

“God Only Knows What I’d Be Without You”

Ashley Sullivan

I attended my first official Trivia Night at the Walrus on Pearl Street last semester. I was a little apprehensive because my friends are extremely competitive, and I was afraid of letting them down. Although I love trivia games, I’m not very good at retaining minute and generally useless details. I sat on a bar stool at a crowded table (the more brains, the merrier at trivia), munching on peanuts and trying to ignore the unpleasant smell of salted peanuts mixed with stale beer. I was getting tired as we tried our brains round after round of themed trivia questions, failing to identify the titles of *Friends* episodes and other occurrences “On This Day.” I continued to be of little help that night, until they announced the final round: Classic Rock. We were instructed to listen to the ten-second clips and provide the band or artist and song title. My ears tuned out every clink of glass, every crunch of peanut shell, and every beat of noise in the bar, as I focused in to the hum of the silent sound system in anticipation.

The first song featured a solo electric guitar. Its melodic tune rose and fell with a soft, sweet voice as if the guitar were itself a lead singer. Instantly, my brain engaged: there’s a distinct style of quick, incredible accuracy that’s hard for most to rhythmically count and hard for anyone to accurately mimic. It must be Jimmy Page. Before the clip has a chance to go further, I can mentally hear Robert Plant’s vocals. Unusually gentle, he’ll enter with “hey, lady,” before rising to his signature shrill tenor for the chorus, “many times I’ve lived....” I’ve got it: “Over the Hills and Far Away.” This my favorite Led Zeppelin tune, and thanks to this song, I won’t settle until I find someone who will

call me “darling” (“Oh darling, darling, darling...”). The next song begins with the rich, warm falsettos of a boys’ choir and gently leads to a beautiful acoustic guitar with soft English horns in the background. The Rolling Stones, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” That was too easy. Soon, I’ve pegged every song in an average of two seconds without using the second playing once. I turn in my team’s answers before any other groups, a cocky grin emerging on my lips.

I didn’t win the round. Instead, I entered a tie with two other teams of very large men. The tie was settled not by musical knowledge, but by the rapid consumption of a certain effervescent liquid (otherwise known as cheap beer) and needless to say, I lost. But that didn’t matter to me; I was still buzzing from exercising my extensive musical encyclopedia excuse for a brain. My teammates were amazed at how quickly I could identify the notes we heard on the sound system, and even I was a little surprised at how completely and immediately I recognized the songs.

I suddenly realized that this wasn’t the first time I’d surprised myself with my nearly (and probably) obsessive music recognition. Whenever I have the radio playing or music is playing in a store, I cannot settle until I have determined whom or what I am listening to. My skin crawls when I recognize a tune or most often a voice but cannot place it immediately. I stand, locked in place, tirelessly wracking my brain for the identification of that raspy alto, of that unique drum line, of that distinct rhythm. If the vast music library stored in my body cannot come up with the artist, I absolutely have to find out who it is and mentally download this new piece to my library.

I found myself wondering, why am I so obsessed with identifying the music I listen to? How and when did I memorize all of the songs and pieces that I can recognize

on a single opening note? I certainly don't remember consciously studying any of the songs. I don't remember ever deciding that music recognition would be "my thing." Then it hit me: I am my mother's daughter.

I remember a single instance of sitting in the back of our 1982 white Volvo Station Wagon. It must be around 1990. I can see my mother fixatedly searching the radio for a good song, pressing the radio buttons that stood in for digital preset selections in 1982. I'm most likely squirming to avoid the scalding hot metal buttons on the already unbearably hot leather seat (how I hated those seats in the summertime). Suddenly, she stops on a station. "Ashley, who is this?" I start to feel pressure building, because if there's anything my mom knows, it's her music, and if there's anything I hate, it's to be wrong. I sit still for a moment absorbing the stereo sound coming from the speakers around me.

I first recognize the unique, slightly nasal tenor singing what I deem the best opening line ever written, "I may not always love you." This man sings an emotionally rising melody, and soon a full range of male voices joins him for accompaniment. It has to be at least four people singing independent, almost instrumental lines: I can hear a high voice sighing like a violin, a lower voice entering like a cello, and even a third voice mimicking the brassy sound of a trumpet. I recognize what I now understand as harmony. This is not just any harmony, but tight, complicated harmonies unlike those I heard on my Raffi tapes. Out of the few bands I can recognize at this age, I have narrowed it down to either the Beatles or the Beach Boys. This is where I start to get nervous. I have to guess the right one because my mom and I must have gone through this for years, and I think she'll be disappointed if I haven't picked up on it yet. With a tight knot in my

stomach and my adrenaline pumping, I take a chance: “The Beach Boys?” I will never forget the proud look in my mother’s eyes as she confirmed my guess with pride. From then on, I could always distinguish between the Beatles and the Beach Boys, and “God Only Knows” would become and remain my favorite song.

I have few doubts that my love of music and my obsession with knowing and recognizing music is inherited from my mother. By constantly testing my recognition of significant artists, ranging from the Beach Boys and Beatles to Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and beyond, she was exercising and expanding my appreciation of all of these artists and those that were to come. Music is our deepest connection. My mother and I are fortunate to have a good relationship as mother and daughter, but it is music that has played a major role in bringing us together as close friends. Since I came to school in Colorado, my mom and I drive to and from Virginia together every year. I look forward to these four-day drives like children look forward to their birthdays. We get to spend four days together, uninterrupted by work or classes, enjoying our favorite activity: listening to music. The first year, we brought a large book of every CD I own, plus a copy of every CD my mother owns (this process became a lot easier when I got my U2 Special Edition iPod). We listened to one album at a time, slowly refamiliarizing ourselves with the albums based on our new surroundings (I now relate Edwin McCain with Kansas) while sharing the stories we associate with each song. For example, I know that she used to have a “blanky” when she was a child. Unfortunately, she was the middle child, and her older brothers threw Blanky out the car window while they drove over a bridge as they moved to yet another military base, while admonishing her with “Big Girls Don’t Cry.” Come to think of it, these stories are how I came to know my entire family.

By reacting and relating to the same music, we know that we can always relate to each other. All of my mother's memories that are tied to specific songs have become my own. My own children will not only have to listen to my personal experiences that are tied to music, but to my mother's as well, because her emotional ties have helped determine my own.

Spending my past four years in Boulder while my family is in Virginia, I have been constantly comforted by music. When I listen to the music my mother and I share a love for, she is here by my side. And when the song changes on the radio or I am tested at trivia nights, it is my mother's voice in the back of my head engaging the search of my mental musical library, saying, "Ashley, who is this?"

[Contents](#)

[Occasions Home](#)

[PWR Home](#)