

Forever young: Joan Baez creates an epiphany, but will Patti Smith?

Triangle player scales back disdain for modern music

By PATRICK WEBB
For EO Media Group

Epiphanies, by their very definition, change lives.

I have had two.

The first was when British glam rock band Slade released “Cum On Feel The Noize.”

I was a mid-teenager. It was 1973, the year when Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs, Skylab was launched and Pinochet led a coup in Chile.

And I gave up on any new popular music.

Perhaps it was the grammarian in me. Perhaps because the former skinhead band’s song was moronic — yet still a “hit.” Either way, my decision seemed irrevocable.

Though the Beatles, Stones and Who had provided my childhood soundtrack, from then onward I reverted to Mozart and classical composers whose works I had played during my brief stint in the back row of the orchestra.

My English high school crowded grades 6 through 12 together. In seventh, having just ended a phase in which I ran with a girls’ gang, I petitioned Doc Morgan to join his corps of musicians.

A recovering asthmatic is anathema in brass or woodwinds. I fiddled not. So percussion beckoned. One small hitch: I can’t read music.

This was overcome by bassoon player Anne Rivers and timpanist Keith Griggs, senior students who took pity on the diminutive wannabe sitting upstage left. At early rehearsals, one or both would turn and nod for me to hit my triangle, bang the side drum or rattle the tambourine. Our secret signals bought me time to memorize each piece, using the same tricks I still use for the stage. If Doc suspected, he never let on.

Massinet’s “Le Cid,” Smetana’s “The Moldau” and two rousing cymbal bits from “Carmen” were my favorites. Dvorak’s “New World Symphony,” the only piece I have played with an adult orchestra, has a terrific triangle part, too. Also, one cymbal crash 1 minute and 46 seconds into the fourth movement. Trust me, it’s there, pianissimo.

Yet I was surrounded by popular sound. My older brother embraced Bob Dylan, well before protest was fashionable, and continues his long, strange trip with the Grateful Dead. His passion for that era continued through a retail career which culminated in owning his own music store. At home, he played Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Down on the Corner” 49 consecutive times until our Mum said enough.

Classmates tried to educate me. Chris Tarry, a gorgeous artist, introduced me to reggae; Phil Townsend, the likable fellow two desks behind me, touted Wishbone Ash; Peter Meecham, my rival for scrum half on the rugby team, offered Emerson, Lake and Palmer. In fact, their “Pictures At An Exhibition” album spawned a longtime quest to collect contrasting versions of Mussorsky’s wonderwork, a search revitalized by jazz pianist Yaron Gottfried and the Portland Chamber Orchestra at Astoria’s Liberty Theater in May 2014.

What came next

As I reluctantly lurched into adulthood, my resolve rarely faltered. Intriguing lionhearted singer Kate Bush disappeared; soundtracks to “Grease,” “Flashdance” and Saturday Night Fever” offered opportunities to tap toes, though the Bee Gees’ falsettos did grate. My devotion



