

Love-Drunk Kid

From group cover story "Soundtrack"

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The author at age 11 (photo by Juris Jurjevics)

When I was 12, most of my time was spent (a) being mad at absolutely everybody and everything, (b) writing furiously, or (c) being mad at absolutely everybody and everything and writing furiously at the same time. Most 12-year-olds are angry bastards. If they're not, they're either the products of perfect parents (unlikely) or hiding their rage extremely well (probably). And if it's anything that will swallow the pure, hotheaded seething of a preteen -- or a preteen with a sizeable chip on her shoulder as I was -- it is music, in some form or another. And, while my contemporaries were getting their ya-yas out to pop-punk power trio Green Day, I was drowning my sorrows in white typing paper and Magical Mystery Tour.

It was the beginning of seventh grade and my life sucked. I say this as I would have said it then, as I sometimes find myself saying now: "My life sucked." The most generic and vague yet sentimentally perfect statement. That was the end-all, be-all.

The cards seemed stacked against me that year, as my father was on the cusp of remarriage, my school couldn't stand me, and I was just beginning to discover that I could not possibly, in any way, shape, or form, turn out to be a normal human being. I had gone from nauseatingly cute child to awkward and funny-looking adolescent, and, I thought, everybody knew it. I was nursing a two-year crush on a manipulative and slightly clueless teacher; the kids in my class, by and large, thought I was nuts and I was desperately lonely. My heart unabashedly on my sleeve for all the world to see, I was doomed. Consumed with fear, dread, self-loathing, I turned to the only people I could: John, George, Paul, and Ringo.

I don't know how they came to me, my four mop-topped, junior high angels. I remember, at some yard sale or other, my eyes wandering over a pile of mysterious new things called compact discs with a youngster's eye for the new and exciting. For novelty's sake alone, I purchased Beatles Sampler, a mix tape of sorts put out by Rhino Records containing a series of unreleased and/or poorly recorded tracks. This, however, was merely an awakening, as I didn't listen to that CD until months, if not years, later, after I weaned myself off cassette tapes in the interest of technological integration. It was, however, the first CD I ever bought -- something important in and of itself -- and I can still recall it now, blue with wallet-sized headshots of each Beatle adorning the front in a line. But.

My introduction to rock music had come the year before this, during which I had learned all the words to, ironically, "Mrs. Robinson." My parents had a healthy collection of LPs, all of which were readily at my disposal, including an original print of the Stones' Sticky Fingers, complete with a scandalous, fully unzipping zipper down the front of Keith's jeans.

As a youngster, exposed to Scott Joplin and Ry Cooder, among others, I'd become intimately familiar with the phonograph, learning at an early age how to reset and drop the needle with an expert's grace. It was a ritual that I loved; the feeling of the velvety record cleaner in my hand, the way it smelled lightly of plastic and chemicals, how it slid slowly back into its case; the little crack and pop just before the song started; the way the edge of the record spun on the lip of the turntable.

In a matter of months, I'd gone through a few decades' worth of music. I started with Beatles for Sale, moving from that to Revolver, from Revolver to Rubber Soul. When no one was home, I belted out "No Reply" as the cats skulked by the dining table, having learned to be unperturbed by the noise. I loved the lost, lofty sentiments of "I'm a Loser," which is what I was. "Got to Get You Into My Life," with its explosion of horns, got me on my toes and dancing. This was my rock and roll odyssey.

But my favorite favorite: "Strawberry Fields" entered my life via the complicated and horrendously long Beatles Anthology, which was released my seventh-grade year. An overambitious, love-drunk kid, I wrote an entire novel listening to that song, the slow melancholy of it taking me away. There were three versions on that 2-tape set -- Anthology 2 I think it was -- and I loved each one of them, rewinding and rewinding and rewinding just to hear them all again. It was this song, in every one of its recordings, that said it all to me, in strange, cryptic language, in a way I didn't quite understand. It was this song that pulled from me what I had deep inside -- the misery, the hurt, the hope, even -- and helped me pour it onto the page, put my real realities and imagined realities up there together. It is for this that I am eternally thankful to those four lads from Liverpool, bright boys who grew to be jaded men, the surviving members growing to be old, bright, nostalgic, and eccentric gents.

So those of you who know 12-year-olds, or any lusty, angry, or hell, even ambivalent preteen, save them from the destruction of modern pop music: go out and buy them Hard Days Night, just to get them started. They'll learn to love it; if not, there's no hope for 'em. And when they hand you the 50 pages of manuscript, the hand-drawn comic book, the five-painting series, you'll know. You'll know.