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Whitewater

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Whitewater

By Chad Trevitte

Song: “Whitewater,” Boards of Canada, *BOC Maxima*, 1996

Audio sample: “Many Me’s,” *Sesame Street*, circa 1975

Most of my earliest childhood memories
come from public TV. Channel 2.

There’s a lot of different me’s, you know.

Along with programs like *Sesame Street*,
the network also had daily broadcasts
of educational films for older kids
with stock footage of migratory birds
or automated factory machines

scored with airy, humming analog
synthesizers—Moogs, Korgs, Yamahas,
Oberheims, Hammonds, and old ARPs.

There’s a Mad Me when I get angry.

The music sounded both soothing and strange,
like being stuck inside on rainy days
playing with imaginary friends
and waving at the mailman through the window.

With the sleepy soundtrack melodies
I loved the most, I memorized my own
loops as daydream music, mixing them
with all the many me’s I came to know.

And the Surprised Me. A few of these old
programs were sponsored by the National Film
Board of Canada, which twenty years
later inspired a Scottish duo’s name—
brothers with tape machines and vintage keyboards
whose childhoods, I suspect, were much like mine.
Nostalgia is a key theme in their work.

And there’s a Scared Me, too. The first time I
heard “Whitewater” was 1999
in graduate school, deep in a Napster binge
after my girlfriend moved from Chapel Hill
to New York, and I knew that it was over.
I wasn’t eating much. I’d lost some weight.
I couldn’t focus on my dissertation.
I’d been depressed for weeks, but hearing it
helped me feel both happy and sad together.
It then became a favorite bong-hit tune,
and I bought all their albums on CD.

Right now I’m the Loving Me. Isn’t he cute?

Its shape is beautiful. The song begins
with a full minute of sustained drum beats
against a background of fast ticking sounds
that help focus the ear, preparing the
listener for a fuller, deeper trance
like a hypnotist's small swinging watch.
Then the progressive layering of sound:
first a thick, low-key loop of long descending
chords, smeared and just a bit distorted in
their reverb; a return of the drum beats;
then (open sesame) a hazy, muffled
voice can be heard, tinny and out of range,
as if transmitted from another planet
or heard across a piece of string that's tied
between tin cans...then near the halfway mark,
arising all at once, a heavy pulse
of thumping bass beats, sliding hisses, and
a gorgeous loop of bright, ascending notes
descending smoothly back into the mix.
Four rhythms, two melodies, and a voice.

*After I've done a real good job—I've cleaned
my room, or something like that—then I feel proud,
and there's a Proud Me too.* About eight years
later I listened to the song again
after I'd first become engaged to marry
my wife and then got hired to teach full time
at Bridgewater. My road was now wide open.
I was in love, and all my earlier heartbreak
and anxious fears about my future life
were far behind me. I was wild with joy.
Near midnight I walked through a vacant field
where Alexandra and I went on dates.
I stripped off all my clothes, feeling the breeze
against my skin, and looked up at the moon.
It was the happiest moment of my life.

*And when I'm with a friend, and we're having
a good time, then I'm the Happy Me.*

A few years later, after hearing that
my father died, I listened to the song
one afternoon while looking at old photos
of him holding me as a giggling baby.
Four years after that, I played the song
after my sister Tracy killed herself,
combing through some family Polaroids
of her wearing an Easter dress at five,

playing at Myrtle Beach, and sticking out
her tongue while hugging our old collie dog.
Later when the college budget cuts
ended my job at Bridgewater, I played
the song to mark the last week of my term,
dumping old papers, books, and travel mugs
in the bin outside Bowman Hall—already
missing the faces of students like you
I'd never see again, all of you turning
so quickly into ghosts from a lost time.

*But when my friend has to go home, I feel
a little sad, so I turn into the Sad Me.*

The full arrangement of the audio loops
has an organic quality, as if
aligned with all the basic functions of
the human body and mind—almost like
an android dreaming of electric sheep,
just like we do when we sleep. Its somatic
rhythms include the pumping of the heart
(the heavy bass beats) and the steady cycle
of respiration (the soft sliding sounds).
The psychic patterns overlaying these
rhythms consist of such combined emotions
as mourning, loneliness, and melancholy
(the falling melody) as well as love,
longing, desire, and some more fragile, fleeting
feeling of joy (the rising melody),
all of which are mixed with memory:
the murmuring, fuzzy voice that speaks to you
unconsciously in dreams, or as a vague
background noise in waking life that seems
at once familiar and remote, some other
version of you that's vanished but still lingers
like a dim echo, a blurred photograph,
or a degraded tape recording of
a childhood TV show seen long ago.

*Anyway, there sure are a lot of
different me's just like you have a lot of
different you's.* That little kid is right,
and in more ways than one. His notion of
many me's is also relevant
to understanding how nostalgia works.
For me this song best illustrates the way
nostalgia actually has multiple modes—
all of them tied to loss and longing, but

each with its own distinctive frequency.
Discrete nostalgia's what we usually think
the concept means—our longing for a single
moment, a self-contained period of time.
There's also *anemoia*: longing for
a time you've never known. (Keep this in mind,
too, if you find this music speaks to you.)
Yet over greater passages of time
nostalgia has a more recursive feel,
a richly layered texture, as if you're
gazing through countless windows within windows
with every moment of the past containing
traces and overtones of earlier moments,
friends, lovers, and places that you've known,
and other me's, happy, sad, or whatever,
all of them lost, all of them still returning
in a full host of insubstantial shades
that somehow miss each other, missing you
just as much as you miss all of them.
Such nostalgic longing is therefore
infinite, spread across an infinite
horizon of loss that, without a structure
to give it form, can be unbearable.
Well, I'm going outside—outside to play now.
That's exactly what the structured sound
of this song does so well. Lately I've
had to devote much time to managing
my fear of what the future holds in store
and my sadness arising from the past,
both of which fuel each other in a cycle
that makes it hard to function in the present.
Yet just ignoring these negative feelings
doesn't help. When driven underground,
they only re-emerge as misplaced anger,
making me wish for the whole world to burn.
What this song does goes far beyond
empty distraction or narcotic numbing
of inner pain and discontent: it neither
denies nor compensates for lack or loss,
but rather reconfigures both through play
in such a way that they can resonate
more beautifully—purged of bitterness
while still retaining all their human ache,
no longer punishing the mind and heart
with disconnected sounds and images

but guiding them in overlapping waves,
investing them with dignity and grace
like flocks of birds in fading autumn sunsets
descending smoothly into darkness on
extended wings.

I know I'll never meet you.

We'll never get to share our favorite songs
in office conversations. That's a loss
I still feel very keenly, like the throb
that you might briefly hear at 4:05.
(That's the note that has your name on it.)
Yet this song has been a friend to me,
and so I share it with you in the spirit
of friendship and further discovery
in years to come, through all the melodies
your life will bring. This public broadcast is
brought to you by Boards of Canada,
along with further funding and support
from many me's. We miss you very much.
I hope all the different you's have fun, too. Bye...!