

MY (BRILLIANT) MUSIC CAREER

"Dance like nobody's watching,
Love like you've never been hurt,
Sing like no one is listening ..."
And so the saying goes.
But what if someone is listening?

I don't think they have music classes in public school any more, and no doubt this is considered a loss. Well, maybe. Maybe not. But back in the dark ages, when I was in grade 5 at Mutchmor P.S. in Ottawa, oh we had music classes all right. I'm not sure I've recovered yet.

An itinerant music teacher turned up once a week to get us singing. To engender a love of music in us, I suppose. To, well, enrich us, I guess. On her first day, she went around the class and asked each of us to name our favourite song. I don't remember what anyone else said, but when my turn came I blurted out "Heart of My Heart". Well, this triggered an absolute explosion of laughter, the teacher included. Later in my life as a playwright I wrote a comedy or two and would have killed to bring down the house like that. Back then – not so much.

I'm not sure what the popular or cool songs of the day were in those days – "Don't Be Cruel"? "Rock Around the Clock"? – but it's safe to say they definitely did not include "Heart of My Heart." So I sat there, beet red, humiliated, while waves of laughter washed over me.

To this day I'm not entirely sure why the mere mention of "Heart of My Heart" prompted such unrestrained hilarity. You remember how it goes –
"When we were kids on the corner of the street
We were rough and ready guys

But oh how we could harmonize ..."

And so on. Oh, sure, it's sort of saccharine and corny – and certainly not cool. But it's not as if I'd picked "Skinamarinky Dinky Dink". Is "Heart of My Heart" really so bad that I was branded with it like some sort of scarlet letter of uncoolness? Forever. Or at least for the rest of grade 5?

A few days went by and I hoped it had been forgotten. Walking down the hall, I passed a girl with a group of her friends. Truth to tell, I had a bit of a crush on her, but I'd never managed to actually utter an untongue-tied sentence in her presence. And, of course, she'd never paid the slightest attention to me. But, to my surprise, she smiled at me – at me! – and beckoned me over. I approached, a little nervously, a little hopefully, only to hear her say "How's the 'Heart of My Heart' boy?" Zap! I slunk away, ears burning, giggles following me down the hall.

And there was more. The harsh gods of music education weren't finished with me yet. Each week the music teacher took us in groups of eight or ten to the music room where we were seated in a circle and taught a song to sing together.

One day, as we sang, the teacher went around the circle, pausing, listening closely to each child and offering a few quiet words. She came to me and listened as I did my best, singing away. She frowned slightly, listened some more. Then she bent over and put her mouth close to my ear. I guess I was expecting some sort of teacherly tip – "Louder please." Or "A little more vibrato," perhaps. Or maybe even a compliment or a word of encouragement. Instead, what she whispered in my ear was "Don't sing."

Don't sing.

She moved along to the next kid, leaving me there, completely flummoxed, humiliated anew.

Don't sing.

But what was I supposed to do? We were seated facing each other like a circular firing squad, and I felt as if every other kid was staring at me. I didn't know if they'd heard her, but they could certainly see me sitting there close-mouthed while they sang their little hearts out and could deduce easily enough what she must have said.

Don't sing.

So I faked it, silently moving my mouth in some awkward approximation of the words to the song. But I could sense everyone else looking at me. I wasn't fooling anybody. My embarrassing little secret was exposed for all to see.

I couldn't sing.

Not only was my taste in music risible – see “Heart of My Heart” above – but my singing was so egregious that it evidently ruined the melodic output of the whole group. And silencing me permanently was the only remedy.

Looking back now, I can see that, pedagogically speaking, this was pretty pathetic. I sincerely doubt that there's a line in the music teacher's manual which says “If a child is a poor singer tell him to shut up.” Surely, there was a better approach that teacher could have taken, because to this day I have no idea what precisely my problem was. Was I just a bit flat or off key? – issues which the teacher could have addressed with a little, you know, teaching. Or did she decide, based on barely 60 seconds of listening, that my singing was so gratingly awful that I was beyond help? Or, as I suspect, did she simply not care?

In any event, she took no further notice of me and each week I'd sit in my little circle of shame, eyes lowered, self-consciously flapping my lips and pretending to sing, and counting the minutes until this ritual humiliation in the guise of enrichment would mercifully be over.

When there were only a few more classes to go and I was about to make it to the end of the year without further mortification, we were gathered in our circle and the teacher again went around listening to each child individually, which she hadn't done since back at the beginning. When she came to me she paused, listened, looked slightly perplexed.

"I can't hear you," she said.

I sensed everyone looking at me. Confused, I whispered "... (mumble, mumble)... don't sing."

"What?"

"You told me not to sing!"

Giggles from the others. No hole to crawl into for me. The teacher looked vaguely puzzled, and for a moment - silly me - I thought - she's feeling badly, she's seen the error of her ways. She's going to rectify the situation. She's going to say "Nonsense. Every child should sing. See me after class and we'll work on it."

