

Musical Wanderlust:

Les Ray



Like the other contributors to this page, my life has had its own musical soundtrack. In my case the songs were those to be heard as I was growing up in a Northamptonshire village, losing my innocence at Reading University, spending a decade in exile in Italy and Argentina, to then return to the UK in the 1990s and embark on my own musical adventures with a band and a radio show. .

I'm currently working on a writing project, which is part personal memoir, part family and village history and part ruminations on life, but the theme running through is of course music. Below are a couple of my stories that will eventually end up in the book in some form.

The Birth of Wanderlust: Listening to America

It was a Christmas present I think, as I don't think I was old enough to buy it for myself. A couple of years later I would regularly take the bus to Kettering and visit Alf Bailey's shop in Gold Street to buy or order an LP or a single. In previous decades the shop used to specialise in selling sheet music and 78s; the owner at that time was founder Alf's grandson Graham, who, dressed in his garish dicky bow tie, wasn't exactly a fashion icon for the kids, but his was the only record shop in town, so it was truly Mecca for us.

Alf's mostly didn't have the music I wanted so I'd have to order it and patiently wait a couple of weeks for it to arrive and then go back to experience the joy of holding the precious object in my hands and complete the pilgrimage by returning home to place it on the sacred turntable.

But this was before then; this was the time of my awakening, my discovery through music that there was a big wide world out there. Of course we sang folk songs by the radio and hymns in assembly at school, and mum and dad had their own music, Elvis for Mum and Lonnie Donegan for Dad; I even remember seeing Jimi Hendrix - who I later came to love - on Top of the Pops, but it was only when I found Simon & Garfunkel that I truly had my very own music.

I can't remember where I first heard them; I imagine it was "Bridge over Troubled Water", again on Top of the Pops, being danced to inappropriately by Pan's People, although it might have been from my older cousin Penny, who had the most amazing record collection ever. It might even have been from my friend Brian, whom I would later reject as not being cool enough, as my other "cooler" friends didn't like him much.

In any event, how I came to know of them is now lost to my memory. What I do remember is that wintertime - as I say, probably at Christmas. I would have been 13 years old, I guess. We had moved house - from 17 to 25 High Street, so not far - when my brother Martin was born in 1967. Our new home was bigger, two small houses knocked into one, and Mum and Dad spent a couple of years slowly renovating the parts of the house that had fallen into disrepair, including what became their bedroom. When they moved into it, I got their old room, much bigger than mine, which then became my brother's. Ray family pecking order.

My new bedroom had a great view across the road to the rising and falling meadows of what had once been the site of the old castle. My parents gave me their record player, as they weren't using it, and I would sit on the painted wooden inside windowsill and look out across the fields as I listened to my favourite LPs. I only had a few at that time.

The first was a Top of the Pops LP, which I had asked for as a present and then was horrified to find that the songs on it weren't by the original artists, but were copies: a cruel introduction to the ways of the world. I got rid of it quite soon after that. Pity, it would be very valuable today, as apparently they're very collectable now. It had "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" by someone pretending to be Joan Baez. Wikipedia tells me the original was released in 1971, so yes I would have been 13 or so.

But I'm getting sidetracked.

The cover tells you all you need to know. A black and white photo of two sensitive, intelligent-looking young men dressed in dark turtle-neck sweaters. They must have something important to say. And they did. Paul Simon was the songwriter, and Art Garfunkel had the voice of an angel, and when they sang harmony ... heaven!

Simon's words took me travelling with him. "America" is the story of his journey to look for America with his girlfriend Kathy. Turns out Kathy is from Barking, Essex - just down the road really - and Simon fell in love with her when he was touring England in 1964, but I only found that out much later.

Here are a couple of verses:

*Kathy I said as we boarded a Greyhound in Pittsburg,
Michigan seems like a dream to me now.
It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw.
I've come to look for America*

Kathy, I'm lost I said, though I knew she was sleeping.

I'm empty and aching and I don't know why.

*Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike,
they've all come to look for America".*

It was from those verses that I caught the Wanderlust that would stay with me for most of my life. I can't really convey in words how exotic those place names were to my child's mind. They don't have that magic now, just the vague memory of it, like an aroma from a former time that you can't quite place, but I do remember how magical they felt to me then. I wanted to visit all those strange-sounding places, ideally with a girlfriend to love and hold close.

All this was to come, after a fashion, but I was becoming impatient. The village couldn't hold me forever. Now I write my own songs and still hold Paul Simon up as one of the greatest songwriters of all. That song is often cited as one of his finest, with the very literary line "the moon rose over an open field" given as an excellent example of assonance in many learned books on poetic verse. I can appreciate the greatness of the writing now, but I can't possibly be moved as powerfully now as I was then.

A couple of years passed. I and a small group of friends formed a band and a clique based around the music we loved: The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead. Simon & Garfunkel were no longer considered cool and so met the same fate as Brian - rejection. I swapped their LPs for some other music - who knows what? - that at the time I thought was more acceptable. More fool I.

Sometimes we are so desperate to fit in that we completely lose sight of who we are. Years later, in my early 20s, I went to live in Italy and soon spent my evenings playing guitar and singing in clubs and bars with my friend Gianni.

Turns out Gianni had a love for the music of Simon & Garfunkel, so they were back in favour again... and my travels had begun. From that seed planted many years earlier by Paul Simon.

The Jack of Both Sides (Reading 1980)

In the summer of 1980 I was living in Reading, in Radstock Road, near Cemetery Junction, sharing a house with four friends from university. We'd all just graduated and were stepping cautiously into the world of work. I'd found a job at British Telecom. In the interview - which I passed - I was told I would be a "Telecommunications Traffic Officer", which sounded rather grand, so imagine my consternation when I turned up in my shiny only suit and new shoes for my first day at work, only to find that I was to be employed in the complaints department; oh sorry, that's customer services department.

