

Dear Hozier,

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I'm not a singer, except in my car. I'm not sure how people become singers. It happened to you, I guess. Every once in a while I wish these letters were two-way. I don't actually want you reading them, because then I'd have to think about the nature of parasocial relationships and whether I'm in one, but also it would be weird. I've seen you in concert twice. Both shows were great, except that at the first one, the people next to us on the mezzanine were drunk and kept bumping into us as they danced, so I was worried the whole night that I'd get beer spilled on me. But that wasn't your fault. I couldn't even really blame them for dancing, for ignoring other people's personal space, because that's how great you sound live. I sort of wanted to dance, and I'm not a dancer any more than I'm a singer.

It's one of those "if I had a penny" things. One of those "if I heard it once, I must have heard it a thousand times" memories. When I was growing up, my mother would say: the Lord said make a joyful noise, not a beautiful noise. I think I'm jumbling that, since I'm plucking the memory out of the sticky pavement of childhood. I know it's a scripture, but I'm not sure how faithfully my mother quoted it, or if she was just getting to the heart of it. The scripture is Psalm 100: Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing. There's more to it, about knowing that the Lord is God and he made us, sheep in his pasture, etc., but my mother never quoted that part. It was just *The Lord said make a joyful noise*, or whatever exactly she said. I could call her and ask; maybe I will after writing this letter, but I want to be in the memories for a while. In their happy, joyful haze.

If you read this letter, if we knew each other in life and you wanted to reply, I'd ask how it happened to you. The singing. All I have is my imagination. Surely there's a moment when you're a kid, maybe when you're singing in a church choir because your mom made you, or when you're plunking out a tune on the family piano because if you don't your piano teacher will rake you over the coals, and someone, an aunt or your parent or the person next to you, tells you you've got a great voice. I can't figure out how you'd know unless someone told you. I can't figure out why you'd sing, and keep singing, unless you knew there was some talent or inborn skill worth developing. Clearly, though, I'm biased. My hypotheticals all involve being forced into contact with music.

My mother loves to sing, but she isn't very good at it. She'll be the first to admit that. Not self-deprecation, just the truth. She isn't vocally talented (no one in my family is. I'm basically musically illiterate across the board), but, God, does my mother love to sing. It was because of these two facts, her love of singing and her lack of talent, that she was quoting Psalm 100 all the time. She would wield it like a sword when she would sing, which makes me wonder if people were rude to her about her singing. I don't remember this, except maybe a few instances of my brothers or her friends teasing her, but those feel half-imagined. So, maybe it was in her

childhood, when she was in her school's chorus and her church's choir because she couldn't get enough singing. Maybe people were rude to her then, and she learned to defend herself in the language of the Southern Baptists that surrounded her in that small Louisiana town. She bit back with scripture.

I don't know what came first: my surety that I'm not a musician or my hesitation to engage with it. Both seem equally likely. As a kid, I was sure I wasn't special. No one ever had to talk me out of some misguided certainty that I was a prodigy or otherwise unique. Privilege of being a middle child, maybe: you're never the center of your parents' world, so you can't imagine changing anyone else's. Or maybe that's just me, the kid who had to see a therapist at age five for my melancholy. The point is that I've pursued everything I've ever done with my eyes open. I consider myself a writer, but only because I've spent a lot of time writing. Not because I'm good, or great. Not because I was born to be a writer or because I'm sure I want my work published or, worse, discovered in a dusty attic to be celebrated only after I'm dead. I'm not romantic, certainly not about myself. And I know that music is like writing in that you have to commit to it, whether you're naturally good or not, and eventually you get better, maybe you even get great. But music is also not like writing, because I started doing one and didn't need anyone's approval, and the other makes me terrified of criticism.

