

## Ron Lappa May 5, 1954 – December 5, 2011 – A Musical Remembrance

Today would have been my brother Ron's 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. He passed away at 57 years old in 2011. I've taken some time to put together a list of music that was significant in his life and also reminds me of moments in our lives together. My memory is not as good as it once was, but I've tried to recall a few musical connections that we shared. I'm sure there are many more that I've forgotten.

What was I saying?

Oh, yes ... so here are 20 selections from our lives along with some recollections.

### I. CLASSICAL MEMORIALS AND MEMORIES

**1. Crisantemi – Giacomo Puccini.** These first few classical selections are offered in remembrance of my brother and were pieces that he had heard at one time or another. *Crisantemi* (Chrysanthemums) is a work that opera composer Giacomo Puccini wrote in 1890 as a tribute to the late Amadeo I of Spain who was a son of the Italian King, Vittorio Emanuele II. Originally scored for string quartet, this version is for full string orchestra and is one of the rare instrumental works from a composer who mainly wrote for the voice. As in many cultures, chrysanthemums are flowers offered in memoria.

**2. Lacrimosa** from Mozart's Requiem in D minor. This is one of the most beautiful choral works by Mozart and was written in his last days. The Requiem was not completed at the time of his death. This section is one of the few portions that was fairly complete. Ron once left me and our friends in stitches at a gathering when he did "the laugh" from *Amadeus*. It was out of character for him and therefore that much more amusing. I was more of a clown, so nothing new when I did it. Maybe a few eye rolls.

Full of tears will be that day  
When from the ashes shall arise  
The guilty man to be judged;  
Therefore spare him, O God,  
Merciful Lord Jesus,  
Grant them eternal rest. Amen.

**3. Romance** from the *Gadfly* by Dimitri Shostakovich. This instrumental passage is from Shostakovich's film score for the 1951 Russian film and was used in the soundtrack for the BBC series *Reilly: Ace of Spies*. It was a program that Ron and my father both enjoyed watching and they loved this music.

**4. Symphony No. 6** by Beethoven. This symphony was familiar to Ron and I recall listening to it at Thanksgiving dinners and other occasions. It is a programmatic work, meaning that Beethoven tried to convey a story through the music. A unique effort for Beethoven, but one found earlier in music and one found more frequently in the Romantic era, which Beethoven helped to create. It is a brilliant work and was composed by a musician and composer who suffered greatly in his life. He was already suffering from hearing loss when this was written in 1808 and he would lose his hearing entirely in the coming years. Beethoven died at about the same age as my brother. This is the first movement, but I encourage you to listen to the entire symphony.

**5. Quattro Stagioni (Four Seasons) – La Primavera (Spring)** is an early piece of programmatic music by Antonio Vivaldi, the Red Priest (he was a priest – not a very diligent one – and he had red hair.) This is one of the earliest works of music that is set to a story and attempts to combine images and music in the mind of the listener. Vivaldi may have written the text that accompanies each of the seasons. We often listened to the entire work at family gatherings, especially at the holidays.

*Poem to the first movement of Spring:*

Springtime is upon us.

The birds celebrate her return with festive song,  
and murmuring streams are softly caressed by the breezes.

Thunderstorms, those heralds of Spring, roar, casting their dark mantle over heaven,  
Then they die away to silence, and the birds take up their charming songs once more.

## **II. GROWING UP IN MICHIGAN**

Ron was more than 9 years older than me, so I have memories of music from the 1960s and early 1970s when I was just a kid. His friends would often stop by the house and play music in the basement. Ron took guitar lessons, but didn't stay with it. He never got rid of his old Harmony guitar, which was not very good. My other brother David, bought a Yamaha classical model in the 1970s and would actually learn short pieces by Sor, Carulli, Bach and others. In a way, my brothers were both an influence on me, musically. My parents would not let me take piano lessons because my brothers "weren't committed" and they figured I'd go the same route. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I persevered. I learned to play by ear after watching my brother Dave play A Salty Dog on the piano and on an old bar upright grand Grinnell Brothers piano that a neighbor had given to my parents. It could never be tuned to A440, so my ears struggled. At 13, I started lessons and progressed quickly enough to be accepted into a university to study music.

