



Elvis Presley

"Hound Dog"

Hound Dog

07/1956

RCA

...and other artists

Rock 'N Roll is Here to Stay

Mary J. Breen

When I'm old and demented and someone thinks to make me a Music and Memory playlist, I know exactly what I want—the same music I listened to as a teenager, and the same music I listen to now on long car trips: Rock 'n Roll, Gospel, and Motown, plus a few Mozart symphonies to show I'm not completely unsophisticated. I know I'll want to hear the music I loved as a kid, the music that helped shape me, the music I still feel connected to all these years later.

Now at 73, when I look back at how I got hooked on that music, I picture myself in Grade Nine in 1958. I see a cautious, much-too-tall girl with thick glasses and dreary clothes at the edges of a school dance. And, since I know her well, I know she has three more strikes against her: she's new to town; she's a top student, and she's the daughter of one of the school's more forbidding teachers. It's no wonder she's there with the other "wallflowers" as we'd already learned to call ourselves: the unfit, the unchosen, the unwanted, marooned on the sidelines of a smelly gym and pretending not to mind.

School dances were very popular in small-town Ontario. If you were a real teenager, you went to all the school dances. Period. A big part of the appeal of these dances was the chance to be immersed in the music of the day. In those dim and distant days before we could carry 1,000 songs of our choice on our cellphones, it wasn't easy to get to hear the songs we wanted to hear. My parents' radio buzzed with static, and its small dial made precise tuning almost impossible. If I did find a station I wanted, it would usually fade in and out, whistling and hissing and swooshing like ocean surf in the movies until another station drowned it out, and on the rare occasions when I found a clear station, I was never allowed to leave it on for long. The radio stood on the bookcase in the living room, and my parents weren't having it playing any kind of music, especially rock 'n roll, when they wanted to read or watch TV.

Then, in my first year in high school, I won a radio in a fund-raising contest for selling the most magazine subscriptions—an easy win because, besides the several subscriptions my parents already ordered every year for themselves, they gave subscriptions as Christmas gifts to most of their friends and relatives: *Reader's Digest* or *Time* for the men, and *Chatelaine* or *Ladies Home Journal* for the women. First prize was a little transistor radio. Everyone was impressed with how small and portable it was, but in truth, its sound was tinny and its reception undependable except late at night when, under the covers, it could pick up a station in Buffalo that played *really good* music. The only reliable radios I knew of were in cars, and a few years later, after my friends and I turned sixteen and were able to drive, we would borrow someone's parents' car and drive around, *with no particular place to go*, just waiting, hoping, listening, almost praying for our favourite song to be played on one of the Hit Parade shows.

None of my friends had enough money to buy records regularly—my friend's solitary Chuck Berry album got a lot of play on her portable record player—but we could always go and hear music at the restaurant where we gathered on Saturdays to drink lime-Cokes and eat French fries. They had a juke box, one of those classic Wurlitzers the size of a small fridge, round on top with flashing lights, little mirrors, and bubble tubes, the kind where you could watch the little 45s being pulled out and set spinning before the needle dropped. Every booth had its selector box with lists on little metal cards you could flip through, and buttons to push for your choice. This was all good, but it cost money—

something none of us had much of—and the latest hits took several weeks to arrive and be slotted in. And, even if you did find the one you were dying to hear again, there might be ten songs lined up ahead of yours.

My most important source of music was *American Bandstand*. Every chance I got in Grades Eight and Nine, I'd dash home to watch it after school on our brand-new-though-often-fuzzy, black-and-white TV with finicky bunny ears on top. Later we got a rotor that sat on the TV and was used to aim the antenna as much as possible towards the origin of the TV station, in this case, Rochester NY, directly south across Lake Ontario. As I lay on the couch and drank ginger ale I didn't just watch the show: I studied it: the girls' smooth hair styles, and their cool American clothes: plaid pleated skirts and long straight skirts, white blouses with Peter Pan collars, pullovers and cardigans, thick white bobby socks and white bucks, saddle shoes, or T-straps. I memorized the lyrics and melodies of the songs—I still know most of them—and I studied and practised their dance steps, especially the Stroll and the Twist. I remember wondering why all the dancers never seemed happy, either on TV or at school, all of us dancing without a smile. I learned the names of the performers so I'd be in the know, but I paid almost no attention to their musical skills, never even noticing that they lip-synched their "live" appearances. Except for Elvis, whom we'd seen on *Ed Sullivan* and who was irresistible because of his voice and his smile and his hair and his "gyrations," I didn't care about any other pop stars. I didn't send off for signed photographs, and I didn't read about their favourite milk shakes at their favourite "malt shop" in teen magazines; I just wanted their music.

