

The Music That Made Us

What happens when we re-encounter cultural artifacts that were deeply important to us and they've changed, or we have, or both?

Each of us has these signal cultural artifacts. They are Those Albums — the records and CDs and playlists we listened to so deeply and constantly that we fused with them, skin and guts and heart. What happens when we re-encounter them later, when we've certainly changed, and perhaps they have too?

One risk of reacquainting ourselves with an album we've loved is coming face to face with who we were when we identified so closely with the work: our younger selves and their (sometimes embarrassing) tastes.

That mix of nostalgia and novelty in meeting our old favorites again, when they've changed, and we've changed too — it's a complicated compound! Sometimes, we're surprised.

The author writes I'd hoped for a similar renewal when, last fall, I went to a 30th-anniversary performance of an album another of Those Albums for me. I had expected an audience as excited to dance deliriously and sing along to every lyric as I was. But instead, I was met with a crowd that felt cool and quiet, and a performance that, perhaps because of my vertiginous expectations, I didn't connect with. I left sort of bummed out, still longing for the cathartic homecoming. I got it, eventually, from the original source: at home, volume on high, singing my heart out in a long, scalding shower, that reliable theater of connection and rebirth.