

Fascinating Asshole

*How I learned to love Frank
Sinatra*

Jim Cory

I snap it on.

I wait.

The silence becomes a purr, the purr a buzz, the buzz transformed in an instant to . . . voices.

With a safecracker's nimble precision, I adjust the dial.

Discovering AM radio at age ten was, I later realized, somewhat like stumbling on love. It's yours, you possess it, and no matter how lousy the day turns out, it's there, waiting.

And, as is the case with love, this prompts new behaviors even as life takes on additional dimensions. Here, for instance, was life Before Radio:

"It's 9:30, why aren't you in bed?"

"Can't I just stay up?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"No!"

"Please?"

"I'm not going to argue with you. GET UP THERE NOW!"

This is life After Radio:

"It's 7:15."

"So?"

"Whuddayamean, 'so'? Why are you going to bed?"

Shrug.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm tired."

"Tired?" (Eyes roll.) "From what?"

Door shut, pillows fluffed and piled against headboard, thumb-shaped orangey bulbs aglow on the nightstand, I await the evening's reverie. Having developed a taste for girl groups such as The Shire-

lles and The Dixie Cups, and the British Invasion bands from The Beatles to The Dave Clark Five and Herman's Hermits, I had found my way to the source.

It's the summer of 1964 and the hits just keep on comin', lofted by hyperkinetic DJs including Murray the K, Cousin Brucie, and 'Big Dan' Ingram. Fifteen or twenty of them man the three big rock 'n' roll stations out of New York (WINS, WABC, WMCA). The jocks are gods and seem to know it. Equipped with psychic powers, as gods, however minor, must be, they know exactly what I want to hear when I want to hear it. How? No idea. Tele-something-or-other.
Click

Birds, sing out of tune,
and rain clouds hide the moon . . .

Oh my God! It's Peter and Gordon warbling "World Without Love," their first big hit. On the TV shows *Shindig* or *Hullabaloo* they look like a couple of guys in high school. Are they? Maybe. I imagine my older sisters bringing them home and my father, easy in his easy chair, lowering the afternoon paper to scowl at their flouncy sleeves and bangs (big back then), telegraphing his disapproval in monosyllables.

Click:

Don't let the sun catch you crying
alone, wo wo wo . . .

Now it's Gerry and the Pacemakers, with this winsome bit of melancholy—their breakthrough single, "Don't Let The Sun Catch You Crying"—to remind me that even though I've never been in love (and won't chance upon it for another dozen years), I surely will be at some point, and that this one-syllable emotion contains its own moist tenderness, its own blind pain, a thought further articulated by, for instance—*click!*—Gene Pitney in whose voice, it seems, a stray

sheep bleats, awaiting some shepherd's rescue:

It hurts to be in love,
day and night, night and day . . .

The hit list, endlessly refreshed, mixes multiple styles. This was diversity before anyone except biologists used the term. Besides the British Invasion there's Motown, Surf Rock, Folk Rock, Rhythm and Blues, plus assorted hybrids and outliers, along with occasional hits by good ol' boys such as Roger Miller or Roy Orbison (note: not to compare them). However various, it's all of a piece. How, I wondered, had I stumbled into this thicket of bliss? It was a miracle far surpassing anything the nuns at St. Cecilia's could conjure.

I mouthed, memorized and occasionally even performed these ditties (white t-shirt, flannel pajama bottoms, cracked 12-inch ruler for a mike, the vertical mirror on the closet door a stand-in for future adoring throngs). The brain becomes a sponge, absorbing entire catalogs of lyrics. How, I wonder from the vantage of a time in life when I'm lucky to remember what I did last weekend, was this possible?

It wasn't so much music as some perfectly calibrated emotion spooling out as sound. Sorrow and longing, send-ups and put-downs, triumph and recrimination ("My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble..."), most of it snatched from desire's bottomless bag of tricks. It promised a world of noble feeling, one no doubt waiting just beyond puberty's door.

"Rock 'n' roll," *Shindig* producer Jack Good told the *New York Times* in 1965, "if it is anything, is pure joy in sound."

Boy, did he get that right.

The only shadow thrown across an evening's utopia was Frank Sinatra's. Well before I ever heard Frank Sinatra sing I knew who he was. You couldn't watch TV or go to the movies and not know. Cavanagh fedora, sport coat, open shirt, the inevitably tentative smile of

someone who doesn't trust his own moods, Frank was in charge, the "Chairman of the Board" (Asshole Nickname #1). He reminded me of the guy who gives you grief when you go back for seconds at the parish pancake breakfast. ("What's the matter, your parents can't afford to feed you?")

