

I Am A Rock vs Soledad

When I was in my last year of high school, in 1965, I had been profoundly solitary for the past seven years. I went to school every day and spoke with students and teachers who spoke to me, but for a long time I'd been determined to avoid anything that even resembled friendship. And I'd never been on a date. As Dickens said of one of his characters, I was as solitary as a clam.

Music changed that. When I heard the Beatles' songs *Yesterday* and *Hide Your Love Away*, they caught my attention. When I heard Simon and Garfunkel sing 'the people bowed and prayed to the neon god they made', I had to come to the door of my shell to find out what was going on.

There was a magic mood in the air – 'normal' people were taking an interest in everything, even in a shy solitary boy who had been avoiding them for years. A girl in another class tried to catch my attention whenever we passed in the hall. She was on the swimming team, along with a young man in my class who I'd begun to talk to. She got him to badger me until I came out one afternoon to watch them practice. I only went in hope they would leave me alone afterward. I suppose they knew that once I'd seen her in that blue bathing suit I wouldn't be able to return to my shell. I would have one date with her, the only date I would have in high school

That was the beginning of my years of struggle to understand the social world, or at least to function in it. Paradoxically, as a backlash I suppose to my many social failures, it may also have been the source of a winter spent hitchhiking alone through Europe, plus two winters in Mexico and Guatemala. But it would finally take me also into the insurance world, accident investigation, marriage and children.

Yes, Simon and Garfunkel were instrumental to all that. I fell in love with their songs, but there was one I was ambivalent about - *I Am a Rock*.

If you don't know that one, it begins with a young man alone (or a woman) looking out the window of his apartment onto snow covered streets below, comforting himself in his detachment from the people down there. His is the voice of at least an introvert, maybe someone autistic, certainly a loner. He says of himself, 'I am a rock, I am an island'. But although he values his

aloneness, it is made clear, through his tone of voice and choice of words, that Simon and Garfunkel are mocking this detachment, as if it's nothing but a cowardly artifice separating him from the real world. Then comes:

I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain,
Its laughter and its loving I disdain.

These lines felt like a betrayal to me. I had never disdained friendship. I envied its laughter and its loving. I didn't envy the parasitic use and abuse of one another that you sometimes saw. But I was convinced by then that friendship was simply not open to me. You need a social instinct for friendship, and that was clearly missing. But look at what else he says:

I have my books and my poetry to protect me,

Pardon me, but what's wrong with that? Books and poetry are not a wall we use to hide from the world. They're part of the world. They have protected me all my life. If you're shy and solitary and trying to cope with the non-solitary, over-populated, insensitive, manic, aggressive modern world, believe me, you need some protection. Don't leave that shell behind either.

At one point he admits that he has been in love, and says if that hadn't happened he never would have cried. No mention is made of the likelihood that, through no fault of his own, he'd suffered a bad love experience. That's often what happens when shy solitary people try to connect with social people - bad connections, with painful consequences. But no, they portray this view of himself as an island as just escapism, running away from reality. There is no recognition at all that he might be an introvert, or autistic, in which case he is simply being true to himself in the only way he knows. Anyway, the young man in the window finally declares:

A rock feels no pain, and an island never cries.

Well human islands cry, we shy ones all know that, yet it seems that the non-shy think we're confused about it. They've again put words in his mouth that don't belong there. Just because we don't flaunt our pain in the face of the world, doesn't mean it isn't there.

Yes, it was a disappointment to find that Simon and Garfunkel were not sympathetic to my kind. But I forgave them. How could I do anything but

forgive them when they produced songs like *The Sound of Silence*, *Mrs Robinson*, or *The Boxer?*, three of the finest pieces of highway music ever written. Those songs, especially on long night journeys, have accompanied me throughout my life.

The young man you see in the March 1968 photograph above (an identity photo taken in the office of the International Nickel Company so he could work in one of their mines), despite its intended message, carried *I Am a Rock* within himself as a kind of personal anthem for years. If he looks a bit haunted, that's only because he had just returned, his money gone, from a winter wandering through the mountainous green country of southern Mexico and Guatemala, and he'd only recently gazed into a pair of dark beautiful eyes that, although he would soon return to Mexico looking for them, he was never going to see again.

But in Mexico, where he'd begun to learn Spanish, he'd also begun to learn that this problem of shyness and solitude was seen differently.

He read Spanish literature, stories like *Cien Anos de Soledad*, the novel of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez which presents us with one solitary character after another. In my novel *The Birdcatcher* I've already written about that book and others with similar themes.

But nowhere in that culture is there a finer recognition of shyness and the solitary mind than in the 1973 song of Emilio Jose - *Soledad*. A young man himself in 1973, Emilio Jose won a contest with it that year. The word 'soledad' is translated into English as 'solitude' or 'aleness' – it is both of those, but in Spanish it has something deeper and richer in it, and it is used more frequently in their writing. The translation of the excerpts here is mine.

The song begins with the singer declaring that his, or her, 'Soledad' is like a delicate 'amapola' (poppy) 'en el trigo sola' (alone in a field of wheat), 'sin necesitar a nadie' (needing no one). It is a:

criatura primarosa que no sabe que es hermosa
ni sabe de amor ni enganos

Those lines lift my spirit whenever I hear them – it is 'an exquisite creature that doesn't know that it is beautiful, nor does it know anything of love or its

deceptions'. The singer declares 'yo la quiero asi distinta' (I want it just that way),

porque es sincera
es natural como el agua que lleva
corriendo alegre desde el manantial,
no sabiendo a donde va
que feliz vive mi Soledad

'Because it is genuine and natural like the clear water that rises happily up from the spring, not knowing where it is going, oh how happy lives my Soledad'.

This is not just an acceptance of shyness and solitary behavior - it is a celebration of them. When I heard Nana Mouskouri's recording of it, that song entered my life like that happy spring, and it has never left. She made it famous in Europe, though it got a cooler reception in North America. She has also recorded a French version.

Yes, the young man in the photograph had already begun to learn these things. He'd already begun to write the first Alan Conrad stories too, and though those stories would be rejected by publishers, as would everything else he would write over the next thirty years, he would never lose faith in them because his experiences in Mexico, along with the literature and songs of Spanish culture were the only antidote he needed to counter the strange pressure in our culture to have everyone write in the same vein, with the same shared set of values. He knew already that he was an island, and he knew that his would have to be an island of rock if it was not going to be eroded by the sea of North American culture that, despite its professions to the contrary, wants everyone to think alike.

No, in North America you're not supposed to sing of the beauty of solitude and aloneness, nor its ability to nourish the soul, but that doesn't mean that *Soledad* shouldn't be your song too.