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A Partial Musical Autobiography

When I first sat down to write this account of my relationship with music, it struck me that there was almost nothing about my life I could reasonably be excluded from it. Every experience of my life, every encounter, event, or person, seems to have brought with it some piece of music, some sound to identify it. Still more, it seemed that there was no way for me to explain the music I've listened to or played throughout the years without describing where I was or what I was doing. In a way, this isn't surprising. Over the years, I've surrounded myself with musicians and music lovers, until it seemed to me that non-musicians are almost mythical creatures, rarely observed or sighted. Neither has this been an accident. Music is for me not just an interest or hobby, but a profession, and now a field of study. It has become an overwhelming pursuit, driven forward by necessity and obligation even when enthusiasm wanes. Still I was startling to see so much of my life come forth when considering the question of my relationship to music. I realized in this process that, in many ways I have been accompanying my music even as it accompanied me. It has been the music I played, the music I listened to and participated in which has led me to where I am today. It seems to me now that I am a product of my musical experiences, that they have shaped and designed my life, so much so that I can hardly imagine what I would be now without them.

The Beach Boys

If music really has been the dominant influence on my life, "The Beach Boys" may be an appropriate title for my teenage years. I can remember very clearly the first time I had a very strong musical experience. I was thirteen and my dad played a Wilson Pickett compilation CD that he had taken out from the library. Wilson Pickett was a very bombastic soul singer who had several hits in the sixties. I don't know exactly why this record in particular grabbed me. There was a lot of music in my house, my dad had a pretty extensive record collection and I had even studied piano when I was younger. Looking back on it though, it almost seems as though this was the first time I had ever really heard music. It was the first time that music had ever solicited me, the first time it elicited a response. I took that CD out from the library every week, tried to dub in onto cassette, and searched for other music which could make me feel that way. I got really into soul music, and started listening to Otis Redding, James Brown, Sam and Dave. I started playing the piano in our house again and started to play guitar. All of this was supported by my father with some delight, who regularly fed me new music to expand my palette. I sought out other musicians as friends, and began hanging out and playing in my schools band room at lunch time. Everybody else I knew was playing guitar, so I started playing bass in order to play with as many people as I could.

The Beach Boys was one of the many bands that my dad presented to me. I had amassed a fairly sizable and eclectic collection of music, most of which I did not share with my friends or peer group. The Beach Boys were one among many that I listened to and enjoyed. This changed

one day when I was around fifteen, and a classmate of mine named Paul approached me and declared, since I was a musician, we would have to form a band and become stars. This kind of talk is not altogether unusual among young musicians, but there was one unique twist: He declared that the way for us to achieve success was to completely and totally emulate the Beach Boys. This was interesting. I had never connected so much with anyone my age about musical taste before this. As we got to know each other, playing together and spending time together, The Beach Boys was a critical link between us. Paul was quite charismatic, and knowing him widened my circle of friends considerably. Most of the people I spent time with, and most of those I played music with were of this circle, and for all of us, The Beach Boys were important. A lot of my time and energy in high school was spent in imitation of the Beach Boys, whether directly or indirectly. We would try to sing in harmony like them, learn their music, pour over their records and endlessly watch documentaries and concert footage. I began to study recording, at least in part because of my interest in Brian Wilson's recording style.

There were many things about the Beach Boys which appealed to us. In part it was the music, but the story of the Beach Boys, the grand narrative of their rise to prominence and tragic collapse was just as important. The music appealed on several levels. Upon first listen, it was pleasant, catchy and memorable, even appearing simple. The more we explored it, though, the deeper, more complex, interesting, and profound it seemed to become. The intricacy and cleverness of the songs came out more and more with every listening. Mixed with this, though, was an unnerving thoughtlessness and naivete. Incredibly beautiful passages were accompanied by the most banal and clumsy lyrics. Otherwise perfect tracks marred with silly mistakes, studio

chatter, or off-mic laughter. This fantastic body of music almost seemed an accident, made in spite of and not because of the abilities of the band. Yet, rather than diminish the bands greatness, all of these things enhanced it, made it seem more priceless and valuable, more personal. It appeared to us as a secret, given to us for safekeeping. (maybe say more about the story of the beach boys)

The music of the Beach Boys is not only a childhood love for me. Though it hasn't always been at the forefront of my musical life, It's always been important to me. In the last several years, my interest in them was greatly renewed. With many of the same people that I shared the Beach Boys with when I was in high school, I started a Beach Boys tribute band in 2010 designed to play their music as accurately and authentically as possible. Transcribing the music and learning to play and sing it again as a much more mature musician made me feel even closer to the music than I had before.