Patrick Webb

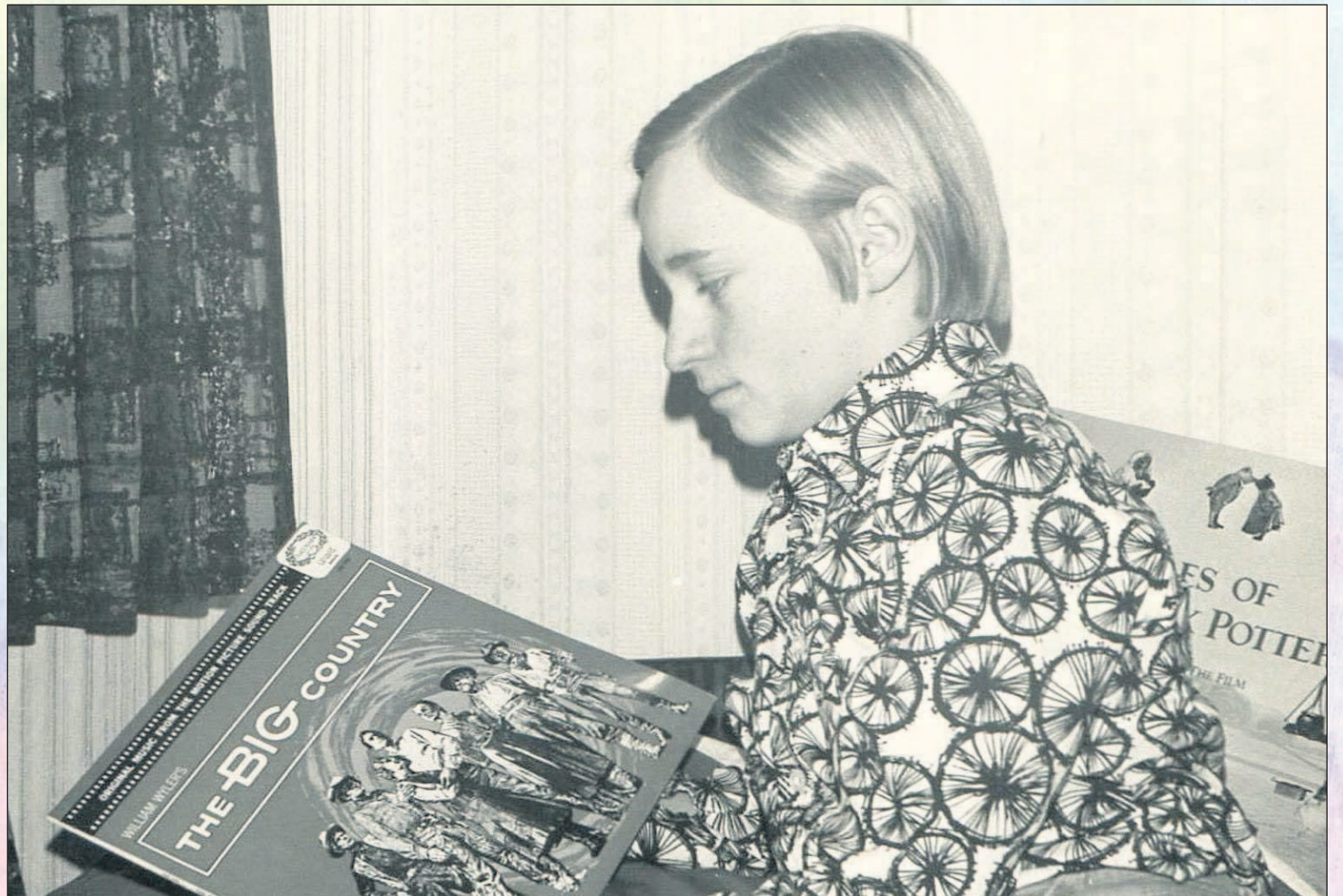
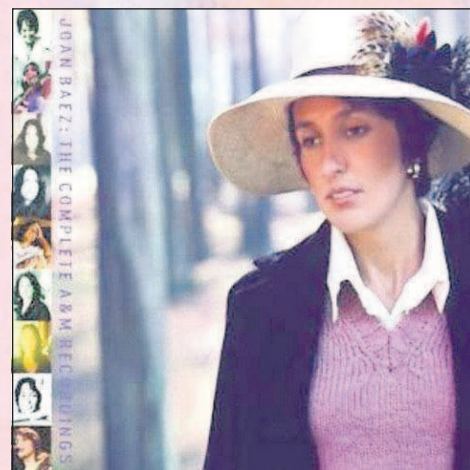


Photo courtesy Webb family

Patrick Webb, aged 14 in 1972, checks over the Oscar-nominated soundtrack album for the Gregory Peck Western “The Big Country.” Behind him is the sleeve for the ballet music for the movie “Tales of Beatrix Potter,” a family favorite. He gave up on popular music in 1973 after a dreadful glam rock release, but is revisiting the sounds of the era.



Submitted photo

Buying the CD box set of “Joan Baez: The Complete A&M Recordings” as a gift for a relative led to an epiphany for Patrick Webb as he pondered his journalism career and his disdain for popular music after 1973.

to theater embraced musicals from “Phantom” to “Cats,” plus my two favorite operas.

