

## CHAPTER 1—WHY DOES SALLY LOVE A NOTE?

I am a music lover. But that does not mean that I love all music. Like most people, I love only a select few pieces of music.

These few pieces are the high peaks of my musical world. They have a marvelous quality that makes them stand out from all other music. They are the be-all and end-all of music for me. Whatever it is that makes music special, that makes it different from the incidental sounds and noises of our lives, is contained in these pieces. Therefore the question is not why do people love music. The question we must ask is why does a person love a particular piece of music.

The first time that I heard Bob Dylan I was in the car with my mother, and we were listening to, I think, maybe WMCA, and on came that snare shot that sounded like somebody kicked open the door to your mind, from “Like a Rolling Stone.” And my mother, she looked at me, and she said, “That guy can't sing.” But I knew she was wrong [1].

I was in the student union one day of this major university and I heard this music, duh\_duh\_daaahh. And it was called “Rumble.” And it sounded *bad*. I left school emotionally at that moment, the moment I heard “Rumble” [2].

I think it might have been Beau, my boyfriend at the time, put on a record, and I heard it out of the corner of my ear, and it was this beautiful, old sounding voice and this incredibly rhythmic, vibrant, but rich and deep sounding instrument, and it ended up it was Doc Watson and he was playing “Shady Grove”... and I sat next to the record player and played it over and over again. I went out and bought a banjo after that [3].

All three are of these people are composers talking about one of their most important encounters with music. Bruce Springsteen was fifteen in the summer of 1965 when he heard Like a Rolling Stone. Soon afterwards, his mother bought him his first electric guitar. That same year, Iggy Pop was attending the University of Michigan when he was stunned by the power chords in Link Ray’s 1958 hit, “Rumble.” Less than two years later, Pop formed a new band, Iggy and the Stooges. From a young age, Abigail Washburn wanted to be a lawyer in China. After college she moved to Vermont to prepare for her graduate studies. That is when she heard Shady Grove. Three years later, just weeks before she planned to permanently move to China, she took a road trip that ended up in Nashville where she was offered a record deal. Every composer has a story to tell about a piece of music that kicked open a door in her mind. Hearing this music changed her life. The evidence cannot be denied. The encounter was crucial in her decision to become a composer. In fact, the piece that triggered the experience was an indicator of the very type of music she would go on to create.

How can a piece of music change someone's life? Similarities in the way these three composers describe their experience provide clues. First, all three tell a story about the first time they heard this music. Second, their stories point to a sound. They do not talk about the lyrics, or the album cover, or a performer's dress or hair. They don't mention anything except the sound. For all three, the experience of hearing a new sound changed the course of their lives. It led them on a path to become a composer.

All three stories point to a sound, yet all three composers seem barely able to describe the sound, even though, in the years since they first heard the sound, they have acquired a technical understanding of it as well as the ability to reproduce it. This is very important. We will see that it is a pattern in the way all people, not just these three composers, talk about their most crucial musical experiences. All three of them have a solid command of the precise language to describe the sound, yet all three choose to not use that language. All three choose to describe the sound by other means. Pop knows that the sound he heard is called a power chord, and Washburn knows that the rhythmic style of banjo playing is called clawhammer. Yet Pop sings the sound and Washburn uses vague adjectives to describe it. Maybe they want to convey to us a sense of how it felt to hear it the first time, before they knew that the sound had a name. Or maybe, in telling their stories, they are actually reliving that moment in which they heard it for the first time. For each of them the sound is what it was like before it had a name. Springsteen does not even try to describe the heavy electric organ sound that is initiated by the snare. He just describes the effect it had on him. It kicked a door open in his mind.

## II

Here is another example of a composer talking about one of his formative musical encounters. In this example, Ben Kweller, an indie rock composer, has a detailed recollection of the first time he heard “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” This happened while he was skating at a roller rink.

I’ll never forget, I was going around this corner, and dah-na-na, chicka chika, dah-nah-nah, nah-na-na came on, and I was like holy shit what is this? And I literally had to pull over onto the side and hold onto the side wall, and I listened to the whole song and it just blew me away. And I immediately went back to the DJ and asked what it was, and he said it’s this new band Nirvana. I went to Hastings the next day, the local record shop, and bought the record [4].

How can a piece of music change someone’s life? For Kweller, as for the others, it had nothing to do with the lyrics or fashion or that cute girl in science class. It was the music itself. A few notes changed his life. Kweller does not leave us to wonder which notes. He sings them for us. His “dah-na-na...” represents the guitar riff that appears in the introduction and that is blasted throughout the chorus. Kweller sings the riff, but not the whole thing. The riff has only four notes, but he sings just the first three. These three notes are critical. They encapsulate his entire experience of the song. These three notes changed his life.

If three notes can change someone’s life, then we need to take a close look at them. The first note is the tonic (F). It leaps up to the second note, the subdominant (B-flat). So far this is old news. A large body of rock and blues is limited to three chords, tonic (F), subdominant (B-

Flat), and dominant (C). But the news finally happens when the second note of the guitar riff, B-flat, moves to the third note, which does not turn out to be either an F or a C. Until his encounter with Smells Like Teen Spirit, Kweller's musical world consisted of songs that used some combination of tonic, sub-dominant and dominant. In all of his experience, the only note that could follow the B-flat was either an F or a C. When he heard something different, when he heard the B-flat make the astonishing move down to the A-flat, he exclaimed, "Holy shit what is this." He had never heard that sound before.

