

Walkman

By

David H. King

*'Freedom, How can true freedom exist when you can be free from so many things,
Reason, How can you reason when there is doubt in everything'*

Excerpt from Mesmerize by David H. King

*Dedicated to John Huddleston, a man who stood up for the
things he knew to be right and changed my life forever.*

Ben Laing loved his personal stereo; he loved it since he bought one with the money he was given on his thirteenth birthday. He can remember being jealous of all the kids in his school who had them, the colors of them and the songs you could make out if you walked close enough to those listening to them. He can remember his mother and father taking him to the big electrical store in town and the assistants smile as he stood on tiptoe to reach up to the counter to purchase it. The journey home had seemed like a lifetime as he sat clamed into the back seat by the seat belt holding the deep red and black box and the pack of AA batteries in his hands not being allowed to open them until they were home, his mother and father joking all the way that they may get some peace in the house now and that he could listen to his music as loud as he wanted anytime he wanted, this was a comment Ben had taken very seriously all through his life and he had no idea it was this that would soon kill him.

He paused outside the front door of his luxurious 5 bedroom town house in the fashionable South Thames area of London with his obedient border collie, Jimmy, at his side to pull the unusual head phones out of the pocket of his suit jacket sweeping his shoulder length hair back to allow him to place them in his ears, he still remembers modifying his first pair like this when he was sixteen, the memory still makes him smile. His wife, Caroline, had suggested patenting the design on several occasions but he would not, he enjoyed the idea of having the only pair of headphones like these in the world, even though he had modified many along his

now thirty years, he had always altered them for himself and only because the previous pair had broken due to gradual wear and tear. Every time he thinks of the modification he remembers how he first thought of it due to his one disappointment on his thirteenth birthday and how he kicked himself at the age of sixteen when he tried it and realized it would work.

He presses the play button on the unit in his pocket and steps off the porch to take Jimmy for his evening walk with amazement at how much the units have changed, when he was thirteen they were heavy chunky objects about the size of a house brick, about as aesthetically pleasing and requiring six AA batteries to run them for about two hours, the one he has now has a sleek streamlined look, not even changing the tailored line of his suit being hardly bigger than the tape inside it, weighing almost nothing and being run by a wafer thin rechargeable Nickel Cadmium battery with power enough for three days continuous play.

On his thirteenth birthday, Ben had walked slowly into his room carrying the box and batteries in front of him placed the box on his bed and carefully removed the unit and connected the headphones then pushing the batteries from the blister packing and carefully sliding them one by one into the battery compartment then sliding the unit's cover home with the care and precision he would later require in his career as a Consultant Neurosurgeon. He pushed his newly purchased tape into the unit and closed the case as he lay back on his bed, headphones in his ears and pressed play. An amazing feeling of pleasure flowed through his body as the first bars of Bob Dylan's Hurricane came flooding into his ears, this feeling had risen to almost a sense of complete euphoria by the end of the second track on the Desire album, Isis.

Ben remembers it must have been the around the fifth time he had listened to desire that night when his mother had come up to kiss him goodnight, he had been playing the album over and over already having to change the batteries once, that was when his disappointment had hit.

Ben reached the corner of his street and turned to walk along the mile that would take him to the path by the canal where he liked to walk Jimmy as the live version Neil Young's like a Hurricane from the album Weld finished. He decided to change the tape at this point, which was unusual for Ben; he would usually listen to entire albums without even fast-forwarding one track. He had resisted the change to either Compact or Mini disk blaming these for what he called the 'downfall of album art' or the 'death of the concept album'. He misses the way every track on a concept album was needed in the telling of a complete story and

shudders at the thought that somebody may skip Mother or Comfortably Numb on Pink Floyd's The Wall at just the touch of the button but has come to realize that in these days of commercial pop, where you did not even have to write your own music, play an instrument or even sing your songs to become successful in the music industry, if you came across a person claiming to be a 'Floyd fan they would almost undoubtedly mention Another Brick in The Wall without even realizing they were talking about part 2, let alone know that Parts 1 and 3 existed at all. He recollects upon the release of the last concept album, No Code by Pearl Jam, it was incredibly unsuccessful compared to their previous or later albums as it was deemed too uncommercial as some of the songs, or tracks as they are more commonly called these days, were there to tell the story and not individually standing, or single, tracks.

