

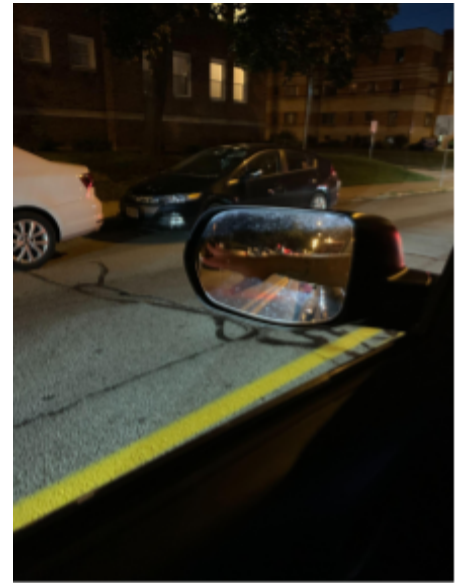
music, magic, and my mom: an ode to the songs we write and the ones we listen to

by: Charlotte McDaniel

My earliest memories of music take place in the backseat of my mom's old silver Honda Accord with beige leather seats. Childhood car rides are always accompanied in my mind's eye by my mom's favorite albums, especially ones by U2 and Midnight Oil. I have always been drawn to the lyrics in songs—I was the kid asking “when are they going to start singing, mommy?” when forced to listen to purely instrumental pieces of music. Though my mom herself has a deep appreciation for non-lyrical music, I do think she is part of the reason why I love lyrics so much. If I asked my mom what some part of a song meant, she would tell me.

I loved the song “Walk On” by U2 even before I knew the depth of what it meant because I just liked how it sounded. My mom transferred her love of Bono's voice and The Edge's guitar playing to me in the womb, so it was no surprise that as a toddler I was vibing in the backseat to their band's music. When my mom explained that in the song “All That You Can't Leave Behind,” the line “you're packing your suitcase for a place none of us has been” was about Bono's dad passing away and going to heaven, my mind was blown. How could someone say so much about the human heart and grieving in such a beautiful way, and in a way I'd never heard before, but that instantly made sense? Looking back on it now, I realize that my mom taught me this around the same time my grandma, her mother, passed away. Through music and words, my grieving mother taught her young daughter how to heal. I also believe that this moment of learning and healing planted within me the desire to make my own magic through words and music.

A few years later, I was in first grade and starting to develop my own music taste. My mom and I kept hearing this one song about a girl wanting Romeo to save her, going to the outskirts of town, an initially disapproving father, and eventually a marriage proposal...and I was hooked. Finally we heard the title and artist of this magnificent song: “Love Story” by Taylor Swift. My mom took me to Borders, and we bought my first CD: Taylor Swift's debut album, *Taylor Swift*. As soon as we got home I raced upstairs to my bedroom, peeled the plastic off,



“Stopped at a Red Light” by Charlotte McDaniel, used under permission from artist

opened the case, and carefully placed my very first CD into my CD player. The rest was history. With that album and every Taylor Swift album that followed, I would sit in my room for hours with the album on repeat, studying the lyrics in the booklet intently until I knew the words so well it was as if I had written them myself. At some point, maybe around second or third grade, I discovered that with my family's Xfinity On Demand television subscription, I could watch the music videos for all of my favorite songs. I was particularly obsessed with the video for "Teardrops on My Guitar." Watching Taylor pour her heart out in a beautiful gown, blonde curls spread behind her, arms wrapped around a guitar, I was enraptured. I wanted to play guitar and write songs just like Taylor...and so I did. I can't remember the lyrics or melody of the first song I ever wrote myself, but I remember sitting on the floor of my bedroom with a journal, and writing down lyrics that sounded a lot like the ones about falling in love and growing old with a childhood friend in "Mary's Song." Though even I knew that if I was going to be a songwriter I would need to actually write my own songs, not just ones that sounded oddly similar to my favorite artists, I kept at it.

At the end of third grade, I found out that there was an after-school guitar program offered at my school. I even watched some of my classmates perform in an end of year guitar showcase, and I knew that the following school year, I just had to be among their ranks. I needed to learn guitar so that I could write songs like Taylor's and have instrumental accompaniment. I begged my parents to let me participate in the program, and they said yes. Once a week after school, I climbed the stairs in the hallway behind the gymnasium to the music room. Along with seven or eight other kids I sat down and plunked out easy patterns on my glossy, golden, $\frac{3}{4}$ -size nylon-stringed guitar. At first, guitar class was arduous. Playing a stringed instrument was much harder than Taylor Swift made it look. I wanted so badly to pull out my guitar and play the entirety of the *Speak Now* album perfectly, but first I had to master the basics with songs like "Doo Wah Diddy." Those first few years of learning to play the guitar were months of frustratingly slow progress. But I kept at it, motivated by the belief that if I just kept practicing, one day I'd be able to produce the kind of music I yearned to create. In sixth grade I switched to private guitar lessons with Jeremy Fisher, a local jazz guitarist who taught lessons out of his at-home studio. I loved private lessons because I got to have much more of a say in the repertoire. Jeremy and I kept working on fundamental guitar skills, but we also played some of my favorite songs at the time by Ed Sheeran, Coldplay, and of course, U2 and Taylor Swift!

