

Music and Memories, hand in hand.

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Everyone has a musical taste of their own and I don't believe I have ever met a person who would not like to listen to at least some kind of music. There are probably as many musical tastes in the world as there are people living on the surface of it. Usually people like to stick around to some sort of genre, or at least have some diversity in the music they like to listen to. Whichever it is, music can be one of the most influential ways to look back at your life and use either the music itself, or the development of musical taste as a guideline to recall the memories from the episodes throughout your life.

With some exceptions of course, one could argue that everyone develops their musical taste around their teenage years and often go along with that sort of music for the rest of their life. Thinking about the time when you got the first album of your favourite band already conjures up certain memories of that specific moment, but you can also use that moment as a starting point to think of what else you were doing back then. That is more of a specific method of using the tool, but it can also be used by accident. Sometimes you hear a song from the past that reminds you of a certain moment. Maybe it is a sad moment, like when you were going through a hard break-up with your girl or a boyfriend. Or a happy moment, like when you were having the best time of your life during that one summer party, while you were hanging out with your friends and everyone was having way too much fun for it to be actually legal in the first place.

But how do you see yourself back then, when thinking about it now? Is life better today than when you were younger? Are the feelings and emotions derived from those times still as vivid and strong now, as they were when actually going through the moment itself? And why is it exactly that music has such a strong impact on the feelings anyways? Is it some mysterious force, or is there more into it? A good musical definition that can be used to explain those memories is "evergreen music", more specifically the songs that you never get tired of listening to. Every generation has evergreen songs of their times that can be used to remember things about when they were younger. Maybe today you can see yourself when you were thirteen years old and laugh about how clueless life was back then. But what do you think your parents feel when they see a picture in their head of themselves when they were the same age as you are now?

Nick Hornby, an English novelist, essayist and a screenwriter wrote a book of 26 essays called the *Songbook*. He wrote about the thirty-one of his favourite songs of all time, as well as about the emotional aspects of each song. He presumed that “the essays might be full of straightforward time-and-place connections like this, but they’re not, not really.” (Hornby, 2003, p. 5) He makes an example of how the song “Thunder Road” would probably bring back the smell of a girl’s deodorant, from 1975 when he heard the song for the first time in a girl’s bedroom, but concludes that this was not the case:

“What happened was that I heard “Thunder Road” and loved it, and I’ve listened to it at (alarming) frequent intervals ever since. “Thunder Road” really only reminds me of itself, and, I suppose, of my life since I was eighteen—that is to say, of nothing much and too much. .” (Hornby, 2003, p. 5)

Later on he even went as long as saying that:

“One can only presume that the people, who say that their very favourite record of all time reminds them of their honeymoon in Corsica, or of their family Chihuahua, don’t actually like music very much.” (Hornby, 2003, p. 5)

Hornby’s book is a good read and very interesting. The feelings he describes in his work are very detailed and one can see that he is a person who is greatly moved by music and thinks of it as one of the most important aspects of his life. Thus my intention is not to look down upon his book; on the contrary, I would recommend everyone to read it. Especially those people who are more down to his generation rather than mine; he is the age of my father so our world revolving around music differs quite a lot to begin with. However, I want to delve more deeply into his argument that memories supposedly would *not* be tightly connected to music. I say that they are, at least from a different point of view.

The development of a musical taste for an individual usually starts around the age of ten to fifteen. It does not really matter if you are into heavy metal, classical music, jazz, or hip hop. You can even like to listen to whales singing all day long and I would still call that a musical taste. When looking back at the times when you found yourself starting to like certain music or genre, it usually gives you quite funny or embarrassing memories. These memories and small video clips in your head are something that is called the

autobiographical memory. In short, autobiographical memory is “a memory system consisting of episodes recollected from an individual’s life, based on a combination of *episodic* (personal experiences and specific objects, people and events experienced at particular time and place) and *semantic* (general knowledge and facts about the world) memory”. (Williams, Conway & Cohen, 2008)

My own musical taste had a starting point around the age of fifteen when I bought my first two albums: *Limp Bizkit’s “3 Dollar Bill”* and the “*Significant Other*”. Before that moment, I was basically familiar only with the music coming out from Music Television channel. Limp Bizkit was still only a quick phase that lasted no more than few months before I got introduced to other bands of similar genre. *Korn* for instance was a big part of my life for many years and it still brings up nice and very detailed memories. For example, the band still reminds me of the very moment when my very first real girlfriend introduced me to the band. How cute is that? How about your very first own albums you bought for yourself? I bet you can also pretty clearly remember the day that you bought the album of your back-then favourite band, and the following excitement you had when starting to listen to it.

