

First ...

Earlier on the morning of the day we decided, I wandered my backyard, drinking in the sights and smells of summer. To a kid of fourteen, there is nothing like being out on a summer morning, as one with the stillness, senses tuned to high, feeling almost raw with the myriad intake. No one experiences a summer morn like a new boy.

Wafting from across the street along with the scent of basil and spearmint were strains of the Beach Boys *Don't Worry Baby*. My best friend's mother had a garden back of the porch over there, and I loved the minty, earthy smells coming from it that tinged the air... along with the heady music that accompanied them – a brilliant melody, lush harmonies that turned my day to technicolor.

All of it was taken in by a pervasive osmosis, to be digested, analyzed, and then, in time, spilled out in another form only to begin the process again.

Life happening...

Later, sitting on Tommy and Bobby's front stoop with Johnny, I began to feel the pull of the day already dragging at me. It was not quite noon, but we were all restless; I felt something latent, hungry in the warm summer air just waiting to pounce. An imminent sense of 'The Next Big Thing'.

"Hey, let's start a band," I declared as if I had no control over the words spilling out of my mouth.

"Hey, yeah! Right!" Tommy and Bobby both, enthusiastically.

John merely nodded his head in my direction, smiling.

"Let's start a band," I repeated softly, for no reason at all.

It was as simple – and, for better or worse, as life-changing – as that.

ONE

There's the quaint adage, 'you can't go home again', or 'you can go back but you can't go back home', words to that effect. But sometimes you can return to long-ago places in the mind, and when the memories, accurate or presumed, are so vivid that they burn lasting images, you revisit them perpetually in dreams. Then the dreams color your waking hours, and you're compelled to daydream childhood pictures again and again, ad infinitum...

West Bayland in 1950 was like living out in the country, my daddy used to say. After the war, he married my mom and moved from Brooklyn out to the Long Island 'sticks' on the GI Bill, buying a house there with an \$8000 mortgage - how times have changed. The suburban neighborhood boasted house upon house of Cape Cod design, and when you looked down our Bay Street you had the impression you could see forever. In front of each house two feet from the tarred, blue-stoned street, an oak sapling was planted. The passing years would see the trees slowly change the look of Bay Street as they respectively grew in size and influence. But when James Gerisanto got out there, it was bare basic country, almost virgin and unmolested.

My daddy was a reedman, specializing in tenor sax, dabbling in a little clarinet on the side once in a blue moon. He loved blowing that saxophone though, and my earliest memories are of waking up (probably in my crib) to the mellow tones of some standard he was revisiting from his younger days in the swing band he had been featured in. When he met my mom, Mayella Cachino, one night in some now long-forgotten ballroom he had been playing in, it was just about love at first sight, and soon all his visions of being the star attraction in a Glenn Miller type orchestra began to vanish, and the primal drives of our human existence took hold.

He landed a job in an electronics firm in the Lindholme industrial park, a town over from West Bayland after their mutual decision to live out east in his idea of God's beloved country.

Hence, the move to West Bayland, and then - me...

I am named Jay, of the Gerisanto clan, a surname of Italian extraction no doubt bastardized en route through Ellis Island back in the day (Giarisanto, Gerasanto?). Many were, and within the family there are still

arguments and discussions about which is the correct spelling; and there are pockets of the clan about the country who proudly spell it *their* (i.e., ‘the right’) way. I, for one, am fine with the moniker the folks hung on me.

I was born in 1950 after the move out east from Brooklyn, my sister Janey three years later. We shared, to good extent, idyllic years of growing up on Bay Street and the surrounding neighborhood. We enjoyed block parties in the summer, house parties for the winter holidays. We were part of a whole, a close-knit block, the definition of what a neighborhood was in those distant days. Everyone got along for the most part – in retrospect, the best of times.

Our house was flooded with music, with my dad practicing his horn at night in our finished knotty pine basement, my mom breaking into song daily, spontaneously, in that trilling soprano voice of hers, and the old RCA tube radio blasting WMIA, the local Italian station on Sunday mornings. Dad would sit down for breakfast in our comfortable kitchen, and before his first sip of percolated coffee, dialed in Morning Man Vito Compare (there were no DJs per se yet in the early 1950s). This well-known welcome voice would employ his ethnic spiel to introduce the Italian singers one after another, and I first became familiar with the great artists of song listening to his Sunday morning gospel – *before* we went to church. I didn’t know their names yet, but my entire being was imbued with the likes of Caruso, Lanza, Vale, Bennett, and the otherworldly phrasings of that kid from Hoboken whose style would influence nearly all of the singers of renown to come after him, Frank Sinatra.