Reports of boorish behavior keep him in the headlines. Frank, buddying up to Chicago Mafiosi San Giancana. Frank, furious when the Kennedys, weighing the political consequences of his Mob ties, drop him immediately prior to a presidential visit to his Las Vegas estate. (He gets off the phone and, in a frenzy, takes a sledgehammer to the helipad where the president would've landed.) Frank, insulting a reporter in Australia. (He calls her, among other things, "a two-bit whore.")

How is it possible to be this rich, this famous, and this pissed off?

And then there's his politics.

After the Kennedys stiff him, Sinatra swings to the right, endorsing the vile Nixon in the 1972 election. Before the decade is out he's donating \$4 million to Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign, the same Saint Ronnie who loathes hippies, commies and queers; who, on being elected, soon sets out to hobble American labor unions by busting the air traffic controllers strike.

Who in his right mind would call this person an artist?

Artists have sensitivity. Frank Sinatra is emotionally clueless.

Artists are doyens of taste. Frank Sinatra has no class, no couth, no culture.

His is the sort of persona you equate with junior-high levels of maturity.

He's the original carrier in a country where Narcissistic Personality Disorder is now a raging epidemic.

His empathy gauge registers zero.

He combines these traits with a relentless need to dominate whatever room he's in or whatever person he's with, physically if he can get away with it.

Sinatra biographer James Kaplan has Joe Smith, head of

Warner-Reprise, noting that Frank Sinatra hated “Strangers in the Night” because “he thought it was about two fags in a bar!”

It’s hard enough to loathe the art and like the person, but is it even possible to loathe the person and like the art?

Wagner fans have wrestled with that question for years. How to enjoy something as timeless and elevated as the prelude to Act 1 of *Parsifal*—a work that exists on the same level as anything Michelangelo or Da Vinci produced—knowing the composition issued from the same pen that wrote “Judaism in Music,” which Wikipedia describes as a “landmark in the history of German anti-Semitism?” I don’t even question it when Jewish friends tell me they can’t get past Wagner’s politics. (His music is “unofficially but effectively banned in Israel,” according to the magazine *Tablet*.) There comes a point where the behavior and/or publicly expressed views of certain artists compel disconnection from the work. It’s not a logical decision, a position built on a structure of facts set sturdily in place. It’s an emotional one. The body makes it. The thinking part of your brain can mull it over all you want, but some other, deeper, truer set of facts has already settled the matter.

The short answer is: perhaps, but it’s not easy.

Especially if you happen to know the person.

For about a decade I was friendly with someone I’ll call Poet X. I admired his work and promoted it to editors and publishers. But the work, as good as it was and is, earned him little. Poet X was scraping by. At my suggestion, we agreed I’d pay him to feed my cats when I went out of town. I gave Poet X a house key.

The arrangement went on for a year. One day, a few weeks after I’d come back from a trip, I went to retrieve a book by a certain San Francisco writer of fiction and poetry. It was a book I read again and again. Poet X and I had shared our admiration for the writer, and for this book particularly, in multiple conversations. My copy was a first edition I’d been lucky enough to find in a Chicago bookstore that was closing.

Now the book wasn't there.

Since I've always been prone to absent-mindedness, I assumed I'd misplaced it. Sooner or later it'd turn up. Meanwhile, on the phone, Poet X references the book and author repeatedly. He's planning an outdoor reading series where people will come and read from the work of a single writer. He mentions this particular San Francisco writer of fiction and poetry. Could I bring the book and read from it, he asks? He asks again. He asks three or four times.

Not only am I absent-minded, I'm often naïve. These no doubt belong to the same family of personality traits. The challenge lies not in overcoming naivete—which I define as the notion that all people are working off an identical moral standard—but in keeping it from becoming its opposite, which is cynicism.

I wondered why Poet X kept referring to the book. Meanwhile other volumes came up missing. For instance, from its publisher I'd received four hardbound copies of the selected poems of another California poet in a limited edition. Each signed by the author. These were stashed in a cabinet. I decided I didn't need all four and offered one to a friend, who was also a friend of Poet X. When I went to retrieve it, there were only two in the cabinet. What the hell, I would give it to him anyway.

"Oh," he said, flipping it open at a café table, "Poet X has this book."

