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**31** SONGS . . .



## 1. Introduction

# "Your Love Is the Place Where I Come From"

So we were doing this thing, this launch party, for *Speaking with the Angel*, a book of short stories I put together to raise money for my son's school, and we—the school, the publishers of the book, me, and my partner—were nervous about it. We didn't know if people would turn up, we didn't know whether the mix of readings and live music would



TEENAGE FANCLUB

work, we didn't know whether anyone would enjoy themselves. I arrived at the Hammersmith Palais early, and when I walked in I noticed two things simultaneously. One was that the venue looked great: there had been some big office party the night before, and there was all this glitter and tinsel everywhere; at the time, it seemed like a cheesy but effective way to symbolize magic. The other was that Teenage Fanclub, who had agreed to play an acoustic set (and had postponed a gig in Europe so that they could do so), were going through a soundcheck. They were playing "Your Love Is the Place Where I Come From," one of the loveliest songs on one of my favorite-ever albums, *Songs from Northern Britain*. It sounded great, a perfect musical expression of the tinsel; and I knew the moment I heard it that the evening, far from being a flop, would be special. And it was—it turned into one of the most memorable events with which I have been professionally connected.

Now, whenever I hear "Your Love Is the Place Where I Come From," I think about that night, of course—how could it be otherwise? And initially, when I decided that I wanted to write a little book of essays about songs I loved (and that in itself was a tough discipline, because one has so many more opinions about what has gone wrong than about what is perfect), I presumed that the essays might be full of straightforward time-and-place connections like this, but they're not, not really. In fact, "Your Love Is the Place Where I Come From" is just about the only one. And when I thought about why this should be so, why so few of the songs that are important to me come

burdened with associative feelings or sensations, it occurred to me that the answer was obvious: if you love a song, love it enough for it to accompany you throughout the different stages of your life, then any specific memory is rubbed away by use. If I'd heard "Thunder Road" in some girl's bedroom in 1975, decided that it was okay, and had never seen the girl or listened to the song much again, then hearing it now would probably bring back the smell of her underarm deodorant. But that isn't what happened; what happened was that I heard "Thunder Road" and loved it, and I've listened to it at (alarming) frequent intervals ever since. "Thunder Road" really only reminds me of itself, and, I suppose, of my life since I was eighteen—that is to say, of nothing much and too much.

There's this horrible song called (I think) "Mummy I Want a Drink of Water" that they used to play on a BBC children's radio show on Saturday morning; I don't think I've heard it since, but if I did it would remind me overwhelmingly of being a child and listening to the Saturday-morning children's radio show. There's a Gypsy Kings song that reminds me of being bombarded with plastic beer bottles at a football match in Lisbon, and several songs that remind me of college, or ex-girlfriends, or a summer job, but I don't own any of them—none of them means anything to me as music, just as memories, and I didn't want to write about memories. That wasn't the point. One can only presume that the people who say that their very favorite record of all time reminds them of their honeymoon in Corsica, or of their family Chihuahua, don't actually like music very much. I wanted mostly to write about what it was in these

songs that made me love them, not what I brought to the songs.

Songs are what I listen to, almost to the exclusion of everything else. I don't listen to classical music or jazz very often, and when people ask me what music I like, I find it very difficult to reply, because they usually want names of people, and I can only give them song titles. And mostly all I have to say about these songs is that I love them, and want to sing along to them, and force other people to listen to them, and get cross when these other people don't like them as much as I do; I'm sorry that I have nothing to say about "Trampoline" by Joe Henry, or "Stay" by Maurice Williams & the Zodiacs, or "Help Me" by Sonny Boy Williamson, or "Ms. Jackson" by Outkast, or anything by Lucinda Williams, or Mariah, or Smokey Robinson, or Olu Dara, or the Pernice Brothers, or Ron Sexsmith, or about a thousand other people, including Marvin Gaye, for God's sake, nothing to say other than that they're all great and you should really hear them if you haven't already . . . I mean, I'm sure I could squeeze something out, and bump this book up to something like a regulation length in the process, but that wasn't the point either. Writers are always squeezing things out because books and articles are supposed to be a certain number of words, so you have in your hand the actual (i.e., natural, unforced, unpadding) shape of this particular book; it is, if you like, an organic book, raised without force-feeding or the assistance of steroids. And with organic stuff, you always have to pay more for less. Anyway . . .

