

Mr. T's Life Soundtrack

Hey folks!

If you are reading this, you are likely a student in my class who has been assigned to post a draft of your own "liner notes" for your Life Soundtrack to this class wiki. Just so you can't say I made you do things that I wouldn't do myself, here are mine...in the form of a reflective letter (as required by the assignment, of course)! Lest you think you will be getting all kinds of "dirt" about my personal life and history, you probably won't, but I suspect I may include some things that are more personal (painful? embarrassing?) than what I would talk about in class. Of course, if you have been sitting in my class all year, you are aware that I usually say pretty much anything that comes into my mind, some of it fairly ridiculous, and I have almost no shame whatsoever. Despite that, I hope you also recognize that even though I sometimes turn my laser sarcasm your way, I really am on your side. Many of the things about school and life that you find frustrating, I also find frustrating. ("Intervention," for example, but don't get me started.) If I have had any success as a teacher of junior high students, it is because I haven't completely forgotten what it was like to be in junior high. I am aware that you often have a set of priorities far removed from what I am trying to do, so even though I am "the enemy" in that eternal educational battle, I'm not always loyal to my "side." (In fact, if my side knew just how disloyal I sometimes am, they would probably execute me for treason.) Actually, in many ways, you as my students know me better than my colleagues (i.e., other adults) do. I like myself better when I am surrounded by youth, and I think I am my truest self in the classroom or the concert hall, not the faculty meeting. Speaking of concert halls: I was in one last night until midnight, so as I sit down to write this letter on an uncharacteristically cold spring morning, my ears are ringing just the slightest bit, echoes of last night's show resounding in my brain. But the coffee is hot and the house is quiet, so here I go....

Hey look! I am already breaking the rules. It says in your handout that the introduction will probably be one paragraph, but that rule is like the Pirate Code: "more like guidelines, really." It's YOUR life. YOU can decide how to organize the songs and the writing, as long as it meets the ultimate requirement. As it happens, I have more introductory material, so I'm not going to get too hung up on the "rules." (And, for this assignment, you shouldn't either.) *Who am I?* Well, I was born in Ogden, schooled in Salt Lake, and now here I am teaching (for 22 years) in between those two places. It doesn't look like I've traveled far or done much with this life, does it? As a teacher, I don't make a huge salary, and I'm pretty sure I won't be inheriting a fortune, so by current cultural standards I am probably not considered successful, but I consider myself rich. I am rich in my experiences and relationships with people. Thousands of students have filtered through my classroom over the years. Many of them have stayed in touch; some come back once in a while to say hi; some send me announcements when they graduate from high school, college, law school; some I run into randomly at the movies, or the pharmacy, or...well, pretty much anywhere I go because, like I said, I've been doing this a long time. Kids grow up. Life goes on. And I am always happy to see how those lives develop. It is just such relationships (which we later call "friendships") that make me rich, even though I'm not sure if I'll ever pay off my house.

My family is another source of meaningful relationships to me, and you'll hear lots of songs on the soundtrack that develop that idea. I know you've heard stories about all of them in the course of our class, but you will probably get to know them a bit better when you see how they are represented in my Life Soundtrack. And there are just some songs I included because they were too good to leave out or because they expressed things about me and my experiences that I had to include. I hope you enjoy "listening."

Rock on!

take him to lunch on his birthday, but our relationship isn't much more substantial than it has ever been. Here's the irony: My dad was a schoolteacher for ten years. Maybe some things do run in the family. One way or another, my lack of a relationship with my father is one of the reasons I became the person I am today, so I decided to include the song.

