



MARK PEARSON
MUSIC

Mad Men

I

*He was born for adventure he's dying to go
Higher and higher with no nets below
The odds may grow longer with each risk that he runs
'Til the one in a million is a million to one*

Chorus

*Mad man on a high wire
Laying it all on the line
In the spirit of the Spirit of St. Louie
Always one step from falling or flying*

That's the first verse and the chorus of "Mad Man on a High Wire" a song I wrote for and about Mike McCoy over 30 years ago. He and I met, became friends, and started singing together at the University of Washington in the fall of 1965.

The Golden Boy. That was McCoy's nickname in college. He came out of high school as an All-State quarterback on a championship football team, the point guard on the basketball team, played trumpet in the marching band, and after just a few weeks of practice his senior year qualified for the state track and field meet throwing the javelin. At a time when lots of us were still sporting crew cuts McCoy let his hair grow long enough to use a comb although he never seemed to need one. As the principal's kid of a small town high school he entered college with a B plus average, a football scholarship, a 53 Chevy convertible, and his father's unspoken expectations to be a good boy and become a dentist. He came off as a smiling mix of Dennis the Menace and Opie from *Mayberry* albeit with a beer in his hand. He could out ski anyone while looking like Robert Redford from *Downhill Racer*. He was a unique kind of leader in that he would head off somewhere not caring who was behind him and end up with a group of us trying to catch up and find out where he was going. You could safely say he was someone the guys wanted to be and the girls wanted to be with. The fact he didn't seem to notice or care made him that much more intriguing.

The first time we sang together someone looked over at me and said how did he get that gift, too?

And with all that as an introduction you might be wondering if I was intimidated or jealous of him when we met.

Absolutely!

Let me be clear. Literally and figuratively I was the lineman, and he was the quarterback. Linemen are supposed to do what quarterbacks tell them to do on the football field and be happy when the quarterback ends up with the girl off the field. It's an often permanent, pertinent, and perpetuated playground pecking order (for Pete's sake.) While no one has to tell him he was the quarterback he goes out of his



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way to remind me to this day I'm the lineman. That dynamic has helped define our relationship from when we used to have knock down drag out wrestling matches at the fraternity house until now. Because we've been friends long enough and the bond strong enough and we know each other and ourselves well enough we laugh about it and we delight in it these days.

But in the fall of 1979 as I struggled to find the confidence to go on to a stage or into a recording studio I was looking for "the quarterback" and no matter how much McCoy might protest I wanted him to be that guy.

II

*With the heart of Amelia he answers the call
Though for many before him fate asks for it all
My heart travels with him as he's out there alone
And will be here waiting to welcome him home*

*Chorus
Mad man on a high wire
Laying it all on the line
In the spirit of the Spirit of St. Louie
Always one step from falling or flying*

When I got back to Seattle in the fall of 1979 there was no blueprint or plan on how to proceed or what to do next. Because of the money I'd made from The Brothers Four tour and the deal I had on rent if I chose carefully between heating and eating I was okay financially for the coming year. At thirty-two years old I figured the best way to sustain a musical career was to first become more established as a songwriter. Easier said than done of course. It was made more difficult because I wanted to stay in the Northwest. Although I'd spent the previous year in LA, Nashville again became the figurative "city on the hill" and the most likely place to get my lyric centric songs listened to and recorded. Del Bryant was still involved with songwriter development at BMI and usually willing to take the time to listen and set up appointments with publishers when I visited there.

One of my challenges as a songwriter at the time was how to write targeted and specific songs while wondering how targeted and specific to be when writing songs. In other words if I had an idea for a song that I thought was good for Anne Murray I would get up in the morning and listen to Anne Murray recordings and try to turn the idea into a song that sounded like one she would sing and record. At the same time I wanted to remain true to myself as a songwriter whatever that might mean. I spent half the time trying to write songs for specific artists and the other half simply trying to write the best song that I knew how.

Through the years I've gotten different advice on the how to present or package a song. Some people say it's important to record with added musicians so that it will be clear to whoever listens how the song is supposed to sound. Other people

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say a simple voice and guitar demo is fine because it leaves room for the publisher or the producer or the artist to hear for themselves how they might want to song to sound. I decided at that time putting money into production gave my songs a better chance to succeed.

