

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

Albert Somma

### A Sound Legacy

**I**t was early spring, about a year after my grandmother died, when I'd found a crate of her books tucked away in the attic. Our *unfinished* attic was not somewhere we frequented though it had a door and a narrow stairway. It was more a place you found after the busyness or boredom of days needing a place of solace from the family independent from siblings, parents, teachers and coaches and away from the noise of life. Sauna hot in the summer and chilled in winter, this cut-off place with its naked roof-rafters and scores of protruding, sharp metal points, my young mind realized (like Saul on the road to Damascus) were the business ends of a thousand nails holding shingles to the roof outside—was an escape to something raw, a haven of the old and unknown. And so, in the spring of 1964, approaching my ninth birthday, I wandered up into that briefly temperate getaway and found my grandmother's books nesting in their musk smell and stillness.

The large cardboard box was a treasure chest, a thing bequeathed by the sheer act of once living and then dying. I would not have the privilege of knowing my grandmother, whom I called Nana, well and through life, yet she was there for those first eight years of mine and I loved her—as much for what I knew as well as her mystery. Long estranged from my grandfather, she was a single working woman in the city and our time though limited was all the more special when it arrived. She always brought us (my two younger siblings and me) a gift, not one of which I can now remember except that I'd come to expect the excitements of mystery and its reveal.

I wish I could say I remember the many titles in that box. Agee's *A Death in the Family* stood out, for obvious reasons. There was Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. I'm now certain my budding depression had a selective focus. There were a slew of *Life Magazines* as well, but one softcover leapt out: *Nine Stories*, by J.D Salinger.

Maybe it was my age and that small bites were the order of the day, but the idea of nine whole stories in a single paperback was right in my wheelhouse. Thus began my love affair with the short story and with Salinger and that journey we take with the cheeky, precocity of the Glass family. A couple of years later I was gifted *A Catcher in the Rye* from a teacher and neighbor for walking her third-grader to our grammar school, as thus my coming snark and maybe even the glimmers of empathy were born. From there it was on to *Franny and Zooey* and *Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters, and Seymour, an Introduction*. Spoiler alert: Imagine my thrill when years after I read of Seymour's suicide in *Nine Stories* by way of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," I would be privy to the inside story of his leaving his bride at the altar in "Raise...," his Zen Buddhist flair in "Franny...," and his *reductio ad absurdum* genius in "Seymour..." See more, indeed. And then there's our story teller who's been there all along, the younger brother in mourning, "Buddy," whose verisimilitude comes with *his* name as well as being a writer in residence at a women's college.

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There was a world opened to me when a family elder passed, leaving behind some hard copy of her life in a large box in the attic—and that is what brings me to this writing.



About two decades ago, in the wake of a mutual separation, I'd moved into a series of shared apartments in Manhattan until one stuck. As square footage was at a minimum, I'd left an extensive vinyl record collection at our house in the suburbs of Staten Island with my ex and teenaged, music-loving daughter. As it happens, I was a kid who'd come of age in the late '60s through the '70's, a late-Boomer's musical paradise. My collection ran to a hundred and fifty albums, everything from the Beatles and Rolling Stones through Motown and Stevie Wonder, James Taylor, Crosby, Stills Nash and Young to The Allman Brothers and Little Feet. Sprinkle in a love for rock's Blues roots with Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson and Muddy Waters to Jazz with Ella and Louis duets, Miles Davis and John Coltrane...A decade later there were The Police and Talking Heads...

Years passed. My ex remarried and moved to a cozy little house in Long Island on the Sound where that calm body of bay water lapped the hull of a new Grady-White in a backyard dock. Then came Hurricane Sandy. Making landfall during high tide and a full moon, the storm surge reached some thirteen feet. While its destruction is now legendary and everyone on the northeast coast lost power for nearly two weeks, the coastal flooding was biblical. My ex called to report that their basement took on several feet of bay water. They had lost furniture and had extensive damage. She then reported sadly, "The record collection was soaked in salt water."

Why had I waited so long to take them home? Well, I lamented: small, shared and perhaps temporary apartments, a music loving daughter using them for a time...but also and not least of all, a life-altering accident that kept me in a rehabilitation home for three and a half years.

