride in and the long line-up at the gate, she hardly fidgeted. She was certainly curious to see in the living flesh this musician whose music was so often heard in her living room.

Santana took the stage around 8:15 PM. His rousing Latino jazz-rock more than distracted from the stinging smoke and hard plastic seats. MT was momentarily animated in seeing through the binoculars, Santana's afro-haired teen daughter on stage playing bongos. Still, by the time the set was over, the 8-year-old was getting tired.

"As soon as we see Bob Dylan can we go home?" she asked.

"Sure honey." I patted her back. "He's coming in just a few more minutes."

As the intermission dragged on, she dropped her head in my lap. I dared not move.

It wasn't until 10:00 PM that the distant stage lights flared up again. A jet engine roar went up from the crowd as a tiny figure in black stepped in front of the bank of amps. I jerked up the

binoculars. Though one lens I caught a fuzzy close up. A figure with an aureole of frizzy hair was giving his strapped-on guitar tentative strums. It was the legend in the flesh!

The Never-Ending Tour band looked like a standard rock ensemble save for an incongruous bass fiddle. The musicians had a rabbinical appearance: black suits, fedoras and wire rim glasses. They started up loud, chugging out a rhythm that reverberated at jet-thrust decibels. Dylan's voice— quacky and slightly off-key— could scarcely be distinguished in the din. When hands throughout the audience went up waving Bic lighters, I felt alone amid a thousand points of light.

Meanwhile, MT was twisting on my knees wincing from the smoke and noise. After 45 minutes I had had enough.

I nudged her. "OK, honey, let's go."

"Where's Bob Dylan?" she yawned.

Take a quick look. We've got to go before the big rush." I put the binoculars into her hands.

Steadying her elbow on my knee she scanned. "Which one is Bob Dylan? They all look the same!"

"Careful!" I swooped up the binocular strap just in time.

"I need to go to bed, dad," she whimpered, rubbing her eyes.

"OK, honey. Let's catch the bus." I lifted her up in the crook of my arm. Stepping across legs and ignoring the glares, I made my way to the exits.

"Can you walk from here, honey?"

We made our way through the gauntlet of souvenir merchandise, not the least tempted by the Never-ending Tour themed posters, caps and sweatshirts. The trinkets of Lourdes would certainly be more affordable to the devoted...

Holding MT hand tightly, I crossed on the pedestrian light at Hastings St. After the smoky arena, the cool night air was refreshing.



On the walk up to the bus shelter, I cringed in recollection of the mashups of old classics: *'Don't Think Twice'*, *'Tangled Up in Blue'*; *'All Along the Watchtower.'* Those were the few songs I was even able to recognize amid the echoing distortions.

But, of course, I should have come with much lower expectations. As much as he loves to tour, Dylan is notorious for sloppy performances. His apathy for the audience is just as legendary. Little wonder there were so many empty seats in our section. Probably fans my age and older (unless they were down in the expensive seats) had known better and stayed away...

I felt a twinge of embarrassment for the near rapture with which I had innumerable times listened to Dylan's songs. As an adolescent bleating along in my bedroom or a lonely bachelor tweeting along with my harmonica in a candle lit Africa night—I might well have been a Pentecostal roused up in the holy spirit... Along with countless millions, had I been spectacularly duped?

Squeezing MT's hand, I ducked into the bus shelter. On the opposite side of Hastings St., the lights of Playland were winking off. In another tweak of bitterness, I realized that for the \$78 blown on the tickets, I could have taken T. and all 3 fledglings through the PNE midway. We could have thrown lop-sided baseballs at milk-bottle pyramids; loaded the kids with corndogs; sent them all spinning on the puke machines— and even taken home a bonus Miracle Knife...

I wearily stepped forward as the Hastings bus shuddered to a stop.

As I lifted MT up the steps, the driver stared hard into my eyes. It was another reminder of my parental negligence in dragging an 8-year-old around so long after her bedtime. Her head dropped into my lap as we pulled away...

"At least you have a story, honey. A long time from now— you can tell your friends that when you were just going into grade 3, your dad took you to see Bob Dylan..."

She was almost asleep. Starring out the bus window at the empty street, I began to feel a little better about attending. It was probably worth \$78 to see the legendary goods unadorned...

