

COMMENTARY

The space between despondency and hope



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Music came back into our lives last week with a rush like a lush, hard kiss — a kiss or a river, either one.

If you're sleeping near a rushing stream and one day you get half-a-mile up the mountain above it, off the rapids and into trees so thick you think you might never see the forest again, you'll hear its murmur far below you, only a water sound as dry as the invisible wind or as insistent but indistinct as a gone-on memory, the sensuous startle of its wet kiss slipped into mere recollection.

Then David Pulizzi walked in the door, he and his 4-year-old son, Jett. They came at night, out of South Williamsport, Pa. — home of the Little League World Series, home of the most singular and ferocious, the most bluntly tolerant, the most curious and ravenous music man I've ever known.

Right off the bat, he bought me a tuner and tuned my guitar. He spread a couple hundred CDs out on a floor and organized them — blues, jazz, rock, folk, classical.

Others could have done that (they wouldn't have, but they could have).

But nobody else could have sung snatches the way he did all week long, hundreds of them, the lyrics glittering and jumping like spray off the rocks. And

they couldn't have told stories like he did, whenever there wasn't sound or talk of Gary Davis, Toots & the Maytals, or Elvis; Pink Anderson, Greg Brown, or Ray Charles; Son House, Johnny Hartman, or Pete Seeger; Ella Fitzgerald, Bruce Springsteen, or Billie Holiday; Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, or Prokofiev; Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, or Hank Williams; Beethoven, Bach or Woody Guthrie.

Mr. Pulizzi would pause only for the likes of Bob Dylan, caterwauling this time from *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 8, "Tell Tale Signs."*

In the liner notes, somebody quotes Mr. Dylan jack-hammering a bad question: "I don't know, would you expect me to make an album of felicitous content? Why on earth would you expect that? The space between despondency and hope can be as large or as small as we make it, depending on who we are... I try to put my songs right exactly in there, and hope for the best. The album is what it is. There's nothing you or anybody else can do about it, so why even talk about it. Make your own album."

All of that helped bring back the music, I suppose: Mr. Dylan's tough straight-talk, along with the heart hammering that any good music, any good conversation or any good living will boost into your life like that hard kiss.

But especially it was Mr. Pulizzi's singing around the house all day that guided us back to the stream, to hydrate our souls. There, the space between despondency and hope became a golden road,

something like the highway of light a low full moon laid down across the belly of the Caloosahatchee River the night all of us waded in.

And oh, baby, those got-to words:

"Do you cry, Do you pray/Do you wish them away/Do you still leave nothing/But bones in the way/Did you bury the carnival/Lions and all/Excuse me while I sharpen my nails/And just who are you this time?" (Tom Waits, "Who are you?")

"Ow, boy, I just can't take my rest,/Ow, boy, I just can't take my rest,/With this 32-20 laying up and down my breast." (Dylan, "32-20 Blues.")

"Deep down in Louisiana close to New Orleans/Way back up in the woods among the evergreens/There stood a log cabin made of earth and wood/Where lived a country boy named Johnny B Goode/Who never ever learned to read or write so well/But he could play the guitar just like ringin' a bell..." (Chuck Berry, "Johnny B Goode.")

"There ain't nothing I can do,/Or nothing I can say/That folks don't criticize me/But I'm going to anyway/And I don't care just what people say/If I should take a notion/To jump into the ocean/Ain't nobody's business if I do/If I go to church on Sunday/Then cabaret all day Monday/Ain't nobody's business if I do..." (Billie Holiday, "Ain't Nobody's Business.")

All week long we sang, even with the roosters, too. Little Jett would run to the open window like my son Nash used to and crow joyfully into the wide world.

Music had come back into our lives

with a music man who could hear it even in his baby's cry. Mr. Pulizzi used to pace his living room, he recalled in *Jazz* magazine, "with the lights down and Jett in my arms, listening to Coltrane's 'Ballads' on the stereo, and hoping that the great tenorman's winsome solos would soothe the boy's frayed nerves as they had so often soothed mine.

"I was going through this routine one night (and) Jett was bawling at the top of his tiny lungs when, for the first time, I heard in his crying a deeply resonant lyricism that sounded to me as indescribably poignant as anything Coltrane had ever conjured. Also for the first time, I thought I heard the stirrings of a particular consciousness. 'That's jazz,' I remember whispering aloud, feeling as if I had stumbled upon a great truth.

"I looked down at the boy. He was writhing and twisting in my arms, all 5½ pounds of him. His cheeks were flush, his brow furrowed, and his eyes conveyed distress. For someone who couldn't talk, he was amazingly expressive. His crying floated atop Coltrane's rhythm section and filled the room. In a mixed state of elation and wonder, I said, 'You're improvising!'

"To the extent that I still hear jazz in his crying, it mostly sounds to me like vintage Albert Ayler material — abrasive honking and screeching without apparent concern for melody or tone. And yet every so often, a late night rolls around when I hear nothing but absolute beauty in Jett's atonal caterwauling — marvelous, unforgettable nights when the boy's jazz can make me feel high and wondrous all over again."

When the boy could bring music back into his life, like he has into ours. ■

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