

Variations on a Theme: September Song

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Categories : Family

Date : 24-08-2021

Stardust

Willie Nelson

April 17, 1978

Columbia Records

On the back cover of my father's copy of *Stardust*, Willie Nelson smiles, soft-focus mountains rising in the distance. It is magic hour, and his paragraphs, drawn drunk, fill the sky with haphazard loops and curves. Most of it is covered in Sharpie, illegible. But if I tilt the record toward the light, his ballpoint script shines through.

"We just cling together."

"Apologizing with no mercy."

"Catholicism."

"Baby."

"Youth."

I think about my mother as I read his scattered words. I think about the rhythms of a marriage, arranged with equal parts magic, hope and heartbreak. Then I pull the record out and catch my finger on a sharp imperfection in the vinyl's curve. Jagged, it could slice through skin.

Soft sound, then.

That crackle of dust in the speakers.

In *Rolling Stone*, Ariel Swarley described Willie's collection of standards—a break in a line of outlaw country records—as a testament to his roots: "*Stardust* is more than a personal history or testimonial," she wrote. "The songs...are a part of Nashville's collective bloodlines..."

When I think about my own bloodlines—about my parents' story, about my own—I picture broken glass in the apartment before the break. But in every narrative, there's a before.

Before: My parents met at Tippy's Charcoal Haven on Kennedy Boulevard in Jersey City, circa 1971. He slung pizzas and noticed her beauty, like they all did. She worked weekends and bought herself an early form of independence.

Before: He left the country, dodging war, but wrote to her from Hyde Park, from Rome and scattered European cities. Technically, she was still a kid. But he waited.

Skip the needle, then: A wall of noise. The music of smashed china.

Skip it again: Newark's refineries glow during that last nighttime drive north from our apartment in Red Bank where a flood once bathed my baby toys in ochre water. We arrive at my grandmother's apartment on the shy side of midnight and the two women talk late into the night. I sit alone at the dining table in the kitchen, overhead light, and suck on Cherry Lunden's cough drops. I find sweet solace in the wake of rhythms that I am too young to understand.

Decades later, I know more. I carry the weight of my own soundtrack. Summer heat, and I listen to "September Song" and let its gentle waves rock me, older than my mother was then. Booker T. Jones produced it, and you can feel the Memphis honey in its sonic corners. You can feel a broken kind of tenderness that gets in the blood.

Oh, the days dwindle down...to a precious few...

And these few precious days, I'll spend with you...

When *Stardust* was released, my parents had been married for two years. "We just cling together," my father wrote. Eyes closed, then, I see it: My mother sways radiant in a crimson dress and my father cracks a Ballantine, sweat rolling down its sides in slow motion. They look one another in the eye and then they dance, that jutting plastic blurred in the rotation.

Damn if Willie doesn't get the line between love and heartache.

I don't know what that time was really like, of course. This is a reconstructed image. Yet there is something true submerged within the sound: How the future will unravel it all, china shards scattered on the dining room floor. How that image, shimmering in late day light, will shape me in turn.

But for now, there is this quiet moment. I close my eyes, exhale, and watch them dance.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).

("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)



Marked by wanderlust, Jenn Hall lives and writes in Jersey. Her essays and fiction have been published in Pidgeonholes, The Maine Review, Hippocampus Magazine, The Tishman Review, and Paste. She was also a notable in Best American Food Writing 2019. Though driven to meander, she has come to learn that the best stories are hidden in plain sight. Follow along at jennhallwrites.com.