

Variations on a Theme: Heroes

written by Guest Contributor | September 19, 2016



My mother rotated Mariah Carey's "Hero" cassette single on repeat for months. It's a habit she picked up with 45" vinyl and continued with cassettes, CDs, and digital downloads. She moved from Michael Jackson to Mariah Carey to Mary J. Blige to Daniel Bedingfield on and on. But before the repeat-one feature, its infinity loop into oblivion, there was tape flipping and rewinding. It took effort and dedication for such single song obsessions. I don't even remember the "Hero" cassette's side B, appropriately named "Everything Fades Away." She must have rewound "Hero" again and again, from car stereo to her little bedroom cassette player.

Twenty years later, I was still confounded by her commitment to her singles. I asked my older brother Paul, who bared the brunt of our parents' divorce, what he thought about our mother's pop mantras. He also remembered "Hero" in the background of our 1993 and 1994 childhoods. But he also remembered hearing the song as our mother cried alone in her bedroom. She had lost her long-time job and was unhappily married to our father. Paul was surprised that I didn't remember the song as an expression of our mother's pain.

I took a closer listen to the song, which after a childhood of repeated listens, had lost its shape. I could no longer hear the words or chose not to; instead, it was a tune embedded in my musical memory, its meaning reduced to a wordless echo. Carey wrote the lyrics for Gloria Estefan as the theme of the 1992 film of the same name. The film, starring Dustin Hoffman, Andy Garcia, and Geena Davis, was a dark comedy about a babbling New York petty criminal who saves and robs survivors of a plane crash—an unlikely hero of sorts. Against her best judgment, Carey was convinced to rework the schmaltzy song into a pop, R&B ballad of self-reliance and empowerment. Over the years, it has become one of Carey's most performed songs. In the 2006 *The Adventures of Mimi Tour* DVD, Carey introduced her song with an anecdote:

"[After] doing the song over and over again and having people coming up to and saying, thank you for writing 'Hero' because it saved my life or it saved my father's life or my brother's or sister's life, or something of that nature, I said I always have to sing that song when I'm performing, because if I don't, you never know who I'm leaving out. In times of my life I've had

to turn to that song lyrically and flip it onto my own life and sing it to myself.”

Its meaning has shifted in its various uses: Aretha Franklin covered the song as a 1994 tribute to Reverend Jesse Jackson; Mariah reworked the song for a 9/11 telethon; Rihanna’s cover for a high-school talent show is credited for her discovery; X-factor finalists released a cover to benefit the U.K.’s Help for Heroes wounded veteran’s charity; First Lady Michelle Obama described using the song to lift Barack Obama’s spirits as they awaited the 2008 election results; and most recently, it was used in a commercial for the Game of War app with a cameo appearance by a gladiator Mariah Carey. But for me, it will always be about my mother.

I had misremembered the song as a damsel’s distress call for a hero, as a silly pop song my mother obsessed over. I had misjudged the potential for pop music to have a meaningful place in people’s lives, let alone my mother’s or my own. After my conversation with Paul, I spent hours watching Youtube videos of other fans singing “Hero” and wondered what the singers were expressing in their iteration, their translation. I re-listened to all the pop singles my mother loved during my childhood and reconsidered their meaning. The songs became a point of access, a digging, into a past my family rarely talks about.

On January 17, 1994, Mariah Carey’s “Hero” was #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts as the Northridge blind thrust fault shook Los Angeles with a 6.7 magnitude earthquake. My brother Paul remembers waking to my mother trying to lift a fallen dresser she thought I was crushed beneath. My mother remembers the relief upon finding me in bed, sleeping through the largest earthquakes in modern Los Angeles. My mother and brother still laugh when they tell this story: Scott, always a deep sleeper, didn’t hear a thing.

I keep wondering if I had walked by my mother’s room, “Hero” playing on a worn cassette, and just did not hear her, the earth slowly moving.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it’s an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life’s soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others’ [Variations](#).

("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)



Scott Oshima is an LA-based artist and community arts educator, who can be found singing Mariah Carey's "Hero" while alone in the car, in the shower, while writing, and sometimes with a group of friends on a pedestrian overcrossing. Oshima also does other stuff: www.o-shi-ma.com.