He opens his black leather carry bag after swinging it around from his back, and looks at the collection of tapes in side before deciding to replace Weld with Leonard Skynard.

He is soon drifting back into his memories as Leonard speaks 1,2,3...turn it up at the beginning of Sweet Home Alabama.

When his mother came into his room to kiss him goodnight he decided to feign sleep so he could listen to Desire right through to the end once more. His mother came close to him and spoke about the thing he had forgotten, how you could hear the music when you were close to a person listen to a personal stereo. 'Turn that thing off and get ready for bed'. His eyes shot open as he realized that not only could she hear but also realizing that he would he would not hear the rest of the album let alone the end of Mozambique, the song he was listening to at the time. He vowed to listen to the end of whatever album he was listening to at the time before bedtime until he could make some headphones that were silent to everyone but the listener, and he did not listen to a tape after his bedtime until he made the modification on his sixteenth birthday.

Ben was still adrift in his memory and walking quickly, as the compulsive guitar solo in the full version of Freebird always seemed to make him do, when Jimmy's lead jerked taught and brought him back to the present with realization that he had reached the corner and almost stepped out into the traffic laden bypass already having walked straight past the pathway leading down to the canal. He steadied himself after taking a step further back on the pavement whilst listening to the last bars of the song, he then stopped the tape and crouched down beside Jimmy, stroking him, kissing him on the head and saying good boy. He swung the carry bag around again and removed a treat that he fed to Jimmy before deciding to

change the tape for something less compulsive, he considers Steve Miller but passes when he remembers in the early 2000s somebody had blatantly used the tune of the joker with some lyrics from a Sandy Shaw song and had a hit single, this was something that always annoyed him, how could people be so easily conned, but what did expect when he lived in an age when 'cover' bands could become popular never releasing any of their own songs but poor versions of other people's released years before. Instead he exchanges Leonard Skynard for the Buffalo Springfield's Retrospective, a much more laid back but powerful album, he has always been blown away by the strength of the protest in the relaxed sounding song For What It's Worth which starts the album. He turns and retraces his steps to the canal, determined to be attentive of his surroundings but he lost in his thoughts again in seconds. His thoughts change from how such individually amazing musicians, all with very much their own style, as Ritchie Foray, Steven Stills and Neil Young could all come together in one band and create such amazing songs, a question he also asks himself whenever he is listening to the Traveling Willburys with the truly amazing musician, writer, singers in that group, turning back to his sixteenth birthday as the album moves onto Mr. Soul.

Ben was sat on the small front lawn of his parents end terrace two story house basking in the warm July sun listening to Solomon Burke's Sweet Soul Music from his newly purchased Soul and Rhythm & Blues Review tape, in those days Soul music was artists such as Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding & Aretha Franklin and Rhythm & Blues was John Lee Hooker, Canned Heat and Muddy Waters, not another name for New Jack Swing as it seems to be these days, when his eyes focused on the boxes beneath the workbench at the back of the garage. His father had kicked him out of the lounge as he said the noise from the personal stereo stopped him from concentrating on the football and was giving him a headache, which had started him thinking about the modification again. He still had the old headphones from the person stereo that he had replaced when the motor went two months ago, which meant that he could try the modification and if it did not work he would still have a good pair. For the first time since his thirteenth birthday Ben stopped a tape mid album.