After that, it became impossible for me to read Poet X. My mind might've wanted to, for the pleasure formerly afforded by his lines, but the spirit wouldn't allow it. On a logical level, you might see it this way: if his actions proved him so completely devoid of basic honesty, what kind of integrity could the poems have?

That point could be debated. But still, I lost all interest in anything he was writing. A few years later he sent me a chapbook. When I flipped it open, the lines may as well have been written in Tajik.

My Sinatra aversion was born at around 8:30 one night in 1965.

Age eleven. One pillow wedged between my knees, another under

my back, the third clutched to my chest, I'm swinging right to left, back and forth, in continuous motion, as WABC counts down the hits. Suddenly there's this:

When I was seventeen, it was very good year
It was a very good year
For small town girls
And soft summer nights . . .

I flung the pillows off and sat up. What? Who?
In six notes, I knew.

It struck me as the kind of voice suitable for the soundtrack of a movie in which, say, Rock Hudson, Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart or similar is wooing that living tribute to frosted hair, Doris Day, through various absurd misunderstandings that end, of course, in the ultimate misunderstanding: a marriage proposal.

But will someone please explain what Frank Sinatra is doing on this radio station? Why is Cousin Brucie touting this, this, this . . . interloper?

Rock stations love hurling the occasional curve ball at listeners. ("Paul is dead.") They artfully mix continuity with surprise. It's part of their game. How else explain Dean Martin (cutting up while he's pretending to be tipsy, an act that always works) vaulting up the charts with irresistible Id-candy like "Everybody Loves Somebody?" Take it in stride. Maybe even learn to like it, because the things you have to learn to like you end up liking better. On TV, Dean projects a comedic charm Frank Sinatra must've envied. Dean's a lout one sheet to the wind, Sinatra's a guy who could blow any minute. Whatever you do, don't get in his way.

I dismiss his invasion of the airwaves as a freak occurrence.

But soon, Ol' Blue Eyes (Asshole Nickname #2) is back. Sinatra had a dozen solid hits in the '60s and 1966 was a banner year with "That's Life" and "Strangers in the Night" all over the air. You could crawl under a boulder in the woods and still not escape that voice.

In defense, I developed the Sinatra Lunge. Quicker than a pissed-off rattler, my arm shoots for the tuning dial. In three seconds, tops, Frank's outta there.

Occasionally I ruminate on the sordid fact of his presence.

Sinatra wasn't on the air out of some kind of affinity for rock 'n' roll. Far from it. To him, the "bulk of rock 'n' roll," (see October, 1957 interview with Paris magazine *Western World*) is "the most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear." Ten years on, his views hadn't much changed. For instance, he despises The Doors, regards their music as "ugly and degenerate." Martin Chilton, in *The Telegraph* ("Frank Sinatra and his violent temper") describes the singer driving in California one night when "Light My Fire" comes on the radio. Frank, doing a lunge of his own, pops the button to change channels but—sonuvabitch!—the next station's playing "Light My Fire," at which point the Chairman "stopped the car and smashed the radio to bits with his shoes."

All this becomes beside the point around 1968, when radio undergoes a revolution, initiated by an FCC ruling that forbids AM stations from simulcasting on FM. FM radio stations transform into a world separate and apart, a place for the burgeoning counterculture. Singles are passé. Thanks to *Sergeant Pepper's* and *Blonde on Blonde*, LPs are what matter now. With long-playing songs, FM radio finds a late-night niche and a longhaired audience. Hash-addled DJs slap an album on the turntable and zone for a half-hour.

And where's Swoonatra (Asshole Nickname #3) in all this? Exactly nowhere. Imagine squeezing Frank Sinatra between "In a Gadda Davida" and "Hey Jude"? Besides, no one I knew in the demi-monde of pot smoking and peacenik politics (or later in gay Bohemia) cared about, or even knew what Frank Sinatra was singing or where he was performing.

And, because laziness licenses ignorance and vice versa, I assumed, for a long time, that that was a universal point of view.

What's more, experience of shared tastes tends to buttress rather than challenge assumptions.

For instance, while touring the Art Institute of Chicago sometime in the '90s I find myself squinting into the glass box containing an earthenware sculpture of a horse from the Tang Dynasty, circa 800 AD. An older gentleman with a stained blue raincoat slung across his forearm is suddenly standing at my side. What, he wants to know, do I think about the horse?

I tell him it's interesting, which is another way to say I have no idea.

Nodding, he explains that the object was made for a tomb, that the lead in the glazing was highly toxic. He begins to hold forth on balance and proportion.

I grunt.

