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Summer Songs that helped us Survive

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Abstract

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Article

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Warning beforehand, this is a fluff-piece - you'll have to excuse me. Actually, a little of this can be blamed on Verizon commercials.

What originally inspired this was the return of typical south Texas summer heat in all its oppressively humid splendor. Mostly we'd been spared this year, save for July 21 (my birthday) and one other day in June - the only profusely body-moistening days so far this year. It's an oppressive climate sometimes. Typical heat brings the discomfort, discomfort brings discontent, discontent seeks an outlet - it's a generally predictable pattern.

A little background, I also live without air conditioning and heat - by choice, mostly. After being laid off in Jan. 2003, it was obvious budgetary reasons. Since then, with the continued "economic recovery" (income deflation and cost inflation), I've continued the practice. Houston's known as for disproportionately expensive electric and gas utility bills. It's mostly not too bad until the really extreme humidity sets in.

Yeah, I know - New York is humid, Washington is humid, lots of east coast places are humid. But when I hear folks there complaining in real time about it, I can't help but chuckle. Courtney Sharp, a New Orleans native, and I both shared a laugh at DC's "humidity." Ask anyone in the Gulf Coastal region, it's a different climate here in more ways than social.

Back to the subject, I sat waiting for my computer to cool down and watched a bit of TV. Lo, there was a Verizon commercial with a guy doing an AC/DC imitation in his copy room at work - a grown-up who never grew up. It got me to thinking: why the hell am I up here sweating when I could be downstairs diverting my focus on the heat with an album or two?

Yes, album. Being a vintage '57 model, I grew up in the 60's and 70's vinyl era. No, this isn't about fetish clothing a la tranny, but music media - LP albums to be exact, turntables and the like. It was a great escape for those of us, pre-computer and internet, when we all thought we were alone. Maybe that

isolation wasn't so for New York or L.A. or the Bay Area. But for transpeople in the howling hinterlands between the left and right coast, and especially in the heart of South Texas, isolation was as pervasive as life itself.

And music was the soundtrack to life. More than any other genre, rock and roll became a more symbolic form, more attention demanding than any other category. It's defined generations, added subconscious imagery to mass marketing, and even become a suggestive influence for the more vulnerable and impressionable (think Judas Priest and the suicides, or N.W.A. and the gangsta wannabes).

While music would never dictate my life choices, it certainly had its soothing qualities - savage breast notwithstanding. It was also a wonderful shared experience, whether it was concerts (a rare and eagerly anticipated "event" in Corpus Christi), cruising around with the cassette or eight-track blasting, or even simply kicking back at home playing albums and partaking in our favorite intoxicant - in whatever form that may have taken.

It was probably just me, but it seemed like a much more magical time.

We certainly had heaping portions of teen angst, lack of opportunity, frustration, and sensory and cultural malnourishment. Authority and social mores were hollow and hypocrisy-filled, it was pre-computer age (much fewer distractions) and our future lives appeared to be an ultimate dead-end. As Jimi Hendrix sang in a line from Manic Depression© "I know what I want, but I just don't know how to go about getting it." The endless humid heat coupled with boredom and idleness caused us to be both outwardly and self-destructive. It's amazing that we kept from killing ourselves! No one questioned the condition: we were all in the same boat. Think the movie "Dazed and Confused": Then exchange the live oak woods outside of Austin for the open beaches and sand dunes outside of Corpus Christi - everything else was exactly the same, save for the surfboards.

Yet even with all of that seemingly spirit-crushing outlook on life, we managed to be happy! We managed to find something to fill that gaping maw, and it had little to do with a perpetual buzz or simply "hanging out at the island (the beach)." It ultimately boiled down to music.

For music, we'd hop in the car and drive 6 hours and 400 miles across state to attend a Texas Jam in Dallas. We'd spend a weekend sleeping in the Astrodome parking lot, eating and drinking little, in hopes of snagging a ticket to a sold-out concert - or alternately just hanging out in the parking lot, partying and feeding off of the multitude of open cars and trucks blaring music. Even in talking with a lot of the others in the trans community, music was the one constant that kept us from going off the deep end.

Even though it was pre-trans years, and I was internally conflicted, it was unnoticeable in the midst of all the others standing sweat-drenched in the open summer sun, baking like potatoes 'til our skins were almost equally as brown and crispy. And through it all was the soundtrack of the quintessential, emotion-charging, high-energy songs of summer - songs to bake by.