These Beatles songs are from the Beatlemania years when Ron and I lived at home (and even later).

**6. You Won't See Me – The Beatles (McCartney)** was actually a song that Ron loaded onto this cellphone as a ringtone. Clever. "When I call you up, your line's engaged".

**7. Taxman – The Beatles (Harrison)** was a song that Ron and millions liked. It was a bit radical when it was written and just a great song. George Harrison complains about Britain's progressive tax requirements for The Beatles which deducted 95% of their income. "Should 5% appear to small, be thankful I don't take it all!" The Beatles managed to keep more exempt income through world tours and overseas sales of music and merchandise – like Beatles wigs and talcum powder. Sadly, their handlers got their fingers in a great deal of that income. As rich as they became, they would have been far more wealthy without the 95% tax rate and the company of swindlers.

**8. Here, There and Everywhere – The Beatles (McCartney)** this song was one that Ron liked and I recall listening to this and many other Beatles songs when he was living at home and when we were adults living in California. I was absolutely batsh\*t crazy about The Beatles. Even home movies showed my brothers and relatives laughing as I sat in a high chair flailing about to *Meet the Beatles*, an album that my parents bought them in 1964. My parents could be trendy ... at times. :)

These next four are from the basement gatherings in Michigan:

**9. Nights in White Satin – The Moody Blues** this song is from their 1967 album *Days of Future Passed* which was a bridge between <sup>c</sup>lassical Music and Pop. It was a huge influence on my musical tastes along with The Electric Light Orchestra's *New World Record*, which my brother Dave brought home one day in the mid 1970s. Jethro Tull and other classically centered Prog Rock bands were in their collections and helped wean me off The Beatles ... a bit. The 1970s could be a strange decade. Sort of a hangover from the 1960s, but the music was often fantastic, despite the birth of Disco. Fortunately for me, Punk and New Wave also began in that decade.

**10. Ruby Tuesday – The Rolling Stones** this song was a favorite. I recall this being played on guitars or on a record player when I was quite young. It and the next two bring on very strong nostalgic emotions when I hear them. They say that smell is our most powerful sense, but for me music is as strong. I am instantly transported to the past when I hear a piece of music. I travel to that time in my life when I first heard a piece. Many others experience this sensation. Perhaps these senses may be our only methods of time travel.

**11: I Can See for Miles – The Who** My brother Dave was more of Who and Led Zepplin fan back then. I remember him coming home with *Tommy* from our local Korvettes department store, which had an amazing record department. I asked him what it was, hoping it was a Beatles album. I remember he told me “you need to listen to something other than The Beatles” as he disappeared into his bedroom to play it endlessly, wearing his headphones and doing his homework. I could not listen to music and study. The music always distracted me, even today. It takes over my concentration. Not a great reason for my less than stellar grades in Math and Science. English and History were not as affected and I managed consistent A marks in those subjects. Ron and his friends sang and played this one in the basement as I spied and listened from the stairs.

**12: Light My Fire – The Doors** I was never a fan of The Doors. The keyboard sounds and pseudo-psychedelic, dark, muddy fidelity just didn't work for me. However, everybody loved this track - even the Jose Feliciano version. Let's not go there. “Light my fire, light my fire, light my fire ... Light my fire, light my fire, light my fire.” Again, the memories are too strong to leave this one out.

Here are two from Ron's college years at the University of Michigan:

**13. Rocket Man – Elton John** I remember seeing the album *Honkey Cat Chateau* in Ron's record pile in college, Florida and California. It was a staple. Eventually Elton John became an important influence on me due to his brilliant piano playing. In high school, I would play and sing songs from my Elton John Anthology and girls would swarm around me. Having girls sharing piano benches and turning pages was a dream for a teenage boy and all of my male friends who teased me for studying piano sat ten feet away – glaring. “and I'm gonna be high as a kite by then”. I believe Ron also owned *Madman Across the Water* and *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. Also great albums from Elton John and Bernie Taupin. Ron also got his pilot license in Florida after he moved to Boca Raton to work for IBM in 1977, so that fits in a bit with the Rocket Man image.