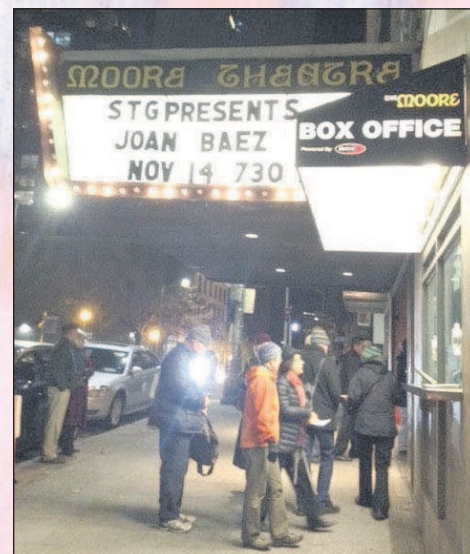
Then came epiphany No. 2.

The context of that life-changer is America’s undisputed claim to fame: shopping. Before my annual return to my birthplace, I ask family for wishlists of rare CDs, then I scour Western music stores. Portland, Seattle and Spokane, Wash., offer decent ones, Vegas and Reno even better. Staff at one in downtown Vancouver, Wash., even greet me by name.

Doing this I have learned about Little Feat, Lou Reed, Levon Helm, Duane Allman, Judy Henske and Dory Previn. Buffy St. Marie is a familiar face as I flip through cracked jewel cases; I know to buy “Formerly the Warlocks,” whatever its condition. Occasionally I listen before I cushion them in my checked baggage.

Then came “Joan Baez: The Complete A&M Recordings.”

I discovered the sought-after boxed set surprisingly easily; it sat at home, on a pile, ready to be packed. I knew her only from growing up with Dylan’s music, both pleading to remain forever young. I slotted one of the four CDs into the player. “Prison Trilogy,” “Rainbow Road” and “Love Song to a Stranger” whispered out of the speakers with a shiver-inducing intensity.



Patrick Webb/For EO Media Group

Attending a Joan Baez concert at the Moore Theater in Seattle in late 2014 was enjoyable, but not akin to a religious experience, says Patrick Webb. Her contemporary, Patti Smith, who offers rather more edge, is the next part of his music appreciation experiment Monday.

I picked up the booklet that came with the album. Hours later, I found myself seated on the floor, oblivious to time, hunger, thirst or discomfort, soaking up her biography, learning about her activism, her drive to right wrongs.

I played all 77 tracks. “Weary Mothers,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” filled the room. When her voice hit the first three notes of “Amazing Grace,” my light went on.

I realized I had spent 38 years being an objective journalist, missing the opportunity to use an available bully pulpit to make the world a better place. No, I do not think my career a waste. After all, I dedicated my work-life to something worthwhile: bringing people their local news. But I had rarely commented on it.

That’s all. That was my private epiphany. It was less of a regret than a realization.

Acceptance

I attended a Joan Baez concert in Seattle a year ago, and was mildly disappointed. Her voice

‘So you think my singing’s out of time, well it makes me money.’

Lyric from Slade’s
‘Cum On Feel The Noize,’ 1973

Writer’s Notebook

is darned fine, but the fire has faded. As I sang along with my generation at the Moore Theatre, I recalled the villain in “Quigley Down Under,” just before the final gunfight, who laments he was born in the wrong century. For me, perhaps the wrong decade. Too young. I have had it easy. I could have been a contender; instead, I was a spectator.

Yet I have the serenity to accept this. Meanwhile, I have begun a privately funded study to determine whether it is possible to properly appreciate music from the late 1960s and 1970s without simultaneously consuming mind- or mood-altering substances. I welcome suggestions to educate my late-to-the-party ear.

Thanks to the Liberty, I’ve enjoyed Don McLean, Judy Collins and Dan Hicks. I saw Mickey Hart in Portland, though I didn’t understand a beat. I have a ticket for Patti Smith, who will revisit her 1975 “Horses” album in Seattle Monday night. I have been researching by listening. No firm conclusions yet, except that playing her CDs on the car stereo when driving those curves to Naselle, Washington, is a risky undertaking.

Another mission is to collect all 36 “Dick’s Picks,” rare recordings of Grateful Dead concerts, for a family fan. It would be entirely unethical to use this platform to ask North Coast Deadheads to assist. But I am six short of the set, and my spring flight is booked.

English-born Patrick Webb is a North Coast writer and former managing editor of The Daily Astorian. Contact him on Facebook (find the panda picture).



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