

## The Younger You Inside

On *Finding Your Roots*, host Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asked Scottish actor Brian Cox, age 76, what he was most proud of. Cox thought a bit then pointed to a picture of himself in the album in front of him. “That seven-year-old boy in this picture is still alive in me.”

Gates nodded, “Me, too. When that boy dies, well, watch out.”

I shared the gist of this exchange with the Quail Creek Writers and Poets organization, a collection of residents who have published or are interested in publishing prose or poetry. A service of the group is to help writers self-publish, and several members have used that assistance.

Our topic for the day’s meeting centered on music with lyrics and how those lyrics are often a form of poetry. Several of us chose songs we valued and talked about the reasons. It became apparent that most of the music we heard and discussed that day was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. We could recite the lyrics with ease.

When I referred to the Gates-Cox conversation, a colleague offered, “when I was seven, I was dealing with alcoholic parents and the threat of homelessness.” Of course, I thought to myself. Not all of us have fond memories of when we were seven or can recall a special song from our youth that touched us in some special way.

So, why would two men in their 70s agree on national television about the value of keeping alive their young selves? And why did a roomful of people in their 70s, 80s, and even 90s, when asked to note songs of value in their lives harkened back to music from 60 and 70 years ago?

Neither Gates nor Cox claimed to have been happy or sad at that age. Because I, too, had been a boy of seven, I tried to recall what the little boy inside me might have been like. That’s nearly seven decades ago, so my memories come through layers of experience and inevitable revision. What I arrived at must also reflect my experience of seven-year-old boys over years of working in schools.

Innocence. Believing life to be simple. Impressionable, eager to learn, open to newness. Excitable, given to unrestrained moments of joy. Protected, in the loving custody of others who looked after my needs. Optimistic, believing that I could become the centerfielder for the Yankees after Mickey Mantle. Trusting, without the guarded skepticism, even cynicism, laid on by experience.

I am saddened by stories like my friend’s, where a seven-year-old is asked to bear more tribulation than ought to be. But I think that he would agree that the resilience he has shown in his life finds its roots in his early years. In that sense, at least the lessons learned at seven are still useful in his life. His younger self is still alive inside.

Gates’ interview with Cox came the day after we went to another Golden Oldie rock concert, the audience being older than the music. A cover band with a terrific vocalist paid homage to Linda

Ronstadt, the Queen of Rock. We in Tucson are proud that she is a native and treasures her time growing up here.

The curtain opened. Two guitarists, a drummer, and the captain of a synthesizer that re-created myriad instrumental sounds, played the introductory strains that cued the singer to run on stage, already into lyrics. The energy in the room skyrocketed.

The woman in front of me half-rose from her chair, her shoulders swaying vigorously, her hands clapping hard. She did not stop moving for the whole of the first song. She rested through “Blue Bayou,” and other slower, more ballad-like pieces. But when the tempo increased, she resumed her solo dancing.

That was her 14-year-old self, disguised in the body of a woman clearly of a certain age. You could feel her joy. I could not imagine me doing the same; just too reserved, I suppose. Maybe you are, too.

Our writers and poets did not get up and dance when we played our favorite tunes at our meeting. I could, however, project on to the others in the room the satisfaction of memories I felt when each of the songs played. Some of the people shared a memory. Others nodded as though they had a similar one.

Together, we were back in time, time that was safe, because it was past. It was also a time when we probably had fewer cares or responsibilities.

People of a Certain Age, we have all been seven and fourteen. What we learned then is part of what we know now. My colleague reminded me that the lessons were not always pleasant, not in line with a more idyllic vision of childhood and youth. Yet lessons they were.

Life can temper the innocence, the openness to newness, the urge to sing old lyrics and dance with abandon. I wonder, though, if those kids inside us would tell us something worth hearing.

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