1993, August

Remembering two anniversaries:

At 5:30 AM yesterday morning, I was looking down my throat in the mirror, when the signature jingle of the CBC radio morning show issued from the radio-cassette. Since my Grundig short wave went kaput, the kids' Fisher Price radio has been squeezed into the towel shelf.

I opened my mouth wider as the announcer gave his usual upbeat introduction. In the alarm of yet another sore throat, the announcer was shifting to his '*this date in history*' segment. In his cheery early morning voice, the radio host informed that exactly 30 years ago on this date: "Canada's maple leaf flag was first unfurled..." He then rattled off a few facts about the flag's highly contested adoption.

Measuring out a capful of Listerine, I remembered thronging in the cold sun with fellow grade 9 students. We were glumly watching the half-tangled maple leaf being pulled for the first time up the school flagpole. I recall some kids mumbling that we didn't have to salute. Yet at the critical moment, the big-boned teacher was scowling around— even swinging her purse to jerk up one obstinate elbow... That little canvass hung in an obscure corner of the gallery of indelible images— 30 years ago today!

I swirled the mouthwash as the announcer gave a few details about the controversy over the new flag's design. It was amusing to recall the anti-Ottawa fulminations that "the flag we fought and died for" was being trashed for the need to "suck up to Quebec". Yet by the 1967 centennial of Confederation celebrations, all but the diehard Monarchists were waving the maple leaf...

I was spitting out the Listerine when the announcer shifted from the memorable birth to a memorable death:

"Also 30 years ago today," he said in his cheery voice, "the renowned American vocalist, Nat King Cole, died at the age of 45."

The program then segued into the first musical interlude.



*'Ramblin' Rose, ramblin' Rose
Why you ramble no one knows...'*

As Nat's mellifluous voice welled up, another memory wavered up from the pre-dawn fog:

The weather in the evening of February 15th, 1965, must have grown milder from the morning. It was mild enough for my buddies and I to loiter outside the village bowling alley, until our school night curfew time. I remember stamping in the slush amid the sound of dripping icicles when a drunk stumbled into the dim pool of light. It was Billy G.

"Howdy, gentlemen."

Billy was back from Ontario and staying with elderly parents. For the previous weeks, he was often perched on a counter stool at the local cafe. He was generous— always playing the jukebox, sharing cigarettes or even buying a hamburger for those who paid him any attention. He couldn't have been older than 30, but his voice was growly and he had the shakes.

"Whoops!" Without overshoes in the icy sidewalk, Billy reached for a shoulder to steady himself. He wore no gloves and his jacket was thin. His face looked puffy. Lighting a cigarette, he smoothed back his Elvis hair.

"Did you gentlemen hear the news yesterday?" he rasped. "Nat King Cole died."

We shook heads. We hardly knew of Nat King Cole.

"Poor old Nat, he was just singing along and '*bra-a-ack*'—just like that— he was gone."

One of the more feral boys laughed.

"Nope," said Billy, pointing his cigarette, "it's no joke. Nat King Cole. Throat cancer. Ole Nat was jest singing' along. *Bra-a-ack*' — he was gone, just like that." He jerked up the back of his hand to cover a rumbling cough.

We looked at one another smirking— unsure of whether Billy was mocking or mourning.

I only knew that Nat King Cole was not Motown. With his slicked hair, I assumed he was one of the passing generation of black entertainers whom James Brown, or any other loud and proud black performer of the current generation, might call an 'Uncle Tom'... It would be several years before I learned that Nat King Cole, rather like baseball's Jacky Robinson, bore with quiet dignity the racism of his day. His family even had even had to endure a KKK cross burning on their front lawn...

As for Billy? When he bent down, hacking and spitting into a snowbank I remembered wondering whether that was still part of his clowning. I remembered how he straightened up, wiped his mouth, and continued his Nat King Cole pantomime.

"Yup, ole Nat sure had some voice. Smooth as silk." He began to croon: '*Ramb-lin' Rose— Ram-blin' Rose...*'

The deep and warbling voice receded with that final image from the night of February 15th, 1965. It was eclipsed by a memory fragment from a few months later.

I was in the village café, looking over at the empty stool from which Billy once entertained. Having just heard of his death by the same malignancy that felled Nat King Cole— I wondered how—back on that winter night— my fellow scamps and I had missed his hints...