**14. Our House – CSN&Y** this mellow track holds some memory of Ron for me, but I'm not quite as clear as to why. I believe he owned their album *Deja Vu* and this music was the epitome of the mellow 1970s Pop/Rock that evolved out of some of the earlier tracks on this list. I have to admit, collecting and listening to these songs could be very emotional at times and brought back many other memories of the past. Is that redundant? Memories of the past? As opposed to memories of the future or present?

### III. FLORIDA AND CALIFORNIA

**15. Smoke Gets in Your Eyes – The Platters** Ron married Lynda in 1984 and this was played for their bride and groom dance. I vaguely recall that there was some connection to their courtship with this song or it may have just been a favorite for the two of them. Like many songs from the 1950s and earlier, this one is haunting and evokes memories of earlier times – even times that you never lived through - if you get that.

**16. Sailing – Christopher Cross** another track that I would pass over if it did not have some connection to Ron. Jimmy Buffet, James Taylor, Harry Chapin and others from the singer-songwriter-superstar crooners didn't click with me. Ron was also passionate about sailing and was quite good at it. He started in high school and even got back into sailing with a team on the SF Bay later in life. His pilot days ended when he and Lynda welcomed their son Daniel into the world. Being a father was grounds for his grounding. I did like Cat Stevens, though. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say that in this day and age. Ron owned *Tea for the Tillerman*, *Catch Bull at Four* and maybe even *Mona Bone Jakon*.

**17. Brigadoon – Lerner/Lowe** this is the finale from a musical in which I sang and acted in 1980. I played Tommy, the romantic lead – hah! Fortunately, unlike in the movie, I didn't have to dance. That was all added in the movie for Gene Kelly – who really could dance. Ron came to Michigan for a visit during the show and was able to see me my debut and swansong in musical theater. Years later, his daughter Kelsey was in quite a bit of musical theater and studied Drama in college. Despite my efforts as a skinny 16 year old, nervously shaking up on the stage for two hours, Ron enjoyed the show. He and Lynda were very supportive of Kelsey's much better and skilled performances in musicals and plays. He kept the souvenir album that we cut for this show and occasionally played it to tease me. I had a cold when it came time to do the recording. I've heard worse singing, but not often. The orchestra, choir and other soloists were amazingly good.

**18. Straighten Up and Fly Right – Nat King Cole** – I'm not sure where or when Ron picked this up. He loved to play it and if I recall correctly, he would offer the title as advice to Daniel and Kelsey. Again, clever. If you're going to give advice, better to sing it. My Dad used to always sing the first few words of God Bless America when he saw or heard something ridiculous about the US or US politicians. It was an effective and humorous gesture which Ron may have remembered.

**19. Seasons of Love – Rent** I liked this song more than the whole musical. A vocal jazz group that I sang with, Special Blend added this to our list. Ron heard it and liked it. He was supportive of our group, my music lectures (The Music Exploration Series) and many of the performances that I directed or performed in. Special Blend sang this for his memorial which was held in Jack London Square about a month after his passing. The lyrics are quite meaningful and suited to this remembrance.

**20. Margaritaville – Jimmy Buffett** Okay, I caved in for the last piece. I figure if Ron liked this guy, I need to be a good brother and include at least one track. The story is that a young Jimmy Buffett auditioned at a bar, which is still in downtown St. Augustine called the Trade Winds Tropical Lounge. They turned him down. Some say he was fired, but the management said his music was not right for the bar at that time, even with a bar name like that. He actually did return to play and drink there in the ensuing years when his laid back, tropical troubadour style caught on. And now you know ... the rest of the story.

Thank you for spending some time listening to these selections and reading about the music and some recollections about my late brother, Ron. His life and memory are always with me and with the people that knew and loved him. Music is a beautiful way to experience and build memories in our lives.

I hope that you find time to reflect on the significance of this often wordless language and how it enhances our lives. If you do not enjoy or are not familiar with some of the music offered here, I hope you take some time to explore. Music has been a gift in my life and connects me to so many people, but especially to family and friends. Even when we don't share the same tastes, we can still share the same indescribable emotions and relief from stress and monotony that music can bring into our lives.

Rob

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