"Problem Child" by AC/DC: Maybe because I had no male role model to "guide me in the path of righteousness," my teenage years were tumultuous. I was indeed a problem child in some respects, and it started in junior high school. While I was reasonably smart and generally got good grades, I was also defiant. I didn't like being told what to do, especially by authority figures (like teachers) that I didn't respect. I was not the type to shout them down or argue angrily in class, though. I would chip away at their authority and credibility by writing about them in an underground (and highly unauthorized!) newspaper that I may or may not have helped create. I would imitate them. I would respond to their classroom questions with answers that were technically correct but ridiculously outrageous. By the time I was in the ninth grade, I was the kind of student teachers hate the most: A smart ass of the first caliber! And it wasn't just teachers: administrators, coaches, friends' parents -- at one time or another, I think I was at war with all of them. "Make my stand/No man's land/I'm on my own/Man in blue/It's up to you/The seed is sown...." And it wasn't just because I hated authority (there's some of that in all teenaged boys); I hated hypocrisy, specifically adults who talked one way and acted another. And I delighted in pointing it out at every turn. Yet, I was a member of the Honor Society, and (for a couple years in high school) a student officer. The reason I was a problem child was not because I was physically hurting anyone or endangering lives, but because I was questioning The System...and The System didn't like it. They still don't.

Flaming Youth by Kiss: "My parents think I'm crazy/And they hate the things I do/(They say) I'm stupid and I'm lazy/Man if they only knew/I'm flamin' youth/I'll set the world on fire/I'm flamin' youth/My flag is flying higher/My uniform is leather/And my power is my age/I'm getting it together/To break out of my cage/'Cause flamin' youth/will set the world on fire/Flamin' youth/Our flag is flying higher...." I think those lyrics about sum it up. That was high school. Don't ask.

"My Girlfriend's Boyfriend Isn't Me" by Autograph: Since all the meaningful influences in my early life were women (Mom, Grandma Rose, most teachers), I was always respectful to the point of reverence with girls, which ironically did not work to my benefit when it came to romance. Even though I could be an arrogant loudmouth in a classroom, I was painfully shy when it came to asking girls out or going to school dances or doing any of that lovey-dovey stuff. Don't get me wrong: I had lots of girl friends, but no girlfriend. I remember once I found myself at an ice cream shop with nine (count 'em: nine!) of the prettiest girls at my school. These were all girls that I had gone to school with for much of my life and I was secretly infatuated with at least five of them at one time or another, but I never felt that they saw me as anything more than a friend. I took girls to concerts sometimes, and to movies, and a school dance or two, but it never felt like dating. Of course, at that time I wouldn't have known what dating felt like, anyway, but I did think sometimes that I was missing something. And I absolutely hated it when girls would confide in me about other boys they liked "in that way." "Like a bad habit she can't break/The more she gives the more he takes/She's walkin' into a mistake/It happens easily and I know what it means/My girlfriend's boyfriend isn't me...."

"Teacher" by Jethro Tull: It's hard to get this song into a chronological spot in my Life Soundtrack because it applies to so many different people. The lyrics run thus: "Well, the dawn was coming/Heard him ringing on my bell/He said, 'My name's the teacher/That is what I call myself/And I have a lesson/That I must impart to you/It's an old expression/But I must insist it's true:/Jump up, look around/Find yourself some fun/No sense sitting there hating everyone/No man's an island and his castle isn't home/The nest is for nothing when the bird has flown...." In the song, the teacher leads the guy off on a journey to a sunny island and then just sort of disappears, and I'm not sure the band who performed the song had any profound lessons in mind about it, but the first part (quoted above) illustrates how I felt about a lot of the people in my life who taught me important lessons. Mr. Marriott, my sixth grade teacher (and one of the only male teachers I ever had) taught me the importance of humor in learning. His class was a joyful time for me, and when I ran into him in a video store during college, I was renting a movie called *Teachers*. I told him that I was considering teaching as a career and a big part of the reason why was because of his early influence on me. There were also older kids who sometimes played the role for me of the teacher in the song. In a junior high school type class, I sat next to a kid who has come to personify John Conlan (from *The Pigman*) for me. He was an iconoclast, a troublemaker, a bad boy...but funnier than almost anyone else I had ever been around. In high school, a couple of guys in my journalism class (who had cars) often took me with them on their crazy adventures (sometimes during school time -- Shh!), and they too played the role of the teacher who showed me how to, as the song says, look around and find myself some fun. In college, a co-worker and friend who had been born with a congenital heart defect that put him in the hospital for long stretches of time and later killed him reminded me to laugh often. George was nuts! His motto was "Overdo everything!" He talked too loud, drove too fast, lived too hard, felt too deeply, and gave the world a mighty hug. Even at his lowest moments, he embraced every second of being alive. He was one of many teachers to whom I owe my outlook and life philosophy. The song isn't about a school teacher, but about a person who comes along and reminds us to embrace and enjoy life. Sometimes those people ARE teachers (like Mr. Marriott...and, I hope, like me), but sometimes they are just special people we encounter in the course of our busy, hectic, tension-filled lives. I think it is important that we recognize and heed their lessons. I discovered Jethro Tull during college, right around the time I decided I wanted to be a teacher (and right around the time I met George), so I included the song here.

