

Whither Favorites?

Last week, a friend from my early days as a cabin leader (and here we're talking late '80's and early '90's) began putting together a retrospective slideshow for our retiring directors. Most day and resident camps enjoy the end-of-session slideshow tradition of putting photos to music and reminiscing as a group about how much fun the summer was. This special end-of-career slideshow is being designed to highlight several decades of loyal service, but the intent is the same: put photos to music.



Nothing makes you move like your favorite song.

Before ProShow, PowerPoint and iMovie, slideshows required sorting physical transparencies into a circular carousel. Contemporary software speeds things along and offers eye-catching—if not sometimes eye-jarring—transitions, but nothing beats the clarity and color of Kodachrome. However, what I'm most nostalgic about is the music. Perhaps not in the way you would think, though. I don't long for the days of stacks of vinyl records jammed into plastic milk crates or towers of CD jewel cases racked up on the wall. I long for shared favorites—songs we all liked; songs that brought us together in spirit.

When my friend Jon (with whom I wrote *The Summer Camp Handbook*) started pulling together slides for this retirement slideshow, he e-mailed me this question: "Chris, what are the staff's favorite songs from the past seven years or so? I have the oldies but goodies from the '70's, '80's and '90's, but I don't have much from the past decade. What do you suggest?" My reply bothered me: "I don't think the staff in the past decade have *had* any favorite songs. Individual leaders have personal favorites, but I can't think of a *shared* favorites."

I had to reflect on my answer. Really? No shared favorites?

My perception may be mistaken, but I attribute the apparent lack of shared favorite songs to two trends in the past 15 years. The first is the exponential explosion of MP3 files. Music is shared and stored in quantities that are orders of magnitude greater than in previous decades. When I began my career at camp, a solid collection of records was in the neighborhood of 20-60 albums, meaning between 200 and 600 songs. CD collections would routinely blossom into the 100-150 disc range, in part because they were, as the name suggests, compact. These days, someone with fewer than 1000 songs on their mobile device must be my age (45) or older. The norm today—according to *Top News Law*, a legal blog—is 1,750 songs per person, per device, of which half which are (gulp) illegally acquired.

Full disclosure: My stepfather is a copyright lawyer, so I've been indoctrinated from a young age. I don't steal music. I've paid for every single MP3 on my phone. Consequently, I have about 100 songs on it, not 1,750 or more. That would cost a lot of bank. It would also be far too many choices to be practical. Which concludes my first point about the lack of shared favorites: Individual collections of music are so vast that choosing a favorite (or even a set of favorites) is a monumental task. And the statistical

likelihood of having the same favorites as a friend or colleague is microscopic. Or, if you want to be geeky: 1 in 1,750, on average.

I read *Rolling Stone*, so I know that chart-toppers still exist. (Remember the “Billboard Charts”? They still publish those lists each week.) That’s proof positive that shared favorites out there somewhere, just as they always have. But could you honestly say what your staff’s favorite songs were this past summer? It’s harder to answer in the affirmative than ever before.

Composition quantity may be one enemy of shared camp favorites, but there is another, more insidious, force at work: Hating on popularity.

It’s the job of adolescents and young adults to engage in a lot of countercultural posturing. Young people are *supposed* to revise trends. That’s what makes them cooler than us old folks. But I don’t recall ardently despising as many artists when I was a teenager simply *because* they were popular. In the past dozen summers, I’ve overheard a lot of staff quip, “I used to like _____, but now they are too popular.” I even heard one of my lifeguards comment, “I used to like Arcade Fire, but then they ended up on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. How lame is that?”

I’m sure the guys from Arcade Fire didn’t think it was lame to be on the cover of an international music and culture magazine, but when that becomes the expressed reason for not liking them, well...they might think that’s kind of lame. What is cooler than ever, it seems, is to like a musical group or singer no one else has heard of, except maybe for your weird cousin who is doing research on glacial melt in Antarctica. That’s obscure enough to bear, I suppose.

If we live in a world where obscure is fashionable but popular is automatically blasé, then shared favorite songs are an endangered species, if not altogether extinct. Perhaps your camp’s staff actually *did* have a favorite song this summer. If they did, then that’s a wonderful thing. In my estimation, they are less cynical and more cohesive than the average camp staff. For that, you are surely grateful.

I’m not sure what Jon will choose as the representative song from the 2000’s, but I hope that when the outgoing directors’ friends all gather for the retirement party—slideshow and all—we can unite around our shared visual memories, if not our shared melodic ones. At least the older generations of leaders will be humming along with the James Taylor tunes. And that’s not lame at all.

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