

TRENDING

Richard Attenborough has died at the age of 90



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| Obsessions in Music: Who's Your 'One and Only'?

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BY FRANK PHELAN ON AUGUST 19, 2014

LATEST, MUSIC, OPINION

If someone asked who your favorite musical artist of all time was, what would you say? You could have hours of fun, or agony, mulling over that one. And your deliberations would no doubt be littered with 'ifs' and 'buts' for this artist or that band. And afterwards everybody could carry on listening to all their favorite music and nobody would get hurt. But let's raise the stakes here a little. Let's pretend you live in some twisted alternate universe where the music gods have decreed that you must select just one band or artist whose music would be the soundtrack for the rest of your life. The choice here is: one, and only one. So who would be *your* 'one and only'?

One of the great pleasures for most music fans is discovering an artist or band that overwhelms you to the point of being oblivious to any other music. I know I've gone through long phases of being completely immersed in the music of the likes of ELO, Van Morrison, Bob Dylan, the Pale, Ernest Ranglin, Dexy's Midnight Runners and a handful of others, who have at different times captivated me to the total exclusion of all others. These periods of time would stretch over a number of years, and in the case of Bob Dylan, more than a decade.

In the throes of my Dylan fetish, such was the impact of his music on my daily existence that I'd often question the need for anyone else to even bother making music. Why would you want to listen to anything else, I would ask myself, on the discovery of a newly unearthed bootleg recording or a gem from Bob's back catalogue.

And that was a feeling I would next have for the music of Van Morrison, whom I discovered during his mid-80's resurgence. His 'No Guru, No Method, No Teacher' album broke the spell of exclusivity woven by Dylan and took me on a spiritual journey deep into Van's muse. Despite his craggy persona, and dour manner, I would defend his right to be a cantankerous old sod on the basis of his musical genius and its uplifting presence in my life. And so, for a time then, Van and Bob stood side-by-side in the spotlight of my affection before Van alone cast a long and foreboding shadow across my musical landscape.

Fate then intervened to bring a new musical light into my life as I walked into a record shop in Tallaght one day in 1996. I was emerging from my Van cocoon (or vancoon, if you prefer) and had decided to delve into the works of South African vocal group Ladysmith Black Mambazo. They had come to world attention through their collaboration on Paul Simon's 1986 Graceland album. As I rummaged through the world music section I was forced to raise my head and instinctively seek out the shop sound system; as if looking at the speaker would help me understand the sound that was now enticing an army of flesh bumps to parade-march up and down my arms and across the back of my neck.

It was a peculiar mix of fluid blues/jazz guitar driven by a taut drum beat and irresistibly flirtatious piano resting on the funkier ska-like bass line. I had never heard anything quite like it in my relatively young and sheltered musical life. Thus my love affair with relatively unknown Jamaican ska and jazz legend, Ernest Ranglin, began with his 'Below the Bassline' album purchased alongside a Ladysmith Black Mambazo collection.

For the next 3 years Ranglin's music would be an all-consuming passion as I pursued his back catalogue with as

much gusto as the limited means of a mature student would allow.

And then one day I was struck by a chastening thought: what am I missing here? I adored this man's music and was immersed in its beauty, and extracted on a daily basis as much pleasure and soul-enhancing joy as I had from listening to Bob, or Van.

But.

It was *all* I listened to.

So what, indeed, was I missing here?

The answer to this question presented itself almost upon the asking, because it was so obvious. Even so, it was scary to think that had I not, on the prompting of a school mate, listened to Bob Dylan's 'Desire' in the late 70's, I might never have broken the stranglehold of my first real, serious, more-than-just-a-crush-type love, that I had had for ELO. No Bob? No Van? No Dexy's, The Pale, Leonard Cohen, Bob Marley? What a frightening thought! Was I becoming that person I once saw in an Elvis documentary whose house was filled with Elvis records and paraphernalia, and who listened to no other music but that of the King's? This man who further claimed that Presley's music was the only music that mattered? Was I now that man? Is this who I had become?

A period of deep soul searching ensued. Was my monogamous relationship with the music of Ernest Ranglin coming to a natural end? Would my new-found need for musical exploration and fulfilment elsewhere now take precedence over my dedication to this man's wonderful music. Was I facing that awful break-up moment? The conversation in my head went: 'It's me, Ernest. Not you. You're not the one to blame. I still love you – I always will. No, there isn't anybody else. I just need to experience new things. And yes, I will always be there for you whenever you need an ear'. In the end I settled on an open relationship. I would still return to Ernest's music while scanning the horizon for potential musical pleasures elsewhere. An easy promise to keep – even to this day.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait too long, or look too hard before the hand of fate once more nudged me towards a new music adventure. While absent-mindedly channel flicking one evening in 1998 or '99 I was arrested by the sight of a singer clambering all over the audience of the Late Late Show with a possessed look in his eyes. To be honest, it wasn't the music that brought my channel surfing to an abrupt stop – more the very real prospect of an elderly member of the audience having a cardiac arrest live on TV. Now that would really put the 'late' into 'the Late Late Show'.

