

STARSHIP



knee deep in the hoopla

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"We Built This City"

Knee Deep in the Hoopla

09/1985

Grunt / RCA Records

80s. Love. Song.

Tom Stern

I love you, Sara Kirk.

It has taken me more than twenty years, but finally I can call this out over the incomprehensible, unrequited, humiliated mass that has obscured it from us all these years. Granted, not every love story is a grand and enduring one. Ours certainly isn't. But it touched my soul, which is how I know it is love. Even if it started and ended with the banal, vapid noise-turd of a song that is "We Built This City," the shame-inducing somehow #1 single that takes me always instantly back to the moment we shared in 1989, a moment so confounding that it has buried and disguised our love ever since.

The first confusing aspect of our unconventional love affair is the fact that the song at its basis was released and charted in 1985, placing it, in the year in question, squarely within that Top 40 no man's land well after a humiliatingly crap song somehow commands the culture's attention but well before it resurfaces via some demented sense of nostalgia prompting people to claim they actually love the song *because* it's so bad.

My second point of stupefaction hinges on the fact that, out of literally every single song recorded during or before the year in question, this is the one you chose to perform at the 1989 Ladue Middle School talent show. And I remain convinced, to this day, that somehow no other song would have done.

To be honest, I did not know you back then like I know you now, possessing nothing more than that uniquely cursory type of knowledge one has about another's basic existence when two people attend the same school for years but have never had a single conversation. I saw you in the halls sometimes. You were rail thin, pasty pink pale, and had hazel eyes, round not almond, peering out beneath sand-colored hair trimmed across the midline of your forehead and in a straight line just above your shoulders, giving the impression of a helmet more than a hairstyle. You walked without moving your arms or head, your chin always tilted slightly down and to the right, eyes flitting between the ground and the space in front of you at a disaffected pace belying a nervous energy that nowadays would be diagnosed as anxiety. You seemed painfully quiet to the point of meekness, but on the three or four occasions I overheard you speak, your voice proved surprisingly assured and intelligent, even if your facial features never seemed to animate, every word unsupported by a flat, unconcerned affect.

The talent show took place on an oddly placed stage on the south end of a massive, wood-floored gymnasium, opposite the tiered bleachers that unfolded and compacted back into a strange, monolithic wall, wooden slats slapping and jolting into and out of place with ear-splitting, thunderous thwacks. The gym ceiling arced easily fifty-feet high, creating an undiscerning sonic orgy that gathered, melded, and bounced all sounds into a single cacophonous mass of reverberating muck. But that night, performer after performer looked right past such trifling unfavorables, seizing this opportunity to let their truest talents ring out, each act greeted by an adamant round of applause from the friends and family on hand to witness the moment when their loved one's boundless potential would be unleashed upon a soon to be adulating universe.

The show opened with a tremblingly nervous flautist, diaphragm aquiver.

She was followed by the half of a Shakespearean monologue that Scott Davis fumbled through before going up and staying up on a line.

From there, the order of things gets foggy, but I recall a diminutive yet sure-handed violinist. And an unaffiliated, pre-teen cheer squad that eventually found its way to a moment or two of synchronization. There was a magician whose tricks would only play in a space one-sixteenth the size. And two different sets of friends who choreographed their own dance numbers. One of them designed their own costumes by cutting and glittering mustard-orange jersey tee-shirts, a choice lauded as creative by several audience members within my earshot. And there was a tie-dyed, greasy-haired rock band called Turbulence trying very hard to look like they didn't care as they befouled a Led Zeppelin cover.

Then you walked out from the wings stage right. At first I was certain you must have taken an unfortunate wrong turn on your way hastily back from the bathroom. But you did not stop, you kept coming. Your footsteps made not a sound as you walked at your usual straight, steady clip to the single mic stand in the barren stage's middle where you took a hard right to face the crowd. The microphone, positioned too high, blocked most of your mouth and nose, leaving only your unreadable eyes visible over it.

And then you waited. Motionless and completely silent. Except for the sound of your breath, rippling and distorting now through the loudspeakers dumping out into the room.

On the gym floor, 20 rows of metal folding chairs were filled with onlookers and the unfolded bleachers behind were scattered with another 150 people easy, every last one of us staring on in wait. It was the type of silence that couldn't happen nowadays. It died back in the '80s, before we started running purely on media time. Now we lose our minds in such silence. We shout or scream or leave, irreparably convinced our rights as an audience have been violated. But back then, we just waited. And eventually, somehow, some way, the A/V guy finally figured out how to push play on the tape you had given him, the cassette single version of "We Built This City" replete with vocal tracks just as you might find on any radio station across America... four years prior.

The song started with that mortifying pang of its chorus belting out in a near-falsetto. Two syllables in and the only thought I could process in my reeling mind was the word, "No." Over and over again. Insistent if not emphatic. My eyes went wide, my breath tightened and shallowed, needles shot through my every synapse as what was about to transpire dawned on me undeniable. Had you lost a bet? But with whom? I had never seen you with a friend. Did your family put you up to this as some brutally misguided attempt to address your social phobias? But wouldn't they be cheering you on?

