

Birds and Beetles

by **Rick Bailey**

I'm reading a *New Yorker* article about Paul McCartney at the breakfast table one morning. At the top of the page there's a black and white photo of him and John Lennon, circa 1965. It's the year, the caption tells us, of *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*.

My wife and I are leaving for Italy in a week. I've been downloading stuff to my Kindle to read while we're away. I've got enough to last me quite a while, some novels (a few trashy ones, a few edifying ones), Clive James' *Poetry Notebook*, a bunch of articles from the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New Republic*. (I guess I'm keeping it New this spring.) When language fatigue sets in over there, and I know it will, with the constant strain of trying to listen very fast to decode flights of Italian, it's a pleasure to lie down in silence and read in my own language.

"Photo by David Bailey," I say to my wife. Our son's name. "How about that?"

"What?"

"This article about Paul McCartney. It has a photo by David Bailey."

Hmmm.

I give her a minute, then ask, "Who's your favorite Beatle?"

"Don't start."

She's reading a book called *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth Century Mediterranean World*. The bibliography is forty pages. Good lord.

"Are you taking that thing on the plane?"

"Maybe." She pushes a small taste of eggs onto her espresso spoon.

"It's a brick."

"Jesuits," she says. "I love the Jesuits."

I hum a few bars of “When I’m Sixty-Four.” Two pals and I turn sixty-four within a few months of each other this year. I’ve suggested, more than a few times, that we should have a “when I’m sixty-four party” sometime this summer, to celebrate ourselves.

Later this day I will drive ninety minutes north to visit my old friend Brian. His caretaker Sheila has told me he’s not quite himself. Listening to music in the car, piped from my iPhone into the radio, I make a mental note of oldies I’d like to play for him. “I’ve Got Friday on My Mind,” by the Easybeats; Cyrcle’s “It’s a Turn Down Day”; The Beatles’ “Dr. Robert,” so we can hear that scratchy guitar and lush chorus. I’d like to see him react to the organ solo in Bonnie Raitt’s “We Used to Rule the World.” In the car I play the music loud, today even louder than usual. I know I probably shouldn’t. My wife and kids tell me I’m getting a little deaf. (A little?) These days the car and treadmill are the only places I listen to music. I can’t help myself. I want it loud.

He’ll be sitting in his wheelchair at the kitchen table, his back to the doorway I walk through. I rehearse the scene in the mind. “Remember this?” Sitting across from him, I’ll play part of a song. I’ll wait to see the look of recognition, watch him travel back in time. “How about this?” When my mother was sick and I made this drive, I listened to podcasts, for reflection and for laughs. For these visits, I want bang and bash. I want nostalgia.

We bought every Beatle album as soon as it hit the store. This was, of course, back in the vinyl days. The first three or four lps, in mono, cost less than five dollars. We took them home, put them on the turntable, and sat down to listen. It was “close listening,” almost like the close reading of a poem advocated by the New Critics. In the front bedroom of Brian’s house on 3rd Street, we sat on the floor and played the records over and over, holding the album covers, like holy objects, in our laps. There was a photo or two to look at; on the back, a song list. You listened, and you looked. “Meet the Beatles,” headshots of four young guys in partial shadow; twelve songs, the longest of which was “I Saw Her Standing

There" (2:50), the shortest, incredibly short by today's standards, "Little Child" (1:46), produced by George Martin, for Capitol Records.

Years later, my kids went totally digital. They bought CDs and queued up the songs they wanted to hear. On some CDs they listened to only one or two songs; that was it. Back in the vinyl days, we listened to the whole album, every track all the way through, even the songs we didn't particularly like. Ringo singing "Act Naturally." Really? To lift the needle, move it to the song you liked, and set it down, aiming for the barely visible gap between tracks, was to risk scratching the record.

A scratch would last forever. That was the thing about vinyl.

And now it's back.

I have purist friends who could explain why vinyl is better: the sound profiles you get in analog are richer, far superior to the sterile precision of digital. I guess I get that. I'm still kind of an analog guy. I look at the clock and say "a quarter to" and "a little after," it bothers me that soon kids will no longer be able to decode the face of a clock and tell time, the way many of them will never learn to write in cursive. I remember moving the needle to tune in an AM radio station in the car. I like a speedometer needle. I go *about* seventy mph (not sixty-seven) when I drive up to visit Brian.

I should ask him, What do you think about the vinyl craze these days?

I know what he would say.

Who gives a fuck?

He's sitting in his wheelchair with his back to the door. The dogs bark when I walk in. There are seven of them. It takes a minute to calm them down. Brian gives me a crooked smile and says, "How the hell are you?" It's his usual greeting. He has a full beard, a lot more salt than pepper, and he's wearing a hat. It occurs to me that in all the recent pictures of him I've seen, he has that hat on. When I ask him how the hell *he's* doing, he turns his head and points to his hair, slate gray, wisps of what's left of it hanging down. It's the radiation, he says.

I figure we'll get a few basics out of the way, before getting down to basics.

Sleep?

He says he sleeps just fine.

Appetite?

He says he's an eating machine.

Pain?

Not even a headache. If the doctor didn't tell him he was sick, he wouldn't even know it.

I ask if he's ever had a beard before.

Couple times.

