

Music stretches across generations, bringing new growth to all

by Kate Good

In the Mennonite world of effortless four-part harmony, I lip-synch.

Honestly.

This is a habit I developed in my high school choir when my fear of hitting the wrong note had me sweating profusely in the alto section. Since then, I've learned to manage the soprano part, sort of. My voice is naturally low so if a hymn is high, I'm faking my way through at least part of the song.

If my musical ability is, well, limited, my appreciation of music is enormous and it began early. I grew up in a house filled with music, from opera and country to the sacred music of Mennonite choirs. Nothing was off-limits, as far as I can remember.

We listened to everything at FULL volume and often while sitting in the Red Chair. An ordinary upholstered chair, the Red Chair was positioned by my father for optimum listening opposite the two large speakers in the living room. Friends, family, and neighbors all eventually ended up seated in the Red Chair, listening to Simon and Garfunkel, Mozart, or Willie Nelson cranked loud. "You'll like this," Dad would say just before he hit "play." He was almost always right.

I hated the bluegrass music he played. Maybe it was the twangy voices or the old-fashioned tunes. Or maybe the sound was just too close to the country music that my friends mocked.

If the Red Chair was my musical classroom, then a sunny morning driving through Lenox, Massachusetts was the spot of my epiphany. On vacation in New England, my family stopped at a small shop where I purchased my first music album, "The Joshua Tree" by the Irish band, U2.

Back in the car, Dad inserted the tape into the cassette player and turned up the volume. The first chords of that first song, "Where

the Streets Have No Names,” were unlike anything I had ever heard before. I can still picture that stretch of road and hear those notes. As soon as the song ended, Dad hit “rewind,” and we listened over and over to the astonishing music swirling around us.

I became a devoted fan of U2. I loved their songs for their poetic lyrics and soaring guitars, but I also learned a lot from their influences. U2 might be an Irish band, but they tap into the great sounds of American music, country, blues, jazz, and, of course, rock and roll.

Through their music I discovered the bluesy B.B. King and the irresistible Johnny Cash. I found the complex jazz of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. I fell hardest for the twang of Bob Dylan. “Nashville Skyline” became my favorite album, and I listened to it repeatedly, rediscovering the bluegrass and country music that I hated as a kid. It was one of the first albums I brought home and played for my dad while he sat in the Red Chair.

The complex harmony of Dylan and Cash on the first song of that album, “Girl from the North Country,” reminded me of the four-part singing that I was afraid to join as a kid. The sounds of Alison Kraus, The Dixie Chicks, and Emmylou Harris returned me to the sacred music that surrounded me at church and home.

The Red Chair is now blue, and Dad and I swap music these days. He introduced me to The Be Good Tanyas. I bought him a CD by Mississippi musician, Caroline Herring. And while I still can't sing very well, I am thinking about taking voice lessons. I want to belt out those soaring harmonies in the car and at church. I want to match the musicians' entwined voices and their effortless vocal leaps and bounds. Maybe I will never sing back-up for my favorite musicians, but I want to know that should the chance arise, I won't embarrass myself by singing off-key. And I definitely won't lip-synch. 📌

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