He offers to conduct me on a personal tour of the building. Partial to brilliant maniacs, I agree.

For the next two hours, Ed shares various uncanny insights regarding roughly a dozen and a half pictures, pieces of furniture, and sculpture. Toward the end of our sojourn we come on Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks." It's probably the most famous painting in the Art Institute. Isn't it, I inquire, Hopper's last picture?

A frown. No, Ed explains. Hopper's last picture treated the subject of theater clowns.

I tell him I'm partial to Hopper and had seen many, but not that one.

"Of course not!" His eyes narrow, the chin lifts a centimeter or two. Gallery visitors now wantonly eavesdropping. "Do you know why?"

I shake my head.

"Frank Sinatra owns it!" Glances back and forth across the room.

"That asshole," he says.

Ed takes a deep breath.

"He bought it," he clears his throat, "for his clown collection."

I thought the view of Sinatra as an entitled, abrasive jerk was common coin until the day I encountered a passel of Sinatra fans and realized there's way more of them than I'd suspected.

Directly across the street from a semi-decrepit house I bought on South 7th Street in Philadelphia stood a building in even greater disrepair, constructed sometime between 1890 and the '20s. A sign in the window reads: Second Ward Republican Club.

Its owner, Charles Santore, former president of the municipal workers union, by then in his early 90s, is standing out front one morning when I return from the supermarket. I park and start unloading the trunk.

"Can I help?"

I beg off, but when I come back for the last two sacks Charlie invites me into the club. In ten years it'll be bulldozed and replaced by million dollar townhouses with gated parking. But at the moment a half-dozen older gentlemen are inside—most ex-boxers—playing cards. One asks if I want to see some card tricks. I pull up a chair and, as I follow the various sleights-of-hand, two black-and-white photos stare down from the wall. One is former mayor Frank Rizzo, the other is Frank Sinatra.

Frank Sinatra was a god in South Philly, which consisted, into the '90s, of rowhouse neighborhoods where people one or two generations removed from their Italian immigrant forebears lived. "A working class hero is something to be," John Lennon wrote. Frank Sinatra was one. Every Sunday for three hours, DJ Sid Mark airs a program called "The Sounds of Sinatra." It's all Sinatra all the time, and the program, authorized by Sinatra, is picked up by at least 100 radio stations coast-to-coast.

If I'd actually followed his career, I would've known that La Voz (Asshole Nickname #4) never stopped touring or performing. In Philadelphia, his preferred venue was Palumbo's, a nightclub a block from the Italian Market and about six or so blocks from my apartment then. But no one I knew at the time would've suggested going to Palumbo's to catch a Sinatra show. Why not cuddle with denning

bears or skydive into volcanos?

Sometimes it's possible for music lovers to leap from one genre to something altogether different. It doesn't happen all the time, but it happens. The antennae synced to a discerning intellect will sooner or later pick up signals constituting proof of inherent artistic quality in any musical genre, familiar or not. You need two things: an open mind and a knack for concentrated listening.

Also, you have to be interested. And to be interested, you have to be curious.

Propelled unconsciously toward slow-motion crossover in increments: from late '60s Rolling Stones to B.B. King/Muddy Waters/Big Bill Broonzy blues to bluesy jazz performers à la Ben Webster, Count Basie et al., and on to Charlie Parker bop and then post-bop.

Sometime in the '70s an article in the *Village Voice* on the keyboard eccentricities of Cecil Taylor activates a nascent interest in jazz piano. Once planted, the seed extends tendrils in the direction of other instruments—saxophone and trumpet, then bass and trombone. In the middle of all that, someone or something—Billie Holiday is the likely culprit—results in the chance stumble into/onto jazz singing.

And jazz singing rapidly morphs from thrill to obsession. To hear them all and to hear them live, a must: Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Betty Carter, Blossom Dearie, Abbey Lincoln, Cassandra Wilson, Shirley Horn, Mose Allison, Jimmy Scott, Joe Williams. More, but I forget. In odd moments, I slap myself for having passed on the opportunity to hear Carmen McCrae and Peggy Lee in nightclub venues.

Frank Sinatra? Not on this radar.

Then a book arrives for review called *Jazz Singing*. Author: Will Friedwald. In 25 years of reviewing books for newspapers, this is the only one that still sits on my shelves. Brimming with anecdote and

information—the sort that know-nothings dismiss as “trivia”—Friedwald’s book blends a fan’s passion with the technician’s analytical skills to explain how singers such as Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday became the artists they were and are. I move chapter to chapter in a happy trance. Everything confirmed or explained. Then I got to the one called “Sinatra!”