This was before digital recording and inexpensive home studios. Through friends of friends I introduced myself to a couple guys who'd recently built a recording studio on Queen Anne Hill in Seattle that they named Big and Famous although it was neither. One of the guys was a musician. They knew other musicians. They were just getting started. The prices were reasonable. I invited my friend and sometime songwriting partner, Gary Drager, to play the role of producer. He was having incredible success as a children's book author under the name Cooper Edens and exuding an even greater than usual aura of confidence that I wanted and needed around me at the time. We laughed about it not long ago. Drager said, "I didn't have any idea what I was doing back then." I said, "Yea, but nobody else knew that you didn't know. Together we learned."

McCoy played an important role. When I finished a group of songs we would get together and polish them. He's always had a gift for phrasing. A typical arrangement would be for me to sing the first line of a verse and for McCoy to sing the 2nd and to split the 3rd and sing the 4th together with McCoy coming up with a unique harmony. We'd sing the chorus together with McCoy again finding then harmony. Then we'd split lines on the second verse this time with McCoy taking the first line. He's always had a way with harmony and I've always had trouble hearing it and singing it.

Looking back I realize beginning at Big and Famous Studios that it would be another twenty-five years before I would truly feel at home in a recording studio. On one hand that's a long time to be self-conscious in an environment like that and on another hand I'm grateful to have somehow had a chance to stay at it long enough so that it feels like home, to finally make it home.

III

Instrumental solo from "Mad Man" recording

Songwriting remained my primary focus yet at the urging and with the help of friends I decided to put on a concert in Seattle. There was a sweet 200 seat space called the Seattle Concert Theater in a converted church not far from the Seattle Times newspaper building that we rented for Flag Day, Saturday, June 14, 1980. The relationship had continued to develop with musicians from Big and Famous Studios so we decided it would be fun to add drums, bass, electric guitar, and piano to about half the songs in the show. We even came up with a name for the music we were creating. It is take off on country and western music we called the things we were doing country and northwestern music.

With a Nashville trip scheduled for the week of May 19th, Drager and I went to the studio on Sunday, May 18th to do some final mixing and copying the songs I

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was taking on that trip. Everything changed suddenly when Drager came into the control room with the news that Mt. St. Helens had erupted. We kept up with news reports on a little black and white TV set in the corner of the control room trying concentrate on the songs. Talk trying to come to terms with what's truly important in life.

Every time I've gone to Nashville I've thought this will be the trip that makes the difference. That trip was no different. A publisher gave me contracts on a couple of the songs, *Don't Wake Me If I'm Dreaming I Can Use the Memories* and *Tears and a Smile Make a Rainbow*. I had to smile when he told me without any prompting that he thought for sure he could get those songs to Anne Murray and Anne Murray's desk. (She never did record them.)

While we sold all the tickets for the concert through word of mouth McCoy and I got our picture printed in the paper as well as an invitation to appear on local TV. A show called Seattle Today. One of the other guests was a Watergate figure named G. Gordon Liddy who became famous for going to jail instead of telling what he knew in front of a Congressional Committee. Wally Amos of *Famous Amos Cookies* was the other guest. I was ten days into a two-week Scarsdale diet getting ready for the concert and I remember Amos offering all of us samples. I devoured a handful before I realized what I was doing. I've been a fan of his cookies every since.

The concert went well. In honor of Flag Day we hung a flag I brought back from Swaziland. It was fun to see the Byers boys who drove up from LA although when they got home they called and said their engine had been ruined by the dust that was still in the air from the Mt. St. Helens eruption.

The show started with me coming out with just the guitar. After a few songs I introduced McCoy, our professional collaboration printed on the ticket: "Mark Pearson in Concert with McCoy." A few songs later the band joined us. We sang all original songs, many of them new.