## 2. "Thunder Road"

I can remember listening to this song and loving it in 1975; I can remember listening to this song and loving it almost as much quite recently, a few months ago. (And, yes, I was in a car, although I probably wasn't driving, and I certainly wasn't driving down any turnpike or highway or freeway, and the wind wasn't blowing through my hair, because I possess neither a convertible nor hair. It's not that version of Springsteen.) So I've loved this song for a quarter of

a century now, and I've heard it more than anything else, with the possible exception of . . . Who am I kidding? There are no other contenders. See, what I was going to do there was soften the blow, slip in something black and/or cool (possibly "Let's Get It On," which I think is the best pop record ever made, and which would easily make it into my top 20 most-played-songs list, but not at number 2. Number 2—and I'm trying to be honest here—would probably be something like "(White Man) In Hammer-smith Palais" by The Clash, but it would be way, way behind. Let's say I've played "Thunder Road" fifteen hundred times (just over once a week for twenty-five years, which sounds about right, if one takes into account the repeat plays in the first couple of years); "(White Man) . . ." would have clocked up something like five hundred plays. In other words, there's no real competition.

It's weird to me how "Thunder Road" has survived when so many other, arguably better songs—"Maggie May," "Hey Jude," "God Save the Queen," "Stir It Up," "So Tired of Being Alone," "You're a Big Girl Now"—have become less compelling as I've got older. It's not as if I can't see the flaws: "Thunder Road" is overwrought, both lyrically (as Prefab Sprout pointed out, there's more to life than cars and girls, and surely the word *redemption* is to be avoided like the plague when you're writing songs about redemption) and musically—after all, this four and three-quarter minutes provided Jim Steinman and Meatloaf with a whole career. It's also po-faced, in a way that Springsteen himself isn't, and if the doomed romanticism wasn't corny in 1975, then it certainly is now.

But sometimes, very occasionally, songs and books and films and pictures express who you are, perfectly. And they don't do this in words or images, necessarily; the connection is a lot less direct and more complicated than that. When I was first beginning to write seriously, I read Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, and suddenly knew what I was, and what I wanted to be, for better or for worse. It's a process something like falling in love. You don't necessarily choose the best person, or the wisest, or the most beautiful; there's something else going on. There was a part of me that would rather have fallen for Updike, or Kerouac, or DeLillo—for someone masculine, at least, maybe somebody a little more opaque, and certainly someone who uses more swearwords—and, though I have admired those writers, at various stages in my life, admiration is a very different thing from the kind of transference I'm talking about. I'm talking about understanding—or at least feeling like I understand—every artistic decision, every impulse, the soul of both the work and its creator. “This is me,” I wanted to say when I read Tyler's rich, sad, lovely novel. “I'm not a character, I'm nothing like the author, I haven't had the experiences she writes about. But even so, this is what I feel like, inside. This is what I would sound like, if ever I were to find a voice.” And I did find a voice, eventually, and it was mine, not hers; but nevertheless, so powerful was the process of identification that I still don't feel as though I've expressed myself as well, as completely, as Tyler did on my behalf then.

So, even though I'm not American, no longer young,

hate cars, and can recognize why so many people find Springsteen bombastic and histrionic (but not why they find him macho or jingoistic or dumb—that kind of ignorant judgment has plagued Springsteen for a huge part of his career, and is made by smart people who are actually a lot dumber than he has ever been), “Thunder Road” somehow manages to speak for me. This is partly—and perhaps shamefully—because a lot of Springsteen’s songs from this period are about becoming famous, or at least achieving some kind of public validation through his art: What else are we supposed to think when the last line of the song is “I’m pulling out of here to win,” other than that he has won, simply by virtue of playing the song, night after night after night, to an ever-increasing crowd of people? (And what else are we supposed to think when in “Rosalita” he sings, with a touching, funny, and innocent glee, “Cause the record company, Rosie, just gave me a big advance,” other than that the record company has just given him a big advance?) It’s never objectionable or obnoxious, this dream of fame, because it derives from a restless and uncontrollable artistic urge—he knows he has talent to burn, and the proper reward for this, he seems to suggest, would be the financial wherewithal to fulfill it—rather than an interest in celebrity for its own sake. Hosting a TV quiz show, or assassinating a president, wouldn’t scratch the itch at all.

