

Muse or Mage? by Bob Gray

Growing up in the 1940's and 50's, music *was* magic. Then recent inventions that made all types of music available to the masses (which meant me and my family) seemed to seal the deal in the mind of this particular adolescent.

My family's first radio, the approximate size and configuration of a refrigerator, somehow brought everything – gospel, country, classical, crooners, and jazz – into our home. The record player, a Victrola, used a “needle” the size and delicacy of a horseshoe nail and somehow made grooves in plastic sound like music. You cranked for fifteen minutes to wind up a huge spring, then lowered the arm with the spike in it and rhapsodized for two or three minutes until the spring wound down. This was indeed magic to a five year old.

As I grew up and learned how the radio worked and why the Victrola could reproduce music from apparently ravaged plastic disks, much of the magic was banished. But then my mother made me learn to play the piano, and the magic returned. I became fascinated with the idea that whacking wires with velvet hammers could reproduce *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* so easily. That water glasses with varying amounts of liquid could sound like the *William Tell Overture* by rubbing the rim with your finger. That pulling a bunch of small silk strings across fatter metal ones could sound like *Carmen*, crying.

Then I grew up some more and learned about sound waves and disturbances thereof between 20 and 20,000 cycles per second – and some of the magic leached away once again. Some. Not all, of course. There was still the magic about it that, for instance, could make a person cry, smile, dance, even fight. Just a few notes, sometimes as few as three, can bring about such changes in a person. This is still, by my accounting, magic.

The Greeks, the common root from which both our words – magic and music – derive, thought of each as an art. At present, however, with some pretty awful things being hailed as great art, the reader can be forgiven some disconnection with the it. Much the same alienation asserts in the world of sport when wholly sedentary pursuits try to assume that appellation. Increasingly, the arts and sports are becoming, with politics, all one thing with little differentiation in the public mind: Entertainment.

And this is sad. Because I truly believe man needs magic. Not the irrational stuff of flying wizards and air-walking either. The enormous public consumption of this nonsense proves the psychological need for magic in man's life – but this is merely symptom.

The real magic is where it has always been – in music. Recently I was lucky enough to have that necessary magic exposed anew. As a kid I didn't pay much attention to the words. Oh, sure, I *knew* the words – I just didn't know enough *about* words to fully appreciate how they were used.

After many years of writing about the business world, I was hired to write about music. Revisiting the foundations (and working my slow way from the Victrola to MP3) with a more mature understanding of the words reintroduced the magic. Below is an example, four lines of twenty from a song recently produced by a Texas singer/songwriter. (Since the type of music this comes from is not the important point here, I'm not including the author. If you want to know about this particular song and it's creator, see * below.)

My friends used to tell me I had a heart of stone.
But I guess it's turned to dust now since you left me all alone.
And I never had to wonder what I was gonna do.
But lately... I've been known to.

First, look at the imagery. A heart of stone that has taken such a hit it is now dust. Not gravel. Not merely broken. Not pieces missing. Dust! The next line describes the loss of confidence that follows such a hit – that makes concrete sidewalks seemingly move under your feet, making the next step uncertain and perhaps terrifying. The emotional upheaval is universal – and excruciatingly private.

Then the rhyme. Perfect rhymes with simple words, which manage to convey all the pain and confusion of a life-changing event. The timing, too, is precise – without mindless contrivances such as eight-bar drum solos or hurrying through anything.

It doesn't matter whether the instrumental accompaniment is blues or ballad, heavy metal or stage musical – the words are beautiful, meaningful – magic.

This is magic of the first order – magic that can change moods and minds. Changing a rabbit into a bouquet of flowers can be explained logically and demonstrated in a linear fashion. The same cannot be done with a song that can change a roaring maniac into a sobbing sheep. Only magic can describe it – explanations fall empty by the way.

If you believe, as I do, that magic is a necessary part of man's rationality, then may I invite you to join us at the Texas Heritage Music Foundation? We are dedicated to keeping this particular magic alive and flourishing. The four-line verse quoted above is merely one of thousands being created in Texas music today. We need our magicians – our musicians – to keep that magic flowing. The goal of the Music Foundation is to support this tradition, to track the influences these magicians have on each other, to archive music (that may not get to the million-seller spot) before it is lost.

Kathleen Hudson established the Foundation in July of 1987 out of the belief that singing songs and telling stories makes a difference in the world. Committed to creating educational projects that both enrich the Texas – and world – community, and preserving the Texas past by sharing the stories of our lives – well, that too is magic. The Foundation has been quietly performing these tasks for more than 16 years. This magic is part of your heritage, part of the legacy you will leave to your children and their children. Step up and help us. Any contribution is welcome and appreciated. Visit our website at www.texasheritagemusic.org, or call us at (830) 367-3750. Your help is needed and necessary to keep the musicians working their magic for all of us. Thank you.

* Visit the website above and click on Newsletter, then the review, *Texans Don't Fit In*.