



RCA Turntable

By Doug Crandell

When mother returned home after a hysterectomy, her brown eyes were dull, and the skin underneath them was a mottled gray. She walked stiffly and tried to smile at her five children standing on the porch of a rented farmhouse, the floorboards buckling and the steps wobbly. Our father helped her climb each one. She glanced at us and tried another smile, but this one was weaker, and she moved slowly past us as if part leaden, part ghost. When she disappeared into the house, our father's hand at her back, one of us said, "She looks like another mom." For a long time that spring afternoon, the five of us remained on the porch, picking at paint scabs, and tossing old acorns at one another. At dusk, we heard her wailing from the back bedroom.

Before our family doctor told mother she needed a complete hysterectomy, she had already started to struggle with her mind. Sometimes she'd cry for days only to rally and become manic for a week, which was followed by some stability before the entire process started again. But now, a couple of weeks after she returned home, she could only be coaxed out of her room for Hee Haw or Wild Kingdom, both programs a family affair, with us all having bathed and dressed for bed, the girls' hair wet and long, and us boys with water in our ears and faces red from the hot water. Mother liked Hee Haw the most because of the music, and one of my brothers nudged me when mother started tapping her foot to a performance by Ronnie Milsap. I suppose that's when dad got the idea to put the RCA turntable on installment payments at Sears. It came with headphones, which seemed something a millionaire might own. We had been given strict rules about the turntable; we were only to touch it if one of our parents was nearby, otherwise, it was hands off. In that way, as in all things made covetous, I wanted nothing more than to break the rules.

That purchase started a ritual of sorts; mother would greet us after we got off the school bus and immediately start talking about the records she had bought. Any time money was mentioned, we flinched, knowing there wasn't much of it since we were cash-renters, meaning we farmed the land, raised the livestock, and gave the landlord seventy-five percent of the profits. In exchange, we were allowed to live in the old farmhouse right outside the city limits of Wabash, Indiana, the first electrically lighted city in the world.

"Come on," mother said, taking our little sister's hand while the rest of us dutifully marched toward the house. "You're gonna love this new record by the Statler Brothers." Our two oldest brothers wanted The Who and Dire Straits. Mom wasn't entirely manic, but she was excited to get us to the living room, where we would sit on the floor while she lifted the needle onto a

specific track, smiling, telling us to be quiet and listen. To me, the Statler Brothers sounded like a Halloween band, baritone and silly. For the next hour we listened as she played other songs, narrated their meaning, which I liked, and talked about the Barbara Mandrell album she wanted. That night, two things happened: our oldest brother whispered in a worried voice that we could not afford the albums on top of the RCA installment payments; and after the rest of my siblings had fallen asleep, I crept downstairs.

The RCA record player sat on a veneered table one of our aunts had handed down to our mother. It had two shelves where the albums were leaning inside a cubby. While it was dark, the turntable and speakers were illuminated from the security light rays slanting into the large drafty windows. I stood and stared at the headphones carefully placed on the table. I reached for them, slipped them quickly over my ears, the sounds of the house, the creaks and groans, went silent. I could hear my own breath rushing in my ears. Mother had violated one of her own rules by leaving an album on the turntable. I lifted the needle, hand shaking, and placed it ever so gently onto the first grooves of the record. I sat down slowly behind a rocking chair, tucked my knees to my chest. Some static clicked and the earphones were heavy, and my ears grew hot. Then, a voice talked, more like a poem than a song. It was Roger Miller saying: “He was born one mornin, it was cold, and it was snowin.” I was hooked. To hear a song about a little baby boy who was sickly, and his daddy who sat by his side and rubbed his head and held his hand, it was breathtaking. When the story ended and Vance had grown up and become a man, leaving on the same kind of day he was born (cold and snowin’) I knew I had discovered something though I wouldn’t be able to put words to it until much later. I felt different, as if a path had been shown to me, about art, story, manhood, even if the song was overwrought, saccharine, and truly sappy. I was hooked.

For the next several hours I would stand, careful to keep the headphones from tangling, place the needle back at the beginning of the song, and sit down again, back against the wall. I cried over Vance, saw him scratch Becky's name on his desk, even as Smitty got the girl. When in the last third of the story song, with Vance aged twenty-one, in a bar before he leaves town, and he beats up Smitty for talking rude about Becky, I relished the revenge, the good guy winning. I probably listened to the song nearly fifty times before I was busted. Mother tapped me on my bare foot, smiled, her eyes wild and her dark hair curly. "Get back to bed now," she said, taking the headphones from my ears, Roger Miller crooning about Vance becoming a self-made man.