"Mama Said" by Metallica: I know this song is a weird choice. For one thing, it is a country song...performed by a heavy metal band. For another, not all the lyrics match my situation...but some of them perfectly describe the way I had to break away from my mom's influence. As noted previously, Mom was my only active parent. I was her first born and only son, and I don't think she ever really knew what to do with me, but she tried to give me every opportunity to be involved in sports, school, scouts: all that stuff boys do that their dads usually encourage them to continue. She never had to worry about my grades or schooling, and I didn't cause her any of the typical mother-son problems, but I know I was hard on her and sometimes more critical than I should have been. Sometimes not. I always loved my mom, but I never understood her, and when she and my dad divorced, Mom went off to "reinvent herself." And I understood her even less than I had before, but I was "off on my own" by that time, almost finished with college and trying to find my own place in the world. "Mama she has taught me well/Told me when I's young/She said, 'Son, your life's an open book/Don't close it 'fore it's done/The brightest flame burns quickest'/That's what I heard her say/A son's heart's owed to mother/But I must find my way/Let my heart go/Mama, let your son grow...." At the end

of the song, the speaker comes home, realizing he needs his mom, and he finds only a cold gravestone with her name on it, so it is a regretful piece (hence, perfect for a country twang), but my relationship with my mom has improved in recent years. We have agreed to live and let live. So, even though it is a sad song, it represents for a me a saved relationship and an important realization: "We won't make the same mistakes our parents made. We'll make different ones." That's what my mama said.

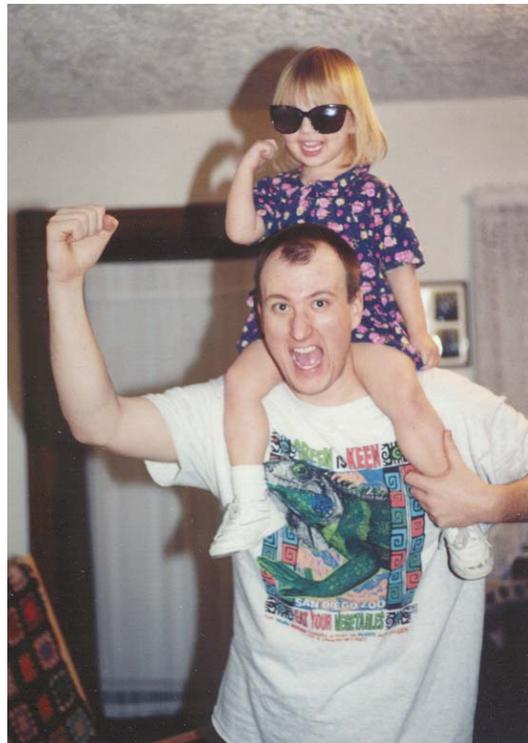
"Wheel in the Sky" by Journey: I remember my first apartment after leaving college dorm life. I was heading into my final year as a student, on my way to becoming a teacher, and I had my own place. Or, at least I had my own room in a place I shared with another guy. On the first day of a new term, I got up and cranked this song at top volume to set me on my road. It's a hopeful piece, empowering! My neighbors, however, disagreed, and were furious at being roused from sleep by my newfound anthem. "The wheel in the sky keeps on turnin'/I don't know where I'll be tomorrow/The wheel in the sky keeps on turnin'!.../...The mornin' sun is risin'/It's kissin' the day...."

