

“The Power of Popular Music” by Preston Wilson (July 9, 2023)

Please find the opening words I am about to read in the handouts I have placed on your chairs. This segment of Eliot’s longer work has given me something new to meditate on over the last month or so. We strive in our UU faith to seek the truth by following the light of reason and bold revelation. We pray, observe, and discipline ourselves to think and act. Yet shouldn’t we also acknowledge the force of what Eliot calls “the unattended moment”?

Would you take two minutes to peruse his message with me in silent meditation?

For most of us, there is only the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time,

The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,

The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning

Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,

Hints followed by guesses; and the rest

Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages” from “The Four Quartets”

This is a lazy man’s sermon. Instead of pontificating on the power of music to move one’s spirit in a deep and meaningful way, on its ability to bring tears to your eyes and goosebumps to your skin, on its power to transcend time and space and transport you away from your common concerns and tedious thoughts, on its infinite variety of melodies, chords, and modes of expression.... Oh, wait a minute. I AM pontificating! Simply stated, let me show you what I mean.

If you would, experience with me five performances illustrating a range of musicians and singers, audiences, styles, themes, and genres. Admittedly, this is music from my generation, yet I trust these performances will live on for many generations to come as they discover again and again that, as Billy Joel so aptly sang, they didn't start the fire either.

The first source of our six sources from which we draw our living tradition speaks of "the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." Just the performances of these five songs alone have already brought billions of us on this troubled planet ineffable moments of pure joy. The transcending mystery of music! How did we humans ever get so lucky?

And because most all of us love poetic language as well as music, I am providing lyrics for you to mull over after the performances. So keep your eyes on the screen, your ears attuned, and your hearts open. Also, we should consider the affirming audience reactions as part of the songs since they express a communion of joyful emotions and release us for brief moments from the rigors of rational thought.

Description of songs and singers

1. As well as being a traditional romantic folk singer, Buffy Sainte-Marie, now 80, has spent much of her life fighting for world peace and social justice for indigenous peoples. 'Now That the Buffalo's Gone' and 'The Universal Soldier' are two recordings you might be familiar with. Recently, she has developed a unique genre she calls "powwow rock" to drive her messages across to discouraged warriors of all besieged tribes. The throat singer is Tanya Magaq.

2. Paul Simon is one of America's greatest songwriters and lyricists, often associated with the popular Simon and Garfunkel duo of the sixties. He is now 81. In 2011, he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences where he performed "American Tune, an interpretation of a Renaissance religious hymn composed by Hans Leo Hassler - it will probably sound familiar to you - though the words and interpretation are definitely his own. In them he expresses the profound tiredness of America losing its way in the exhausting years of the late nineteen sixties.

3. In 2009 on the television show “Britain’s Got Talent,” the unknown Susan Boyle from Scotland shocked the audience and the world with her interpretation of “I Dreamed a Dream” which when recorded has become one of the best-selling debut albums of all time. She is now 62 years old, and still going strong with eight albums to her credit. An ethereal voice illuminating “the inherent worth and dignity” of a very ordinary seeming person.

4. Freddie Mercury, the charismatic lead singer of the British rock group Queen, performed “Love of My Life” at Wembley Stadium in London as part of the world-wide Live-Aid Extravaganza in front of 72,000 celebrants who were mesmerized by his trademark showmanship and his encouragement of them to sing along. He died in 1991 at the age of 45 of HIV/AIDS but not before captivating the entire world with this homage to enduring love. (“I still love you.”)

5. Finally, we have the iconic and mysterious “Stairway To Heaven” written by Robert Plant and Jimmy Page of the band Led Zepellin. It was performed in 2012 by Mary Heart with her sister Nancy on guitar at the Kennedy Center Honors Concert in Washington DC, with the band members in attendance (minus the deceased John Bonham who is here replaced by his son Jason Bonham.) Few can resist choking up upon rehearing this beloved rock anthem.

Final Words: My love of certain popular music has delighted, comforted, and sustained me throughout my 78 years on this planet. I am so grateful that it continues to be a great joy. And it was a pleasure to share these songs of the spirit with you. May we live to experience many half-understood “hints and guesses” during those unattended moments of grace.

Amen