And, of course—don’t let anyone tell you otherwise—if you have dreams of becoming a writer, then there are murky, mucky visions of fame attached to these dreams, too; “Thunder Road” was my answer to every rejection

letter I received, and every doubt expressed by friends or relatives. They lived in towns for losers, I told myself, and I, like Bruce, was pulling out of there to win. (These towns, incidentally, were Cambridge—full of loser doctors and lawyers and academics—and London—full of loser successes of every description—but never mind. This was the material I had to work with, and work with it I did.)

It helped a great deal that, as time went by, and there was no sign of me pulling out of anywhere to do anything very much, and certainly not with the speed implied in the song, “Thunder Road” made reference to age, thus accommodating this lack of forward momentum. “So you’re scared and you’re thinking that maybe we ain’t that young anymore,” Bruce sang, and that line worked for me even when I had begun to doubt whether there was any magic in the night: I continued thinking I wasn’t that young anymore for a long, long time—decades, in fact—and even today I choose to interpret it as a wistful observation of middle age, rather than the sharp fear that comes on in late youth.

It also helped that, sometime in the early to mid-eighties, I came across another version of the song, a bootleg studio recording of Springsteen alone with an acoustic guitar (it’s on *War and Roses*, the *Born to Run* outtakes bootleg); he reimagines “Thunder Road” as a haunting, exhausted hymn to the past, to lost love and missed opportunities and self-delusion and bad luck and failure, and that worked pretty well for me, too. In fact, when I try to hear that last line of the song in my head, it’s the acous-

tic version that comes first. It's slow, and mournful, and utterly convincing: an artist who can persuade you of the truth of what he is singing with either version is an artist who is capable of an awful lot.

There are other bootleg versions that I play and love. One of the great things about the song as it appears on *Born to Run* is that those first few bars, on wheezy harmonica and aching pretty piano, actually sound like they refer to something that has already happened before the beginning of the record, something momentous and sad but not destructive of all hope; as "Thunder Road" is the first track on side one of *Born to Run*, the album begins, in effect, with its own closing credits. In performance at the end of the seventies, during the Darkness on the Edge of Town tour, Springsteen maximized this effect by segueing into "Thunder Road" out of one of his bleakest, most desperate songs, "Racing in the Street," and the harmonica that marks the transformation of one song into the other feels like a sudden and glorious hint of spring after a long, withering winter. On the bootlegs of those seventies shows, "Thunder Road" can finally provide the salvation that its position on *Born to Run* denied it.

Maybe the reason "Thunder Road" has sustained for me is that, despite its energy and volume and fast cars and hair, it somehow manages to sound elegiac, and the older I get the more I can hear that. When it comes down to it, I suppose that I, too, believe that life is momentous and sad but not destructive of all hope, and maybe that makes me a self-dramatizing depressive, or maybe it makes me a happy idiot, but either way "Thunder Road" knows how

I feel and who I am, and that, in the end, is one of the consolations of art.

## **Postscript**

A few years ago, I started to sell a lot of books, at first only in the U.K., and then later in other countries, too, and to my intense bewilderment found that I had somehow become part of the literary and cultural mainstream. It wasn't something I had expected, or was prepared for. Although I could see no reason why anyone would feel excluded from my work—it wasn't like it was difficult, or experimental—my books still seemed to me to be quirky and small-scale. But suddenly all sorts of people, people I didn't know or like or respect, had opinions about me and my work, which overnight seemed to go from being fresh and original to clichéd and ubiquitous, without a word of it having changed. And I was shown this horrible reflection of myself and what I did, a funfair hall-of-mirrors reflection, all squigged up and distorted—me, but not me. It wasn't like I was given a particularly hard time, and certainly other people, some of whom I know, have experienced much worse. But even so, it becomes in those circumstances very hard to hang on to the idea of what you want to do.

And yet Springsteen somehow managed to find a way through. His name is still taken in vain frequently (a year or so ago I read a newspaper piece attacking Tony Blair for his love of Bruce, an indication, apparently, of the prime minister's incorrigible philistinism), and for some,

the hall-of-mirrors reflection is the only Springsteen they can see. He went from being rock 'n' roll's future to a lumpy, flag-waving, stadium-rocking meathead in the space of a few months, again with nothing much having changed, beyond the level of his popularity. Anyway, his strength of purpose, and the way he has survived the assault on his sense of self, seem to me exemplary; sometimes it's hard to remember that a lot of people liking what you do doesn't necessarily mean that what you do is of no value whatsoever. Indeed, sometimes it might even suggest the opposite.

