

IN THE BASEMENTS OF MY LIFE

Somewhere in my basement, there are boxes filled with CDs. And these aren't just plastic jewel cases taking up space, these are discs stored in little plastic sleeves. There are hundreds of them, maybe a thousand or more. If I paid them any mind, I might still count them among my most prized possessions. But I haven't looked at them for a decade, much less played any of them.

When I was a kid, we listened to records. There were cassette tapes, and CDs entered our house before I was 10, but it was hard to ignore the shelves of colorful, vinyl LPs. Once I was old enough to operate the turntable without inciting too much consternation in my father, I would rifle through the albums, pulling out the ones that looked interesting.

I would spin the kaleidoscope wheel on the sleeve of "Led Zeppelin III" and ogle Tina Turner's legs on the back of "Private Dancer" and read the lyrics on the back of The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." Having my parents' music library to peruse was a gift and an education. As far as I recall, my parents gave me free reign to listen

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to whatever I wanted. I would sit on the floor in front of those two huge speakers and let it wash over me. More often than not, I wanted to play the music stored inside the record sleeves with the strangest artwork.

I was familiar with Frank Zappa because my dad played the album "Hot Rats" all the time, but I only dug deeper into his massive catalog after I saw the cover of "The Man From Utopia." A 'roided-up, shirtless, cartoon Zappa wearing swim goggles crushes the neck of his guitar with one hand as he menacingly waves a fly swatter with the other. How could I not listen to what was inside?

I guess I'm living proof that listening to the song "Cocaine Decisions" as a 10-year-old does not turn you into a cocaine addict. But it might make you an anti-establishment cynic, and it's possible "The Dangerous Kitchen" planted the seed for what would grow into a mild, obsessive-compulsive dishwashing disorder.



ISTOCK

Still, I was unwittingly introduced to Steve Vai and some tips on alternative entertainment options in Albuquerque. That, dear readers, is personal growth.

There is more than entertainment in music. A song doesn't have to be great to teach a lesson, and each new album expands the listener's creative horizons. There is also family history—and maybe a better understanding of your parents—lurking in the gatefold covers of worn-out albums.

So what to do with all those CDs in my basement? That's my personal history gathering dust down there, and I have a kid who might be interested in flipping through those discs.

Thanks mostly to my wife, my daughter is getting a good music education. We catch her singing along to Beatles songs, even some of the lesser-known ones, and she probably knows more about Bruce Springsteen and Prince than the average 7-year-old. She has access to music, but it comes through tiny speakers around the house,

served up digitally by Spotify.

The only thing standing in the way of lending my library to her is technology. Our CD player is also in the basement. It might be time for me to put a little stereo in her room, and make some space on her bookshelf for a pile of old CDs.

It would be interesting to see what she finds there, and whether any of it becomes meaningful to her. I may join her, and try to remember the journey I took to get here.

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WALK IT OUT

There's something about "Slow Burn" by Kacey Musgraves. It's been in my head since she won the Grammy for album of the year. Her voice is beautiful, even ethereal, and the song is a delicate bit of acoustic silk—the drums don't even kick in until the minute-40 mark. On the other hand, the lyrics are a bit of a word salad, a compilation of disparate ideas. And the bridge is about four seconds long. But man, the song just walks.

While Musgraves does mention taking a walk in the song, the thing that strikes me is the loping rhythm of the track. It moves at a pace that feels particularly human. It's a pedestrian beat, and seems to click with something primal: a casual gait, a relaxed heartbeat. I noticed it when I was strolling with my dog around the neighborhood, and it reminded me of a few other songs that find considerable energy in a leisurely stroll. Put these on the playlist when a sunny day begs you to get out of the house.

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'ALONG WALK' BY JILL SCOTT

Seems obvious enough, right? I remember seeing this video on one of those late-night music shows on a station that didn't normally play videos, and it was an immediate breath of fresh air. It's impossibly positive, bright and creative, and it's certainly buoyed by Scott's powerful vocals. It moves at the pace of poetry.