We craved this music, but we knew very little about it. I didn't know about its black roots in jazz and blues. Ours was such a white world that I never noticed that there were no black kids on *Bandstand* and very few performers were black. The only ones I'd ever seen were Harry Belafonte and Louis Armstrong on *Ed Sullivan*. I'd never met one in person.

I loved the music so much I thought maybe I could learn to play it too. At that time, I was preparing for my Grade Eight Royal Conservatory piano exam, but of course I had no idea how to sound anything like Fats Domino or Jerry Lee Lewis. I mastered "In The Mood"—anyone could—but I did not at all master "Bumble Boogie," even though I'd spent good money on the sheet music. It was soon apparent that there was no point in trying to play my pathetic version of rock 'n roll all by myself, especially with my father radiating disapproval of the music in the background, and both of my parents radiating disapproval of my taking time away from my arpeggios.

At school dances, however, good music was guaranteed. A few boys had dreams of putting together a band, as teenage boys seem wont to do, but they couldn't compete with the music of real pop stars played by a "disk jockey" up on stage. I don't know who those records belonged to, but they were loaned to the school for these events, so we got to hear stars like Neil Sedaka, Dion and the Belmonts, The Marcels, Leslie Gore, Bill Haley, and Elvis singing "The Wanderer," "Blue Moon," "Calendar Girl," "It's My Party," "Walk Don't Run," "Rock Around the Clock," "It's Now or Never," "Strangers on the Shore," "Save the Last Dance for Me," and "Jailhouse Rock." We didn't care that the lyrics were ridiculous: *Who put the bomp In the bomp bah bomp bah bomp*, and we didn't care about the sentiment behind *I kiss 'em and I love 'em 'cause to me they're all the same*.

These dances, often mysteriously called Tea Dances, started right after school, and went only until about seven, probably so they wouldn't delay the country school buses any longer. And riotous events these were not: the only food or drink available was milk, white or chocolate, sold to us by our cautious and perhaps unimaginative Student Council. Besides both fast dances and slow, there were Spot Dances: special secret places on the dance floor that earned a prize for whomever was closest to one when the music

stopped. Sometimes the dances were called Sock Hops, but we weren't obliged to protect the gym floor by dancing "in sock feet" because our mothers would have killed us for coming home with filthy socks. We also had Hard Times dances where we were expected to wear torn or grubby clothes, and yearly Sadie Hawkins' Dances—a chance for the girls to invite the boys—although hardly a blow struck for equality of the genders. Sadie was a character in the *Li'l Abner* comic strip, a woman too toothsome, warty, and homely to ever get a man, so on one day a year, in the world of Dogpatch, she was allowed to try to hog-tie one of the town's bachelors and drag him across a finishing line before sundown. If she succeeded, he had to marry her. Ha, ha, ha. These dances just made for further humiliation for any girl desperate enough to ask a boy.

One thing I soon figured out was that, unless you came with a date, we girls were expected to lurk along the far wall and unattached boys along the opposite one. When a song began, we could make no forays from our side to theirs, but some of the braver boys would make the long trek across the floor in our direction. I wonder how long it took me to learn not to watch as they headed towards us, but rather to stare straight ahead or to appear to be paying rapt attention to whatever a friend was telling me. If ever a boy asked me to dance, I worried about what I was supposed to do when it ended: say thanks?...or say thanks and wait to see if they wanted another?...or say thanks and scurry back to the wall of woebegones and let him escape in the other direction? If—or much more often when—no one asked us to dance, we younger girls would dance with each other, getting to spin around, making our wide skirts spin too, and perfecting our dance steps. We all became much better dancers than the boys.