To refrains of 'Musha, God help her', the song ran the gamut of the salacious commentary and gossip witnessed in every small parish in Ireland. Sung in a hybrid Irish/New York accent, tinged ever so slightly with something English in there, this was a very interesting spectacle altogether. I was intrigued. Here was an Irish artist unashamedly using a turn of phrase straight from the Foster & Allen book of hackneyed Irish phrases, placing it in a celtic rock setting, and making it sound so bloody cool! *Ah, sure Musha, God help her. She's in an awful state. She's got that*

husband fella run away. A teenage daughter in the family way. And she don't pay her bills to nobody... After a very protracted incubation period, the music of Wexford man Pierce Turner would eventually reveal its beauty, its chaos, its calm, its quirkiness. So much so that history would repeat itself as *his* songs then became the only songs that mattered.

Late into my love affair with the music of Pierce Turner I continually reminded myself that I should allow other music into my life and that the pain of separation I had felt during the Ernest Ranglin break-up had been forgotten once I had unlocked the code into Pierce's music. In doing this I kept myself open to some wonderful new musical experiences while remaining beguiled by Turner's growing catalogue.

Damien Dempsey was the first to threaten Pierce's place in my heart, and I still love what he does. Other discoveries such as Fred, Jinx Lennon, Rory Faithfield, Gavin Mee, Kevin Nolan, Ana Egge, Southern Tenant Folk Union, Valerie June and so many more have all made a mark on me that won't wash away. The obscure nature of most of these artists is testament to my new commitment not to commit blindly one hundred per cent to any single artist or band. To paraphrase Leonard Cohen: to leave a crack for other lights to get in.

So where does that leave me in answering the question of who my favourite artist of all time is? Or to put it another way: who is my desert island artist? Who's music could I not live without?

In making my choice, I have no hesitation. No doubts whatsoever. I do, however, harbour guilt for having to exclude those whose art has nourished me, soul and body, for almost 40 years. I briefly mentioned Leonard Cohen. Of course it was he who brought a suave sophistication of cool to the party, and an intellect and wit to poetry and music matched only, perhaps, by Dylan's. The Pale also jump out at me from the mists of guilt. A band once tipped to eat at the big turntable and who continue to make remarkably inventive music; they are to me like one of my children. Really. And Dexy's Midnight Runners. Northern Soul with a Celtic heart, as Morrissey might put it. It still beats to this day.

However, in determining one, single, stand alone artist as my favourite of all time, I asked myself two questions. Firstly, who's music has impacted upon me physically, mentally and emotionally more than any other?

(All have strong cases, some stronger.) And, ultimately: were every single one of my favourite artists to play live on the same night in different venues at exactly the same time, who would I absolutely not be able to miss? In answering both of these questions one candidate met all the criteria: Pierce Turner.

Granted, he may not have the historical significance of Bob Dylan (few do!) or the public profile of someone like Van Morrison. But this is a personal choice based on what the actual music means to me: the sometimes off-kilter melodies; the quirky lyrics; the voice that makes a sound that no other entity, living or inanimate can make; and the maniacal, stunningly beautiful and often hilarious live performances that leave you a physical wreck wanting for more. No artist has ever done *all* of that for me, other than Pierce Turner. And it's been that way for a long, long time now. That said, everything has a shelf life, and who knows what musical gifts may present themselves to turn my head in the years ahead. So, please feel free to ask me again in ten years' time.

Whatever the case, Pierce Turner will always be a huge part of my appreciation of music, just as Dylan and Morrison and all the other artists mentioned here have been. And as music heroes go, Pierce Turner, ridiculously obscure for one of such talent, is for me noteworthy even in the company of the likes of Van or Bob.

Have your say at thedigitalfeed.com. Make the case for your favourite artist of all time in the comment box below. Share with your friends and let them have their say too. Remember – one, and only one – for your 'One and Only'.

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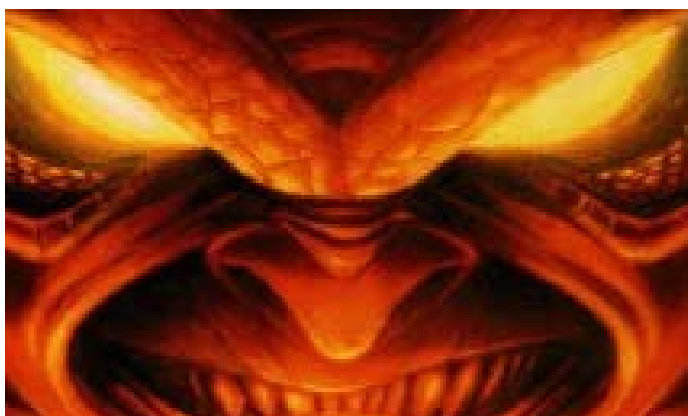
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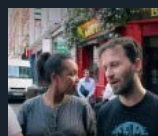
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