With the fade out of the smoky voice of Nat King Cole on the kids' radio, I stepped into the shower. I shivered in the reminder that I was already approaching the age that poor Nat died and had already outlived poor Billy by a dozen wasted years. Turning on the tap, I croakily sang:

*'Ramblin' Rose, ramblin' Rose
'Though I love you with a love true
Who can cling to a ramblin' Rose?*

It was hard to tell whether the echoed blubbering was only from spray on moving lips.

1995, February

fwt

An earworm of reassurance:

In driving in for the evening shift yesterday afternoon, I was touched by the tribute on the CBC afternoon show to Gordon Lightfoot. It was the 55th birthday of the master songwriter from Orillia, Ontario...

I was not an early follower of his music. His voice sounded too close to 'easy-listening' with a country twang. The revulsion to that genre was reinforced in hearing songs, like *'Ribbon of Darkness'*, covered by 'country gentleman' and fellow Ontarian, Tommy Hunter...

Only in my early 20s did I come to embrace the Lightfoot catalogue. My interest was probably drawn in, as intended, by his successful rebranding in the latter '60s for a younger market. A resemblance to Bob Dylan on his album covers was far more appealing than to that of Tommy Hunter.

Hair style and marketing aside, in the early '70s I felt that Lightfoot's best songs were as good as any of Dylan's.

Even in listening to the CBC commemoration yesterday, I was surprised that his classics like *'Early Morning Rain'*, *'Steel Rail Blues'*, *'Summer Side of Life'*, *et. al.*, were not featured. Curiously, the one song played in entirety was the lesser known *'Walls'* from one of his earlier albums. Coincidentally, that song happens to be a sentimental favourite:

*I'm not ashamed to talk it over once again
To rearrange my vocabulary
But I can't seem to find
Any words to change your mind...*



Hearing *'Walls'* for the first time in decades unleashed a cascade of images. Most vivid among them was hearing the song performed live at a Lightfoot concert in the National Arts Center in Ottawa.



In the midst of a breakup in the winter of 1974, I had unwisely gone to Ottawa during the college March break to see my former girlfriend. I had had a hope that by talking things over, a possibility for some future reconciliation might be seeded. Instead, my showing up only ploughed in the salt.

Still, the Lightfoot concert which we attended together was a poignant break in the tensions. Forgetting my earlier assurance that we would "just be friends", at one point I was so moved by the music that I reached over and squeezed her hand. She pulled away. That could well have happened during the performance of *Walls*:

*I'm not ashamed to try
To be your friend once again
'Cause that's what's friends are for...*

There was another unforgettable moment in that concert. During the intermission in the lobby, she unexpectedly touched my shoulder and whispered:

“Don’t worry, you look OK!”

I do not recall whether that gesture was taken only in friendship or in the faint hope of something more.

I do well remember that as the ‘relationship’ crashed and burned, ‘*Walls*’ ever more offered consolation. In hitch-hitching back east after that unhappy visit, I sang that tune to myself by the slushy roadside:

*I’m not ashamed to say I loved you well
I’m not ashamed to let you know...
I loved you well but what the hell
And that’s what walls are for...*

Well into my 20s, the song often came to mind when resignation or reassurance was needed. Perhaps it was in growing to no longer need such consolation that the tune faded away...

So, the song and its significance disappeared until yesterday afternoon. Then after hearing it on the radio, I whistled it on the drive back home last night. ‘*Walls*’ was still in my head when I woke up this morning:

*I’m not ashamed to darn
Nor too proud to find some yarn
To sew them up again
‘Cause that’s what socks are for...’*

The hope is that by writing this, I can push the old earworm back into hibernation...

1995, November

Wallflower in amber:



"Go girls, go!"

An unforgettable family night it was: 3 fledglings along with their mom and dad whooping and thumping along with the Chuck Berry cassette. Most irresistible was *'Johnny B. Goode'*:

MT and TE jived around the coffee table. Their 2 ½ year old brother held on to the sofa arm, grinning. T. comically shook her buttocks and I slapped my knee. A dead fish could not have resisted twitching to the infectious beat.

*'He never ever learned to read or write so well
But he could play a guitar just like a-ringin' a bell
Go Johnny, go go go—'*

"Go, Johnny go!" I yelled.

