



Elton John

"Can You Feel the Love Tonight"

*The Lion King: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*

04/1994

Walt Disney

# Dreaming of Lions in the Desert

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In the Muscat of 1994, the only way for people with tight budgets to buy music was to go to one of the stores in Ruwi or Muttrah that had wall-to-wall ceiling-to-floor shelves stuffed tight with audio cassettes.

These were not original cassette albums, imported from the US in the case of American music, or from Bombay if Bollywood numbers were more your style. These were the copies of copies of tapes that existed in a more black-and-white legal world where copyright was respected. You would find the expensive originals in places like Dubai, which, though it had only a couple of tall buildings and a handful of shopping centers in those days, was still considered more pop culture savvy than Gulf towns like Muscat.

We didn't have MTV on our television sets either—it would take a few more years before satellite television became ubiquitous. So the only way for the average teenager to listen to the latest chart hits was to tune into Oman Radio FM 90.4 that broadcast each day from 9 in the morning to 10 in the night. The music programs and news bulletins were sandwiched between Quran recitation hours—a divine start to your day before the Chopin came on and a blessed end after Michael Jackson's latest had been played multiple times by cheery RJs high on their sweet life in this sleepy seaside town.

And on Friday afternoons, the weekend in that part of the world, Salima Raza would come on and host the weekend request show. You could call in or post letters and place requests for songs. She would, in that rich, drama school-trained voice of hers, announce your name and your choice of song and read out your message. Birthdays were the most celebrated followed by wedding anniversaries. The rare lonely heart would request a song for themselves. Cliff Richards' "Congratulations" got a lot of airplay. A lot. Sometimes three times in one show. And The New Kids On The Block would have been sick after hearing themselves singing "Happy Birthday" week after week after week.

It was in 1994 that I fell in the thrall of *The Lion King*. Looking back at my thirteen-year-old self, I do wonder if I wasn't a bit on the older side to be mooning over the romance between Simba and Nala. If I shouldn't have been a bit more worldly and recognized the sexiness of the bedroom eyes that Nala makes when she and Simba tumble about with "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" soaring in the background. Whatever it was, I was hooked on the movie and its songs and the way every orchestral swell reminded me of the sweeping plains of Disney's generic Africa and the lushness of the Technicolor Disney jungle.

I remember asking my father to buy me the cassette of *The Lion King* album. I remember we weren't able to find it when we first set out to search for it. For some reason, the music shops of Ruwi and Muttrah had the latest Mariah and Madonna and Michael and Whitney, but when you asked for *The Lion King* all you got was a blank look. Or vague promises to get it next week—the salesman would promise that someone had been sent to Dubai to make copies and haul them back over the border.

We had to make do with catching the songs when they aired on the radio. A year before, I had figured out that by pressing record on our portable player while the radio was on allowed you to tape whatever was playing. Of course, you couldn't get the full song in pristine condition—the RJ's voice would cut off the beginning or the end, or the next song would crowd out the final crescendo. But it was a cheap way to record your favourite tunes and you could hoard your pocket money to eventually spend it on the album cassette that you really wanted when you visited Dubai during the school holidays.

Starved of the opportunity to get *The Lion King* album in full, the weekend request show seemed the best way to get the songs I wanted and record them on our player. I would call up and tell the lovely assistant at the other end that I wanted "Circle of Life" to thank my father for being such a fantastic parent, and a week later I asked for "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" for all my friends at school. My father didn't listen to the show and neither did my friends (I think). But Salima Raza would play the songs and I recorded them.

Then I played them. Again and Again. After school I would stretch out on the living room sofa near the player and listen to Elton sing about how we were all part of this universe in which you could eat or be eaten and you should never take more than you give and the wildebeest would run in circles in my mind and elephants would raise their trunks and crown the young Simba held high up in Rafiki's bony hands.

The "Circle of Life" was the rousing song you'd want to hear as a pep-me-up before you went off to write your exams and try to score those A grades your parents demanded.

But when Elton sang of restless warriors and wide-eyed wanderers in "Can You Feel the Love Tonight", my feet would itch to traverse the deserts under a canopy of stars atop a camel at the head of a caravanserai.

I now realize that it helped to be in Muscat and let my mind fly on these fantasies. It was a place that helped spur the imagination—mainly because there was nothing much else going on. There was the calm sea on one side, rocky hillocks with abandoned forts ringed the city, and out west was the desert. It was, in short, the best place for a child prone to day-dreaming to grow up.

As I grew older, my musical universe expanded and grew more eclectic. I listened to Mozart and Handel, attended traditional Indian music concerts, bought CDs of 90s rock bands and Miles and Ella and added Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco to my streaming apps.

But there's a part of me that makes space on my phone for the songs that played every Friday afternoon on Oman's English FM radio. I can happily ignore Cliff Richards or NKOTB, but I can't resist Lionel Richie and old school Madonna.

And of course, I have "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" there, on every list, on every device. With the passing of time, and as my musical tastes developed, I would read about how this Hindustani raag or that Vivaldi piece really speaks to the truth of nature and love and the mysteries of our world. Maybe. But for me to appreciate the infinity of space and worlds beyond our own, and also remember the slow magic of that Muscat childhood, I need to listen to Elton sing of star-crossed voyagers and the wild outdoors. After all, it's enough to make kings and vagabonds believe the very best.