"Jet City Woman" by Queensryche: This is Maddie's song. She is the love of my life. She was born "back east," but before she came into my life, she lived in Seattle, also known as Jet City. As it turns out, Queensryche is one of a very limited number of hard rock bands she can tolerate (and has been tolerating these past 20 years of marriage, bless her!), so it is appropriate that this song is placed here. I worked with Maddie at the university. She worked the day shift in the office. I worked the night shift in the dungeons. It was NOT love at first sight; in fact, she hated me because I teased her mercilessly. (I still hadn't figured out how to talk to girls.) But when I was leaving the university to begin my first year of teaching, she essentially dared me to ask her out, and there was no way I was backing down from that. And we've never looked back! (One piece of advice about finding a compatible mate: A lot of people think you have to have everything in common to have a successful marriage. My experience says that all you really need is a set of shared core values. Maddie and I had almost nothing in common: different background, different religions, different musical tastes, different hobbies. All those original differences, tempered by shared values, have allowed us to grow closer over the years.) My "Jet City Woman" is the most meaningful relationship in my life, and it is a relationship I get happier with every year. Not bad for a guy who couldn't even get a date to the senior prom!

"Teacher Teacher" by .38 Special: Yeah, I know, another song with "Teacher" in the title. Sorry. It's what I do. It's who I am. It's part of my life philosophy. And, despite all the crap I gave my own teachers over the years, I became one myself. Maybe part of the reason was because I thought I could do better. Whatever the case, this song was the theme song to the movie I was renting when I ran into Mr. Marriot in that video store a few songs back, and it does sum up some of the issues and fears involved in teaching and learning: "Teacher, teacher, can you teach me?/Can you tell me all I need to know?/Teacher, teacher, can you reach me?/Or will I fall when you let me go?" When we go out on our own (like in "Learning to Fly," "Problem Child," and "Mama Said"), we don't know how we will do it without the support of those who taught us what we know. That is exactly what I felt the year I started teaching. Even though I had a degree and a teaching certificate, I had no idea what I was doing. For some reason, though, most of my students responded well to me...and I loved what I was doing. I was at home in the classroom. No one ever actually called me "Teacher!" like kids do in elementary school, but I acquired various other nicknames over the years.

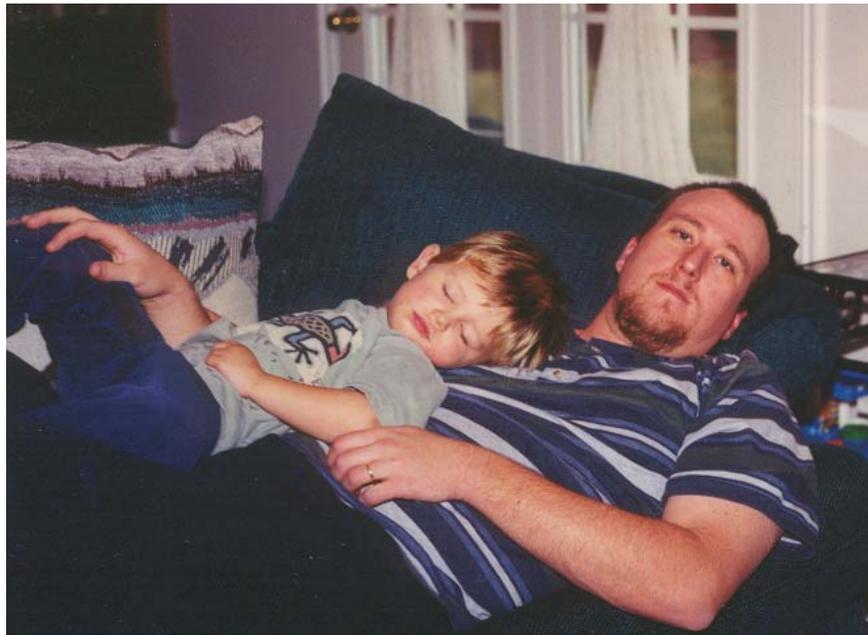
"Closer to the Heart" by Rush: I didn't know it until much later in my career, but the reason I lasted so long in the classroom was because I was willing and able to form a trust with my students that was often more important than the content of the class. See, part of what keeps me in this is that I genuinely like most students...as people! I recognize bits of my teenage self in all of you, and I really do want you to succeed in life, not just in my class. A college can teach someone all the theories and strategies of education, but it isn't a hard science. The best teachers, the ones that really make a difference, teach from the heart more than the brain. They get close to the hearts of their students, and they let their students into their own hearts. That's what I was always trying to do, even when I didn't have the words to express it. Rush says it better than I could: "And the men who hold high places/Must be the ones to start/To mold a new reality/Closer to the heart...." (Many of my students have told me that I am a child at heart. And I guess there is some truth to that. I do have the heart of a child...in a jar on my desk! Sorry -- couldn't resist! :-)