I've always admired this attitude of my mother's. Her unbridled joy for something she loves, regardless of her talent, the way she stands up for herself if anyone teases her, and her genuine belief that artistic expression doesn't have to be *good* to be wonderful. Another one of her go-to sayings was, "There's no such thing as ugly art." She believes that art and self-expression have inherent value, regardless of quality. Her attitude has always been it matters because it brings you joy and because you are joyful when you do it. That's the beginning and the end of it. I am in awe of this attitude and incredibly jealous. I need the things I make to be good, great, perfect, ideally. This perfectionism applies to my writing, mainly, but I even get self-conscious dancing with my seven-year-old niece, because I'm not a good dancer. My mom, on the other hand, will always jump into the dance-off, even though she's a worse dancer than she is a singer. For my mom, expression means music and any chance to sing or dance is welcomed with open arms.

No one ever told me I had a good voice, so I figured, alright, I'm not a singer. My piano teacher didn't tell me I was a natural, she just told me to practice, and I don't hate practicing, but I hate being ordered around, so I quit. In one of these stories, I needed approval. In the other, I intentionally did the opposite of what I knew would get me approval. In both, I avoided making music. Maybe it is music I am afraid of. Maybe it is failure, or hard work. Maybe it is being laughed at that I fear. Because the thing about music is that I've always thought it's not quite real unless someone's listening to it. Unless someone is applauding when it's done, or dancing drunkenly in the moment. Writing I can keep to myself. I can put it in that dusty attic, and no one ever has to know. Music is more real.

My mother shared her music with me throughout my childhood. As she would drive me and the other neighborhood kids to pre-school, she'd let us all take turns requesting songs that she would sing for and with us. They were children's songs, like *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* and *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*. I remember the words to all of them, and most of the melodies, and in my memories, I'm driving down a specific stretch of Creek Road, watching the sunlight through the leaves as my mother sings *You Are My Sunshine*. As the youngest child, I spent a lot more time running errands with my mom than my brothers. When it was just the two of us in the car, she'd turn on a CD of her favorite music. She liked a mix of country music and pop, mostly, and since this was before iPods made playlists easier, we'd move from artist to artist. People like The Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, Aretha Franklin, Celine Dion, Martina McBride, Faith Hill, Kelly Clarkson, Garth Brooks. Or we'd listen to movie soundtracks. *Michael* and *My Best Friend's Wedding* were her favorites. In the car, she and I would sing together. Running errands with her is Sprite and singing. She would buy me a bottle of Sprite in the grocery store checkout line when she bought herself a Diet Coke, including me in her ritual. We'd drink our soda and sing on the way home or to the next errand, lemon-lime coating my tongue and my throat, making the songs taste and smell like citrus and sugar.

I remember once being on a long car ride to a church event with a number of girls in my youth group. I was maybe thirteen. My mother was driving, and although it was not a Sunday, she played a church CD to fill the silence that expanded awkwardly whenever my group collectively remembered that we had nothing in common but age and religion. And that second one was up for interpretation. Sure, we were all in attendance at the Wednesday-night church event, but some of us were there voluntarily, because we believed unilaterally in a single God above whose grand design for the world included bright-eyed thirteen-year-olds cheerfully doing charity work on a school night. And some of us were there because our parents had forced us, and some of us were hovering between those two extremes, begrudging the loss of our time and energy but frantic to think it was worth something to anyone other than ourselves. You can guess which I was. What I'm trying to say is that some of us wouldn't have minded listening to Lady Gaga on a Top 40 radio station, while some of us would have been deeply offended to listen to anything other than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. My mom's happy medium was the church CD.