My new line manager - who I seem to remember was called Geoff - showed me to my desk in the large open plan office. My consternation increased exponentially when I saw the huge pile of files in the inbox on the desk. Noting my shock, Geoff said: "Oh yes, this was poor John Wentworth's desk, sadly he committed suicide a couple of months ago, and no one else has had time to take on the cases he was dealing with". "Mum, I want to come home", I thought.

BT has the shrewd policy of employing graduates in the complaints department, rather than telecoms engineers. Telecoms engineers understood telephones, but although graduates knew nothing about telephones, they had voices that sounded polite and intelligent over the phone... and they were cheaper. The light on the top of my phone flashed for an incoming call... But that's not the story I want to tell you. That will do for another time. I want to tell you about the Jack of Both Sides.

My housemates were Rupert, who had found the place for us, Simon and Debbie, a couple, and Graham, who I hadn't known before but who when I moved in made it discreetly clear to me that he was gay by showing me around the house; in his room, laid casually on the bed, there was a copy of Gay News. "Very stylishly done", I thought to myself.

Simon and I both played guitar and sang. Simon was the bassist in a band, but they were on a bit of a hiatus, so we decided to work on some songs together with a view to earning a bit of extra cash by playing in pubs. It just so happened that our local was the Jack of Both Sides, where every Saturday night they had a live act playing country and western. "We can do that", we confidently decided.

The "Jack" was our local mainly because it was the closest. It wasn't a student pub, much more a working man's boozier. The beer was cheaper than a lot of places, and the staff were friendly enough, so we kind of liked it, partly because students didn't tend to go there and we could convince ourselves we were more integrated. It didn't have sawdust on the floor exactly, but it was far from plush.

Simon and I were really fond of country music, which had become popular with younger audiences in recent years. Dylan had done a couple of country albums, one with the legendary Johnny Cash joining him. But it was Emmylou Harris who had made country cool; her musical partner and mentor Gram Parsons had turned her onto some of the greats of previous eras, such as George Jones, Merle Haggard and Buck Owens.

After Gram died in mysterious circumstances in 1973, Emmylou went on to form her own band and toured the UK, building up a big following among students such as us. Bob Harris loved her, and that was recommendation enough.

So we worked on our repertoire, taking our favourites by Dylan, the Eagles, the Everly Brothers, and of course Emmylou. We put together arrangements for two guitars, and nice vocal harmonies. One evening we tentatively enquired with the landlady at the Jack if we could play there sometime and to our amazement she said yes, so we agreed on a date a couple of weeks hence. I guess she was interested in getting more students into the pub, as in those days they had more money with their grants to spend.

The big day came. We had some form of amplification, but I can't remember what it was, so I suppose the pub must have provided it. We got there early and set up, did a quick sound check and waited for the punters to arrive. The public bar began to fill; soon several tables were abuzz with conversation. "Now's the time", we agreed. Nerves made the first song a bit of a mess, but by the second we were in our stride. By five songs in we were starting to enjoy ourselves, yet the locals weren't applauding much at all; just a smattering, most were ignoring us. That didn't bother us much though; we were too engrossed in what we were doing.

Then, as we were drawing towards the end of our set, a man got up from one of the tables and walked towards us. Any detailed memories of what he looked like have been lost in the mists of time, but I do remember he was a lot older than us - when you're 20 anyone over 35 looks old - and that he was quite smartly dressed. He will have been of the generation who get dressed up in suit and tie to go out on a Saturday night.

Anyway, we're between songs and we watch in trepidation as he approaches us. "Play the Crystal Chandeliers". We had no idea what that was. A band? A song? "I'm afraid we can't", we confessed. "Call yourselves a country band and you can't play the Crystal Chandeliers! You're rubbish", he pronounced. And with that he returned to his seat and resumed his conversation with his friends, no doubt telling them how rubbish we were.

We had a short break, then played our second set, not to universal acclaim, it must be said. The landlady didn't rebook us. When we summoned up the courage to ask her why, she said they hadn't liked us much, as we didn't play the right songs.

That was nearly 40 years ago, and I now know what the Crystal Chandeliers is. It's a song recorded by Charlie Pride in 1965 about a poor guy who falls for a society lady. Charlie Pride himself is unusual as he's a black country and western singer adored by redneck audiences.

I guess our not knowing the song confirmed everything the man who requested it thought about elitist students.

Jack of Both Sides

*School was out, bright and bushy tailed we went to sing our songs
To the weekend crowd at the Jack, where we hoped we'd belong.
We played Eagles, Dylan, Everlys, then this guy drew near
Asked if we could play him "Crystal Chandeliers"*

*It was Saturday night, he wore suit and tie, we t-shirt and jeans
He was a working man, he was middle-aged, we'd just left our teens We said
we didn't know the song, which spoiled the atmosphere
But we couldn't play him "Crystal Chandeliers"*

*Now I'm older than that guy, that night is distant past
He's likely dead, the pub is gone, but all the songs will last
And it's music that still cheers us and moves us to tears
And now I can play you "Crystal Chandeliers".*

*Oh the crystal chandeliers light up the paintings on your wall
The marble statuettes are standing stately in the hall
But will the timely crowd
that has you laughing loud
help you dry your tears
when the new wears off of your crystal chandeliers?*

Les Ray presents 'Strummers and Dreamers' on Cambridge 105

<https://cambridge105.co.uk/shows/strummers-and-dreamers>