"Daughter" by Loudon Wainwright: "That's my daughter in the water...Everything she owns I bought her...Everything she knows I taught her...Every time she fell, I caught her...I lost every time I fought her...That's my daughter in the water." I've said that a thousand times, while pointing at my daughter Elizabeth as she leaves a wake across whatever pool she happens to be winning a race in that day. She's a swimmer. She holds every individual record at Layton High School, and she is now attending college at the same place where I met her mom. (In fact, she walks past Maddie's former office and my former dungeon on her way to the pool to practice every morning!) Since she was born shortly after I started teaching, and since Maddie had to work during the summers but I didn't, I spent an inordinate amount of time with my water daughter when she was little. In fact, in an effort to be the "active" father I lacked, I probably worried a bit too much and involved myself in too many aspects of her life. And, of course, all that time spent with me certainly had an effect on her:



Here we are rocking out to **"Mama We're All Crazee Now"** by Quiet Riot. Need I say more about this one?

"My Little Man" by Ozzy Osbourne: This one is for my son. I used to sing it to him (as close as I ever came to a lullaby) when he was a baby. "You know I love you more than life itself/Don't you know you're my pride?/I would not have you walking through this world/Without me by your side/Go to sleep, my little man...." My little man isn't so little anymore. In fact, he is a student at Fairfield now, and he'll probably be in this class next year, doing this assignment and cursing me for making him reflect on all this stuff. He was at the concert with me last night, and he recently got an iPod that contains all the songs in this soundtrack because we share our song collections. I won't embarrass him further, but there's another part of his Ozzy song that expresses the recurring theme in this Life Soundtrack: Part of the job of a teacher (or a parent: the child's *first* teacher) is to prepare the student to make his way in the world independently. "I will gladly carry your cross for you/To take your pain away/But what I can't carry is my love for you/Beyond my dying day/So be strong, my little man/When I'm gone, my little man...."



"Go to sleep, my little man...."

End of Disc 1

The first CD of my Life Soundtrack covered the people and events in my life up until my children were in school, which gave me more time to focus on my own craft in the classroom, as well as more time to focus on my own life philosophy. Disc 2 will address those issues...and others.

"Coming Home" by Alter Bridge: This is a natural follow-up to the previous song. The song itself may be about life on the road for a rock band, but the operative lyric is this one: "We come to find/What we take for granted/Keeps us alive in the end/So don't let time/Leave you empty handed/Reach out tonight and make amends...." In other words, don't wait until it's too late. Take advantage of the time you have; don't waste it being mad; don't let negative feelings eat up your life. I include this here not just as advice to you, my young padowans, but also because I am especially prone to waste time being angry about things I can't control, and I've never found it useful. Also, this is a killer song, and I wish they would have played it at the concert last night! I was looking forward to it....

