

Memory, all alone in the moonlight

BY PETER JONES

Sometimes I'm forgetful.

Yes, I have committed irrelevant music, movie, television and pop culture trivia to my memory ... but sometimes I forget to do the laundry. Sometimes I forget to smell the roses. Sometimes I forget to write this blog.

I was out of town over the weekend, and I happened to be thumbing through my daytimer for some reason. I know how to have a good time.

This was after I had fallen down a narrow, steep flight of stairs at my parents' mountain cabin. I have the bruises, stubbed toe and other bodily injuries to prove it.

But wasn't there something I was supposed to do around the middle of the month ... besides pay last month's mortgage, watch my cholesterol or plan my afterthoughts?

Flash forward, only slightly ... I'm sitting in a Peter Cetera concert, watching the former Chicago singer sail through his adult-contemporary solo catalogue. (Cetera forgot to perform much of his former band's early more-eclectic repertoire.) But once again, I'm thinking, you better get home and start blogging it, buddy!

A few years ago, I didn't even know what a blog was, much less, forget to write, do, or drink one. Times change. And so does my old pal, memory.

I once read a column by someone who for years had been telling a "true" story about how he had met the unknown Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. Years later, the writer had come to wonder if the event had really taken place or if the story had been the product of his imagination -- mating somehow with the collective conscious of others he had met in and around the New York folk scene.

For me, memory has worked the opposite way. In listening to tapes of my days in talk radio (a practice I loathe and find fascinating), I am often surprised to find out that I have interviewed people whom I have no recollection of ever actually talking to.

But there I am ... on tape ... asking questions that clearly show at least some superficial stab at preparation.

More interesting, some radio shows that I had thought were disasters at the time now have a new kind of charm, maybe.

At KBX radio's downtown studios in about 1989, I was host of a weekly entertainment talk show called *Pop Goes the Culture*. One day, Peter Boyles offered up a singer-songwriter he said was funny and talented.

I took Peter at his word and booked the dude.

Then, I get a tape of this singer ... Hmmm, now I'm not so sure.

Can I really spend an hour with a guy who sings ... off key, no less ... songs about dogs you don't pet for fear that the dog might ... uh ... get the wrong idea?

But I've already booked him, and I don't really feel like canceling. Takes effort and I'm too nice. He seemed like a nice guy, too.

Suddenly, the weekend producer has a solution ... not the perfect solution, but any port in a storm. Her friend is a very talented and quick-witted comic actress ... and she has recently entered the phone-sex industry! Perhaps if we put the two on together ... for a mix of conversation, live music and commercials ... we might fill the whole hour painlessly! Then, go home. Miller time!

But then we're on the air.

The singer's humor is obscure.

He doesn't seem to get my stabs at self-deprecating humor ... or does he? The awkward moments of silence are deafening. The actress plays straight man ... or straight lady. She has a wry, wicked sense of humor. She's trying, awkwardly ... but is the singer getting any of this? Her timing is off. Nothing is working.

During a commercial, the producer asks me if everything is okay.

"Yeah, just fine," I lie.

About three days later, the hour from hell is finally over. I scurry out of the studio for a beer ... or three. I grab the tape from the board operator, but I can't muster the strength, courage or humility to actually listen to it. So I throw it, literally, in a box with the rest of my tapes ... and, figuratively, with the rest of my life's bad memories.

Flash forward: 2000 or so. I'm going through my old radio tapes, dubbing the stuff worth preserving onto CDs. I've made my way through Wolfman Jack, Vladimir Posner and Charles Schlulz, among many others.

And there it is ... staring me in the face ... the tape of my worst hour ever on talk radio. It's in my hands. Do I dare listen? Could any good come from preserving this dreadful hour that had lived in the infamy of memory for two decades?

The waste basket is right over there. It'd be so easy to just ...

But the devil gets the best of me. I slip in the aging cassette, tentatively. Am I destined to replay my agony? Will I relive the tortuous hour, again, in real time?

Play.

Hmmm. OK, I'm waiting.

This is goofy. It's got one or two awkward moments, but it's not *that* bad.

In fact, it's almost akin to humor. The singer isn't *that* bad. And the actress did a nice job filling in the slack. And, by golly, I was kind of quick-witted.

By the end of the hour, I (circa 2000) was laughing almost hysterically at what I was hearing, and more important, not hearing. It was an *almost* beautiful moment.

It was sort of like three people with no business interacting suddenly being thrust together in a desolate train station, forced to make conversation, fight the boredom, and thus discovering a connection that they didn't know they had.

For me, it took 20 years. (Somewhere along the line, I heard that the singer and actress had coffee together after the show and became friends, though I never saw either again and have no idea if that denouement is the product of a wishful memory.)

In any case, that CD now sits on my shelf, one of the most beloved moments in the archives. It is a testament to the fallacy of memory and the subjectivity of emotion and firsthand experience.

Had that hour of my life not been recorded, my "memory" of it would be among the most achingly uncomfortable of my radio career ... and even my life, of that era.

The whole thing made me wonder about my other memories ... the ones not recorded for posterity or embarrassment. The rejections, the schoolyard taunts, the emotional crises. Maybe none of it was as bad as my mind had insisted it was.

Maybe the bad concerts weren't so awful either

Maybe I didn't "forget" to do my blog at all.

Maybe it was a way to get me to rethink my "memory" again ... and revisit those 60 minutes that changed my mind two decades after the fact

Here's the rub: I don't ever want to listen to that CD again. What if my memory of listening to it 10 years ago was all wrong?

One thing is certain about memory, though.

I forgot to write this blog.

Now I remember, I think.