"All the album covers are lost, obviously," she said, "but we cleaned every record with soap and a soft cloth to keep the salt from settling in the grooves." This was a positive—conscientious and caring in an otherwise dire scenario. But I knew that they were lost, at least to me, forever. Why I hadn't missed them more was simple, really. I'd had dozens of compilation, cassette tapes I'd made over the years. Compact, edited and played by the car's cassette deck for drives and vacations, or slipped into a Walkman™, they were perfectly arranged replicas that satisfied. In addition, I was a working singer and musician whose love for '20's and '30's jazz set me on a quest to collect scores of compilation CD's and mine them for material. Hot Lips Page, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Ellington...and of course, The American Song Book: Cole Porter, the Gershwin brothers, Fields and McCue sung by Nat King Cole, Billy Holliday—Sinatra!. My CD collection had been growing exponentially.

Then came the accident. A bicycle; a broken concrete slab and a crash resulting in spinal cord injury and quadriplegia. Next, three and a half years of institutional rehabilitation—and so, life in a shared room with wheelchairs was problematic for any and all possessions. And then? The very forms of packaging music had evolved. Seeing my need, my daugh-

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ter transferred *hundreds* of Mp3 formatted, CD music onto an iPod™. Lo and behold, I suddenly had a *one thousand* song library in a space that literally “fit in the palm of my hand.” Meanwhile, all of my worldly possessions went into storage at my brother’s place.

My brother Frank owns a landmarked farm house on four acres of New Jersey that includes a cedar shingled garage, an early nineteenth century corn crib and an enormous, red, clapboard barn, circa 1788. I was careful to tell him to store my stereo equipment in his cozy, warm house—as well as my guitar, a vintage (1949) Epiphone archtop. Still, somehow my *second* tier of recorded music, curated in disc jockey fashion, cassette-taped lifetime of vinyl favorites...where were *they* stored? For *three and a half years* a full crate of cassettes, their plastic, mylar tape coated in ferric oxide, were left to the heat, cold and moisture of *fourteen* consecutive seasons. There, in the uninsulated, open-air of an eighteenth century barn, they had oxidized to faded erasure.

“*I still have my CD’s,*” I told myself. Yet, when I moved into my new home, there they sat in several large boxes in my living room. The truth was, I had changed—physically. Since my accident, I had lost my fine motor skills—I was in no hurry to open those slender, often stubborn, CD cases, *then* open the drawer of the CD player, place a *single* CD inside and hit Play. For years I had taken to playing the commercial-free, cable TV music channels fed through a stereo amplifier and released to my appreciative ears through two, Large Advent™ speakers, both of which had brand new insides. And now of course there were even newer avenues of listening.

In the last decade, Spotify™ and Apple Music™ had come of age, artificially intelligent algorithms, branching into continuous and related sounds by genre, providing a broad education that only *begins* by feeding it what one knows and wants to hear. You Tube™ was another avenue that could provide sound *and* video of live concerts—Thelonious Monk in Paris in 1964 and ’65, Miles Davis’s Quintet with Wayne Shorter in ’67, Dianna Krall in Paris...Les McCann and Eddie Harris’s classic, “Compared to What” live in Montreux in ’69...From early Blues and Swing to Folk, Country, Classical and Rock and Roll, thousands of live shows and *hundreds of thousands* of recordings from more than a hundred years...Bluetooth™ casting sound from a phone or computer to powered, wireless speakers, some smaller than the size of a quart of milk, filling an entire room with uncanny clarity. It was time to admit and submit to change. My third, tangible wave of collected music—my CD’s—would not go by way of hurricane or flood or inclement exposure, they would be given away voluntarily.

In a July, 2021 article for *The Atlantic*, Joe Pinsker wrote:

“*Each of [my] albums cost more than a month of [what] streaming does today, which reflects all that happened to music listening in the intervening 20 years — Napster and LimeWire, iPods and iPhones, Spotify and TikTok. Every decade I’ve been alive, a new format has ascended. Tapes were displaced in the 1990s by CDs, which were displaced in the 2000s by mp3s, which were displaced in the 2010s by streaming. Now, instead of buying music, people rent it.*”

