

Wesley Fenlon
Valerie Boyd
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Are You Gonna Let It All Hang Out?

All it took to change my life: two stomps and a clap, aggressively injected into my eight-year-old brain with a chaser of wailing electric guitar. Eyes glued in rapt attention to the fluorescent glow of the television screen, heart fixed on the underdog story of junior hockey players, ears tuned to the the unlikely presence of classic rock in a cash-in Disney sequel. Bodies struggled, clashed, collided in time with the vengeful lyrics: kids beating ass in a preteen mosh pit, gleaming ice skates and hockey sticks taking the place of thrashing limbs. This perfect symmetry of raging music and energized Disney storytelling was over far too soon; I'd gotten a taste of something edgy, something with too much emotion for an innocent Parental Guidance experience. I needed more.

Rewind.

And so I sat, endlessly, reliving the moment through the magic of VHS and a white-knuckle grip on the pudgy 1990s remote control. It's just something kids do—certain movies are mysteriously exempt from the ADD of childhood, and for a week or a month or a year they can swallow us whole, absorbing every ounce of our attention. It must be enough to drive some parents to the frayed edge of sanity—and when it's one *scene* on repeat, instead of an entire film, that's even worse. Was my dad expanding my musical awareness when he came home with my first album, or just trying to stop me from watching D2: The Mighty Ducks for the hundredth time?

I'd won the movie—actually *won* it, in a display of material luck I've never manifested in the decade since—by spinning an oversized cardboard roulette wheel in a stuffy classroom, impatient teachers waiting to usher in the next student. I'd been watching my classmates return from the prize room with handfuls of candy, three foot long cardboard tubes housing pink bubble gum, but when it was my turn I hit the jackpot with the casual grace of a Vegas hustler. They were taken aback—did this kid just flip over proverbial blackjack on his first try? You bet he did.

Then came the long walk to the school's command center through dull white hallways, a little strut in my step, confidence and eagerness battling for control. When you hit the mother lode, you have to play it off like no big thing. “Yeah, I went to the office. But I wasn't in *trouble* or anything. They were just giving me my prize.” And what a prize it was: that smooth, oversized VHS case, Emilio Estevez smirking stupidly on the cover, and the tape of the gods inside, glistening in all its ebony glory. Did I stare? Maybe just a little.

Winning D2: The Mighty Ducks as a grand prize may have imbued it with some special quality, something that drove me to watch it again and again, but I probably just bought into the cheesy story. After awhile, though, something changed; I found myself waiting for that moment the kids shed their generic USA jerseys in favor of the eternally cool Anaheim Ducks logo, when the roar of the crowd faded into “We Will Rock You.” The name “Queen” meant nothing to me, but Freddie Mercury's delivery of those devil-may-care in-your-face lyrics got my blood pumping. Eventually I was rewatching the credit sequence two, three, five times over, just to catch the first half of “We Are the Champions.” I didn't know those two songs were meant to flow together, but I *did* know they outclassed everything else the film had to offer.

And then a little CD labeled Queen Greatest Hits blew the doors off my sheltered musical existence. Up until the day my dad came home from a business trip and presented me with my very first album, the most sophisticated music I'd owned was a cassette tape of Raffi sing-alongs. "There's *more*?" I asked in wide-eyed wonder, staring at the track listing on the back of the rusty brown case. 17 whole songs—that was 15 more than in the movie! I had just been thrust into a brave new world of rock.

I was cheerfully oblivious to how *bizarre* it was for a kid to listen to Queen, a band bursting at the glitter-covered seams with goofy innuendo. But for every "Killer Queen" and "Fat Bottomed Girls" that soared straight over my head, there was a "Bicycle Race" or "Don't Stop Me Now," exercises in pure childlike joy that I *got*. My appreciation for Queen could have just been a phase, an isolated incident, but I turned it into a trend with my next obsession. While most kids were singing along to Hanson, the Backstreet Boys, and their ilk, I hopped back a decade, dropping into a surfer phase with Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys' 20 Good Vibrations: The Greatest Hits.

"Surfin USA" on repeat may well be a baby boomer's worst nightmare, his own music turned against him by the ruthless appetite of a young mind discovering surf rock for the first time. I can understand the agony, reflecting on the music of my own youth—I can still see (and worse, *hear*) the horrific commercials for Now That's What I Call Music when I close my eyes at night—but after decades of exposure, it's a wonder my father could stand such a resurgent Beach Boys saturation. I think he may have wept a solitary tear of joy, when I deigned to play "Good Vibrations" instead of my crush of the moment "Fun, Fun, Fun."

Still, for all the classics I managed to touch upon as a kid—The Beatles were my next step after The Beach Boys—it was mostly sophistication through dumb luck, more an appearance of classy taste than a genuine appreciation of musical prodigies. Essentially, I was that kid who was always a little late to the party—I was *totally* down with 90s alternative once 2003 rolled around—which affected a lot more than what my tinny computer speakers would be pumping out on any given day. I learned to *hunt* for music, to seek out new sounds and see how much was really out there. That's about the only way you can explain a 16 year-old spending a year listening to jazz, for instance. But most importantly, it taught me to write about music, to shine a light on artists outside the public eye. There's always going to be someone chattering on about what's raking in mad cash at the top of the weekly Billboard chart. When you find the bands on the edges, the bands that have something to say with no one to say it to, that's when you find the soul; that's what Queen taught me to look for.

And the soul is what it's all about. Last summer I found myself on the hour-long drive to a baseball game with four friends. Conversation had hit an awkward, uncomfortable lull. I thumbed through the 450 bands trapped in my battered iPod, scanning for that perfect icebreaker. There's really only one choice for a situation like that—could the answer be anything other than "Bohemian Rhapsody"? If it's good enough for Wayne's World, it's good enough for real life; you better believe we all sang along. "Bohemian Rhapsody" is just the gateway drug, the song that taps straight into your emotional core and demands that you open yourself up to the music. That's when I hit 'em with "We Will Rock You" and felt the energy soar.

Two stomps, one clap. Sometimes that's all you need.