Two years later, mother had stabilized. While she learned to live with her illness, having less manic episodes, she did not lose her love for music. While Christmases were sometimes meager, she had put on layaway a little guitar and I unwrapped it with glee. It came with three free

lessons, and I was eager to take them at a little music store off the town square in Wabash.

Mother simply dropped me off and I positioned the guitar on my back like I'd seen Johnny Cash do on *Hew Haw*. I walked through the front door, excited and feeling a bit like an outlaw, my hemmed hand-me-down cords rustling from my stocky legs.

A skinny man with porkchop sideburns greeted me. The small space was adorned with all sorts of guitars and banjos on the walls. A glass case with picks and strings was illuminated with fluorescent lighting. I didn't have a pick. I coveted the ones in little plastic baggies, but I had no money. Greg said, "Come on in, Douglas," and he led me to a tiny room with egg crate foam on the walls which I had never seen before. Greg saw me staring. "It's for the acoustics." He recognized my confusion. "That means so the music sounds good."

Greg helped untangle me from the guitar. He got right to teaching, showing me where my fingers should go as I sat in a chair with him nearly drooped over me. He smelled like cinnamon gum and cigarettes, which made me feel at home; my father's Salems and his penchant for Big Red nearly identical to Greg's aroma. For the next half an hour he tried his best to get my body to relax, to coax my fingers into some semblance of agility, but I was stiff, and embarrassed because I could tell I was a challenge for Greg. The first session ended with him playing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, instructing me to listen, but to watch his fingers closely. I stared as hard as I could, but I wanted him to sing the song, not just play it. I wanted words, a story, even if I knew there wasn't much more to it than the little star shining like a diamond in the sky.

Greg helped me with my guitar, gifting me a vinyl case that while used made me proud. He also gave me his turquoise pick. Greg said, "Hey, man, practice those finger placings." Outside, on the curb, I waited for my mother to arrive. When she pulled up, a smile beamed across her face. I got in and she showed me an album she had gotten from K-Mart. While dad had tried to

keep her from spending what little we had, he couldn't make himself rule out the music she loved so much. "I can't wait for us to get home and play this one," she said as she pulled up to a stoplight. I stared at the album in my lap, featuring a face I knew from others mother had bought. John Denver looked more like a father on this one than those at home under the RCA turntable where his face looked like a kid's or a girl's. *Windsong* would replace *Vance* for me in heavy rotation. I decided once we were home, and listening to the album while my siblings and I put on work clothes for chores, bedding down the hogs and closing barn doors for an early frost, that I would try harder during the next two free guitar lessons.

I did not practice as much as pose in the full-length mirror with the guitar. I daydreamed of being on stage at the Honeywell Center in downtown Wabash, my crush there and screaming like I'd seen girls do for Elvis during his television specials. When I did manage to sit down long enough to go over where my fingers were to be placed, my mind drifted to the lyrics I would write, the songs that would go platinum. Before long, I would put the guitar aside and start writing in a little spiral notebook with lined pages, perforated too. The sound of the pencil scratching across the paper was hypnotic. I still have those notebooks.



A week later Greg didn't greet me but was engrossed in a discussion with a kid not much older than me. The two of them were sitting on a sofa near the glass cases, and the kid was tuning an expensive guitar. Greg's face was ruddy, and he seemed odd to me, as if the kid were the teacher. Before long, with Greg nodding encouragement, the kid started playing *Tennessee Flat Top Box* like his fingers were as pliable as noodles. My heart sunk. I couldn't help but tap my foot and stood and listened and watched as Greg even let out a holler. He finally spotted me standing there with my cheap guitar strapped against my back. I felt stockier than ever when a brief, disappointed expression flashed over his face. He told the kid, a boy whose last name was Crews, that he would meet him at the gig that evening.

In the little private room, Greg tried hard again to get me to pick the correct notes to *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. He would watch me, eyes trained on the neck of the guitar, his brow furrowed. He said, "How about you try singing it. I'll do it with you, sometimes that helps." I didn't know the full song, just the first stanza. I opened my mouth and gave it a shout while Greg expertly plucked his big guitar. At the line, *How I wonder what you are*, Greg stopped. "Can you hear the notes?" He performed the opening slowly, but I was only thinking of the words, how I could improve them. Greg should have been paid overtime. For the next hour he labored to get me to recognize notes, a melody, and beat. It was no use. At the end of our session, as I was walking out the door to the car where mother sat no doubt with more records, Greg said, "Hey, you know, a person can have a musical life even if they don't play an instrument or sing." He smiled at me and gave me the peace sign.