Jazz

I became interested in jazz later in my teenage years, when I was around fifteen or sixteen. It was my dad again who first showed it to me. In the beginning, I listened to a lot of Miles Davis records that he already owned, but I moved pretty quickly into buying CDs and developing my own taste. Two early favourites of mine were Charles Mingus, a virtuoso bassist who straddled both traditional and avant garde styles, and Joey DeFrancesco, a very funky organist. I started playing much more jazz to as a bassist. My high school band teacher helped me a lot as well. She and her husband often invited me to play with them, and they even set up a summer weekly gig for us at a local legion.

Jazz had a very different impact on me than any of the music I knew before. It felt uniquely mine, a discovery that I had made on my own and that nobody could take away from me

To me back then, jazz seemed like an intellectual challenge more than a pleasant experience.

When I listened to it, I felt the impetus was on me to appreciate it sufficiently and not on the music to be interesting and excellent. I had the impression that all jazz was great, and it was me who had to learn how to approach it correctly to enjoy it properly. I also felt that listening and playing it set me apart from those I knew. In fact, it did open up my world beyond my circle of friends and peers. I had a chance to play with a lot of musicians around town, many of whom were older and more experienced than I was, and go places and see things I never would have otherwise. Through my band teacher, I joined several community jazz bands and started playing small gigs around my town. I made a strong effort to cultivate my taste, always looking for something denser and more challenging to work on. I got really into avant garde jazz and noise music, again struggling to appreciate and understand it. As I got closer and closer to graduating from high school, I felt that I had no choice but to pursue music, and jazz in particular. I auditioned for, and attended Capilano University, the only school in Vancouver to offer a degree in Jazz Studies.

When I got to Capilano, I felt overwhelmed, but also comfortable. It was intimidating to be surrounded by so many musicians, many of whom were more experienced and older than me, but I also felt for the first time in my life surrounded by like-minded people. To my conviction that jazz was the most challenging and serious music was the weightiness that comes with studying a discipline. Capilano university's jazz program specializes in a style called be-bop, a

technically challenging and difficult style which led to the transformation of jazz from a dance music into an art music. Here also, lessons on proper technique and idiomatic playing was accompanied by a studies of skilled jazz appreciation, listening to the right things in the right way. This emphasis was present in class work, private discussions with teachers, and also in the conversations between students students, alumni, and musicians around the school. Anybody who tries to make a career out of their artistic pursuits will know the anxiety we all felt in this situation. We worried about technical challenges, about not understanding something or not practising enough, but much more stressful than that were concerns about appreciation and enjoyment. Was I truly enjoying what I was doing? Was I playing authentically enough, creatively enough, and with enough passion and joy? Many of my fellow students, ashamed by their lack of appreciation for the music, dropped out of school and from jazz, choosing music more suited to their tastes, while resenting those players who stuck with it. Still others plunged into the music with gusto, becoming model players and listeners in that idiom and never diverting from it. For my part, I threw myself into the music as much as I could, and while not forgetting my love for other kinds of music, allowing jazz to take centre stage in my musical life. I began playing jazz gigs, writing jazz tunes, and starting jazz bands, and though me and my peers often strayed from the strict be-bop idiom, it was always available for us and often held as the standard to aspire to.

I too resented the imposition of be-bop as the standard for appreciating jazz, and jazz as the standard of appreciating music while going to music school, but it did give me a way of thinking about music which I still have to this day. It's shortcomings and strengths are mine. Jazz theory is more general, more pragmatic, and more flexible than it's counterpart in classical music.