This sound, B-flat moving down to A-flat, has a gigantic presence in the song. It reverberates throughout the song, not just in the endlessly repeating guitar riff, but also in the strangely abbreviated melody of the chorus. The sound B-flat to A-flat does not just dominate the piece. The sound *is* the piece. At the chorus, at the climax of the song, the two notes, B-flat to A-flat, are air-lifted into the melody making them the highest notes of the vocal line, at the very edge of what Cobain is capable of singing. The two notes return again and again in parallel motion with the same two notes two octaves lower in the ever-present guitar riff. There can be little doubt that Cobain himself was amazed by these notes. It was not enough for him to sing the notes. He had to scream the notes. Better than that, he screamed them in tune.

### III

My husband, Jeffrey Brooks, is a composer. We talk about music all the time. Recently we got on the subject of our earliest memories of music, and he offered this story from elementary school. Brooks grew up in the sixties. There was no music room at his school. Instead the teacher came to each classroom with a cart of instruments, hand percussion and two autoharps. At the

beginning of class, she passed out the instruments. A few lucky kids got bongos or a tambourine or, even luckier, an autoharp, while everyone else got a pair of red rhythm sticks. Brooks hated the class because he always got the rhythm sticks. His disappointment in not getting a real instrument was enhanced by the disgust he felt for the sticks themselves. In a typical class, the students sang “Oh Susanna” along with a worn-out recording, accompanying themselves with the rhythm sticks, dully tapping on beats one and three.

One day, the teacher introduced a new song. It was “Pick a Bale of Cotton.” She passed out the instruments. As usual, Brooks got the sticks. She instructed them to tap along with the music. But, when the song started, something crazy happened. In a moment of pure inspiration, Brooks finally knew what to do with those sticks. Instead of mumbling the song and tapping on beats one and three, he sang loudly and whacked the sticks hard on beats two and four. “Oh! whack Lord! whack, pick-a-whack-of-cotton, whack. Oh! whack Lord! whack, pick-a-whack-a-day, whack” [5]. Brooks sang and clapped as he told me this story, and his eyes filled with tears as he recalled his exact thoughts towards the kids who always got picked to play the autoharps. “What are you going to do with your precious autoharps now? I’ve got rhythm sticks” [6]!

The experience of hearing a new sound changed their lives. Kweller and Brooks went on to become composers. The new sound was, for each of them, an indicator of the music they would later compose. Kweller formed his first indie rock band within three years of hearing “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” Brooks’ discovery of the off beats was an early sign of the rhythmic innovations that have characterized his music in the years since then. Kweller and Brooks were both young at the time these events happened. Kweller was ten and Brooks was eight. Neither one knew that he was headed for a life of music. What if, instead of becoming a composer,

Kweller had become a doctor? What if Brooks had become an accountant? Would their experience of these songs for the first time have been less life-changing, less formative? Would it have had less influence on the way they each experience music today, as “just” listeners?

#### IV

Each one of these stories points to a sound. The stories from Bruce Springsteen and Abigail Washburn both point to a timbre, while the stories from Iggy Pop and Ben Kweller both point to a guitar riff, which is like a melody and a timbre blended together. The story from Brooks points to a rhythm. Now this next story points to a different kind of sound, a single note, though, as it turns out, there is more to this note than meets the ear.

I was listening to the BBC one night when a report came on about the death of Whitney Houston. A correspondent was in Newark, Houston’s hometown, where groups of women were gathering on street corners around the city to hold vigil. He encountered one group who broke into a spontaneous performance of “I Will Always Love You.” They started with the words “I will always love,” but got no farther than “you.” The reporter asked the women what they would miss most about Houston. The answer given by one woman could not have been more specific. “I hear her songs, you know, just the fact that she would start a song off *a cappella* with that amazing, that first note, you know, like, wow” [7]. The note that she was referring to is the note sung to the word “I.” We did not learn this woman’s name in the BBC report, so let us call her Sally. In her thirty seconds of fame, Sally is free to say anything she likes, and what does she do? She tells the whole world that she was going to miss a note. A single note. The next morning, I replayed the report and checked her singing against Houston’s original recording. Sure enough,

Sally was singing the exact same note, the same pitch, as the recording. Did she have perfect pitch? Probably not. But Sally loved that note so much that she had memorized it and could still recall it two decades after the first time she heard it.

Why does Sally love a note? Her brief statement contains a strong clue. She says, “the fact that she [Houston] would start a song off *a cappella* with that amazing, that first note...” Sally says that the song begins with the note sung *a cappella*, unsupported by instruments, but that is not how the song goes. The song in fact begins with a long introduction sung *a cappella*, but Sally’s note occurs after the introduction, at the beginning of the verse, when the instruments come in. The note that Sally loves is the first note of the song that is *not* sung *a cappella*.