There was a serious sincerity to the evening. I introduced McCoy with a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem that begins. "I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth I know not where....it continues: I breathed a song into the air it fell to earth I know not where. The poems ends:...Long, long afterward in an oak I found the arrow still unbroke; and the song, from beginning to end, I found again in the heart of a friend." With that I said...please welcome my friend...Mike McCoy." McCoy would come out laughing and shaking his head...

My two brothers agreed to play 4-string banjo with me that night. I introduced them with a Thomas Hood poem. "I remember I remember the house where I was born the little window where the sun came peeping in at morn it never came a wink too soon nor brought to long a day though now I often wish the night had borne my breath away."

The show ended with me singing "Winners and Losers" and all of us on our feet.

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IV

*Tonight he may be on a mountain exploring the moon
Soaring across the ocean in a hot air balloon
Or half way to Saturn with stars in his eyes
I know it sounds crazy but don't be surprised at the...*

Chorus

*Mad man on a high wire
Laying it all on the line
In the spirit of the Spirit of St. Louie
Always one step from falling or flying*

McCoy and his wife owned property on a small lake east of Seattle. They decided to build log house there. They ordered a kit from an outfit in Montana that pre-built the house then took it apart and labeled the logs so it could be rebuilt sort of like a jigsaw puzzle on the property. The company banded the whole thing together and delivered it on a flatbed truck the week after the concert. The idea was that by the time McCoy returned to teaching in September this full size set of Lincoln logs would become if not a finished home at least a habitable structure. I told McCoy I'd be happy to help. The crew that first month was McCoy, his wife, his father-in-law, and myself.

Professionals poured the foundation and placed the subfloor. A representative of the log home company came and helped measure and place the first layer of logs. Each layer is called a course. McCoy and I did a double take when the rep took a measurement that seemed a bit off and then calmly said, well, close enough for government work. We didn't think he would say the same thing if he was laying the first course on his own house.

It was good manual labor. I was nicknamed Otto the assistant. In other words I was the lineman. We carried and set logs. We pounded spikes into the logs that were set on top of the logs beneath them. We tried to remember to drill holes in each course where the wires would go and make sure the spaces for the windows were right and tight.

For three or four weeks it was like going over to McCoy's house to play. We were like little kids building a fort or a clubhouse except that when we wanted to we got to drink Coors beer. The goal each day was to finish a course or row of logs. The house plans included a second story loft so that when we got to top of the first floor of logs we needed to fit two fifteen foot long 10 X 10 beams across the width of the house and then have them meet and be held up by a 6 X 6 post.

We notched the top logs to fit the butt ends of the two beams and we stood there facing each other as the two ends that needed to meet rested on the floor. Soon we hoisted those ends and we were nose to nose lifting with all our strength as his wife waited to position the support post that would fit underneath them and hold them up. We were inches apart listening to each other breath and gasp. The ends of the beams touched but we couldn't lift them high enough so the support post would fit underneath them. After putting the ends of the beams back on the floor

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and doing some measuring we realized the walls were sagging inward a few inches complicating our task. (So much for government work.)

In retrospect the wise thing would have been to wait till the next day to get more help and maybe even rent a Genie lifting device. Still we were two too stubborn guys convinced we could make this work. We just had to try a little harder. So nose to nose breath to breath ready set go the two beams met amidst few more grunts and groans. McCoy moved just slightly to get a better position. By doing that he stepped into the hole that would become the stairs to the basement but at the moment was just a hole. Why we, Mo and Curley, hadn't put a sheet or two of plywood over that hole I still don't know. Fortunately he was enough of an athlete that he didn't fall in. At the same time he had to let go of his beam. I was enough of an athlete that the two beams grazed but didn't knock me over or out although a few moments later I was leaning against the wall my eyes glazed over. It all happened so quickly I didn't have time to see my life passing in front of me.

What's amazing but not surprising is that we were going to stay at it until we got it done so after an hour of resting we tried it again and lifted those beams high enough to get that support beam under them. It would be, however, my last day on the job as Otto the assistant. A few weeks later I went out to visit and McCoy was confidently walking around on the newly tacked down roof wearing his tool belt like a gunslinger laughing and truly being the Mad Man on a High Wire.

*A Mad Man on a High Wire
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