



America in Black and White

Like so many in my generation my musical awakening and coming of age is framed roughly by two events taking place on Sunday evenings 7.5 years apart sitting with my family in front of the communal campfire of the times which was a relatively small black and white TV screen with an even smaller audio speaker and they were both inside a much larger wooden box. I was nine and a half years old. It was September 9, 1956 when after being introduced by Ed Sullivan Elvis Presley sang directly to me and 60 million others sitting similarly transfixed and somehow transformed if not by the music then by the fact that what we were witnessing it had to be big and it wouldn't and couldn't be ignored.

Having grown up inside the age of television it's hard for me to appreciate the extent of the changes. We had our own artifacts that include TV trays, TV dinners, and TV Guides and they invited us to spend Friday nights at the fights and Saturday Nights with Mr. C otherwise known as Perry Como. At first there were two choices, NBC and CBS, two channels. We had to walk across the room if we wanted to change from one to the other. Then a third appeared, ABC, and it quickly became the children's channel of choice because there in 1955 we could watch the exploits of Davy Crockett and then quickly and collectively become covetous of or cool in our coonskin caps and where later that fall we found our own special after school gang, The Mickey Mouse Club, complete with its own unforgettable theme song. We didn't know and we certainly didn't care that we were fast becoming a demographic and that the Mad Men of Madison Avenue simply considered us consumers and the music that we listened to a commodity.

Back then each network signed off at the end of a broadcast day with the American flag flying and the national anthem playing until those still awake were left watching that small window to the world fill with snow and white noise. Those mornings when we were up before the next broadcast day began and if our parents were distracted enough by other things we'd go into the den, now known as the TV room, and sometimes somehow be satisfied simply sitting in front of and watching an Indian Head Test Pattern.

My personal rite of passage into the full light of the television age and music of the time remains a bit traumatic, dramatic, and vivid all these years later. While fortunate enough to be one of the first generation to receive the Salk vaccine and so no longer live in fear of polio and the iron lung that would accompany it, growing up in the 50's still meant becoming sick with and then recovering from a series of childhood diseases like the chicken pox, the mumps and the measles. My memory of recovering from the measles includes spending an interminable amount of time lying quietly in a very dark room. My faithful companion a red plastic plug-in radio out of which came the voices and the stories of the likes of The Shadow, The Lone Ranger, and Fibber McGee and Molly. Then when the curtains finally parted and the door to my bedroom finally opened my memory has me emerging into the bright lilac scented light of a new day with the latest, a transistor radio, glued to my ear out of which came the most recent songs from Elvis or from endless Elvis wannabe's and an equally long list of those nurtured by the music industry to be the next "Anti-Elvis."

MarkPearsonMusic.com
(360) 643-1705

P.O. Box 65002
Port Ludlow
Washington
98365

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The radio characters that I'd conjured so completely in my mind lived no longer in that radio but now could be seen for who they truly must be inside our small black and white television.

At the same time black and white America was beginning to redefine what "one nation-under God" those last two words added in 1954 might mean after the Supreme Court said that same year that separate was not equal. With Elvis leading the way white America began integrating black music albeit homogenized and sanitized and often offered up with white bread arrangements by the likes of a white boy wearing white bucks named Pat Boone competing with Elvis, his Tennessee counterpart, for the hearts if not the soul of American youth.

On April 17, 1957 Ricky Nelson made his television singing debut and though that itself didn't foster a generation of air guitarists the fact that we could see ourselves or someone we wanted to be in that adoring crowd or maybe even on the stage on some level took our collective breath away. And then on October 4th the Soviet Union launched Sputnik One into space—and the race was on and somehow everything was different the next time we heard Jiminy Cricket sing "When You Wish Upon a Star."

In the fall of 58 a group of clean cut buttoned down shorthaired guys who called themselves The Kingston Trio had their first and only Number One single, "Tom Dooley." While they never again topped the charts with a single song in the next five years they had 5 number 1 albums 2 more that went to #2 and 3 more that made it to #3. Between my brother and me I think we owned them all. While the lines were blurry and easy to cross as we got into Junior High and then High School, one of things that helped establish our homogeneous individuality was being considered either a folkie or a rocker.

While popular folk music of that time could be dismissed as music of the establishment there was a belief in the songs we sang. songs like "We Shall Overcome" or "Come By Here" better known as "Kumbaya." A belief in the songs and their message accompanied by an unsubstantiated faith that if we sang them long enough and loud enough and believed in them strongly enough the world would and could truly become a better place.

The beginning of the end of that incredible time was well documented in George Lucas' "American Graffiti" set in Modesto, California in the fall of 1962 with the songs of the time playing an essential role. The end of the movie mirrored the times as well—when before the credits began the audience was shown in a few sentences each what was going to happen to the male characters while the futures and fates of the female characters went unmentioned though it might not have gone unnoticed that the most prized female roles were either as "cheerleader" or "unattainable blond in a T-bird."