That chapter stopped me like a slap. There was no way Frank Sinatra would be mentioned, let alone discussed, in the review. I’d simply skip the chapter.

The first paragraph, of course, proves irresistible. Three minutes later, I’m on the second page, where I encounter this: “Children of the last few decades risk growing up thinking of him more as a political figure than a musical one.”

That seems plausible.

Twelve long paragraphs in: “In picking out songs for his recording schedule, Sinatra codified the basic repertoire of adult popular music.”

So that’s who did it.

But in the face of such storied musical accomplishment there’s Frank, the man, the asshole. How get around that?

Friedwald acknowledges and explains, even excuses, Sinatra’s rabid egotism by pointing out that the singer had transformed this defect into an aesthetic strength, to wit: “...so much of what he sings about is himself, and he doesn’t try to hide his arrogance but instead makes it part of his performance.” Further, he writes: “Sinatra arouses our anger and our passion by expressing his own.”

Maybe, but I still wasn’t at the point where I felt a serious challenge had been thrown down. Then I encountered this sentence in Friedwald’s discussion of the albums on which Sinatra collaborated with conductor/arranger Nelson Riddle: “It’s the same feeling you get from Shakespeare: There’s no death, as Howard Dietz once said, like you get in *Macbeth*, but *Only the Lonely* is at least as profoundly moving an experience of romance undercut by tragedy as *Romeo and Juliet*, while *Songs for Swingin’ Lovers* and *A Swingin’ Affair*

balances feel-good machismo with erotic tenderness as effectively as *Henry V.*”

C'mon, I thought, you can't be serious? Two days later I'm exiting the record store with a bag of CDs.

Who hasn't at some point seen a trusted friend become a treacherous enemy? Nothing deflates, or empowers, quite like betrayal. Now imagine the exact opposite. You're thrust into circumstances where someone you loathe is revealed as a different and more sympathetic figure. You ask yourself: How could I have been this wrong? How could I have so completely misunderstood his motives, misread his intentions, and judged his actions so harshly in the absence of evidence?

You end up befriending this person.

In a similar way, I came to acknowledge the artistic validity of Frank Sinatra. The first hunk chipped from that raft of calcified prejudice in the brain was the notion that this singer interprets everything the same way (either because he's lazy or his talent is limited). “That's Life!” sounds like “Strangers in the Night” which sounds like “Summer Wind” which sounds like “Something Stupid.” But . . . popping *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* into the CD player made two things clear: 1) the sound is the same because that's his voice and, 2) a strategy underlies his every inflection.

The sound is often relaxed, but every fraction of every second is thought through, the product of many choices considered and discarded. I think: could I actually have convinced myself that this perfectionist—consider the famous twenty-two late-night takes to get “I've Got You Under My Skin” the way he wanted it—was coasting on his name and intellectually lazy?

And then there's the tone. Trying to describe it is like trying to describe rare wine. You could toss adjectives at it— suave, earnest, authoritative, vulnerable, butch—and still fall short of anything accurate. A friend says that Sinatra songs strike him as just so many post-coital cigarette breaks. You can see why someone would think

that since the songs we most closely associate with Sinatra are imported from the Great American Songbook and so much of what's there is about love. Those songs nail down just about every which way love arises, flourishes and fails. And Sinatra sings them in a way that signals he knows what they're about and that—he knows—you do too. It's a sly way of requesting your confidence, of seducing your engagement. It sounds deceptively casual until the instant it morphs into something more earnest. As verse piles on verse, for example, "I've Got You Under My Skin" measures out its mix of ardor and fatalism in ever larger doses.

But what anyone could agree with is that Sinatra's sound, his vocal tone, carries the authority of experience. That of course is a word with many definitions, but dictionary.com defines it as: "the totality of the cognitions given by perception; all that is perceived, understood, and remembered." It is there in the words but the tone itself is ineffable, beyond words. If you know it, you hear it. If you don't, you don't.

Once I really listened to Sinatra I was able to step inside the spirit of his singing. His best songs have this in common with much great art: they're both familiar and strange. They both comfort and disquiet. His approach seems so unaffected that sometimes I wondered if he was talking or singing, and resented it, but it occurred to me after a while that those two activities are not mutually exclusive and that this happens constantly in opera, a genre with which he was on intimate terms.

