

# The Magic of Music

There are so many things in this world that divide us as human beings, that seem to create conflict and strife, but if there is one thing that can be pointed to, as bringing brings people together in a positive way, it is music.

More than any other art form, music has this great collectivising aspect. It can be enjoyed on your own, in the privacy of your home or through the plastic earpieces of your iPhone, but there is little doubt that the experience is enhanced by coming together and sharing it, either by participating or just communal listening.

Some anthropologists have speculated that early humans sang before a common language was developed. You don't always need to comprehend the precise meaning behind chants, chorals or songs, for them to touch the emotional centres of your cortex. From the ululations of the warriors of the Serengeti, to plainsong in Gregorian Chant, from the whirling Sufi dervishes to the polyphonic harmonies of traditional Georgian, the keening sorrows of Iberian Fado to contemporary Gangsta Rap – they all have the capacity to reach into our hearts and to transport us to other, more ethereal forms.

My Grandfather sang at weddings and funerals, – sadly, much more of the latter. He did it for a shilling, which paid for the following Saturday:, a ticket to the rugby or a theatre show, a few beers, a sneaky bet and fish & chips on the way home. He had a lovely lyric tenor voice, that to my biased ears, sounded like the great Enrico Caruso on the 78 that he used to played on a gramophone.

Music was always present in my home as I grew up. We had one of those old Radiograms and I used to play all my parents' records: *Favourite Arias*, Mario Lanza, Kathleen Ferrier, Frank Sinatra, Nina Simone – to *The Dubliners*. I would sit on the speaker part of it, turn the Bass wheel up to 10 on the dial (there was no 11!) and feel the deep, low vibrations through my backside.

To my parents' horror I moved on to heavy rock and metal of *Led Zeppelin*, *Queen* and *Iron Maiden*. That was was simply beyond their comprehension at the time – though I later had my father watching VHS videos with the likes of Meat Loaf, Gary Moore, *Heart*, and *Whitesnake* and thoroughly enjoying them.

This was the thing; my parents taught me not to be too 'precious' in your music listening and to try different things, my tastes remains catholic and eclectic to this day.

Live music has led me to have many wonderful experiences and come together with a diverse range of people: a week in Bayreuth, enjoying *The Ring Cycle* by Wagner and the endless conversations in the hotel bar with fellow Wagner enthusiasts; seeing *Madame Butterfly* for the first time and having my heart broke sore by her death at the end. Then there was a Manowar concert in Birmingham. where Joey DeMaio played *Sting of the Bumblebee* (his take on the

more well-known *Flight*) on a 12-string Rickenbacker Bass, and the even more impossibly flying digits of Scandinavian axeman Yngwie J. Malmsteen in Bristol.

There was that time in Edinburgh seeing Scotrock band *Runrig*, when the notes of Banks of Loch Lomond struck up and I was grabbed by a leery-eyed, bekilted native and told to '*Sing ye Sassenach gobshite ye*' (I am Welsh but I did not argue the point). So we sang and pogoed until I needed a double hip replacement and – my blood roiling with Braveheart blue woad – I was rewarded with a whisky-sodden sloppy kiss on the lips. It was a little forward, but *When in Rome...* as they say.

Then in Dublin one steamy July evening, I went to see *The Lone Bellow*, a band who performed a range of self-penned Americana. At the end of the concert, they came down from the stage and in the middle of the crowd, sans electric amplification, performed Paul Simon's *Slip Slidin' Away*. Kanene Doheny's soulful vocals were met with a chorus of 200 drunken concert-goers.

Here's the thing, it was not roared out: instead there were perfect harmonies, totally unrehearsed; and we sang with restraint, gentleness and with perfect pitch. It was a spiritual experience and our cheeks were wet with tears; it was an unforgettable moment.

Music at its best is capable of these all things and many more besides. Music is magic and those of us blessed to be open to it, can have our lives transformed by it.

***John Llewellyn James***