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Music That Fuels a Family

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Brooke Woodard

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Abstract

This is part of a panel presentation about music from home. An essay about music through different generations and how the music from each generation carries on to the next. Simple things like dancing in the kitchen have roots deeper in the ground than one would think. Even if the religious and folk music has fizzled out, even if no one in the family can play the banjo anymore, even if the family that has started the musical traditions are no longer here...the music that fuels the family is still alive and well, spilling through each generation to come.

My whole life, my family and I have always enjoyed music together. We would sing and dance in the kitchen while cooking, usually making a mess. Around the holidays, when all of my extended family gets together, we always sing and dance while preparing dinner, usually to Christmas songs around the holidays. My sister and I sing and dance together whenever we get the chance, including in public (like randomly in a supermarket), where we likely embarrass ourselves. Heck, I even taught some of my teammates how to line dance. I had always wondered how the singing and dancing in the kitchen tradition began, as my maternal grandmother would also always sing and dance with us. So, I decided to interview my grandmother, Robin, about our family and how we got our musical traditions. Turns out, her parents were even more musical than she was, and our love of music stems back to them.

First, a little background about my great-grandparents. My great-grandfather, George, was born in America, but his parents were from Scotland. When he was growing up, his parents would sing traditional Scottish songs, and even play the bagpipes. To this day, we still have my great-grandfather's kilt (and I am fairly certain that we have his father's old bagpipes somewhere). By the time George was eighteen, he was drafted to fight in WWII. Since he was so talented in learning languages, he quickly became a translator, which was an extremely dangerous job. He had to help interrogate and even spy on the Nazis. What got him through it was telling himself that he had to get home to his wife, Marilyn. By the end of the war, he was fluent in German and Mandarin, as well as having a wealth of knowledge in French and Spanish. After the war, George came home to his wife, Marilyn, and they had children.

My great-grandmother, Marilyn, on the other hand, had a family that was from Norway. So many of Marilyn's habits and traditions have a Norwegian background, including the loving and playing of folk music, often with religious influence. Marilyn loved to sing and dance, and most importantly, play the banjo. These traditions only grew once she had children with George.

My grandmother, Robin, recalls setting the dinner table with her brother Scott as kids, but it was never in silence. Marilyn would play the banjo, and George would sing at the top of his lungs, in one of the many languages he spoke (I guess it was whatever he was feeling that day). Marilyn would play a variety of songs including religious songs and hymns, German songs that George taught her, and what Robin and Scott describe as "homemade songs," which were songs that she made up on the spot, sometimes sweet, and sometimes funny. George and Marilyn's love for each other was well represented in these musical sessions, as they sang about their love for each other, and would even change the lyrics in the songs to describe one another. At the time, my grandmother thought it was embarrassing, but now she realizes how much they really loved each other, and she would do anything to hear one of their songs again. Before George and Scott would leave the house, Marilyn would force Robin to sing with her. She would even sit outside of the bathroom when Robin was taking a bath and yell "Sing, Robbie!" quite literally cornering her into singing with her. Unfortunately, Scott and Robin do not have much recollection of these songs, so the specific songs have not been passed down, but the love for music sure has been.

Marilyn passed away at a young age from cancer, but George lived a very long life, outliving three wives. When George passed, his funeral was very ceremonial, as it was both a traditional Scottish funeral and a military funeral. There were men there in kilts who played the bagpipes, as well as military men who presented my grandmother with a flag. After his funeral, the family decided to celebrate his life in the most "George" way possible, they drank. I was only thirteen at the time, so I just sat back and watched as everyone else pounded drinks at a Scottish pub. Outside on the patio, there was a Scottish band, playing and singing Scottish songs. During a break in their playing, my aunt told the band about our situation. They gave their condolences and offered to play somber music that would honor his life, but that's not what he would have wanted. She told them to play songs that we could dance to, the perfect tribute. Everyone in my family danced that day, even the stubborn ones who usually do not. We even danced with the youngest members of our family, who were still figuring out how to walk. We danced, we sang, we cried, but most importantly, we celebrated his life the best way we knew how. With music and with love.

George passed away at 98 years old, which gave me the amazing opportunity to meet him and get to know him. Although I only really knew him as an old man, he inspired me in so many ways. He was the reason I decided to start taking German classes. He was also the reason I decided to start learning the ukulele. He spoke so highly of Marilyn, his first wife, who was so musically talented, that I wanted to keep that part of the family alive if I could, as most of my family members do not play an instrument.

I figured that the ukulele could be a good instrument to learn basics on, then I could attempt to find a banjo and learn to play later.

After George's passing, my grandmother gave me one of Marilyn's banjos that she found at his house since I am one of the only people in the family who has an interest in musical instruments. It was in desperate need of love and repairs, and at the time, I was still just dipping my toes in the water with my ukulele. My grandmother also knows how much I enjoy writing, so she gave me all of the letters that George and Marilyn sent back and forth while he was away at war, in hopes that I could make a story out of them. I have tried and tried, but no matter what I did with them, or what approach I took, I just never felt like I could capture their life and their love the right way. After interviewing my grandmother, I think that I may have a new approach to these letters. I want to revisit the letters and get the banjo restrung. I will teach myself to play the banjo and write a song with the letters. I am not particularly musically inclined. But I would like to think my writing has some backbone to it, so if I can get my words to come off my pen in the right way, I would hope that I could finally create something that captures who my great grandparents are and how much they loved each other.

My entire family misses my great-grandfather desperately, and though most of us did not get a chance to meet Marilyn, we all can feel a strong connection with her still even though we have never spoken to her. Through my great-grandfather, and through music.