

Word Sharing That Fed Our Souls

Shelley Maxwell

Songs and poems helped generations of my family survive what seemed to be hell on earth and hold onto cultural gems.

Even the sounds associated with music like whistling carryover and cloak hidden messages and systems of communication that allow for oral stories that might otherwise be forgotten. When we lose each other at a Walmart or another large venue, the family whistle helps us assemble. That whistle alerts us to a safe reconnection. This has been passed down for many generations.

Raising children in public housing at the height of the crack wars in Chicago could have thrown our family into disarray. Fortunately, we were and are thinking people. We talked about where others lived and how they seemingly lived in peace when we had to dodge bullets almost daily. My oldest son's 6th grade class lost most of the boys to gun violence. He and my other children knew why they could not have normal freedoms like walking to the store or playing outside. They constantly craved the freedoms I could not grant. But I gave them song.

We also had a religious war. The war of the good we believed God was teaching warring against the horrible realities we worked so hard to cope with and resist.

I was a happy person. I grew up in tough circumstances with a mother plagued by the

difficulties of her childhood. She loved me as much as she could make room for. She had to develop a stern heart to survive the game. There were ills she could not share for the better part of my youth. When I learned her issues, all was forgiven.

With all the weights my mom carried, she still gave me the gift of loving all kinds of music. She sang with me on some of our darkest days but mostly as a routine of happy sharing. We would sing:

Frank Sinatra "Strangers on the night exchanging glances."

Nancy Wilson "The very thought of you,

And I forget to do,

The little ordinary things
That everyone ought to do."

Victor Johnson

"After dark in the ghetto, no one walks the street, in the ghetto after dark...but what you gonna do when you're young and you're lonely and you are very very blue...on a warm summer, things should be right, but there never right in the ghetto after

Shelley Maxwell has supported UIC Center for Literacy and Chicago Department of Family and Support Services Family Engagement partnerships along with the Chicago Public Library for more than 20 years. She believes parents want the best for their children and, with a little help, can achieve any learning or career goal.

dark...screams can be heard like a scary and unwary night bird..in the getto after dark...I should be bright, not filled.. with fright...but fear is part of the ghetto after dark."

A few breaths later, we would move on to BB King, Elvis, or Dinah Washington. I might be able to sing a few lyrics from every popular song from the 40's to the 70s.

Was this a road to literacy? I believe this process opened my mind to words and their meanings in a way the classroom never could.

My mom knew she was doing something special for me but she did not realize the tunes she exposed me to and sang to me were packing my head with vocabulary and ideas and a cultural richness that no one else could give me. We sang and discussed lyric. I learned that words conveyed meaning beyond their meaning. Words presented in one way could express love and longing and, at the same time, share cloaked frustrations. I easily transitioned what I knew to learning in school and in life.

From their first kick inside me, I sang to my babies; old songs, new songs, and many specific compositions to help us cope. One family favorite was "We're waiting on the bus and we're cold, cold, cold." We had to wait on buses in minus zero weather. We had to. We had no car. Our family members had no car. In brutal weather conditions before there were bus shelters and transit that was anything but rapid, you had to find a way to help your babies manage their struggle. My children love the bus song to this day.

We sang our way through the years in public housing. We performed the entire Little Mermaid movie for friends. We got a car when my youngest was ten years old. After buying a car, we only had enough money for gas. We

couldn't really go many places. And so we went to music. We drove and sang from 57th and Lake Shore Drive to Wilson avenue and back again.

We performed old songs at family gatherings and volunteer events. My son got into poetry. He wanted to share some of his poems at these events. He wrote so much that he wrote in his sleep. The anthologies poured out of him. He and I developed a poetry workshop for the library. The anthology for this workshop was called Echoes.

I read books to my children. I read the Bible with them. But I believe music inculcated a love for words and what they mean and how they should be expressed. This was the best of me as it was the best of my mom.

My children sang to their babies.

I was also fortunate to receive genuine and guiding love from teachers, counselors, librarians and community centers which took the foundations my mom shared to new and wonderful places.

I don't think our story is unique. I hear African-American families engage music this way all the time be it with popular or religious music.

I believe the literacy tool of song exchange in families warrants further examination. It feeds the soul as it shares the words.

