

Personal soundtrack

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue



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Recorded music has suffused my life. It began during a time when my afterschool chore was to milk the cow, and beside the milking stall was a cobwebbed portable radio. One afternoon while I was squeezing the cow's dry, calloused teats and listening to the radio, I heard a menacing baritone intone the words, "I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die." Those stark words made an impression. The baritone, of course, was Johnny Cash, and the song was "Folsom Prison Blues."

The first Cash album I heard whole was *At San Quentin*, an album my dad bought because he loved "A Boy Named Sue." Later I would come to appreciate even more Cash's most outstanding prison-recorded album, *At Folsom Prison*. What a frisson to hear Cash taunting the prison guards and identifying with the beleaguered prisoners. (The enthusiastic cries of approval heard when Cash sings the line "I shot a man in Reno . . ." did not actually emit from the prisoners—the raucous applause was added later in the studio.) Many Cash albums graced my stereo in the ensuing years, but one merits special mention—Cash's angry elegy honoring Native Americans, *Bitter Tears*.

In high school in the early 1970s, I was introduced to more obscure country music. At my girlfriend's house on lazy Saturday afternoons, my future father-in-law played the recordings of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. I had never heard anything like this fiddle-laced country music, which added horns, a heavy jazz inflection, Wills's whooping and hollering and his odd band-leading interjections (such as "Shoot 'er low, son, she's riding a Shetland"). Wills's idiosyncratic music was called western

swing. I was entirely converted to its merits, not least by how much fun it is. There is plenty of Wills on record, but perhaps the best overview is the three-disc set *Encore*.

It was in high school that I first earnestly listened to Bob Dylan. I joined the Columbia Record Club and got Dylan's *Greatest Hits, Volume 2*. Throughout my life since, Dylan has proved endlessly rewarding. My favorite album from his gospel period is *Shot of Love*, which includes the masterpiece "Every Grain of Sand." I deeply enjoy his late music, including *Together Through Life* and *Time Out of Mind*. Dylan once referred to his songwriting as "vomitic," and he is unmatched for his prolific number of truly great songs written and recorded.

I could say much about the music I listened to in my college years, but I'll skip to the 1990s, when I discovered jazz. I read copiously in *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* and followed its leads, collecting albums from the early Louis Armstrong onward. The early CD period was a boon for collectors, for lots of old music was remastered and presented on that new (now nearly outmoded) format. Tower Records stores were then still very much in business (the retail chain closed in the U.S. in 2006), and I relished Saturday afternoons visiting the local Tower store, sampling all sorts of jazz and blues on the headphones. Not least among my discoveries was the music of Billie Holiday. Holiday's fragile voice and understated voicings would have been impossible to hear without the advent of the microphone. Likewise, she is wonderful on recordings—and can be heard most beautifully on the lushly remastered *Love Songs*.

I have collected hundreds of other jazz artists on CD, but my mainstay is John Coltrane. I own the recordings from his Prestige period up through the Atlantic era. Though I have tried, I have not been able to develop an ear for his later free jazz. Otherwise, I am besotted with Coltrane and his ever searching, spiritually seeking sound. It is hard to choose favorites, but I suppose I have listened most to *A Love Supreme*, *Live at Birdland*, *My Favorite Things* and *Giant Steps*.

In 1999, on a business trip to North Carolina, I took a free Saturday and went on a pilgrimage to Coltrane's birthplace in Hamlet, North Carolina. Pulling into town, I stopped at a gas station and asked the teenage girl at the counter where the Coltrane house was. She had no idea and had never heard of John Coltrane. On my third stop I was finally pointed to the site. The house no longer stands, but there is a commemorative sign.

I have barely scratched the surface in this account—not even mentioned Elvis or Emmylou Harris or Neil Young—but those are highlights of how my life has been enriched by listening to music.