Oh yeah, my sis and I took it all in; by the time I was nine and Janey six, we were breaking out in song with our kiddy versions of the standard fare children’s program songs, and the reigning Hit Parade tunes, as promulgated each week by that eternal bastion of youth and innocence, Dick Clark. His show’s acceptance into virtually all American households brought exposure to the new music - that thing of fire with the beat that all the kids could dance to, still perceived as intrinsically innocent and harmless but promising a future of unlimited possibilities, both good and bad (as it turned out); the music that colored our youth and gave it new meaning – Rock and Roll.

Rock and Roll...initially hated by parents, beloved in rebellion by their offspring. That derelict southern truck driver boy who sang like a Negro; the crazy singin’, duck walkin’ guitar player who *was* a Negro! Those Doo Wop R&B groups with the four- and five-part harmonies who delivered a song totally unlike the staid, square singing of popular, non-threatening acts as evidenced on Lawrence Welk and other variety shows – and favored by old folks everywhere.

Glorious; different; exciting! Even as kids, we knew it, without knowing why or to what extent it would impact us...

By the time 1960 came around, Janey and I were singing together and, probably more significantly, harmonizing every day. Each of us was blessed with a good ear and tonal pitch, and we adapted our favorites in acapella two-part harmony. With her perfect contralto range and my natural tenor, and the remarkably close-sounding timbre of our combined vocal cords (due simply to genetics), we tackled stuff by Buddy Holly, the Platters, the Cadillacs, the Five Discs, Dion and the Belmonts – the list goes on and on. But we excelled at the Everly Brothers' two-part, close-thirds harmonies.

Bye Bye Love, Dream, Devoted to You, Bird Dog, Claudette, Problems – man, we sang the shit outa that stuff! My Dad had an old Rodriguez Spanish guitar, a cheaply put-together thing that he gave me, and soon I was learning the basic chords to accompany our duets. It was easy enough. Anyway, it was the *singing* that mattered to me.

We began to attract attentive audiences among first the family, singing at holiday gatherings and family outings, and then friends throughout the neighborhood, performing at backyard parties and block affairs. One day it just hit me that I loved to sing, couldn't do without it; and though I knew essentially it wasn't realistic, I wanted this to go on and on – forever...

But time, like a relentless wave, moves on and Janey, who was almost crippled by stage fright anyway, began to grow into new friends of her own age, and other interests like kids do. We never stopped singing together; to this day we can break into an impromptu tune, one that we've performed countless times before. It brings on the memories and the smiles...

I had my own intimate friends on our West Bayland neighborhood block of Bay Street, as most kids of that young age do. Tom and Bob Peres, the twins from diagonally across the street, were a couple of years younger than Johnny Perisi and me, but there never was a closer bonding of buddies; rite-of-passage partners in youthful summer celebration. By the early 60s, we were exponents of the hotshot baseball team the Bayland Flyers, a ragtag club of sometimes six, sometimes maybe eight players, depending on the day and availability of its members. Except we weren't that 'hotshot' at all, just a little better than the kids' team on Vine Street, the next one over from ours. But we all shared a love of our NY Yankees, and lucked out to be growing up with one of their famously preeminent clubs, as exemplified by

Yogi Berra, of the infamous quotes and malapropisms; Whitey Ford, pitcher extraordinaire; Roger Maris, who would soon begin his epic home run journey; and my fave of all time, Mickey Mantle, a ball player capable of amazing feats while under the influence (although as kids, we didn't know it then) that most other ball players could only dream about sober.

The other thing we all had in common was the Music. The *Rock and Roll* Music.

On early summer evenings, we would sit on Johnny's stoop directly across from my house with someone's treasured new transistor radio and try to croon the latest hit tunes we were being exposed to, usually accompanied by gales of laughter, when Bobby screwed up a note or two (which he was wont to do), or when Tommy came in at the wrong time. Harmonizing with the early Beach Boys or Four Seasons, extolling the vocal abilities of Brian Wilson and Frankie Valli, or the great Sam Cooke, arguing who was the best and greatest – a childhood summer ritual.

And Johnny, always my closest mate, he of the great ear for new artists or songs on the radio, never did sing too much; even then, he was quieter, more introspective than the rest of us. But he loved it all, nonetheless – never any doubt there.

When you're a kid that age, each utopian summer is synonymous with time standing still, and pleasurable moments repeat themselves, like a beloved song that's played on your Victrola turntable over and over...

Then in late '63, when I was 13, JFK caught a few slugs in Dallas, and winter slammed us awake.

Camelot crushed in an instant; I finally understood the true meaning of the word with the loss of its promise. Listen, we weren't ignorant of the state of the world even as kids, what with the talk of nuke tests, siren warnings and fallout shelters. And nearly every household with a TV set watched with bated breath during the 13-day faceoff between the USSR and the USA, because an Island nation off our coast named Cuba suddenly had the ability to launch missiles at us with scant minutes to spare!

But when Kennedy bought it on that fateful day, optimism of a new fresh kind was suddenly ripped right out from under us all - like trying to breathe in an instant vacuum.