### 3. "I'm Like a Bird"

Oh, of course I can understand people dismissing pop music. I know that a lot of it, nearly all of it, is trashy, unimaginative, poorly written, slickly produced, inane, repetitive, and juvenile (although at least four of these adjectives could be used to describe the incessant attacks on pop that you can still find in posh magazines and newspapers); I know, too, believe me, that Cole Porter was "better" than Madonna or Travis, that most pop songs are



NELLY FURTADO

aimed cynically at a target audience three decades younger than I am, that in any case the golden age was thirty-five years ago and there has been very little of value since. It's just that there's this song I heard on the radio, and I bought the CD, and now I have to hear it ten or fifteen times a day . . .

That's the thing that puzzles me about those who feel that contemporary pop (and I use the word to encompass soul, reggae, country, rock—anything and everything that might be regarded as trashy) is beneath them, or behind them, or beyond them—some preposition denoting distance, anyway: Does this mean that you never hear, or at least never enjoy, new songs, that everything you whistle or hum was written years, decades, centuries ago? Do you really deny yourselves the pleasure of mastering a tune (a pleasure, incidentally, that your generation is perhaps the first in the history of mankind to forgo) because you are afraid it might make you look as if you don't know who Harold Bloom is? Wow. I'll bet you're fun at parties.

The song that has been driving me pleurably potty recently is "I'm Like a Bird" by Nelly Furtado. Only history will judge whether Ms. Furtado turns out to be any kind of artist, and though I have my suspicions that she will not change the way we look at the world, I can't say that I'm very bothered: I will always be grateful to her for creating in me the narcotic need to hear her song again and again. It is, after all, a harmless need, easily satisfied, and there are few enough of those in the world. I don't even want to make a case for this song, as opposed to any other—although I happen to think that it's a very good

pop song, with a dreamy languor and a bruised optimism that immediately distinguishes it from its anemic and stunted peers. The point is that a few months ago it didn't exist, at least as far as we are concerned, and now here it is, and that, in itself, is a small miracle.

Dave Eggers has a theory that we play songs over and over, those of us who do, because we have to “solve” them, and it's true that in our early relationship with, and courtship of, a new song, there is a stage which is akin to a sort of emotional puzzlement. There's a little bit in “I'm Like a Bird,” for example, about halfway through, where the voice is double-tracked on a phrase, and the effect—especially on someone who is not a musician, someone who loves and appreciates music but is baffled and seduced by even the simplest musical tricks—is rich and fresh and addictive.

Sure, it will seem thin and stale soon enough. Before very long I will have “solved” “I'm Like a Bird,” and I won't want to hear it very much anymore—a three-minute pop song can only withhold its mysteries for so long, after all. So, yes, it's disposable, as if that makes any difference to anyone's perceptions of the value of pop music. But then, shouldn't we be sick of the *Moonlight Sonata* by now? Or *Christina's World*? Or *The Importance of Being Earnest*? They're empty! Nothing left! We sucked 'em dry! That's what gets me: The very people who are snotty about the disposability of pop will go over and over again to see Lady Bracknell say “A handbag?” in a funny voice. They don't think that joke's exhausted itself? Maybe disposability is a sign of pop music's maturity, a recognition

of its own limitations, rather than the converse. And anyway, I was sitting in a doctor's waiting room the other day, and four little Afro-Caribbean girls, patiently sitting out their mother's appointment, suddenly launched into Nelly Furtado's song. They were word perfect, and they had a couple of dance moves, and they sang with enormous appetite and glee, and I liked it that we had something in common, temporarily; I felt as though we all lived in the same world, and that doesn't happen so often.

A couple of times a year I make myself a tape to play in the car, a tape full of all the new songs I've loved over the previous few months, and every time I finish one I can't believe that there'll be another. Yet there always is, and I can't wait for the next one; you need only a few hundred more things like that, and you've got a life worth living.