Though I don't think this was ever stated explicitly in my studies, it was often assumed that jazz analysis could be applied easily and seamlessly to any kind of music. My piano teacher at Capilano regularly wrote jazz nomenclature over Bach preludes, and I myself often translate new music that I learn into jazz theory terms. This universal quality of jazz theory is possible mostly because of its collapse of melody and harmony into a single concept, the "chord-scale." Rather than thinking of chords and scales as separate but related concepts, jazz musicians consider them both as a single unit, with every note of the "chord-scale" capable of being used melodically or harmonically without distinction. This is tremendously useful in highly-chromatic music and it allows one to move from one chord-scale to another as a whole, concerning oneself with voice-leading from tension to release rather than the specific function of single notes or chords .

However, this quality becomes a significant disadvantage when dealing with less harmonically challenging music. Thinking about music as chord-scales, jazz musicians often fail to see the significance of a chord progression which moves from tonic to subdominant in a single key. Also, different chords sharing a chord-scale may be replaced by one another indiscriminately in this scheme. I encountered many difficulties trying to apply this knowledge to playing pop or rock music. Thinking about chord-scales often devalues melody as well, especially diatonic melodies. Jazz musicians go through such a vast quantity of notes that melodies can seem cheap and replaceable. This is especially true because of the value jazz musicians place on improvisation. I'm still conflicted over these aspects of jazz performance and theory. Much of what I know about music, how I think of it, and how I play are due to my experience at music school, but there are some aspects of it which I reject or find unsatisfying. I struggle through these issues whenever I play now, and especially when I embark on new projects or creative

pursuits. Whether I play as a jazz musician or not is still a question for me whenever I pick up my instrument.

The Song Band

Though I loved, and still love jazz, after a few years of music school, I felt a pull for something else. I wanted to get away from its conventions and aesthetics, and to discover my own thing. In my third year at Capilano, me and a guitarist named Cole Schmidt came together to start a new band that we called “The Contemporary Lovers.” We had played together often since we met, and saw eye to eye on a lot of things. Though we had very different musical taste, we both shared a lot of ideas about what was important in music and how to create it. Our idea was to start what I called a song band. Playing jazz, we spent most of our time playing tunes, or pieces, or sometimes playing freely, with no preconceived music at all. It seemed as though the material we played over was disposable in some way. Melodies were formulaic, chord progressions designed for improvisation possibilities instead of sound, and forms were dull and

repetitive. We wanted to play music in which the melody, chords and lyrics worked together to form a greater whole. We wanted to play music with a singer who would sing, rather than do his or her best to imitate the sound of a saxophone. In my case, the inspiration came from musicians like Tom Waits, Paul Simon, and Elvis Costello. I thought that the song band could cut across genre divisions to let a band play a wide variety of music. We decided to play only "songs we liked," only music which we felt that the songs could stand on our own. We didn't want to reject the technical knowledge we had, or turn our backs on jazz, but to bring something to it that we felt was lacking. We found a singer named Andrea Vargas, whose unique and very interesting voice seemed a perfect vehicle for the project. She was interested and we began to rehearse and prepare to play.

Though all three of us agreed in principle about the kind of band we wanted to have, the details proved difficult in practice. We decided not to play any original material, but only covers. However, our specific ideas of what music we wanted to play varied wildly, and we all compromised a lot. The musical chemistry was good though, and we began to rehearse more and more, building up our repertoire and finding small gigs to play here and there. We found the opportunity to record, and pressed CD's, hand making covers out of old paint canvas. We embarked on a small tour to Vancouver island, and got a lot of support and praise from our friends and those around us. It was a very satisfying musical experience for me. I was able to select my favourite music and transform it, mixing the skill I had learned playing jazz with the heartfeltness and intimacy of the songs that I loved. After a few years, though, we decided that to take the next step in the bands career, we should begin to perform original music.

