

The Story Behind the Soundtrack I Made for *The Best of Us*

If I could have chosen what art form I might have been good at, no question, I'd have been a musician. A back up singer would have been enough. Even the girl on the tambourine. But I'm a writer (I love to sing, not always on pitch) and the keys I play are the ones on a laptop. My goal though, when I write, is to come as close as I can to create, with words, the kind of intense feeling that music brings about in me. Corny but true: I want to pluck your heartstrings. All I have to accomplish this is the alphabet.

So I always create a playlist for myself when I'm writing a book. I don't play music while I write, but I play it while I'm considering what I need to say. Most of all, though, the music I choose to play is meant to remind me of feelings I had and experiences I want to bring back.

My new book is about finding the first true partner of my life, in my fifties, and losing him four and a half years later to cancer. For the story I tell in *The Best of Us*, more than any other book I ever wrote, music was everywhere, because my husband and I shared so much of it. So...the playlist I created is a long one. (Four hours and seventeen minutes, to be precise.)

Jim had been, since age 14, a bass player (forbidden by his father to play rock 'n roll, so he did it in secret, and forty five years later, when we met, he rejoined a band. Many of the happiest times he knew during his last few years—the ones we shared—were spent making music. Or listening to it.

I wanted to create a story in songs, in this playlist, beginning with the state of solitary yearning for a partner that I was in, before I met Jim, ("Somewhere Along the Way" by the Silly Sisters, and the Dixie Chicks' "Cowboy Take Me Away") to the joyful time of early love, through trouble (some of which we encountered before his diagnosis), and struggle, and having to let go of a man I adored, and after, being on my own again.

So I created *The Best of Us Playlist*, and it's available (free) on Spotify.

Some of the song choices are not difficult to figure out. Marc Cohn's "True Companion", that I used to listen to in my single days, thinking "That's what I want", and Leonard Cohen's "I'm Your Man". There was no question I'd include the Townes Van Zandt ballad, "If I Needed You. My three children sang this one for Jim and me at our wedding. And I had to include the song my friend Melissa sang for us at Jim's memorial, "The Book of Love" by The Magnetic Fields.

The playlist follows a certain order, though not always an obvious one. (There's Richard Thompson's "1952 Vincent Black Lightning", an homage to the time, not quite a year after we met, spent together on Jim's motorcycle over the course of what I call our Bonneville Summer, and a song in Spanish by the Guatemalan

singer Ricardo Arjona, because we had such happy times together at Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, and Nina Simone, singing in French, because France was probably where we fell in love, and a song by a group we discovered at the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, Low Anthem, called “To Ohio”, because we never missed that festival, and because Jim came from Ohio, and he remained – despite sixty years spent in California, very much a Midwestern Eagle Scout. I treasured the part of him.

I included a song by George Jones, “He Stopped Loving Her Today” for a few reasons. First off, no singer’s voice reaches directly into my chest cavity and tugs at my heart strings the way his does. I asked the band that played at our wedding to perform this one, and when they started to play, I couldn’t help myself: Though I had not planned this, I performed an interpretive dance out on the floor, acting out the story of the song, which is about a man who loved a woman so deeply and unflinchingly that the only thing that finally made him stop loving her (even years after she’d abandoned him, which I would never have done with Jim) was that he died. The song is definitely a little over the top (as was my dance), but that was the way Jim loved. The way he loved me, anyway.

And then there’s Richard Shindell’s gorgeous song, “Wisteria”, that still brings me to tears every time, because wisteria was blooming the first time we laid eyes on the house we bought together, the summer before his diagnosis, and it was blooming again when I brought my husband home from the hospital that last May, when he said to me “This would be a good place to die”.

This one is almost painful to listen to, but I wanted to include a recording made by Warren Zevon when he was dying of cancer, himself, “Keep Me in Your Heart”, in which you can hear, as you play the song, how hard it was for Warren Zevon just to breathe by the time he recorded this one.

Emmylou Harris had to be on this list, because if there’s any singer I could be, it would be Emmylou. And Lucinda Williams. And Roseanne Cash. And Dolly, because I love her, and the McGarrigle sisters singing “Mendocino”, because I think it’s one of the most beautiful songs anyone ever wrote. Oh and Willie Nelson of course—one of the many, many singers we went to hear together (at the Fillmore). The song I chose: “You Were Always On My Mind”. Because not always, but very often, this is true for me, of Jim.

It was hard choosing which Bob Dylan song—there were so many we loved, so I ended up with two. Dylan would have been part of this playlist even we hadn’t made a pilgrimage to hear Dylan perform (outdoors at the Greek Theater in Berkeley) on a night that turned out to be the last time Jim ever left our house. He died five days later.

In the end, the Dylan songs I chose to include on this playlist were “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” and “Shooting Star”, but the one that made Jim get up out of the

wheelchair that night at the Greek Theater—god only knows how—and stand there, through all the verses, was “Tangled up in Blue”. When the nurses helped us back to our car, Jim asked, (and this was just about the last thing he ever said to me): “Did you have a good time, Baby?”.

The best.

The last song my husband played on his bass by the way(not on this playlist) was “Sympathy for the Devil.” He finished the song. Then he set down his bass. He said “I’m done”. He was not just talking about that song.

I have to add here, if Jim were making a playlist, there would be whole lot more rock and roll on it, in addition to blues, and classical, and R and B, and rap. Led Zeppelin for sure, but also a lot of bands I never heard of until I met him—like Tragically Hip and Thievery Corporation and Camper Van Beethoven and Sigur Ros, that he played, very loud, while driving his Boxster, that had a subwoofer in the trunk. But this is not Jim’s list. It’s the list of the woman who loved him. And no question, it’s a little sentimental because of that.

There is one odd omission from this list: The Beatles. When we got right down to it, I think they were Jim’s all-time favorites. They were the ones he wanted to hear on our last great road trip to the Eastern Sierra, anyway, that we took the month before he died, anyway—beginning with the old songs, that we fell in love with when we were so very young. I don’t even need to play the Beatles much myself, is the truth. Because their songs are embedded in my brain, same as they were for Jim. I can’t even imagine what it would be, not knowing those songs.

Near the end, I wanted to include “They Can’t Take That Away From Me”, as sung by Susanna McCorkle—particularly because of that line “The way you wear your hat”, which spoke to me, of Jim. (I am aware, writing this, of how many of the singers on this playlist have died. But we’re still listening to their voices! That tells you something about how a person can remain a presence in our lives, even after they’re not here among us any more.)

So then there’s Randy Newman’s “Living Without You”, but sung by Mary McCaslin; I wanted a woman’s voice for this one, because that’s where I was, after Jim died. “It’s so hard...it’s so hard...living without you. “ And then I had to share Liam Clancy’s “The Parting Glass”, that we played at Jim’s memorial service, as friends passed around shot glasses of whiskey, and the Traveling Wilburys’ “End of the Road” . And there could have been another three dozen songs after that—Hank Williams! Tom Waits! Dwight Yoakum! Dean Martin! The great Mexican band, Mana! -- but a person has to stop somewhere. .

The playlist ends with the one that is closest to being *our* song, John Prine’s “The Glory of True Love”. We danced a lot together, usually in our kitchen, and often

to that one. One night, when Jim was already very sick, we rode into San Francisco on a BART train to hear John Prine, and when he started singing that one, Jim reached for my hand, but mine was there already, reaching for his. "The Glory of True Love" captures how we felt when we found each other-- such a joyful, optimistic song, and happy, and funny too, which was always true of Jim.

I ended my playlist with that song because I didn't want to end on a sad note. Jim would not have wanted that either.