T. pulled up baby MH and pumped his arm like a Charleston partner. MT reached towards me for a jive...

Taking a swig from my third can of Coors' Light, I rose unsteadily to my feet.

"Imagine this— having not one— but *three* beautiful girls to dance with. Now, if I'd been so lucky in my teens!"

Before taking my 9-year old's hand, I flashbacked to the Saturday night dance at my native village's Masonic Hall, *circa* 1968. The local band, led by a Roy Orbison clone on lead guitar and vocals, was pumping out its signature cover. Even a screechy voice distorted by cheap amplifiers never failed to rouse the crowd to a frenzy when *Johnny B. Goode* was played. By the end of the night, nearly all in attendance excepting the dozing drunks, were paired up... Yet even as the dance floor heaved in the Chuck Berry numbers, there was one skinny kid in bush jacket who unfailingly stood frozen in the front corner...



In the *'American Graffiti'* mythos—even in Chuck Berry lyrics (*'No Particular Place to go'*) dancing and groping in the back of cars was a coming of age experience of the 1960s. Yet that world was as alien to me as some New Guinean mating ritual. What had I missed by not partaking of the village's rites of passage?

Back in the present, I whirled MT around a few times, setting off her giggles. Exaggerating her dizziness, she staggered and sank to the carpet. Meanwhile, her younger sister who had plumped herself down on the sofa with crossed arms, was frowning.

"You only dance with M.!" she pouted.

I reached out. "Your turn, honey."

She turned her head.

I make an exaggerated bow. "Please?"

She let herself be limply dragged to her feet.

Whirling my little daughter around, I flashed back to that dark front corner of the Masonic Hall. Younger girls with sexy grins often sat in the opposite corner. Through the evening I stole glances at them despite older brothers to be crossed at peril. Still, 'greasy brothers' was much more an excuse than a real concern. In any case, by the end of the night, I would be facing empty seats.

Whether of chaste or of wilder reputation— no girl would endure the humiliation of sitting out the last waltz alone. By that time, the unpaired guys were smoking on the outside steps, vomiting behind the hall or sleeping off the booze in the back of parked cars. Yet right to the flashing on of the lights at midnight, I stood frozen watching the clinging dancers...

"TE?" Suddenly TE was breaking away from me, falling back on the sofa, playing coy.

Com'on, honey," I played along, "don't you realize how much that hurts?"

You guys, dance!" said MT, nodding to her mom, who was still hopping with little MH.

"Yeah, com'on!" TE joined in.

"Let's wait for a slow one," said T. almost out of breath.

"Not on this tape," I smiled, "Chuck Berry doesn't do waltzes."

1996, May

A nostalgic antebellum glimpse:



In finding a little common ground amid the domestic tensions, MT and I watched another episode of the BBC series on the Beatles. At 14, she has become something of a Fab Four fan.

Tonight's video chronicled the Sunday evening in February 1964, when North America stood still for 15 minutes while the mop-top lads from Liverpool were introduced on the Ed Sullivan Show.

At the age of 12 I was, of course, blind to the convergence of social factors that determined the moment's magic. I was duly swept up along with the tens of millions. Yet watching the black and white footage tonight, I saw more of the show-biz acumen of manager Brian Epstein and America's need for post-Dallas catharsis that raw musical talent.

At the same time in watching the screaming white girls, I was struck by a more personal connection: the nostalgia of those girls' fathers for wartime England 20 years before. Perhaps in remembering English girlfriends they might have married, those ex-soldiers felt no threat in their daughters' frenzy over the cuddly English working-class lads. In those first exuberant months of the 'British invasion', middle-aged North Americans were tapping their toes along with their sons and daughters.

It was odd to remember that I had first heard of the Beatles through the *Time* magazine with the Beatles on the cover that was dropped under my nose a few days before their Ed Sullivan appearance. For vets like my father, the Beatles were batty but charming boys of the mother country they had defended.

Of course, all that was to change with the gradual mutation of the erstwhile cuddly lads to drug-addled subversives. In the innocence of Feb. '64, the battles lines of the 60's culture war were still beyond imagining...

On the video, the Beatles took their bows amid the pubescent screams. As they shook Ed's hand, I looked over at MT. I was pleased to see that she was charmed— perhaps no less that one middle-aged soldier was in noting my reactions before the TV hearth, 36 years ago...

1999, December