The introduction is forty seconds long, an eternity in a pop song. For forty seconds, Houston sustains the solo line heroically, but she is all only human. Eventually the instruments have to come in, but when they do, they bring with them a powerful new weapon, harmony. The amazing first note is held over not one but three different chords, one slowly melding into the next, each giving the note a different color. At first, the amazing note is harmonized with a chord that has the same note as its root. Then the amazing note is harmonized with a chord that has the same note as its third. But there is even more. Then the amazing note is harmonized with a chord that has the very same note as its fifth. It is like a color wheel shining on a tinsel tree. It is like magic. The single note sung with the word “I” is actually three different notes. It is the root and the third and the fifth, one right after the other, of three different chords.

This explanation may seem complicated, especially for someone who has not studied music theory. In fact, this is the kind of technical stuff that you read about in the later chapters of a tonal harmony textbook. But wait. Sally never studied harmony. She has no concept, no idea

whatsoever, of what a triad is, let alone a root or a third or a fifth. So how is it possible that she hears, much less loves, the subtle harmonization of a note that has the same note as the root, third and fifth of three different triads? You want to know how? Sally already told us when she said, “that amazing, that first note, you know, like, wow.” Sally does not love a series of numbers. She does not love harmonic structure. She does not love the overtone series. She does not love a magic trick. Sally loves, simply, a sound. She calls this sound a note, but that is only because she has no other word for it. Sally loves a sound for which she has no name. It is a sound about which she *knows* nothing except one thing. She knows that it is a new sound. She recognizes it as a sound that she has not heard before. She hears a new sound. She loves its newness. Moreover, she does not need to read a harmony textbook to hear a new sound. She just needs her ears.

V

When my kids were young, the highlight of our annual vacation at Lake Superior was the afternoon we spent on a beach near the town of Beaver Bay. It was hard to get to, but we always made the effort because we heard it was a good place to find agates. Following the directions in our rock pickers’ guide, we pulled off the highway just north of town, got out of the car, and followed a path that took us first over a fence, then through tall weeds, then through some woods, and then down a muddy slope that deposited us finally at one end of a long secluded pebble beach. For the rest of the afternoon, the kids sat on the beach or stood in the chilly water while combing through the rocks. Their idea was that they were looking for agates, but the whole thing was very unscientific because really they were picking up anything that was shiny, colorful or weirdly shaped. First they filled their buckets, then their pockets. When their pockets were

full, it was time to leave. After we got home from the vacation, the kids dumped out their rocks and picked out the few that they considered to be the best ones. These were displayed on a shelf while the rest went into a shoebox. Do not tell my kids this, but sooner or later the shoebox found its way to the back porch, which was the last stop before the Lake Superior rocks became mixed with the landscaping rocks in the driveway. Each of them brought home hundreds of rocks each year, but only a very small number of those rocks became part of the permanent collection on the shelf.

The rocks on the shelf are like the pieces of music that you love. Compared to all of the music that you encounter in a lifetime, compared to all of the rocks on the beach, only a very small number end up in your bucket. What made you pick those rocks in the first place? They appealed to you. That is all. Nobody taught you to appreciate rocks. When you got home and the rocks dried, some disappointed you. It had been a trick of sunlight and water. No big deal. Those went into the shoebox and were quickly forgotten.

But the rare piece of music that becomes part of your permanent collection is different. It has a quality that makes it stand out from all other music. You can recall the sound of this piece anytime. You can play it in your head. This piece is like a rock. It feels heavy in your hands. If you are out somewhere and it turns up unexpectedly, on the radio or on the playlist at a coffee shop that you frequent or in a film score, you can feel it. Hearing this piece of music is a jolt. It has a presence, a resonance, even a solidness, that other music does not have for you. What is the reason for this massive difference? If we are ever going to understand our strongest experiences of music, if we are ever going to understand the power of music itself, then we need to find out

what made this piece of music so different in the first place. We need to look at what happened differently the first time you heard it.

## Chapter 1 Notes and References

1.  
Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website. 22 November 2015 <<https://rockhall.com/inductees/bob-dylan/transcript/bruce-springsteen-on-dylan/>>.
2.  
The Colbert Report website. 22 November 2015 <[www.cc.com/episodes/pag3eh/the-colbert-report-april-29--2013---iggy-and-the-stooges-season-9-ep-09093](http://www.cc.com/episodes/pag3eh/the-colbert-report-april-29--2013---iggy-and-the-stooges-season-9-ep-09093)>.
3.  
NPR Studio 360 website. 22 November 2015 <[www.studio360.org/story/aha-moment-doc-watson-abigail-washburn/](http://www.studio360.org/story/aha-moment-doc-watson-abigail-washburn/)>.
4.  
NPR Studio 360 website. 22 November 2015 <[www.studio360.org/story/american-icons-nevermind/](http://www.studio360.org/story/american-icons-nevermind/)>.
5.  
Jeffrey Brooks, interview with author, 5 February 2011.
6.  
Brooks [6].
7.  
BBC The World Today Weekend website. 22 April 2012 <[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00h1pz2/episodes/player](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00h1pz2/episodes/player)>.