No telling where he could have taken us had he lived to serve.

One thing was certain; it was not to be writ in the history books...

"What's gonna happen now, Dad?" I remember asking, uneasy with the reality setting in.

"I don't really know." But the confused, worried look on his face was most unsettling of all.

“Is there gonna be a war?” Janey would cry, a now familiar query, evidence of the only way her young mind (and hordes of others; I know – I was one of them) could grasp and translate this latest in a sequence of world events all ostensibly stemming directly from those early A-bomb tests.

“I don’t know!” would be his exasperated reply, and then, seeing the look of concern on my mother’s face, he would hug Janey and pat her head reassuringly.

My friends and I didn’t talk too much about it; we were happy to leave it to the grownups to sort out and fix. But the sense of loss had hit home, and our gatherings, when possible after school in those cold, lonely winter days, were more subdued, fraught with some as yet unnamed thing we were more aware of in the world now – and whose face had become just a little bit clearer....

The consensus was, from our childish perspective, that we had been f**ked over.

All of us were raised in Catholic households; Johnny and I have had devoutly religious mothers, and consequently, fairly strict upbringings. Janey and I went to church on Sundays with Mom, a practice that would continue until our late teen rebellious years set in, and other priorities and pursuits would replace the need to sit and cogitate over the latest priestly sermon, and then feel guilty about some unrealized sin that must surely have been perpetrated during the course of the previous week. Mom stuck to her guns throughout the years, though, and would drive to church every Sunday or holiday she could. She also never stopped feeling the need to coax us into joining her in later years either. My response would be to reassure her that I still believed and lived by the basic precepts taught within those walls. This was for the most part true, and I’m grateful to this day for the positive teachings I’ve taken from those years of religious instruction. They formed the bedrock of my beliefs, and - I’m certain of this - eased my tormented soul at times.

But the downside of this relentless hammering of ideas, the other side of the coin, if you will, were the negative feelings on all of our parts that something evil had been loosed in the world, and we were soon gonna get what was coming to us: The Antichrist, Armageddon, the Midnight Ride of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (or, in the modern context, Nuclear War); or some other as yet unknown disaster for which we would be certainly unprepared. In our naïve not fully developed minds, Kennedy represented all that was considered good, righteous in our lives; the fact that he was shot, that he was even *able* to be killed at all – well, that could only mean the Devil was loose and doin’ dirty deeds...

We hung together in those dreary, somehow soulless days of November and December of '63, attending school, getting through the holidays (Christmas being a somewhat cheerful distraction for me and my sister), and then entering the winter drudgery of the new year's unrelenting cold, classes, and conjecture. Johnny and I would have deep, involved conversations about what the future would bring, sometimes bordering on the metaphysical, but always with the desired result of bolstering each other up. We would invariably start with a 'serious' topic, such as where rock and roll was going, or what the Yankees would accomplish this year, and end up in some form of mutually induced hysterics - like about who the hell Fabian thought he was, anyway!

But we were just kids; it was our way of beating back the dark...

A peculiar event snuck up upon us in early '64, something we certainly wouldn't have expected with what was going on in our music at the time: the dilution of rock and roll into some candy-ass hybrid we wanted nothing to do with. Elvis was selling out since his return from overseas service, his initial hard-edged, lean take on the music becoming fat and lazy; Berry was nowhere to be found on the dial since his carnal transgressions had been made public. Valens and Holly were long gone to us, victims of a coin toss and plane crash; only their recordings remained, precious few of the Chicano's, more of a legacy from the prolific Texan.

What was filling the gap was some runny, mucous-like substitution for the real thing: manufactured teenybopper idols like Bobby Rydell and Fabian, boys with cute enough visages and adequate vocal abilities who were put forth to their adoring female public by the powers that be as the newest smash idols of rock and roll, when in truth their line of descent to such success was owed to the master of an entirely different genre, Sinatra himself.

In defiance, we instinctively leaned heavily on the burgeoning prospects of the Beach Boys due to Brian Wilson's creative gifts, and the distinctive, almost alien tenor range of Frankie Valli with the Four Seasons. We were still too young and steeped in our ethnic traditions to fully appreciate the simple, soulful genius of black artists like Sam Cooke - but I tell you, we were getting there.

So, when WMCA began hitting one tune over and over in their playlist - and from an English band across the pond no less! - Johnny and I couldn't help but take notice.

"Damn, but that's a boss tune!" was John's assessment. "What a *beat* - f**k!"

"Does your mother know you talk like that?" I prodded, smiling.

“My mother talks *worse* than that, and you know it.”

“F**k yeah, she does.”

Sitting in his room on a cold January Saturday, engulfed in the warmth of the friendship and surroundings, we were intrigued that a Liverpool bunch of Brits had stolen the Music and - dare we even think it - improved upon it somehow.

