



Domestic Harmony

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An abiding question for many of us is the one that asks who we are and what it is that makes us who we are. In his novel, *The Razor's Edge*, Somerset Maugham, the English writer, has this to say on the subject: “For men and women are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learned to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives’ tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poets they read, and the God they believed in. It is all these things that have made them what they are...”

To this list I would add the entertainments we shared with our family, and I say this with specific examples in mind. In a recent conversation with some of my childhood friends we were reminiscing about the albums we used to listen to when we were young and still living at home. Our parents would occasionally travel to England or the States, sometimes with us in tow, where they saw shows on Broadway or in the West End and brought back recordings of the ones they had enjoyed. These were vinyl LPs (long play 33 RPM discs), a format that was introduced in 1948, became hugely popular in the early 1950s, and was the recording industry standard for years during the “album era” until the arrival of cassettes in the late 1970s.

Some of the albums our parents brought back from those trips were recordings of comedy performances by Victor Borge, Flanders & Swann, Tony Hancock, and so on. Others were the soundtracks of musicals, such as *Camelot*, *My Fair Lady*, and *West Side Story*. There was no television in Montevideo in those days and one of the ways in which we entertained ourselves in our family was to sit in the living room with drinks and snacks and listen to albums. Over the years we listened to our collection of records countless times, until we all knew most of the words by heart. We could sing along when Eliza Doolittle sang “The Rain in Spain Stays Mainly in the Plain,” or when her father belted out the crowd-pleaser “Get Me to the Church on Time.”

We listened to the comedy albums just as much as the musicals and memorized most of the words in those shows as well. Despite knowing the lines by heart, we still found them hilarious, and laughed out loud as punchlines were delivered, often spouting them in unison with the performer. There was much hilarity in these sessions but there were also what my mother called “weepy moments,” as when Richard Burton sang: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief, shining moment, that was known as Camelot.”

Of course, like other families, we had our differences of opinion and arguments sometimes got heated, usually when my brother or I challenged the parental authority. But somehow, all discord vanished when we sat down together to listen to the albums we had heard a thousand times before. Those recordings created a sort of neutral zone, a haven where the familiar words bridged a temporary lack of communication and helped us get over any ruffled feathers or bruised feelings. Over time, those shared moments became an essential part of our collective identity as a family. They were like secret rituals that only the four of us were privy to. Certain lines entered our family vocabulary and were used as if we were speaking in code. We might quote Maria in *West Side Story* and say, “It’s alarming how charming I feel,” and, amongst ourselves, the words seemed to be charged with special meaning.

I had never seen *My Fair Lady*, on stage or screen, until recently when I saw the film version on TV. The story, the characters, and the lines were all so familiar and I could still remember almost all the words to the songs. The show transported me back to our living room at home where I was once again with my family, sharing those moments that laid one of the cornerstones of my identity and my sense of who I am.