

Aging in Place: To be or not to be sentimental.

By Marian Knapp

There are wonderful programs on public television that bring back old songs, often with original singing groups made up of initial members plus replacements for those who didn't make it to older age. A lot of this music is my music from the late 1940s and early 50s when rock and roll was just emerging as something exciting and exotic but perceived by some as toxic and decadent. Where I grew up, this new sound was prohibited from radio stations because it was deemed too sexy, suggestive, lustful and clearly too "ethnic" for everyone, especially for teens. The powers that had control over local broadcasting said that no one could hear this music. Of course, for young teens, who really didn't know or care who was making these morality decisions, the challenge became how to get around the ban.

We learned (probably from someone's mother's cousin's daughter who lived in Brooklyn) that in New York this music was all over the airwaves. If they could listen, why couldn't we? Word got around that late at night, when the radio circuits weren't as crowded as they were during the day, you could pick up a New York City station and for a few crackly minutes hear forbidden sounds. I don't remember actually hearing an entire song – only bits and pieces as the broadcasts faded in and out. Also, I was never much of a late-night person and got fidgety after a few minutes of constantly moving the dial to find a second or two of illicit rhythm.

Over time, the radio stations loosened up. Also we could buy 45s of the most popular tunes. Naturally, we knew the songs but for boy/girl dances sponsored by schools, youth groups, or religious organizations our daring music was prohibited. We continued to dance to music of the 30s and early 40s using the steps we learned in school classes for fox trot (1,2,3,4; 1,2,3,4) and waltz, (1,2,3; 1,2,3) – nice even tempos, prescribed positions and postures, with no suggestive hip movements.

The blossoming music was an important part of my teenager hood but I didn't understand that great and widespread musical changes would explode in the late 50s and the 60s. I tagged on to these as well. Given these life-defining shifts, I should be sentimental about this era. But I am not. Sometimes I watch parts of those TV programs with grayish haired or balding people singing and dancing in the aisles having a great time. However, in spite of the fact that I love to see people enjoying themselves, I don't sing along or dance. In fact, I usually flip channels looking for something else. I don't even order videos that are tantalizingly offered. It is almost as if I am exhibiting some kind of avoidance behavior.

I think what is going on is that I am fearful of getting stuck in a by-gone era. By being sentimental, I unconsciously fret, I might have trouble re-directing my energies back into my future. Those teen years are far in the past. But the impressions, feelings, sensations sit

within me and are embedded in my inner consciousness. If I imagine rejuvenating this past pattern of meaning and trying to place it into the context of my current life it seems an out-of-date relic from a different time and place with no present value.

This doesn't mean that I can't join in when the opportunity presents itself. But I can only do that for a short amount of time—not in one or two-hour immersions. In fact, the other day I saw a talent show by independent living facility residents. Most of the people were 10 to 20 years older than I am, so their music was from an even earlier era. But, because I came from a family that liked to sing, I know that music. I sang “Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy” with everyone else.

It's fine for me to remember the past and even be a little sentimental about it. But, nostalgia can't dictate who I am now. I have learned that to live a satisfying life I must constantly take what I know from experience and use that to recreate myself—over and over. It has worked so far and I'll keep doing it. Logically, I know that I don't have to be afraid of being mired in the past and realize that, someday, long-ago memorized music could be an important stimulus for my brain. But right now I won't sit through hours of early rock and roll unless I can find a way to incorporate those images and sounds into imaginings about my ever-changing future.

Wicked Local Newton

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