Here is a style largely free of embellishment or effects (imagine Frank Sinatra scat singing, ouch!) the point of which is to put the song first, the singer second, but which by seemingly doing that accomplishes the opposite. A lot like a card trick, when you think about it. And ingenious. How else do so many Sinatra interpretations top the list of American popular songs that have been covered and recorded by hundreds of people?

The strange thing that results—strange because I never would have expected it—is the pleasure listening to Frank Sinatra's music

gives me. Like all aesthetic pleasure, it's involuntary. In the beginning I neither desire nor anticipate it. It just happens. A discovery, much like rock 'n' roll at age ten, though, in this case, not the product of lucky circumstances (that place, that time). This time it's the result of being willing to do the work necessary to change my own mind.

One September weekend in 2015, the Pope arrived in Philadelphia.

The city closed its streets to vehicular traffic. Maps in hand, pilgrims wandered our public spaces. As many as a million people gathered on the Parkway, in front of the Art Museum, to hear His Eminence say Mass. And while the town shut down, I withdrew to my apartment and for two days played, with undiminished pleasure, the same eight Sinatra albums.

Late discoveries may be the best discoveries. They prove that that repository of curiosity and awe within remains somehow intact. And once I was hooked I couldn't shake him. I finally figured out why. Listening to The Supremes or the British Invasion bands remains a guilty pleasure, one freighted with the double risk of sentimentality and burnout. Is *Herman's Hermits Greatest Hits* playing right now because it's great music, or because I'm trying to crawl back into the pillow-piled bed of childhood? With the Beatles the answer is unambiguous, but I limit my Beatles listening to a few days a year, rather than risk growing indifferent to songs I've heard, now, thousands of times.

Sinatra has more staying power.

What are you working on, a visitor asks, and when I tell him he fixes me with the look a mirror might have thrown back had someone else asked me the same question at, say, age 30.

"Frank Sinatra?"

We pay a price for aesthetic stubbornness. Sometimes it's a big one. In this case the price consists of all the opportunities to hear this artist in that most perfect performance venue, the nightclub, which I forfeited.

One July evening some years back I'm driving to Cape Cod. By the time I get to the Mass Pike, it's 2:45 a.m. There's not another car on the road. Suddenly I'm hungry. Then, tired. Now I feel overwhelmed in the way that everything suddenly seems meaningless or unimportant with no discernable catalyst for said feeling. I've been in these situations before—red-eye driving—and you at some point run the risk of succumbing to hallucination.

I pop *Only The Lonely* into the CD player. The box features the album's original cover art. Sinatra, as Pagliacci, the tragic clown. The artist who drew it won a Grammy. It's the last of the Riddle collaborations and different, deeper, more somber, than the others.

Desire, the verb, is about not having something. Desire, the noun, is a spiritual state. On *Only the Lonely*, recorded in three days, desire's come and gone. The singer recorded this album, his favorite among the Riddle collaborations, in the aftermath of his divorce from Ava Gardner. Frank Sinatra was literally out of his mind about Ava Gardner.

I crack first the right back window, then the left. Air pours in. Tires roar across asphalt. The world is noise. Our lives are noise. There is noise and there is music. I twist the knob as loud as it will go. No lights ahead or behind.

In a minute there's a lump in my throat, a sensation I haven't visited since fifth grade. How do great singers do this? Thank God they do and thank God there's no one else in this car.

If you love an artist instantly, it's like any other kind of love at first sight: turn the hourglass upside down and wait. Whatever is great mixes positive and negative elements. These are necessarily held in balance and out of that balance there arises a tension always present, always felt. Immediate worship only means you've blinded yourself to the negative that's surely there; that you see only what shines, what's colorful, what soothes, and when that light goes out or the tune dies away, as it will, you're left questioning your taste, your judgment, your self. If your attention is directed only toward the

dark side, toward what's negative—in other words if you instantly dismiss—you'll fail to see, or more importantly, to feel, what might have changed who you are or where you are.

Great artists speak for everyone. It's one of several things that make them great. They don't have to be great people. Often they aren't. What they have to have is the ability to awaken what's great—sublime, generous—in each of us. The next time you sit in a concert hall or any musical venue, ask yourself why you're even there, why you've paid all that money to place your body and mind in that space at that time, amidst the manifold distractions attendant to any human gathering. Wouldn't you rather be watching television, reading or having sex? Wouldn't playing tennis or bird watching be a hell of a lot more fun? But you're there to find what you already know exists, something that's part of you, the best part, and art, especially the greatest art—music—is only a way to find it.