#### 4. "Heartbreaker"

The traditional interpretation of boys and their infatuation with heavy (or nu-, or rap) metal involves guitars that serve as substitutes for the penis, homoeroticism, and all sorts of other things betokening perversity, sexual confusion, and intractable, morbid neuroses. True, I spent a brief period in love with the Irish blues-rock guitarist Rory Gallagher (unrequited); and true, I would, for the first three or four years of my life as a rock fan, only listen to

singers who would happily admit to eating rodents and/or reptiles. And yet I suspect that there is a musical, rather than pathological, explanation for my early dalliance with Zeppelin and Sabbath and Deep Purple, namely that I was unable to trust my judgment of a song. Like a pretentious but dim adult who won't watch a film unless it has subtitles, I wouldn't listen to anything that wasn't smothered in loud, distorted electric guitars. How was I to know whether the music was any good otherwise? Songs that were played on piano, or acoustic guitar, by people without mustaches and beards (girls, for example), people who ate salad rather than rodents . . . well, that could be bad music, trying to play a trick on me. That could be people pretending to be The Beatles when they weren't. How would I know, if it was all undercover like that? No, best avoid the whole question of good or bad and stick to loud instead. You couldn't go too wrong with loud.

The titles helped, too. Song titles that did not contain obvious heavy-rock signifiers were like music without loud guitars: somebody might be trying to part you from your pocket money, fool you into thinking it was something it wasn't. Look at, say, *Blue*, by Joni Mitchell. Well, I did, hard, and I didn't trust it. You could easily imagine a bad song called "My Old Man" (not least because my dad liked a song called "My Old Man's a Dustman") or "Little Green" (not least because my dad liked a song called "Little Green Apples"); and God knows you couldn't tell whether the record was any good by listening to the fucking thing. But the songs on Black Sabbath's album *Paranoid*, for example, were solid, dependable, im-

mediately indicative of quality. How could there be a bad song called “Iron Man,” or “War Pigs,” or—my cup ran-neth over—“Rat Salad?”

So for me, learning to love quieter songs—country, soul, and folk songs, ballads sung by women and played on the piano or the viola or some damned thing, songs with harmonies and titles like “Carey” (because who with a pair of ears that work doesn’t love *Blue*?)—is not about getting older, but about acquiring a musical confidence, an ability to judge for myself. Sometimes it seems that, with each passing year, a layer of grungy guitar has been scraped away, until eventually I have reached the stage where I can, I hope, tell a good George Jones song from a bad one. Songs undressed like that, without a stitch of Stratocaster on them, are scary—you have to work them out for yourself.

And then, once you are able to do that, you become as lazy and as afraid of your own judgment as you were when you were fourteen. How do you tell whether a CD is any good? You look for evidence of quiet good taste, is how. You look for a moody black-and-white cover, evidence of violas, maybe a guest appearance from someone classy, some ironic song titles, a sticker with a quote taken from a review in *Mojo* or a broadsheet newspaper, perhaps a couple of references somewhere to literature or cinema. And, of course, you stop listening to music made by shrieking, leather-trousered, shaggy-haired men altogether. Because how are you supposed to know whether it’s any good or not, when it’s played that loud, by people apparently so hostile to the aesthetics of understated modernity?

I discovered, sometime during the last few years, that my musical diet was light on carbohydrates, and that the rock riff is nutritionally essential—especially in cars and on book tours, when you need something quick and cheap to get you through a long day. Nirvana, *The Bends*, and The Chemical Brothers restimulated my appetite, but only Led Zeppelin could satisfy it; in fact, if I ever had to hum a blues-metal riff to a puzzled alien, I'd choose Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker," from *Led Zeppelin II*. I'm not sure that me going "DANG DANG DANG DANG DA-DA-DANG, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA DANG DANG DA-DA-DANG" would enlighten him especially, but I'd feel that I'd done as good a job as the circumstances allowed. Even written down like that (albeit with uppercase assistance), it seems to me that the glorious, imbecilic loudness of the track is conveyed effectively and unambiguously. Read it again. See? It rocks.

The thing I like most about rediscovering Led Zeppelin—and listening to The Chemical Brothers, and *The Bends*—is that they can no longer be comfortably accommodated into my life. So much of what you consume when you get older is about accommodation: I have kids, and neighbors, and a partner who could quite happily never hear another blues-metal riff or block-rockin' beat in her life; I have less time, less tolerance for bullshit, more interest in good taste, more confidence in my own judgment. The culture with which I surround myself is a reflection of my personality and the circumstances of my life, which is in part how it should be. In learning to do that, however, things get lost, too, and one of the things

that got lost—along with a taste for, I don't know, hospital dramas involving sick children, and experimental films—was Jimmy Page. The noise he makes is not who I am anymore, but it's still a noise worth listening to; it's also a reminder that the attempt to grow up smart comes at a cost.