I can continue following this pattern all the way to the present day. I can recall the episodes of my life very clearly when I am thinking of the music I listened to when I turned sixteen, then seventeen; eighteen; nineteen, you get the point. In the first place it is very easy, but also very fun. Just go ahead and have a small journey in your own head using the same method. All these memories that you can somehow relate to music are just popping into your head like stars in the night sky. You can also see these memories in more or less of a linear way because you can remember what music you listened first; and how that music brought you to listen or do something completely else afterwards. Cause and effect!

Autobiographical memory has been studied in multiple ways, and other much more scientific methods have been applied to get proof on how the memory works. The scientific history revolving around the subject is explained by Douwe Draaisma in his book *Why life speeds up as you get older. How memory shapes our past* (2004). Draaisma in the first chapter of the book tells a brief story of two scientists, namely Francis Galton and Hermann Ebbinghaus, who were both conducting experiments on their own memories. Galton’s method was to think of words and the associations that were brought into his mind through them. Ebbinghaus’ method was to study memory by cues, or short words, and how well he could remember them. The musical method might be a bit naïve and completely non-

scientific. But then again, would you rather be mumbling incoherent words to yourself months after months like these two other gents did, or think of your own memories through some of the most awesome songs you have heard? I guess that's more of a matter of personal preference.

Even though music can be used as a more scientific method on studying your memories, you can sometimes also find yourself suddenly having a flood of emotions, feelings and memories because you just heard some specific song. Every single person has these kinds of songs that bring up those memories of your life that are sometimes sad and sometimes good. Probably the most cliché thing to think of is the song that you were listening to when having a bad time in your relationship. Girls especially excel at this over guys. But I am no different and I also have those songs that make me think of those times, just like you or anyone else. Happy memories are maybe even more dominant. Just think about seeing an old friend for the first time in years and you just might start subconsciously whistling a tune in your head from the days that you were still hanging around a lot together. Surprising how close music goes hand in hand with memories like that?

One of the aspects of an autobiographical memory is called *flashbulb memories*. Flashbulb memories are specific moments in your life when you learned or heard something very significant. Best known examples around the subject are the assassination of JFK; and the example that is maybe closer to our generation: the 9/11 terrorist attack. In flashbulb memories, people tend to see them in a third person perspective, like they would see themselves in a movie clip as a spectator. The memories can be very clear, all the way into remembering the most insignificant details. Personally I can not remember that much about the 9/11 more than that I was sitting home and learned about the whole thing from TV. But for some reason I can remember one specific detail from that moment; the song in the background coming from my stereo set: Deftones' *My own summer*. Why is it that something so small, and one could say useless detail, can be recalled from a moment so shocking? I could argue that music is something for our mind that enables us to somehow 'seize the moment' and thus help us remember that moment in a more stronger way later on.

Why does music make such an impact on us anyways? Why memories that are recalled through music so full of life and still able to summon up the same feelings today that you felt even ten years ago? Maybe the question lies in the humanly fluids (the ones in your brain) why you get those oh-so-comfortable chills in your spine when you are listening to your very favourite best songs. I do not know which type of music exactly is able to create the

chill-effect; or if the genre even matters; but personally I just love the feeling of listening to a new song for the first time and getting that feeling into my back straight away. And I have always wondered why that is like that?

The answer to that question might be more scientific than one would have guessed. A Canadian research team found clear evidence that when a person is listening to one's favourite music, the brain releases an overload of a fluid called *dopamine*, which is also the result of sexual arousal, or doing drugs. According to the researchers, the results were surprising because until now dopamine had only been linked to human survival instincts. In the first test the eight volunteers had to listen to their favourite music for fifteen minutes and after that they were injected with a radio-active substance that would bind to the same receptors in one's brain as dopamine would. After that the volunteers were put into a PET scanner. If there would be any dopamine in the brain that was released by listening to music, the areas covered with dopamine would be shown as islands, or empty spots, in a sea of radio-active substance. This is exactly what happened. In the second test they went through the same routine, but this time with random music. The test resulted into no dopamine at all. The test subjects also pushed a button at the same moment when they got the shivers, and based on that the researchers were able to combine them reliably to a flood of dopamine in the brain. Most of the test subjects were close friends to classical music, but one was more into jazz and another into rock music. (Salimpoor, V.N., Benovoy, M., Larcher, K., Alain Dagher, A., Zatorre, R.J. *Anatomically distinct dopamine release during anticipation and experience of peak emotion to music.*)

