

Welcome to my den. I'd like to share some music with you; music that carries a message for me and, I hope, a more general message as well. It's always risky to share your feelings about a song, because the meaning is often so personal. Like, *The first time I heard this song I was in my 73 Duster, with my friends, and we were on 95th Street...* Yeah, OK. Old people say "There hasn't been any good music since (and fill in the year--or the decade)." I saw a cartoon recently that said, "There hasn't been any good music since that time I was coming of age, and my emotional reaction to external stimuli was at its peak..."

Because that's when music reaches us most deeply: when we're coming of age, discovering the world, and exposing our emotions to joy and sorrow and misery and ecstasy for the first time. So, many of our most meaningful songs are about the feelings that go with one very particular experience. I'm going to try not to just name a bunch of coming-of-age songs that affected me, but songs that I hope have a universal message.

The first song is by the singer Melanie. She was popular in the 60s; she was at Woodstock. She is best known for the song "Brand New Key." "I got a brand new pair of roller skates, you got a brand new key..." She *hates* that song. I know it because she told me. That trip I took with my son after I heard the lyrics from Graceland? We ended up in Toledo, Ohio, at a performance space called the Happy Badger, where we saw Melanie in concert. [Show bag, record, picture of Melanie.] At the concert, she said she has to play that song anytime she performs, but she hates it. She wrote it as a steamy, sexy song with a Louisiana bayou feel to it, but her husband is a music producer, so he sped it up, made it bouncy, put in a chorus, and just ruined it. She hates it.

So that's not this song. This song was on the very first record I ever bought. It was a 45. The B side was called "Close to It All" and this was the A side. This song is called "Peace Will Come." (Play intro to song.) I'm twelve years old listening to this song, and I think, When I get older, I want to...get high. What is she talking about? A velvet hill in the small of her back, her hands are playing the sand, her feet are swimming in all of the waters, all of the rivers are givers to the ocean according to plan. Whoa.

Years later I'm reading a garden design book. It starts with, The enemy of garden design is the flat rectangle. The city lot, or many suburban lots, are flat rectangles. To do something interesting you have to break the rectangle. Elsewhere in the book it says that you should think of the land as a body, a human body. Trace the curves in your mind; think of your hands running over all the curves and hollows and swells of a human body...and then I took a cold shower and started planning my garden. And today, at our house, the vegetable garden is a productive grid shape; but the rest of the garden is all curves, and it's not flat.

And the idea that the earth is a body and the body is the earth, with a velvet hill in the small of the back and the hands and feet playing the sand and the water, is a message I have always taken with me. The old way of looking at nature is to consider humans on this side and nature on that side. That thinking enabled people to fear nature, to want to conquer and destroy it; but it also led early conservationists to want to wall off nature to protect it. And we have now realized that we are not apart from nature, we are a part OF nature, we're in nature and nature is in us. To care for nature we have to be involved in the world around us and inside us. It's our Seventh Principle: the interconnected web of life. As Joni Mitchell would say, and as Carl Sagan would say, We are stardust.

And speaking of Joni Mitchell, the next song is this one. (Play intro.) I know. Of course that's my song. Pave paradise, put up a parking lot. Hey farmer farmer, put away that DDT now. You may spot some apples but leave me the birds and the bees. It's an environmental song. But it's not. It's not about the environment. It's about a lost love. The title of the song is not "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone," it's not "Pave paradise and put up a parking lot." It's "Big Yellow Taxi." The central line is "Late last night, I heard the screen door slam, and the big yellow taxi took away my old man." It's about her lover leaving in the middle of the night. It's a sad lost love song. But the universal message from the song, whether it's a lost love, or the environment, You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone. Don't ever take anything for granted. That message is the one I always keep in mind.

And speaking of screen doors slamming, here's one. (Play intro and stop.) Yeah, I know, right? This is one of those songs where, if you were there, you'll always know the song by the first few notes. (Play rest of intro.) "Thunder Road" by Bruce Springsteen. OK, I admit, this is definitely a coming-of-age song for me. The Born to Run album came out the year I finished high school and started college. Just about every song on the album is about a young man on the brink of entering the big world. "Baby this town rips the bones from your back, it's a death trap, it's a suicide rap, we gotta get out while we're young, 'cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run." There was another coming of age song by Paul Simon, when he got back together with Art Garfunkel, "My Little Town." "In my little town, I never meant nothin', I was just my father's son; savin' my money, dreamin' of glory, twitchin' like a finger on the trigger of a gun." That was me. I had a very happy childhood. My mother used strict discipline, but she loved her kids. We didn't have a lot, but we were solidly middle class. I had no worries. I was happy. But man, I couldn't wait to get out. Give me some cinder blocks and wooden boards to put my stereo, and I'm outta here!