The last free lesson was much of the same, my fingers, short and stiff, couldn't make music, though I had practiced much more, the tips sore, the index pad blistered. Greg put his guitar aside and asked that I do the same. "What do you really like doing?" he asked. I liked baby pigs but

knew farming wasn't for me because I often cried when the man who hauled the hogs drove away with our shoats squealing. I picked at the dry skin on my lips as Greg waited patiently. Finally, I was able to say, "Stories." He smiled, patted my knee. "How about writing lyrics?" I nodded, felt a sob coming on, and Greg was wise enough in his young manhood to recognize it. "Tell you, what," he said, "Go home, fiddle around with the guitar, strum it, make up some stories and write down the lines. Then, come by sometime and show me what you got!" Greg's positivity did the trick, and while I couldn't have found the words to say it then, I would discover I was just as easily encouraged as I was discouraged.

In fifth grade, our music teacher, Mrs. Nair, announced there would be try outs for chorus. We would be evaluated on just one verse of a song we were to pick ourselves. I signed up with a classmate named Troy who like me smelled like hay, manure, Ivory soap, and cigarette smoke. We worked as a pair for a week, practicing what we were to sing for the try out. I chose my favorite John Denver song and had my mother cut my hair to look like his, but it ended up parted and feathered, sprayed in place with Aqua-Net, and the result was something akin to the hairstyle of a provincial pimp. Still, I kept trying to sing the opening to *Windsong*, but even I could tell something was askew. I sounded like I was depressed like my mother when I did my best croon about the wind being the whisper of our mother the earth. Troy worked on *Leaving on a Jet Plane*. When I was admitted into the music room at Southwood Elementary, Mrs. Nair nodded at me while her nephew plucked a guitar. I did not wait for any indication on when to begin and the nephew struggled to right me, as I sort of did a spoken word performance poem. Mrs. Nair's nose wrinkled, and she had to keep herself from covering her ears, smiling, then wincing, and finally waving me off and telling me the choir would need boys to place folding chairs on recital evenings. Troy stomped by me a little while later where I sat in the hallway waiting for my

mother. He tossed the sheet music and lyrics to *Leaving on a Jet Plane* in the janitor's rolling trash can.

Our mother went back to work, holding jobs in fast food and grocery stores, and while our family remained locked in a kind of plateau, neither improving nor falling apart, things seemed to make some more sense to me in terms of my attraction to music. I checked out books on songwriting after flipping through the maple card catalogues in the city library; I listened to songs on the RCA turntable and studied the enclosed lyrics of not only Roger Miller, but a whole host of musicians. I tried my hand at writing songs, but they often turned into paragraphs. Still, I wrote in spiral notebooks, erased gently, looked up words in the World Book Dictionary set (two volumes, one for A-K, and another for L-Z) that I could rhyme. By the next year, I felt I had two songs that would impress Greg. One was about a runt piglet that was obviously influenced by Miller's *Vance*, but the other one was about my mother, with a chorus: *She looks to the woods/walnut eyes rainy/she stands on the porch/ her world gone grainy/I want to wash it all away/her frown as frayed as the tattered gown/night comes down, down, down.*

When I stopped by the music store Greg was gone. A new guy with long black hair and a tattoo of Mars on his forearm told me, "He went to live in Denver, my man."



In a magazine I found at school, there were ads in the back about sending your lyrics to a contest. I took a five-dollar bill from my shoebox and filled out the entry form, which asked for the title of the song, the genre, and the songwriter's name. I filled it all in with mother's Bic, putting the typed lyrics and the five-dollar bill in the envelope too. I never heard anything after that, but it would begin in me a sort of lottery mentality when it came to entering writing contests. Somebody had to win, right? Might as well gamble on my own words.

By the time I graduated high school, unsure if I would be accepted into one of Indiana's state college's, I had gotten roughly the same feedback. *Your lyrics are more like poetry, maybe try that.* Since it took very little to discourage me, I left my songwriting behind. I got an undergraduate degree in psychology, got married too young, and had a beautiful baby girl. Then, one night, as I was rocking her to sleep because she was colicky, I had an idea for a story. After I put her down in the crib, I pulled out an old electric typewriter and stayed up late tapping away. All the stories I had listened to on the RCA turntable had settled into me, the beats and pauses, the tiny descriptions of place, person, and love. I wrote nearly all night. It wasn't a great short story, but I had discovered how I could make music, even if it were only me listening. I wrote more, learned more from others, and listened to Americana music over and over, playing the albums on my mother's RCA turntable that was mine now, where I had learned the power of story, of the strum of my broken heart. It would be years before I had a story published, but one day, after I had opened a SASE, there was a hand-written rejection note from an editor. It stated: "Not bad, you have an ear for the music of language." That was all I needed, and I got back to practicing how to sing on the page. My little acoustic guitar sat next to me, forgiving, waiting, and I'd strum it and listen for words.