I was always so happy with her, in these moments of driving around. I had an easier time being...alive, being present, *being* at all when it was just me and my mom. I was an incredibly anxious child. The more I reflect on this as an adult, the more I understand exactly how anxious I was and how abnormal it is for children to be that nervous, obsessive, uncertain. Not the little girl either of my parents signed up for, but whereas my dad never seemed to *get it*, never knew how to operate in my orbit when I would get into one of my vibrations and would often get frustrated with me, my mom was the opposite. Whatever was going on with me, whatever cocktail of physical and mental illness and stressors, or whatever it was, my mom seemed to get it intuitively, this thing going on with her child. This isn't to say she never got frustrated with me growing up, but it was never in those vibratory moments. She was always patient with me, would

find ways to make me laugh or help me get grounded again. She held space for me to freak out, she helped me build little rituals and habits to calm myself down and help the world seem safer. I never felt like a freak with her, the way I did around my dad, my brothers, my friends, my teachers.

You might be wondering what I mean by church CD. I hesitate to tell you because my whole adult life, people have been informing me that I spent my childhood in a cult, and the nature of the church CD really doesn't do much to beat the allegations. Yet I also want to tell you because it is so funny. I'm not sure I'll be able to get through this without laughing. Don't get me wrong, it's funny in a sad way, in a cringey, slightly horrifying way, but I'd rather laugh than cry. So here we go.

Everyone with more than a passing acquaintance with the concept of Mormonism knows that Mormons believe that in the early 1800s, an American named Joseph Smith was a prophet. Like, he said he *met* God and also Jesus. The Mormon version of the story, which I was fed uncritically until well into my adolescence, is that as a young man he went into his local woods and said a prayer about which of the many churches in upstate New York he should join, and God descended and told him he'd need to start his own church, because none of the others of the dozens popping up in that particular wave of Protestant revivalism was the right one. God then sent a series of angelic messengers to direct Joseph to a buried religious text and the tools to help him magically translate the ancient languages within. Thus was born the Book of Mormon, a sort of weird cousin to the Bible. Joseph published it, gained a following, and started a church that, in its early years, kept migrating west because whenever they tried to stop and set up shop, the locals kicked them out. There was violence on both sides and eventually Joseph was assassinated alongside his brother. Rather than dying along with them, the religion found new leadership, splintered into a mainstream and several offshoot branches, and once again migrated west into Utah, where I now live, alongside the majority of the world's Mormons.

The car was our chapel, but we also sang in the kitchen, where she installed a CD player that hung from one of the cabinets. A sleek white thing where she'd play Christmas music while we decorated for the season or where she'd turn on someone's greatest hits while we baked. I felt safe when we were singing. I also felt I could be sillier with my mom than with anyone else. She is a big proponent of silly to this day. I was also a very self-conscious child, but my mother let me be silly and weird while Josh Groban sang *O Come All Ye Faithful* and I played with our collection of expensive Nutcrackers, crafting complicated stories with them. My mother recognized early on that what she felt for music, I felt for stories. I liked music and I liked singing, but the art that resonated with me was storytelling and writing. She would read to me, buy me books when I could read on my own, read the stories I wrote about Gumby in first grade, and she bought me a laptop when I was fourteen so I could type up my weird fantasy stories. That was another thing she understood that my father did not – needing an art to stay sane.

Now we get to the CD itself. It was, as I recall, a sort of country-pop musical narrative about Joseph Smith's life and several of its dominant characters. There was a melancholic

ballad for Joseph's wife, Emma Hale, the real-life version of whom had to deal with Joseph's insistence on instituting polygamy in the church. There was a twangy banger about Porter Rockwell, who was more or less Joseph's hired hitman. And the tragic tale of the Mormons' oppression is told in a variety of songs designed to make you cry. I first heard the album performed live at a church event when I was like eleven. It was, predictably, a hit in the community. Everyone's mom bought a copy of the CD, including mine. And that's what she figured was appropriate for a 45-minute car ride to a church-sponsored youth event serving dinner at a homeless shelter.

I've never been able to be as uninhibited as my mother in her love for singing, or her love for anything. I am tightly wound. I'm not sure I've ever relaxed, but I try my best to have fun with the things I make and the things I do. She's a huge inspiration to me in this, in just having a good time and not taking life too seriously. She's had a hard life, as most of our mothers have, and I'm grateful she's had music to comfort and delight her throughout it.