But beyond the coming-of-age message in Thunder Road--"Tonight's busted open, these two lanes'll take us anywhere" there's another, more universal message.

The line is "my car's out back if you're ready to take that long walk from the front porch to my front seat; the door's open but the ride it ain't free." Now I know that a boy singing to his girl, saying "the door's open but the ride it ain't free"--I know what he's talking about. But more universally, whatever our decision, whatever the crossroads, the door is always open, but the ride it ain't never free. A couple years after I first heard this song, I'm sitting in philosophy class, studying existentialism, which is an atheistic philosophy that says that, in the absence of a divine god, we are left completely free--but with complete responsibility. We can't say, "the devil made me do it." We can't say "But I had to." How many times do we say that: "I had to." No you didn't. Nobody has to do anything. You always have a choice. It might be an expensive choice, it might be a bad choice, but it's a choice. We have complete freedom, but we have to take utter and complete responsibility for everything we do. The door's open; heaven's waitin' on down the track. But the ride, it ain't free.

Here's a song by Alanis Morissette from 1995. (Play intro.) This song was popular the last time I fell in love. When I thought about my girl, I would think about this song. And now me girl's me wife. The lyrics include "You ask how my day was..." And I always try to remember; be the best listener she's ever met, ask how her day was. We should always remember, with any lover, friend, family member, no matter how long we've known each other, no matter how routine our lives have become, to stop, put the phone down, look in their eyes, and listen. Ask how their day was. In any relationship, good advice from a young hipster.

Here's another song from my coming-of-age years, but it's not a coming-of-age song. One of my favorite Jethro Tull albums was War Child. It came out in 1974 and we played it to death when I was in high school. On side 2 of the album, there's a song, "Only Solitaire," which ends, and then there's dead air, and you think maybe the album's over, but after about ten seconds--which seems like a minute; you know, on albums usually the next song comes on in about 3 or 4 seconds, but after about ten seconds, the next song comes on. Okay, so let's count ten seconds. The previous song ends, and...One, two, three, four, five, six... .. (Play intro.) And then Ian Anderson plays the flute for about five minutes. There are lots of lyrics to this song, but the most important is this one: Hoorah! We don't get to say "hoorah" much. We do a good job, and we say, oh, that was good. I didn't screw that one up much. How was your vacation? Oh, it was good. It was OK. Back to work now. We need to celebrate life. There's a passage from Lady Chatterley's Lover--Lady Chatterley's Lover is famous because it was banned from the U.S. about a hundred years ago because it was obscene. And there are some very explicit sex scenes; but there is a lot of message in the book. Mostly it's about the change from a traditional society to an intense industrial society, and the loss of the joy of a simple life. Here's a quote--this is not

one of the sex scenes. One of the main characters has this to say: "[quote from book]."

We need to make our own chairs. We need to wear scarlet trousers. We need to march in parades. Whenever I wear green tights and dance around a Maypole, whenever I wear butterfly wings and antennas, I'm celebrating the joy of a simple life. We need to do more of it... ... Hoorah!

And another thing we need more of in our lives is awe. "Awe" is an overused word. "Awesome" is overused. "If you could get here a little early and help set up the chairs, that would be awesome." Really? Awesome? "Look! He got here early! He's helping...set up...the chairs!" That's not awesome. That's nice; that's handy; it's not awesome. The Grand Canyon is awesome. Stonehenge is awesome. My next song is by Dar Williams. Dar Williams is a modern, contemporary folk singer--she's current; you can go see her in concert. The first album of hers that I got was called "The Green World" and it has this song, which is called "What Do You Love More Than Love." (Play intro.) There's a line in the song that goes "When you know you won't get your heart in that stone, and you drop your tools and you stand alone." That's an image I carry around with me, that means "awe" to me. When we're doing habitat restoration work in the forest preserves, and I'm cutting down some invasive tree--and, by the way, this a very good mindful activity, cutting down trees. I'm usin' my saw, I'm cuttin' this tree. I'm cuttin' this tree. I'm movin' the saw to the other side, I'm linin' up the cuts, I'm cuttin this tree. And when the tree finally falls, all this light comes in where the tree was shading the forest floor. And you can look straight up, through the branches and leaves, and see the blue sky that goes on literally forever, and you think about our place in the universe, and you drop your tools and you stand alone. It's good to stop and feel awe in the face of that mystery.

So those are the six songs that have a message for me, and I hope some of them resound for you as well. Oh, and here is the seventh song, with a message that I hope everyone can relate to; it's by the Beatles, of course. (Play "The End.")