Yes, I was into Punk and New Wave, but not many other folks in South Texas were. Even so, Punk was more intimate music for smaller venues, being born in the pubs and smoky little basement bars. Loud, very much so. Expansive and reverberating outdoor music, no.

Not sure why, but very few songs from outside the US were on this list, surprisingly (esp. for UK

groups). Possibly it was because of their more complicated and sophisticated rhythm and song structure - the progressive rock. The synergistic songs that seemed to inspire action, regardless of heat-fatigue, were those more reliant on the up-temp power chord crunch. There was one John Lennon song, Instant Karma that made it in that category. And also an Aussie group, AC/DC with Problem Child, that also had that spontaneous activating quality.

The rest were all American continent groups, most with something to do with Texas. Songs like Ted Nugent's Free For All, and Bachman-Turner Overdrive's Roll On Down the Highway (Canadian), Kiss' Calling Dr. Love, the Raspberries' Go All The Way and the Sweet's Ballroom Blitz were there to be sure - none really anything to do with Texas then (though conservative Ted's now a Texas resident).

Maybe Texas was more inclined towards setting up amps in open areas (like beaches) and just letting the music blast forth, neighbors-be-damned. It was really the mentality, blare until the police came and shut it down. We had ZZ Top with LaGrange, Steve Miller Band (who lived in Dallas) with Jungle Love, the Eagles' Good Day in Hell and at the tail end of the era, Stevie Ray Vaughan's When The House Is Rockin'. Save for the middle break, Edgar Winter's instrumental Frankenstein would be there as well.

The #3 all-time top beach songs had no connection with anything to do with Texas (save for Ronnie Montrose being in Edgar Winter's group at an earlier point, and both Winter brothers being from Orange, TX). But this isn't six degrees of Texas. Actually there were two Montrose songs off of their first album that really rated in this, as Space Station #5 should also make this list. But the one song, Rock The Nation, was another of those blistering, power-chord reverberation heavy songs that would get cranked to top volume and echo up and down the shore. Needless to say, the song subject was equally appropriate.

The Doobie Brothers weren't from Texas, nor had connections to it, but one of their songs was probably the #2 quintessential beach / summer sunburn song and captured the essence of relentless summer heat in our neck of the woods. China Grove was really not even an official town, more just a collection of businesses and a few homes and trailers at the intersection of Rigsby and Foster Rd. just outside the Loop, east of San Antonio. There's nothing there. Why it rated a song, I have no idea. But it was a song that captured the essence of summer for us then.

The top summer song that floated my boat back then, whether the beach or campgrounds, was yet another Texas boy from Orange. Rick Derringer was a one-hit wonder, and never enjoyed much recognition in his solo career. However, his one hit was a good one. Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo used to blast out of a jukebox at our lonely little campground west of San Antonio on our two family vacations up the Nueces River. It was one of the few decent songs on the box, and it got the overwhelming lion's share of play. In my mind's eye, I can still hear (and even feel) the beat from the bass-thumping box a football field away, wending through the live oaks every night. Even at the coast, in the mid-day heat, it was enough to get us energized, to inspire harder play in the pick up football games or give it our all in traffic Frisbee games on the drive-on beach. There was just something about that crunch that shook your bones, no matter how heat-fatigued, and activated you. It also helped you put the heat out of mind, arguably one of, if not the most important quality of all!

Clearly, this is not a definitive list for everyone. Certainly age and the era we grew up in will influence other songs filling that list. I can see a Guns N' Roses Welcome To the Jungle, a Nirvana Smells Like

Teen Spirit, or even Marilyn Manson’s Mobscene or something from Korn being subsequent generations’ top outdoor summer songs. There will be other suggestions and a near-infinite number of opinions on how they beat the heat, pain (physical or emotional), quell frustration or simply keep their focus. But for my prime of youth era, for me and for those I also observed, these were the songs that did it. Whatever gets you through your life! (thanks again, John Lennon)

As I wrap this up, it’s another of those more typical summer days in Houston, a smoggy, humid, 100 degrees with a bullet at 3PM. Even in oppressive heat, it works! Besides the cicadas rattling outside, you can guess what I’m listening to at the moment. Sorry about the noise, neighbors!

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