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Countdown

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Countdown

January 18, 2017

Howard Schaap

We're driving home from shopping, two 40-something parents and their three teen and tweens. It's January. Call us old-fashioned—we listen to the radio, Rick Dees. It's not just the Weekly Top Forty; it's a countdown of #1s. A list of a list. We click around but the kids insist—"Go back to Rick Dees!" This pop culture is ruining them, I think, ruining us all, a proud tradition of pop culture ruin for every generation—[Rick Dees](#), [Casey Kasem](#), [Dick Clark](#).

For some reason I think of artists—and I guess I mean *True Artists*—as above or somehow beyond pop culture. This is, of course, dead wrong, but I imagine, say, [Rilke](#) as unswayed by whatever tripe or swill gets swallowed by the masses. If only we had truer, more profound tastes like Rainer Maria, this line of thinking in me goes, we would have more profound experiences and deeper understandings as a culture.

But no. We fall for "[Call Me Maybe](#)"; we OD on "[24 K Magic](#)."

Blame the grocery store for "The Age of the List." Blame the space race for "The Age of the Countdown." Whatever the source, the list defines us, the countdown abides.

And, of course, pop songs, despite my own active resistance to them, were a major force in my life. I fell hard and fast for a girl as a teenager, and the torrential power of pop songs reshaped the landscape of my very character. Think major flood that bulldozes a hill and creates a new river bed. But in this case think deluge of syrup encasing me in crusty sugar.

So in the spirit of January, and in the spirit of the countdown, here, chronologically, are the top four pop songs that drove my little relationship mercilessly along before them, almost wrecking what turned out to be a fine marriage before it began.

1. **Whitney Houston (via Dolly Parton), "I Will Always Love You," 1992.** Of course this. The idea that forces beyond your control could be the flaws deeply embedded in your own character—what could be more terrifying? And like crack to a self-deprecating teen: "So goodbye. Please don't cry: we both know I'm not what you need." Our teen love was star-crossed in its own way by race and culture, though we felt the forces against us more than understood them, but Whitney's voice grabbed and twisted our hearts like little kids do bubble wrap.

Glorious.

1. **Little Texas, "What Might Have Been," 1993.** For the record, this one was all her. I never gave into it. It was clear really: never trust crossover bands. Ever. But we were split, college and high school, and that meant our relationship was a sort of interminable point of no return. And oh the melancholy of projecting yourself into the future and

trying “not to think about what might have been”! To look back—“cuz that was then” and realize there’s no going back—“and we have taken different roads.” It’s just Robert Frost: knowing “how way leads on to way,” just how important is the choice of the moment! Talk about existential dread—Little Texas tapped into the motherlode with “What Might Have Been.”

My then-girlfriend even bought the album. Miraculously, once we were married the album got lost.

1. **Alanis Morissette, “You Oughta Know,” 1995.** College years were a pageant of break-ups. During one memorable one, we were both working at the same warehouse that stored old files, named for a generic Native American tribe, let’s call it Tomahawk Industries. And we were broken up. But still friends. Except not, which came especially clear when, “You Oughta Know” came on. I mainly tried to dismiss it with an eye-roll but couldn’t help but swallow hard. Dear Alanis! The song is a memorable, un-gentle calling-to-account. It’s also a helpful exercise in point of view.

We got back together.

1. **Michel Gondry, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, 2004.** Okay, this isn’t a song, but I wanted to end someplace satisfying. “I apply my personality in a paste,” confesses Clementine Kruczinski in *ESotSM*’s bizarre first scene, a hook that set deeply in my mouth when I saw it for the first time. I remember when the film was over, we just sort of sat there, letting the disc play to the end, unable to move or speak. We were six years into our marriage, and now I finally understood that a work of art could capture the actual complexity of a real relationship. This is probably what *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* were trying to get at in high school, but who knew?

But maybe it’s all of a piece. Maybe somehow *The Bodyguard*—source material for Whitney’s rendition of “I will Always Love You”—eventually gives rise to *Eternal Sunshine*?

So I click back to Rick Dees. It’s Adele, [“Someone Like You,”](#) and there it is, the ache that hurts so good.

My daughter, fifteen, begins singing along.

I turn it up.