'GREEN ROCKY ROAD' BY DAVE VAN RONK

This old tune got some lyrics in the 1960s thanks to Len Chandler and Robert Kaufman, and it's become a folk standard. There is talk of bipedal locomotion throughout: a pilgrimage, a promenade, and a green road made for wandering feet. Van Ronk's version from his "On Air" album is particularly motivating, lending a sunshiny sound to the propulsive rhythm.



FILE / CHARLES SYKES / INVISION

Kacey Musgraves performs 'Slow Burn' at the CMA Awards Nov. 14. The song opens her Grammy-winning album.

'COUNTING THE CROSSTIES' BY BAD LIVERS

It makes some sense that the rhythm of early blues and jazz music was informed by the rhythm of trains. They make a consistent sound, traveled at a consistent speed and musicians often used them to travel. But it's more likely that a regular walking pace informed the rhythm of popular music. Try it yourself. Take a walk, and it's not long until you notice your thoughts working at a similar

beat. This folk-ish, blues-ish song combines the best of the two theories and takes a walk on the tracks.

'STAYIN' ALIVE' BY THE BEE GEES

As John Travolta demonstrated, this song is more likely to inspire a strut, but it walks nonetheless, and it walks hard. Disco is nothing without an insistent, consistent rhythm, and this song is the heartbeat of the genre. You can tell by

the way the brothers Gibb sang this song that they used their walk when they wrote it.

'PUSH IT ALONG' BY A TRIBE CALLED QUEST

Hip-hop music is poetry by nature, and depends on the inherent beats of words and thoughts. Tribe songs are elemental in that way, often flowing with an easy rhythm that lends itself to stepping along the sidewalk. Add a little lyrical motivation and this is a good one to keep you moving.

'COUNTRY ROAD' BY JAMES TAYLOR

This list wouldn't be complete without the king of walking, James Taylor. Most of his songs have an easy, swaying rhythm, and a whole lot of them mention walking. There's "Walking Man," naturally, but also "Fire and Rain," "Carolina in My Mind" and probably every song he's ever recorded—I didn't check them all. I'm going to make an assumption here and say that inspiration only strikes Taylor when he's strolling along some tree-lined New England byway in the fall. The proof is in the rhythm.

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MADONNA EXPRESSES HER ART IN JUMBLED, REDEEMPTIVE SHOW

DOES MADONNA have anything to say? Perhaps the answer to that question is less interesting than her attempt to say something in the first place.

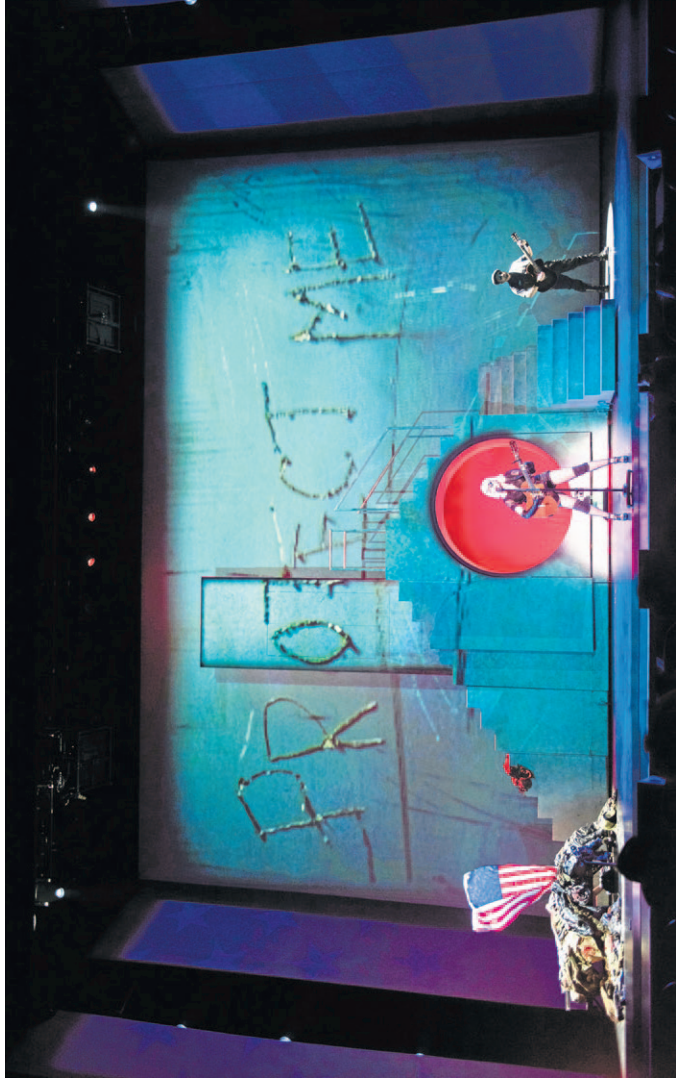
Madonna is in the midst of her “Madame X” tour, named for her latest album, which debuted (as I’m sure you remember) at No. 1 in June. While the album is typical for Madonna in its attempt to meld yet more world music into a pop-dance milieu, the tour is a bit of a curveball for the superstar, since she’s decided to forego giant venues in favor of smaller rooms coupled with longer “residencies” in a few cities. When you typically fill stadiums and arenas, a 3,000-seat theater is practically Sunday supper with the family.