"Totem" by Rush: It would be impossible to live here without saying something about the influence of religion on the culture and the community, and I have lived here all my life. The fact that every public secondary school in the state has a little brick outbuilding dedicated to religious instruction next to it illustrates the importance of religion in daily life. I come from a diverse religious background that includes the following faiths: Latter-Day Saints, Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Then I married a Catholic. Wow! I've spent time in a lot of different churches, and I have known "good people" from all of them. Because of that, I have a hard time saying that any one is the "right one." At least not the right one for me. However, that doesn't mean I am anti-religion or anti-God. I am spiritual in a more holistic way -- one that includes ALL the faiths: "I've got 12 disciples and a Buddha smile/Garden of Allah, Viking Valhalla/Miracles once in a while/I've got a pantheon of animals/In a pagan soul/Vishnu and Gaiga/Aztec and Maya/Dancin' 'round my totem pole/I believe in what I see/I believe in what I hear/I believe that how I'm feeling/Changes how the world appears...." My Grandma Rose was the most "religious" person I ever knew, but she recognized (after a long, thoughtful journey towards her faith) that religion is a personal matter. She seldom mentioned her own faith, deeply held though it was, and she never criticized anyone else's. Hers is the model I follow in this regard because if anyone deserves a place in Heaven, it is Grandma Rose. When I am asked about my thoughts on faith, I often refer to a letter written by Thomas Jefferson in 1816: "I never told my own religion or scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed. I am satisfied that yours must be an excellent religion to have produced a life of such exemplary virtue and correctness. For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be judged." And that, ultimately, is the reason for this Life Soundtrack assignment!

"Don't Fear the Reaper" by Blue Oyster Cult: Cool song! Simple advice: Don't be ruled by fear! If you're busy making the most of your life (and helping others do the same), you don't have time to be afraid. I think it was in a Shakespeare play somewhere (and quoted ten-thousand other places since): "The coward dies a thousand deaths, the hero but one." Be a hero! (And I need more cowbell!)

"This is Who You Are" by Trans-Siberian Orchestra: This song is from a symphonic rock opera about Beethoven's finished-but-undiscovered symphony...and the reasons it was never discovered. In the story, Beethoven (on his deathbed) has to choose between giving the symphony to the world and saving the life of an unknown child. I like this song because it reminds me of something I often tell my children and my students. It is a line I stole from Kurt Vonnegut: "Be careful what you pretend to be because you are what you pretend to be." The song lyrics, sung opera style by a trained voice, include this: "...You can run from all the memories/But never get that far/For in the end they'll

find you/For this is who you are...." I had to include this song in this assignment because the Life Soundtrack is a way of doing what Socrates suggested: "Know thyself." (Have you noticed how many allusions to history, writers, and philosophers have started working their way into the musical choices? Who would have thought?)

"The Meaning of Life" by Monty Python: And now for something completely different.... Monty Python, whom you may know from a movie about the Holy Grail, was a group of British comedians who made fun of everything. They are the sort of troupe you either love or hate, and most of the people who hate them "just don't get it." So, even though most of their humor is somewhat nonsensical and/or iconoclastic, I've always thought of it as humor for smart people. This song, from a movie of the same name, addresses some of those larger questions that we are talking about here in a light-hearted way. And it does encourage you to ask yourself the question "What is the meaning of MY life?" That's why I include it here.

"Life Won't Wait" by Ozzy Osbourne: Whatever your answer to the last question, it's always good to keep in mind that every minute you waste is a minute removed from your time here. "Every second you throw away/Every minute of every day/Don't get caught in a memory/Because life won't wait for you/No life won't wait for you, my friend...Stay strong/Stay true/Be brave/It all comes down to you...Life won't wait for you my friend...." Don't forget that. Make the most of it!

"I'll Never Grow Up Now" by Twisted Sister: I always thought this song applied to me. I have never felt comfortable in rooms full of adults, even though I have been one for a long time. Like I said at the beginning of this letter, I am my truest self among youth, and for that reason, this rather whimsical song from a really weird band seems to fit a man who is still in school after 40 years.

"Time Stand Still" by Rush: I told you about this one in class when I was trying to show you an example of what these little explanations should include. When I find that write-up, I'll copy it here. For now, suffice it to say that I often find myself awed by how fast time passes. Yet another reminder to get out there and live while we have a chance!

"School's Out" by Alice Cooper: Okay friends, here endeth the lesson. One month from now, you'll be going to Lagoon, attending the ninth grade dance, saying hello to summer and goodbye to some friends who will be going to the other high school. Kinda sad, but we all look forward to that time off, right? "No more pencils/No more books/No more teachers' dirty looks/School's out for summer...."

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