His father had been a special effects expert for a television studio before moving into financial consultancy and still had most of the general effects equipment boxed up in the garage and it did not take Ben long to find what he needed and he quickly set about making a cast of his ears. He dismantled the old headphones during half an hour taken for the cast to set, it had seemed like an eternity, the drying plaster itching in his ears, all the time wishing he could listen to Lou Reed's Walk On the Wild Side or The Velvet Underground's Sweet Jane, but

once finished he instead of putting some music on he set about making a mould from the cast in the shape of his ears then into this he carefully placed the working parts of the dismantled headphones. Into the mould he poured liquid latex, a plastic which rapidly solidified on contact with air, up to the level of the back of the parts, making headphones which would fit perfectly into his ears. Once solidified he molded some more latex into a shape of the back of the headphones then hollowed both pieces out except the part which would be facing directly towards each of the ears, he realized that if this worked he would be able to listen to tracks like The Doors' Soul Kitchen or Stillwater's Fever Dog as loud as he liked whenever he liked. Into each piece he sprayed sound proofing foam, the kind used to cover over explosive percussion caps to prevent the sound being picked up to the microphones recording whatever television show his father was working on at the time, moving faster now as he became more convinced that it was going to work. Once this had dried he stuck the pieces together using a heat bonder, which looked much like a glorified soldering iron with a piece of cheese wire stuck on the front. Then finally, taking as much care as he had done when he first purchased a personal stereo on his thirteenth birthday, he drilled a hole through to the working parts of each earphone, being careful to drill right up to, but not into each part. Ben's heart was racing as he blew the dust out of the headphones and connected them to the unit, thinking to himself 'It's going to work, it's really going to work'.

He placed the headphones into his ears and pressed play, a moment of doubt passed as the silence on the tape passed into Stevie Wonder's Signed, Sealed, Delivered, He thought the headphones work but will anyone else be able to hear them.

Ben cleared up the mess in the garage before stopping the tape, taking off the personal stereo and heading towards the house.

Ben could feel his heart racing at the memory of this as he turned to walk along the canal pathway, which runs parallel to the bypass that he had almost stepped onto minutes before.

Ben entered the lounge and sat on a chair by the dining table, he chose the one directly behind the couch so there would be no doubt if his father could hear him or not, placed the headphones in his ears and pressed play. He slowly increased the volume to maximum wondering when his father would turn around at tell him to go back outside, but he did not, even after Al Green's Here I Am had moved onto The Spencer Davis Group's Gimme Some Lovin' with the volume remaining at maximum. He began to chastise himself for not making the modification when he had first thought about it whilst laying awake on his

thirteenth birthday, all the times he could have been sat on a bus and listened to his music without annoying people with the low level sound, the times he could have studied at the kitchen table whilst listening without his mother telling him to switch it off, the times...the tape finished and it dawned on Ben that he could not hear the television or his father's continuous excited shouting, which he always seemed to do during any football match he watched. Ben realized not only could no one else hear his music, he could not hear anything from outside of the headphones.

Ben was about to consider the implications of this when his mother touched him on the shoulder making him jump, he had not heard her approaching even though her shoes made loud noises on the wood floor.

Just as he did not hear the sound of metal against metal as the out of control lorry plowed through the crash barrier at the side of the bypass or the screams of people shouting at him to run as it rolled down the hill towards him rapidly gaining even more speed. When Jimmy's lead suddenly pulled taut then free of his hand he let him run as he normally did along this stretch of path presuming he had seen something interesting, perhaps a nice looking stick completely unaware he was running from the approaching lorry.

He could remember feeling like he wanted to live forever as his mother told him how worried she was that he had gone deaf by listening to too much loud music. He was still smiling at this as the lorry connected with him, instantly ending both his and the personal stereo's life mid the Rolling Stones You Can't Always Get What You Want.

Caroline, Ben's wife had taken possession of the headphones along with Jimmy when she identified Ben's body at the hospital morgue and had almost thrown them away before deciding to do something Ben had always decided against.

Within two months of going into production the News was filled with headlines like 'Miracle Headphones Claim Another Victim' or 'The Silent Killer'.