Most of us would have listened in silence or, like me, dissociated in silence, but one of the girls in the car, let's call her Suzie, knew all the lyrics and all the notes of every song and proved it by singing along to the whole thing. To this day I am impressed by her chutzpah. I am impressed, too, by her technical skill. She came from a family where music and making music was important. There was no slacking off on piano practice for those kids. They sang in the church choir and sometimes performed solos and duets. However, while they were all extremely capable, they were not what I would call good singers. This may seem oxymoronic; it confuses me as I write this. I am sure that when Suzie sang, she hit all the notes; I am equally sure that I did not enjoy listening to her sing. Simply put, she didn't have a good voice. As far as I remember, no one in her family did.

I only really sing when I'm alone. In the car, mostly, or on Sundays when I clean the kitchen while Emily's at the grocery store. I turn on a playlist, often at random, hitting *next* until the song feels right. There are certain days when the only songs that feel right are the ones I sang in the car with my mom. Today, it was Whitney Houston's *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*. I barely realized I was singing until I locked eyes with one of the cats, who watched, confused. But I leaned into it, kept singing, serenaded both cats while I scrubbed the sink. I've used a lot of past tense in this letter, but I'm not really any less nervous than I was as a child. And I still have an easier time being around my mom than anyone else, at least when it comes to those small freak outs about miniscule things like choosing a postcard or a box of granola bars. Things that feel huge in my mind but confuse most people. I worry that I'm exhausting. I know I'm miserable to shop with and probably miserable to travel with and maybe even a little miserable to live with, but my mom makes me feel less crazy, less exhausting. She's had almost thirty years of practice, so she knows which things to tease me about and which things to leave alone. She knows how to get through those vibrations (which is really all I can think to call them unless you want to call them episodes. I don't mind either). I guess what I'm trying to say is: I love my

mother very much. She is not perfect, and our relationship is not perfect – who’s is? – but I love her.

Still, Suzie sang her heart out for a full 45 minutes, which did feel a bit like a social experiment designed to test whether anyone would say anything, but no one in the car did. My mom didn’t even crank up the music to drown her out, probably out of fear of embarrassing her. She and I shared a look after dropping off the others and going home, but I don’t think we said anything about it; honestly, more awkward things happened regularly at church events. I was thirteen, and every day I spent in my gangly uncoordinated body felt like punishment; every word that came out of my mouth felt like a crime. I’m sure Suzie’s not listening to this letter, and I don’t know if she remembers this happening or how she’d feel about it now, but if she were I’d tell her, truly, it was amazing. Her confidence and her love of music weren’t infectious in that particular crowd, but they were awe-inspiring. As the song goes, “You didn’t always sing it right, but who could call you wrong?”

When I think of this song, I think of the lines, “Who could ask you be unbroken or be brave again?/ Or, honey, hope even on this side of the grave again.” These lines in particular make me think of my mother. There’s a whole other letter to be written about how music probably saved my mother’s life after my nephew, her grandson, died. About what it’s like to watch your parent go through a depression and then, thankfully, find joy again. About how she once again shared that music with me, once again while we were in a car, and maybe saved me, too. But that’s not the letter I have in me today. One day, maybe, but until then, as always, here’s to noise making.

I love the way you refer to singing in this song: noise-making. That’s all it is, at the tender, raw core of it. Just sound waves. We produce those all the time, thoughtlessly, reflexively, helplessly. And quality is a subjective metric determined and honed by people’s piano teachers or aunts or church choir directors. It is both innate and refinable. I am sure that my singing voice is, at best, mediocre; I am sure that through years of practice and hard work, I might increase my vocal range and strength, but I might never be good to listen to. And that is fine. Maybe it is even the same with any skill, even writing, but I won’t be storing my singing voice in a dusty attic or trading it to a sea witch. It dies, weak but well-loved, with me.