The teachers took turns being chaperones. Presumably, their job was to keep the peace, and to keep kids from dancing too close, although *Dirty Dancing* hadn't arrived at our little school anyway. Only a few of them bothered to patrol in the gloom. At least they didn't go about with a ruler getting kids to dance far enough apart to "make room for the Holy Ghost" as my friends at Catholic schools had to endure. I don't know why our teachers weren't aware—or weren't concerned—about those boys who drank stronger drink than milk outside the back door. I assume they didn't realize that the liquor was sometimes provided by an entrepreneurial school employee.

Even though I was seldom asked to dance, and even though I was keenly aware of how many strikes I had against me, and even though I knew I couldn't compete with girls who were prettier and had better clothes and probably gave off less of an aura of desperation, I still went to most of those dances, carrying with me a little glimmer of excitement, optimist that I am, and more than a little dread, realist that I am. It would have been so much easier to stay home and eat popcorn and watch *Highway Patrol* and *Peter Gunn* and *M Squad* with my mother.

And now, 55 years later, I do wonder why I kept going to those dances, though of course teenagers do things for tangled, overlapping reasons, reasons both complicated and simple, critical and shallow, and most of all, for reasons deeply unclear to themselves. Back then, wanting to be in a certain place at a certain time with certain people felt like it had life-or-death consequences. So, yes, I felt I had to keep going to those dances.

I went for the music, but not just for the music. Like most teenagers, I very much wanted to belong within the world of the teenager—something easier said than done. In the Lutheran/Mennonite town we'd just moved from I'd been a misfit because my parents were Catholic outsiders who ran the unwholesome movie theatre. Now my father had been transformed into a proper citizen, someone who taught right here at our high

school, and this, I hoped, might make me more acceptable. That hope was fading, however, when I discovered that he was so strict that everyone was afraid of him, and so, I figured, no one would ever visit me for fear of encountering him.

I also went because I saw school dances as a necessary though painful step towards becoming a real live teenager, which meant I was partway to becoming a real live adult, which meant I'd soon be an independent person who could buy herself a ticket out of Dodge. I was certain life happened somewhere other than in small towns, and I was very keen to go to the only city I knew, Toronto, where I'd go to university and be very, very sophisticated and very, very suave. And escape my mother.

It wasn't hormones compelling me either, since I was a late bloomer, and I didn't have a crush on any of the Grade Nine boys—mere children that they were. I did think some of the older boys were cute, but I knew they wouldn't have noticed me if I'd shown up wearing nothing but feathers. Even though, in those days, all girls were expected to marry (and pitied if they couldn't catch a man), I never thought I would. I hadn't grown up with fantasies of white dresses and flower girls, as my mother had made me aware of my many fatal flaws. Besides, my parents' unspoken but loudly declared wish was that I become a nun. Even so, I think I was still child enough to hope for a kind of Cinderella miracle, the Ugly Duckling girl who, after her super makeover, is discovered and rescued by Prince Charming—and at a ball. Teenagers are caught in a strange transitional time somewhere between the *make believe* world of childhood and the dreary realities ahead that they'd often rather not face.

What I really knew deep down was that these dances mattered a lot, and mattered in an intense way that I had no words for. I didn't know that an awful lot of people throughout the ages have felt that dancing mattered an awful lot because dancing is part of the mating game: the stylized practices of displaying, judging, choosing, touching, and pairing—and rhythm. I suppose I knew dancing was about sex—mysterious subject that that was—but if, at 14, I'd heard George Bernard Shaw's clever words that dancing was "The vertical expression of a horizontal desire legalized by music," I wouldn't have even known what he meant.

When people asked young people the late 50s and early 60s what they loved about the music, they always gave the exact same answer that the adults gave when they were asked why they so disapproved of it: "the beat." And it was the true answer; I, and a few million other teenagers, felt it and loved and craved its physical, driving energy. Even though there is nothing new about singing the blues, we too were drawn to the narrative of loss and heartbreak in those songs. They made us feel very grown-up; we thought we already knew about broken promises and unrequited crushes and forbidden loves and the pain of being ignored at a dance by the very boy you helped with his homework every day after school. And then there was the intoxicating certainty that this powerful music was our music—not our parents'. They could still listen to that stupid *How much is that doggy in the window?*, but we now had *You ain't nothing but a hound dog*. And the more the adults—priests, teachers, politicians, and parents—declared the music decadent, vulgar, full of Communist influences, and certain to make delinquents of all of us—the more we defiantly adored it.

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