After a few years of lessons with Jeremy, I was a proficient intermediate guitar player, and music became more than just something I loved; it was magic that I created, experienced and depended upon.

Though I was excelling in guitar and academics, middle school was tough for me socially. I'd always been the tallest girl, I hit puberty early, and I was more emotionally intelligent than many of my peers. I struggled to find a secure group of friends, and I felt hurt watching boys in my grade ask other girls out on dates when it seemed no one even had a crush on me. I'd been listening to Taylor Swift songs about whirlwind adolescent romance for years at this point, and I desperately wanted to experience that in my real life, not just in my fantasies evoked from her music. Playing and singing songs written by other people on my guitar in my room when I got home from school helped me. Singing "You Belong with Me" after the guy I'd had a crush on for years asked out my best friend made me feel like I wasn't alone. If Taylor had survived not feeling as cool or as pretty as the popular girl, so could I. I also started writing my own songs again, especially when I was going through something that I didn't think had already been expressed in a song by someone else. I wrote lyrics in journals, on scraps of paper, and on the Notes app of my phone about all sorts of things.

In 2016, I wrote about my best friend's neighbor, my first kiss. I was in eighth grade and he was a year older. Over the summer we would text all the time, but then he started high school and it felt like everything changed. I wrote these lyrics and recorded a voice memo of myself singing them: "You used to know me\You used to care\But now I wonder\If I'm even there\You used to talk to me\And I would talk too\But now you don't even hear\When I'm talking to you\And then you threw my heart out\You caught me by surprise\I never would have imagined\The hate that was in your eyes." The song kind of makes me laugh now that I'm older and realize that this dude was literally just some silly irrelevant 14 year-old, but at the time he had shattered my world. (Or "threw my heart out," as I put it six years ago.) The song might not have impressive wordplay, imagery, or advanced songwriting techniques, but it was so important to me. Songwriting allowed me to say and feel exactly what I needed to say, which was particularly necessary because I was in a situation where I didn't feel comfortable sharing my pain with the person who had hurt me. Songwriting allowed me to gain some sense of closure, or justice, in a scenario that significantly lacked both of those needs. Expressing myself through song became my best form of self-medicating in response to negative situations.

I haven't stopped writing songs since my first kiss, and as I've grown older and more mature, so have my songs. I still write about boys who have wronged me, but I've also written about my observations of all sorts of characters in my life. I wrote a song a few years ago about a girl at my school who seemed like she had everything: expensive clothes, fun parties, a huge house...she could do whatever she wanted to do. But I knew that underneath that facade there was a sadness, a loneliness that others did not see. The refrain goes: "Walls and walls of champagne bottles/Vaporized dreams and poisoned water/She takes a sip, she inhales slow/Closes her eyes/And no one will ever know." The song is in the key of F# minor, but I use major chords in addition to minor ones in order to musically reference the happy facade that veiled the sad realities of the girl's life. I initially worked the chords out on guitar, but I ended up enjoying the song better when it was accompanied with piano. I wrote the song because at first I was jealous of this girl. But once I realized that I was jealous of a life I did not actually want to live, I felt bad for her. I wrote the song because I felt this need to communicate the truth of the situation. Even though I did not explicitly share the song with anyone, writing and singing the song made me feel like, somehow, the world knew.

The songs I write are completely my own; made by and for myself. I have only ever shared them with a few close friends, but never posted them online or shared them publicly. I'm not utterly opposed to releasing my own music, but it does scare me a little. My songs mean so much to me personally, and I worry they will lose their magic if I subject them to the opinions of those outside my inner circle. For now, at least, songwriting is meaningful to me because, frankly, it just makes life better. I have collaborated with others a few times, but in these scenarios it was usually based off of a melody or riff that they had written, and I just improvised lyrics in the moment for fun. I think what I like about songwriting as opposed to just writing is that it connects my love of words with my love of music. I enjoy finding clever, rhyming ways of saying what I need to say, rather than just word vomiting in my journal. (Although I definitely do that too!)

When I got my driver's license my junior year of high school, the first thing I wanted to do was take a drive with the windows down, blasting my favorite songs. Though my mom was definitely not thrilled about me, a new driver, turning up the volume in the car, I like to think that in some way, like my love of songwriting, she helped inspire me. The silver and beige Honda Accord was long gone by the time I was driving; replaced by a gray Honda CR-V. Now that I've

gotten older, listening to music in the car is more of something I do by myself or with friends. (I've even played my own songs in the car once or twice before). But the feeling of being on the road and experiencing lyrics, whether in a car seat or the driver's seat, in an old Honda or a new Honda, with my mom or with others...that feeling will always be magic.