Writing music is something that I had done ever since I began to play. Sitting at a piano,

experiment with chords, melodies, and improvising, were some of my first and most important musical experiences. One of the first instruments I bought was a keyboard that I used to sequence songs and simulate large ensembles, and many of the most important friendships I have were crafted over songwriting sessions. I tried hard to write songs with lyrics throughout my youth. I did not abandon this pursuit at Capilano either, though my focus changed. I wrote for jazz groups I played in, but stopped writing songs with lyrics, instead trying to write in the style that I was learning. This impulse didn't go away entirely, though. While working summer jobs as a painter, window washer and greens keeper, singing songs to one another was one of the ways that me and my friends and co-workers occupied ourselves. We would write songs about painting, about driving and window washing and have a great time doing it, spending time trying to get them just right, sometimes writing them down and playing them later at home. This experience got me back into songwriting, and I eventually moved past these kinds of songs to writing seriously again. My goal was to write short and precise songs that expressed themselves with wit and eloquence. I thought of each song as a little essay, with every line that did not support the thesis eliminated. I wrote a lot, but very slowly, always editing until the song was as good as it could be. I had a number of songs ready when our band decided to perform original material, and I was happy to write more if I had the chance.

The main problem with performing original music was with the dynamics of the members of the band. Disagreements about taste and song choice can be amicable when dealing with song covers, but they are much more sensitive when dealing with original material. Nevertheless, It was important for us to grow as a band and attract an audience. This was mostly because of the kinds of venues we wanted to play and the kind of crowds we wanted to attract.

As a cover band playing a wide variety of styles, and often presenting ourselves as a jazz band, we most often played accompanying another event, often for long periods of time. These are “casuals” or “background music” gigs, and though they can be lucrative, they rarely put you in a position to be appreciated or noticed. In order to play more concert like venues where we could perform for an appreciative audience, we needed our own music. This also would help us to be taken more seriously. We wanted to be able to play both kinds of events, to be able to play as a cover band and also put on a concert when needed. We put together a number of tunes and got back to rehearsing. In this process we rethought our sound completely. We found a drummer, and Andrea began to play glockenspiel and percussion. Over the next year we had some success and were feeling pretty good about this new direction. This coincided with our graduation from music school. After graduating, we resolved to make a full length record of our music. We spent most of the next year raising money to record and then meticulously recording and putting it together. We expanded our sound again during this period, hiring extra musicians and spending days on arrangements, recording techniques, and album packaging details. We hired a hall to release our CD with a big concert. which was a success. Our band seemed poised to get better, do bigger things.

It's difficult to explain what happened next. After our CD release show, the band was a bit burned out and took a few months off. After this, we never really got together again. We had a few gigs and a few rehearsals, but the drive that had brought us to where we were was gone. Soon, our singer moved away to pursue organic farming, and though I wanted to continue without her, the rest of the band wasn't willing. Very quickly, we drifted off from one another, with nothing but our just finished CD to show for it. It was hard for me. I put a lot of my future

plans and creative ambitions in that project, and it wasn't easy to see it disappear so easily. For a long time afterwards, I resisted joining and playing in groups like that one. I thought it was foolish to invest so much in something that could be fall apart so easily. I didn't want to work towards something when I didn't know if the other members were committed. I spent time playing as a sideman, or doing projects which I could lead and run by myself.

Conclusion

After the breakup of the Contemporary Lovers, my musical outlook changed drastically. After spending years playing jazz and seeking accommodation with it, I was tired. Around that time, I began playing with several Brazilian and Afro-Cuban bands. Before I realized it, I was enmeshed in a completely different musical culture with a completely different group of musicians than I ever had known before. After years of having jazz at the centre of my musical life, my world was opened wide up. I learned new ways of playing, new ways of understanding and thinking about music, and whole new musical cultures to explore. Since then, I've immersed myself in studying these other cultures, culminating in studying Ethnomusicology here at UBC.

As a musical autobiography, this account has been limited to say the least. What I've said has dealt with a few bands, a few kinds of music, and a few parts of my life. Very much has been left unsaid. Still, I hope this essay will allow the reader some insight into my relationship with music, and especially into how difficult separating life and music can be. I'm

still surprised at the impact a piece of music can have on my life, at the way a performance can make me feel, at the way a record can affect me if I listen to it at just the right moment. I often question whether I've acted wisely in making music the centre of my life, but it's always seemed to me that I have no real choice in the matter. When my dad played that Wilson Pickett record, music grabbed me, and it hasn't let go yet. Music for me isn't a choice, but a necessity. This may be why it's so difficult for me to distinguish between life and music. Music has led me to where I am today, and I think this will probably be true for the rest of my life.