But what she actually said was "Oh, yes." And moved on. And I realized - she doesn't feel badly. She's not sorry. She's just forgotten! And I screamed, "You've subjected me to this seventh circle of musical humiliation every week and you've forgotten?!?! You've made me miserable! You've made me ashamed to open my mouth! You've made me hate music!! And you don't even remember!! Well, that makes you a lousy excuse for a human being and -- and

pedagogically deficient!! And what's more, "Heart of My Heart" is a perfectly good song!!"

But, of course, I didn't actually say any of that back then. Or ever. Until now.

The upshot of all of this was that the idea that my singing wasn't fit for public consumption had been firmly implanted in my psyche. I know it seems silly - it was grade 5 after all - but that whispered admonition still echoes in my ear.

Don't sing.

And ever since I've never been comfortable singing in public. Sometimes at concerts or services the audience is invited, indeed expected, to sing along to songs or hymns or carols. And sometimes I do, selectively, sotto voce. But even if I'm surrounded by hundreds of others who will presumably drown me out, even if, statistically, a few of them surely must sing just as egregiously as I do, I'm still not entirely comfortable and sometimes imagine the people directly in front of me flinching at my sour notes, and half expect someone to turn and shoot me a sidelong look which says - "Please, don't sing."

(I do confess to singing along to Sweet Caroline at weddings and at the Market Square with the Big Phat Horn Band. And I don't think I bothered anyone too much. But that's the Sweet Caroline exception. It's more shouting than singing. You're not supposed to be good - just loud and boisterous. And no one sounds bad to Sweet Caroline.)

The irony is I like music. I'm always working songs into my scripts and plays and even wrote a musical, Love and Larceny, with David Archibald (although he wrote all the music.) I know the words to all sorts of show tunes. (Relax, I just sing them to myself in private.) And my wife

Joan and I go to countless musical performances each year, to support our friends or just for enjoyment's sake. Indeed, we have a number of friends for whom making music is an integral - yes enriching - part of their lives.

There's a noted oncologist who, after putting it aside for 50 years, has taken up the trombone again with a vengeance and now plays regularly with three or four local bands. And has never looked happier. There's a physiotherapist who dons a pork pie hat, picks up a guitar and magically takes on a whole new persona as a cool bluesman. There's an architect who sings with Open Voices and taught himself the banjo to boot. A social worker who plays cello with a local orchestra and even goes to cello camp (yes, apparently there is such a thing.) And many more.

It's a passion they've rekindled often later in life in retirement or semi-retirement. Or perhaps it was there all along, simmering. They have the skill and gumption to get up there and sing or play in public, and I imagine it opens up a whole new world for them - new friends, new challenges, new highs. On top of all that it just looks like fun. And I confess to a slight twinge of envy when I see how music expands and enriches their lives as those music classes were presumably meant to do for me all those years ago.

Of course, I also took the obligatory piano lessons as a child and hated them and after listening to two or three years of incessant whining and complaining my mother allowed to me to quit. And told me I might regret it later on. Which I do. But I didn't last long enough to get to a stage where it's something I could go back to. I'd have to start from scratch.

Now I understand story structure. If this were fiction, I could give it a Hollywood ending, which would have me summoning up my nerve, joining a choir – (preferably one not requiring auditions) – and daring to actually sing. And at some point the director would come along, and pause and listen – and whisper – “Very good. A little louder, please.” But, of course, that's only happened in my dreams.

(In the Disney version I'd not only join a choir but be given a solo which I'd perform flawlessly to rapturous applause, during which I'd spot that dreaded (and now aged) music teacher in the audience, looking gobsmacked. And I'd give her a magnanimous little all-is-forgiven wave. But I'm getting carried away.)

To paraphrase Teddy Roosevelt, it's not the "cold and timid souls" on the sidelines who count but "the man who's actually in the arena - who strives, who errs, who knows the triumph of high achievement" - and the triumph of hitting that high note on the trumpet, I suppose. But, sorry Teddy, musicians need audiences, and so for now that's our role.

Kingston sometimes feels like Nashville North, with an endless and varied stream of music emanating, not just from the Isabel and the Grand, but from every club and nook and cranny. And Joan and I will continue to enjoy performances of the Kingston Symphony and Brasswerks and the Rideau River Big Band and the Choral Society and the Frontenac Concert Band and Melodia Monday and the Big Phat Horn Band and Sonny Slide Maddams and the Vimy Band and David Archibald and Anna Sudac and countless others.

And you never know, with all that music we go to maybe one of these days I'll hear that old, familiar tune and

someone will launch into "Heart of My Heart." And if they do I'll just say the hell with it and sing along. At the top of my lungs. I do remember all those corny words after all and ...

"I know a tear would glisten
If once more I could listen
To that gang that sang heart of my heart ..."
But that probably won't happen.

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