**And then this stubborn fact:**

*"If your entire collection is on a streaming service, good luck accessing it in 10 or 20 years...experts on media preservation and the music industry whom I consulted told me that I have good reason to fear ongoing instability...Spotify listeners' ability to access their collection in the far-out future will be contingent on the company maintaining its software, renewing its agreements with rights holders, and, well, not going out of business when something else inevitably supplants the current paradigm of music listening."*



There it was, my worry all along—legacy. Pinsker went on, citing “lost libraries” to hard drive malfunctions and massive losses of files of companies that have gone under, like *Myspace*. All of which brought me back to my grandmother’s books in the attic. What was I going to leave my grandkids, now *actual* boys aged eight and three? What would happen a month or two after I passed and my streaming company stopped automatically deducting from my debit card or defunct checking account now closed? Can entire Apple or Spotify libraries be transferred? Must I think about that too when I’m “getting my affairs in order”? *and* do it *before* I die? Apparently so...though there’s still that nagging anxiety: No *hard copy*. No big box of Grandma’s stubbornly, *physical record of life* waiting to be found.



In 1946, three Bedouin shepherds discovered “The Dead Sea Scrolls” housed in earthen jars, hidden in the Qumran Caves of the Judean desert, each scroll an addendum to every book, except one, of the Old Testament. Twenty five-hundred-year-old scripture preserved on papyrus. Archeologists had a field day that lasted a decade. They were like movie geeks finding lost scenes of “The Godfather” that Coppola had left on the cutting room floor. Many religious historians see those scrolls as credible license for a rewriting of The Bible. However: *Did it change two millennia of Judeo-Christian culture?* My informal research discovered a Rabbi in Williamsburg and an ex-Trappist monk in Englewood Cliffs who thought so. The other 15.2 million Jews and 2.38 billion Christians asked, “Who is Papyrus?” and “Does a scroll come with a shmear?”

Before Homer, there was an oral tradition whose cadences sang and repeated phrases like, “The rosy fingered dawn...” for centuries so that a frame of rhythm could pause, gather itself, breathe and advance. This is how *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were told from generation to generation, poetry codified with prompts to keep its shape and help the memory. Before that the Gods of Olympus were preserved by this same story telling tradition—parents to children, generation after generation. Five hundred years before Christ, Gautama Buddha emerged from Hinduism’s technicolor pantheon and spoke in Deer Park—but beginning some 4,000 years before that, Hindus *recited* their stories before they were anthologized in *The Vedas* or the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Perhaps, at long last, I’m discovering that I need a little faith. If human history is to be our guide, then I needn’t worry. What’s important will survive. We will sing it. We will say it. We will pass it on to each other. It is in the very DNA of our tribe.

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In Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, that title declaring the temperature at which books made of paper combust—and did—at the hands of “firemen,” the pawns of an anti-intellectual, totalitarian society ridding itself of such subversive things as books. Still, there came the “exiled drifters,” intellectuals who had a method for unlocking photographic memory in order to preserve their immolated treasures. In Truffaut's film adaptation, a few of these “exiles” are introduced. In their hidden, forest seclusion we watch them pace in a discipline of recitation that for us is a cacophony of literature's canon. In my mind I recall the excitement of a few introductions as I opened their covers:

“Stately, plump Black Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and razor lay crossed...”

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way...”

“Mother died today...”

“In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since...”

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born and what my lousy childhood was like...”

This last a great gift picked up along the trail of breadcrumbs my grandmother had left for me beginning with *Nine Stories*, the book that had waited in a quiet attic after she'd gone, which reminds me—I've got some singing to do with my grandsons while I'm still here.



In a curious twist of fate, my daughter, like a few Millennial and Gen Z audiophiles, has gone vinyl. She has rescued all my cleaned and coverless records, protected them in generic jackets and placed them in her library. It was my privilege to give her my Large Advent™ speakers, provide her with a belt driven turntable and new Sony power amp with Bluetooth™ to take advantage of digital streaming services as well as our needle-in-groove, analog legacy. The large Advents stand nearly as tall as my 3-year-old grandson. His older brother says he can feel the music in his bones. I happened to catch them during a recent visit in impromptu dance, stomping to the sounds of Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love*, a fifty year old Acid Rock recording, spinning on the turntable. Two young kids high-stepping in a mini mosh pit of audio ecstasy as life and song were passed along in whatever fashion happened to be available—just as it's always been.