



Céline Dion

"It's All Coming Back to Me Now"

Falling into You

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Columbia · Epic

If You Whisper Like That

Katharine Coldiron

Céline on stage is quite a sight. She has these bizarre gestures, these tightly controlled flourishes, these odd steps and sweeps and stops. It's all highly engineered, based on many years of knowing exactly what her voice sounds like, exactly what she traffics in as a performer. Her every gesture, her still body and elastic face, all point toward the same especial range of emotion.

Melodrama is what she traffics in as a performer. No other singer is so melodramatic. And no song expresses her melodrama as well as "It's All Coming Back to Me Now," which, let's get this out of the way, might have been written for Meat Loaf, sort of, but people who say he sings it better are fooling themselves. If you are one of them, stop reading now, because I'm never going to convince you that "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" is a genuinely great song. But it is.

I was 17 when this song came out and I had no interest in anything so stupid. Beck claimed most of my heart, and whatever was left over belonged to ska, pop-punk, and early Sarah McLachlan (Ani didn't make herself known to me till college). Céline's romantic nonsense was too much for me to admit even to myself, let alone anyone else. I remember local radio DJs making a version of "My Heart Will Go On" that featured them howling in pain, because everyone was that tired of hearing the goddamn thing. I remember telling my best friend, whose heart-shaped box belonged to Courtney, that I kind of liked U2, and the chilly silence that followed in the car.

The video. A mansion and candles and flowing dressing-gowns and relentless mirrors. Céline reaching for the sky and the ground and the man and the fire. I've made fun of it many times, and I can do so again, because it's so ripe, it's a melodramatic apple wailing like a siren before it falls, perfectly formed and ready to eat, from the tree. But none of this is telling you why I love the song so much.

Because I do. I'll listen to it three or four times in a row, happily; I'm listening to it on repeat as I type this. And I keep stopping to gesture wildly at the air. The song is so powerful, so full of its own potency, that it spills into my cells whether I want it to or not. I croon "forever" with the choir, but even alone in the car I usually just listen to Céline, rather than spoiling the ductile textures of her voice with my own. She lets herself break and bellow and whisper in this one song, which is so big in its seven and a half minutes that playing it just once feels incomplete.

I know it's silly. There are dramatic violins, and a disconsolate wind blows when the music is quiet. The "story" is about some kind of bad love, a difficult past full of softcore sex and suffering (*Wuthering Heights*, says the songwriter). It's all too evocative to be specific. But this is the genius of sad pop: it makes heartbreak intrinsically vague, so when we listen and cry, we can stretch our situations over the generalities and believe the song really is about us.

Yet the silliness is so sincere. And it's good. Poking fun at sincerity, at dead-serious attempts to say something, is much easier when the work isn't very good. See *The Room*, for instance. Céline, even if she is generally Way Too Much, has a muscular and unforgettable voice, and "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" is exceptionally well-crafted

melodrama; the words are well-chosen, the music is sensuous and dynamic, and the production is grand, its priorities beautifully proportioned.

Bad melodrama, seen daily on soap operas, is much easier to laugh at and dismiss. Still, I challenge you to absorb a week of soap operas and not wind up emotionally involved by Thursday. Melodrama appeals to the side of us that believes in happy endings, that yearns for a time before we knew about moral relativity and the sourness of bottled resentment. It makes us feel something urgent and uncomplicated. It's a yank under the solar plexus: emotion without paradox. Simple barriers stand in the way of a woman getting what she wants instead of systemic political pressure or internal error. For instance: I had this lover and, even though we fought, the sex was amazing, but then he died in a motorcycle wreck. Now I must writhe in my satin-sheeted bed, and my inadequate health insurance and the uncertain future of *Roe v. Wade* have no claws at the moment.

Yes, I'm aiming toward women in this analysis, but women are the traditional audience for melodramatic art. Romance novels, Douglas Sirk movies, Céline Dion albums. Soap operas. Reality TV. Stuff where women are the subjects of their own lives, and their lives are generally narrow and lovelorn, full of tiny conflicts and enormous emotions. A bad relationship is huge, all-encompassing. Ask the best friend of someone in one. And "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" brings that alive beautifully, ideally, leading the listener by the hand through a house of mirrors, showing her every bad relationship she has ever lived through, experiencing years of turmoil in seven and a half minutes. Moments of gold. Flashes of light. I can barely recall, thank God, because being in a healthy relationship is much better than being in a sick one, even if it's much more boring.

When Céline's voice touches me like that, though, it all comes back to me. The dude who barely talked to me, but whose smile made me feel like a goddess. The guy who breathlessly called me a pale English rose when I undressed, and later coaxed me into having sex with porn playing in the background. The time my lover and I were fighting and I ran outside and got in the car and drove away, hyperventilating, and he thought I might have driven off a bridge, because that's how intensely the air between us had vibrated. Then we fucked in that same car, so passionately that I hung on for another year. All of this was terrible at the time, and lost long ago, but the melodrama of it endures. I can visit it (*melo*, from the Greek for music) without the unpleasantness of living it (*drama*, from the Greek for...drama).

Living vicariously through Céline for those minutes, again and again, gives me the kind of satisfaction I can't get from rolling my eyes at her. I can't listen to "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" every day, or even every month, and I can't listen to it with other people around, because I do preserve some outward dignity about my taste in music. But every time I listen, I am totally swept away by the song. I can't hold back any part of me when I hear it, can't close any emotional doors and smirk at her earnest vibrato. There's too much truth in it, too much genuine feeling. If it takes such pageantry to whisk me into a state of mind where my emotions are bigger than Alaska, I'll take it. On repeat, enthralled, gesturing for no reason, I'll take it.

Contributors

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