“We’ll find out just how good they are next month. They’re gonna be on TV.”

The jury was still out, as far as I was concerned. Although it was not a conscious thing at the time, I was fiercely possessive of original American rock and roll and could only consider this band - who called themselves the Beatles, no less, a take on Buddy Holly’s band, The Crickets - as Limey imposters who had to go a long way to prove themselves in my book.

But I could tell that Johnny, who was always good, almost prescient, at predicting the appearance of the Next Big Thing, was soundly taken with this song, an up-tempo, exciting piece called *I Want to Hold Your Hand*. As innocent as its name implied, the title alone incited all sorts of ideas in our youthful, male Id imaginations. Repeated listening only served to increase the wonder as new harmonic flourishes and touches seeped into our unconscious.

Johnny laid down his benediction.” I’m telling you, there is something about this song. It’s *boss*, man!”

Nothing further needed to be said.

On February 9th, 1964, the Beatles played the Ed Sullivan show, and over 70 million people tuned in. Due to the media blitz of the past month or so, they had become the talk at school and, of course, amongst my friends. My sister Janey was all questions and excitement; she loved what she heard too. Mom and Dad certainly had their curiosity piqued by all the buzz.

We had to see and hear them.

So, Janey and I parked ourselves on the floor of our living room in front of the 19” RCA television set (on the rolling TV stand), my parents on the couch in their usual comfortable recline (they sat close in those days) in anticipation. I was almost certain all this buildup was prelude to a big downer. *I mean, how could anybody live up to all this hype? How good could they be?*

We didn’t have long to wait. A few minutes into the show, Ol’ Ed garbled his way through the introductions, and on they came.

A seminal moment in my life.

A day later, at the tender age of 14, I would lose the Brylcreem in my pompadoured hair and comb it out like the Mop Tops, one of the many monikers the adoring press laid on the Beatles.

I didn't know how then, but I knew my life was forever changed, that things were gonna be different for me...watching the ecstatic prepubescent girls in the audience screaming, crying, God knows what else...the adults in the audience (most of them, anyway) smiling, clapping along...the 'Look' of these young Englishmen in their matching suits...

...But most especially the exciting music the four lads performed – and they could sing and play their instruments! Standing up there, with Ringo in back on the skins, John, Paul and George tore into *All My Loving* and looked like they were having fun. Later on, I would discover John Lennon and Paul McCartney had even written that catchy little ditty and would write lots of songs that would infuse our everyday existence, and chart the course of our youth - and the 60s.

My sister and I were riveted to the set.

My Dad, after the first performance: “Hmm, nice little melody, but I don't see what all the big fuss is about.” Coming from him, a man of some musical knowledge, ability and taste, it was a compliment. The Fab Four would eventually win him over with their inventive songwriting skills and melodies.

I glanced back at my Mom and could tell by the look on her face. She loved them.

So, there it was. The Muse out of captivity.

The Rainbow at the end of the storm.

An opposing positive force to offset the negative gloom in our fearful adolescent world.

Beneath the happy waves of consciousness, I knew it implicitly that night in front of the TV. I (and countless other kids of my age) was relieved; another path had been shown and would be taken by many.

At school the next day, students and teachers alike were all abuzz over the Beatles. I didn't get together with Johnny, Tom or Bob until the weekend when we congregated over the Peres' house and, while munching Mama Rosey's delicious tuna salad sandwiches for lunch, marveled over the Beatles performances on Ed Sullivan. There was to be a follow-up presentation on the next day, Sunday, and we all chimed in excitedly between mouthfuls of food that we would tune in again, wouldn't miss it for the world.

The British Invasion had begun; subsequently, we would adopt as our own, and be fiercely loyal to, bands such as the Dave Clark Five, the

Kinks, the Who, and of course, the Rolling Stones. Many others would assail our shores, some good, some friggin' awful, but none would reproduce the impact of the Beatles that fateful winter of '64.

Timely, it was, yes; its megaton explosion blew away the veils of mourning for JFK. Exhilarating, certainly. Eventually, even adults got on the bandwagon, trading in their clothes for a more youthful look, growing their hair longer, and spouting out epithets like 'groovy' and 'fab'.

A much-needed vitamin shot in the battered arm of the world.

In our gatherings over the next few months, the guys and I would consistently return to the subject of the Beatles' new songs, the other British groups we admired, and the exciting backlash occurring in American music, particularly in the soul and R&B genres. The floodgates were open, new creative juices had been let loose in the music industry, and there was no way this torrent of output couldn't rub off on our collective psyche.

There was a direct line of descent from February 9th to the summer day in August on the Peres' stoop when I voiced what I felt was permeating the air around us.

"Let's start a band."

Right! Let's start our *own* f***ing band and make the Music!

The seeds had been sown.