So now there might be a scientific explanation to the feelings and shivers in one's body, coming from music. But how about the feelings today, when thinking about some episode in your life that is very memorable to you? I always remember myself with some embarrassment when thinking about myself when I was listening to certain music from the days when I was around sixteen to seventeen. It definitely has everything to do with the style of clothing for people of that age around the late 90's and early 2000. But the funniest detail from those times still was the available technology back then. Present day's kids have it easy. Now they have their iPod Minis, mp3 players, USB-sticks and all that. Even cell-phones can be used as music devices today. If I wanted to carry music with me back in the 90's, I had to bring along a huge portable CD player called the 'WalkMan'. The thing could not really even fit into any sort of a pocket at all, hence the name I guess, because it was the size of a fully

grown man when compared to your smallest music device today. The point being, it does not matter if it was the technology you are laughing at, or yourself, or any reason. I do not know about you but at least I get these kinds of funny memories in my mind that are somewhat awkward, but that also draw a kind hearted smile on my face. What do you feel when thinking about yourself ten years ago? Or what do you think your parents think of themselves today, while trying to remember how they were like thirty years ago?

Evergreen music can be one of the best ways of thinking back to your life. Just think about the song or a band you for some reason never get tired to. These songs usually give you the strongest feelings, be it memories of very specific moments or a bit broader episodes in your life. Personally I never get tired of the two first albums of Mudvayne. I can always listen to them and it does not even matter which mood I am on. If I am feeling like partying, these guys have songs for that; if I am in a bad mood and feeling like banging my head to the wall to the point I lose my consciousness, these guys have songs for that also. And I have so many memories related to this specific band that it would take me a whole book to write all about it, just as Nick Hornby did for his thirty-one favourite songs; in a way at least.

Every generation has, or will have, their universal evergreen music eventually. I do not think my generation has yet developed its own the same way your parents could argue some music from their youth being today's evergreen music. But it seems that even today these songs that they were listening to still build up memories and feelings from those times. Since I was wondering how the subject really reflects to an older generation than mine, I was compelled to go and ask. And who would be a better target for my research than my own parents. My mother, for example, remembers ABBA as one of her *hot* favourites which most likely is not a surprise for anyone, not for us or her generation for that matter. I'd guess your parents would possibly say the same. She also mentioned how the feelings 25-30 years later are not that strong anymore, but still gets the same shivers from certain songs. Other funny example was when she found herself thinking how certain songs from one moment can relate to many other moments. For example *Albenino's Adagio* reminds her not only about her wedding, but also of many funerals; and it was even the song that was played in the background in an Olympic Figure Skating competition for the winning gold medallists. Personally I can't help but laugh at that recollection, but I can not help myself wondering what Nick Hornby's reaction would be.

Today my taste in music is very different than it was ten years ago, but at the same time I can clearly see the path that led me to listen to the music of today. Following that road brings up all kinds of memories, so clear that I could almost remember them just like it happened yesterday. The feelings, or the memories of those feelings, are still very strong. It is amazing how I still can remember the misery, or happiness, of some moments in my life so clearly and how I can still remember the songs I listened to when I was partying with my friends, still completely clueless about life. Or when I was crying a river because of relationship issues; or the influence a certain band had in my taste in music that some friend of my introduced me to; or how laughable of a person I see myself being when thinking of the times ten years ago. The autobiographical memory is something to thank for that. Without it we would not be able to re-live those episodes in our minds so clearly that it is like watching a trailer of a movie. Following the path in your memory is also an epic journey that everyone takes once in a while without even fully knowing it. I think all of us do it once or twice a year; having these evenings when you go back into your albums in a hope to feel those chills in your back that derive from the sheer awesomeness of nostalgia. Speaking of nostalgia and movie trailers, I think I am going to put on some Mudvayne now and recommend you do the same with your favourite teenager band: be it the Spice Girls, Dimmu Borgir, ABBA, Tupac Shakur, Bruce Springsteen, or whatever you liked to listen to 'back in the good old days'.

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