All of it, everything, changed on November 22, 1963 on that sunny day in Dallas when the bullet that hit President Kennedy in the head also hit the heart of who we believed we were and all that was and might have been...

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Three spirit wrenching days later on a day proclaimed a National Day of Mourning by our newly unelected President we watched together on black and white televisions as our president was buried along with oh so many dreams. We wondered at a grieving widow's grace and cried as a young boy on his 3rd birthday saluted his father's passing coffin.

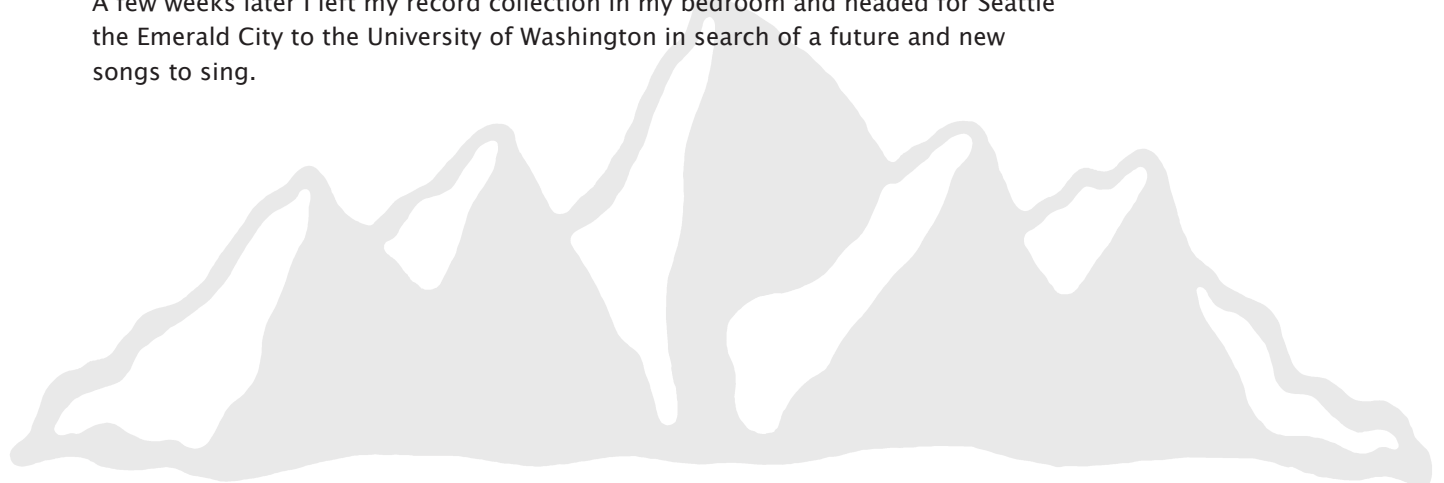
Three days later with flags still flying at half mast we somehow celebrated as a nation Thanksgiving our great secular holiday of abundance and soon after we celebrated Christmas and then after that a New Year.

Then on February 9, 1964 76 days after our national day of mourning and 7.5 years after Elvis's appearance demonstrated the seductive power of music, of black and white television along with the desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves 75 million viewers the most ever at the time watched Ed Sullivan welcome the Beatles who sang "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and a still grieving nation grateful for anything to hold onto said "We love you, yeah, yeah, yeah..."

A time had ended. Elvis sent the Beatles a congratulatory telegram to which George Harrison deadpanned: "Elvis who?" When Bob Dylan released "The Times They Are a Changin'" it was not only cool it was expected for a singer or a group or a band to sing songs they wrote themselves. The summer of 64 the US Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution no one realizing its full ramifications. That November President Johnson was elected in his own right promising everyone's parents that their boys would not be sent to fight in Asian wars.

By the summer of 1965 125,000 boys many of them poor and black were doing just that as America again was dividing along racial and economic lines. Those who could afford it went to college and those who couldn't went to war. American television beamed the first images of those dying in that war live from Da Nang. On July 25th at the Newport Folk Festival Bob Dylan our poetic prophet plugged in. On August 6th President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act saying the next day that the Democratic Party had lost the South for a generation. Paul McCartney sang "Yesterday" on the Sullivan show. A few weeks later CBS began broadcasting all future Ed Sullivan Shows in living color and television that in its black and white infancy let us collectively visit "Dorothy's Kansas" now put us all on the Yellow Brick Road in search of our land of Oz.

A few weeks later I left my record collection in my bedroom and headed for Seattle the Emerald City to the University of Washington in search of a future and new songs to sing.



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