All coherent, rational efforts to explain away the horror unfolding before me were absolutely obliterated the second you started singing.

If one can truly call it that, my love.

You had missed the first bar, as the tape had started with no warning. But you scurried and caught up as the second "We built this city..." hit.

Your voice was a shrill, tone-deaf falsetto. A quivering and lost sound. The kind you hide and simply don't admit—no matter the circumstance. But of course, since life is

unflinchingly cruel, your voice managed to clearly distinguish itself atop the vocal track on the tape flooding into the sonic free-for-all that was the gymnasium.

Your expression remained blank and flat as you sang. Your body did not move an inch to the music. Not a foot tap, not an arm sway, nothing. Your eyes held wide and round and fixed no different than they had been in the endless silence that I now pleaded with a clearly absent God to bring back. You were a voice and only a voice, my love. A sonic desecration of a voice. A noise dagger eviscerating all of the senses, rendering them flaccid and fallow. Squeaking out lyric after lyric of the pandering faux anthem shaking the room with its boingy synths and split-track harmonies and skin-crawling lyrical and musical earnestness. By the time the lyric about someone playing the mamba hit, my gaze was buried irretrievable into the waxed wood of the floor, the question *why?* now screaming over and over again in my mind in a futile effort to block out the sound.

And then, the single most unimaginable thing happened.

To this day, when I play these events back in my mind for the thousandth time, still I am stunned every time my memory takes this turn.

It started somewhere in the back of the gym.

A small group of people.

At first just barely discernible.

Then it elevated. Quickly.

Into the unmistakable sound of people clapping to the beat.

I pried my eyes from the floor and looked back, expecting to find a mocking group of middle-schoolers. Or maybe a nuclear and extended family of entirely monotone mutes staring blankly forward and clapping their hands in an odd and belated version of support for their daughter, sister, niece, and granddaughter. But it was neither of these things. It was a group of high school kids who, contrary to everything that logic itself stands for and the order it kindly provides to so many aspects of our world, seemed to be honest to God enjoying the performance.

The claps gained immediate traction, too, snowballing almost instantly into a thunderous and emphatic drum track. Then the hoots and hollers began erupting. The bleachers even started toggling and squeaking with the inherited motion of bodies dancing. And, I shit you not, people even started to sing along when the chorus next hit. Utterly inexplicably, the entire room had shifted electric—a truth that surely left *Turbulence* in the wings dejectedly second-guessing their own musical prowess.

I scanned the room again and again for even a shred of irony in the crowd's fervor, but there simply was none there. At which point I turned my eyes back to the stage, ready to find you transformed into a joyous, expressive, impassioned performer finally pulled swan from the layered sediment of your shell. What I found instead was you, unaffected and persisting. Just as you had been before my eyes fell miles from the stage to the floor. Seascape dwarfed by the same oblong, sky high proscenium, arms at sides, face obscured now as then, body holding motionless, expression offering nothing, eyes still lost in the space overhead the bafflingly exuberant audience, your voice flat at every single turn imaginable—and some unimaginable, too—all the way to the end of the song, until the tape finally finished with its gradual fade out, amplifying your piercing voice by subtraction.

The crowd replaced their percussive accompaniment with booming applause and whistles and varied exclamations. But you just turned, as if you perceived none of it, and walked right back off the stage as you had entered it: flatly, impassively, already unfettered.

I would not understand it throughout high school as you went Goth and then metal and then landed somewhere in between, your hair black and then purple and then green and then purple and then black, your complexion somehow managing to get continuously paler. I would not understand it several years later when I heard some old friends discovered you stripping at Roxy's in East St. Louis. Nor would I understand it when I read your update on our high school alumni website, that you had moved to Colorado with a man you met, took a road trip with, and then married—and now you have a daughter. But when I stumbled upon your memory not long ago while sitting yet again sleepless under 3am stars stewing over the difference between a savvy life decision and a compromise, it finally became clear to me that my feelings for you were love. Not the kind of love upon which a new family is built. Not even the kind that results in fumbling naked experiences selectively stored in memory. But the kind of love that lets you really see another, to their core, finally making it obvious to me that of all the songs in the world, you chose that awful one to sing simply because you liked it. And you chose to sing it in that talent show just because you wanted to. Consequences, appearances, perceptions, and expectations be damned. And I love you for this. I have for what might as well have been forever. Even if I only know it now.

But if you see me at our upcoming reunion, please don't stop to talk. We've made our choices, built our respective cities, so to speak. Some loves are like that. Perfect until turned into something they are not. Ours can go on just as it is forever, shared together alone.

Besides, I could never start a life with someone who authentically likes that festering ass-crap of a song. How would I even pretend to defend your honor should a friend or a stranger, let alone an actual, informed fan of real music, ask us how we fell in love?

So I guess this is hello and good-bye, Sara.

It has been life-changing only maybe knowing you.