He's sixty-four years old, a September birthday, a year older than me. Three months ago Sheila organized a benefit. It went from noon to nine at the Elks Club bar in Bay City, all music all the time, played by over forty years of musician friends in the area. Brian packed the place.

I tell him I'm thinking about a "when I'm sixty-four party" for me and a few pals this summer. What does he think?

Yup.

Next to the kitchen table, a tv set displays weekday afternoon programming. He watches it while I ask more questions, about his sister, son, nephew, a pal we call Easy Eddie. I'm thinking about my song list when he wonders, Hey, what're we going to eat?

In this *New Yorker* article, published in 2007, Paul McCartney confesses to dyeing his hair. He also confesses to being freaked out about actually being sixty-four. "The thought is somewhat horrifying," he tells the interviewer. "It's like 'Well, no, this can't be me.'" The article is contemporaneous with the release of an album called "Memory Almost Full," which the interviewer describes as "up-tempo rock songs ... tinged with melancholy." I know the album. When it came out, I listened to thirty seconds of each track at the iTunes Store, bought one song, "Dance Tonight," for \$1.29, and downloaded it. It's a jaunty piece with a kazoo solo in the bridge.

The writer mentions the famous deaths: Lennon, Harrison, Linda.

McCartney, I learn, was sixteen when he wrote “When I’m Sixty-Four.”

When Brian and I were that age, we had begun to realize we were not going to be the next Lennon and McCartney. We had written exactly one song together, called “If I Could Dream,” which some years later he managed to get recorded with a band he was in, graciously crediting “Bailey and Bennett” in parentheses beneath the song title as the composers.

I come back from Mulligans with two bar burgers, mushrooms and mayo on his, and French fries. The dogs bark. Four or five of them eventually settle under the table. We eat our burgers, watch a little more tv, and I think again about my song list. Maybe I won’t play the songs after all. Who wants to listen music on a phone, anyway? In the kitchen it will sound like a cheap transistor radio.

I say, “Hey, remember ‘It’s a Turn Down Day’?”

He looks at the tv for a bit, then turns my way. “The Cyrle,” he says. “They were a good band.”

The show we’re listening to is called The Doctor. It’s talk. Two men, two women. One of the men is dressed like a doctor. They’re discussing castration as a way of punishing rapists. Or maybe it’s a preventative measure. The man dressed as a doctor explains that there is both surgical and chemical castration. The two women agree that, either way, it’s an extreme measure. They are both against it.

I try another one: “Remember ‘I’ve Got Friday on My Mind’?”

It takes a minute. He turns away from the tv and gives me a partial crooked smile and a nod. “Good song,” he says.

I know the nod.

Sheila says, “Getting tired, Brian?”

It’s for me. Well, okay, I think, that’s enough.

We sit together for a while longer, through the rest of my fries. Brian takes a bite or two from his burger, gazes at the tv. Before going to commercial, the doctor previews the next segment of the show. They’re going to talk about a woman’s cancer treatment. The woman on screen looks familiar.

“Is that Bruce Jenner?” I say.

Sheila says it’s not Bruce Jenner. It’s a real woman.

“Goddam,” Brian says.

We watch a few more minutes in silence. I get up to go. The dogs rouse and congregate around my feet. I tell Brian see you in a month or so, shake his hand, and lean down for a long hug. “You hang in there now,” I say. “I’ll be back the middle of next month.”

He nods, says thanks for coming, Richard.

“See you, right?”

He nods. I’m pretty sure he nods.

About the time I get to the freeway, which takes ten minutes or so, my iPhone shuffles to a favorite Beatle song. I play it loud and sing along: “You say you’ve seen certain wonders, and your bird can sing.” That would be another song to mention, on another visit.

A few days later, my wife and I are upstairs packing. It’s mid morning. I’m tossing power cords for my phone and Kindle and laptop into a carry-on when I realize I’m not wearing any pants. What happened to my pants?

“Have you seen my black sweater?” my wife says.

When did I take off my pants? For a while now I’ve been walking into rooms only to find I can’t remember why I’m there. I’m used to that. Like tinnitus, it comes with age. Losing my pants is new.

“Did you hear me?” my wife says.

“I heard you.” I look around the room, feeling mild panic. No pants, anywhere. “Which black sweater?”

I stand there, marveling at this altered state. Then I remember: I took them off in the other room, in front of the closet, so I could try on another pair I had fitted a while back.

“I’m losing it,” she says.

There they are, the pants I tried on, in the carry-on. So the other ones are over there?

“Can you hear anything I’m saying?” she says.

“I hear you fine.”

We’re all losing it.

One of these days I’ll have to get my hearing checked. I sort of don’t want to know. I think about my parents growing old, my father and all his hearing aids. There were owls in the woods a half a mile away from their house. My parents almost always slept with a window open. For years they said they heard owls all night. One day my wife and I were up for a visit. When I asked about them, my mother said yes, the owls were still there. Then she added, “Your dad can’t hear them any more.” I think he took it in stride. What choice did he have? Still, it broke my heart.

One day it will happen to me. I’ll wake up, look for my pants, and I won’t be able to hear the birds and the Beatles. I’ll have to remember to consider myself lucky.



Rick Bailey writes about family, food, travel, current events, what he reads and what he remembers. The University of Nebraska Press will publish a collection of his essays, *American English, Italian Chocolate* in summer 2017. He and his wife divide their time between Michigan and the Republic of San Marino.