The Philadelphia Metropolitan Opera House is such a venue, and that’s where I saw Madonna take her creative stand. The show was sloppy, disjointed and rambling, but it was brave in its own way, and perhaps the most compelling case I’ve heard for considering Madonna as a bona fide, boundary-pushing artist rather than a commercial pop star.

In some ways, the concert was a test of fandom, if not an outright rejection of the concept of celebrity worship.

Gen X-ers who paid through the nose to hear the ‘80s hits left disappointed. People who came to collect Instagram and Facebook proof they paid through the nose to see Madonna were shut out—all phones were locked in Yondr bags for the duration of the show. “Like a Virgin” virgins paid through the nose for satisfaction, but left the theater as chaste as they came.

The original showtime of 8:30 p.m. was pushed back to 10:30. When music started



STUPISH

Madonna’s ‘Madame X’ tour struggles to make a coherent statement, but it still soars.



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at 10:45, it was a quartet of talented Portuguese musicians playing acoustic versions of Madonna hits. After 30 minutes, an announcement declared technical difficulties would delay the show. The crowd stewed.

In retrospect, the preternatural attempts to enrage her devoted fans had a certain logic. Making people uncomfortable is, and perhaps has always been, Madonna’s goal. She makes it clear at the opening of the show, which features a clean-cut businessman being gunned down as a James Baldwin quote is projected across the stage: “Art is here to prove that all safety is an illusion. ... Artists are here to disturb the peace.”

Heady stuff, and perhaps a little above Madonna’s pay grade, but a mission statement most popsters would shy away from. She did her part by calling out sexism, voicing support for gun control and declaring “I’m not keeping my baby” in an a cappella chorus of “Papa Don’t Preach.”

There were moments of humor and some raunchy bits, as you might expect, but there was also some stunning, Martha Graham-inspired choreography, and moments of uplift that did their best to eschew raw nostalgia.

Four of her daughters took part in the performance. She paid homage to her adopted home of Portugal by adding fado music to her set, and some seriously talented musicians from Lisbon. Orquestra Batukadeiras, an all-female drum ensemble from Cape Verde, was a stunning surprise mid-show. Coupled with

classic tunes such as “Human Nature,” “Like a Prayer” and “Vogue,” it became a celebration of Philadelphia freedom, even if the through-line frayed at times.

The most egregious lulls came when Madonna took advantage of the setting to engage the audience in a bit of impromptu back-and-forth. Instead of using the time to further the themes of the show, she took a seat in the crowd, flirted with a few starstruck guys and swiped some swigs of beer from overjoyed fans. It was cute, but proved Madonna is only quick on her feet in a literal sense.

Even in an unusually intimate show, the biggest surprise was that Madonna’s brand of pop spoke with such direct authority. She had a lot to say, and it was worth hearing.

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