

Rock and Roll, Records, and Reminiscence: Ethnography of a 1950's Memorabilia Collector

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On the afternoon of Thanksgiving, I made the twenty minute drive to the home of my grandparents. Although the drive is short, the location of my grandparent's home feels as though it is worlds away from the congested town I now live in. As I got closer and closer to their residence, the sight of strip malls and housing developments were replaced by visions of corn fields and open land. As I pulled into their driveway, I immediately noticed the American flag that hung from the porch swaying gently from the brisk, fall wind. Despite it being autumn, not a single leaf appeared on their lawn. The lawn was cut so precisely that it appeared as if each blade of grass was equal in length. Unlike the serenity of the landscape surrounding me, my mind was rapidly assessing the upcoming interview I was to conduct.

It was the morning of Thanksgiving, and I was to interview Richard, my grandfather, who has consented to participate in this ethnographic project. Since I can remember, Richard has always been quite the talker. He has never been afraid of voicing his opinion on matters of politics or religion. There is nothing Richard seems to enjoy more than conversing with others about his love for all things from the 1950's decade. As an avid record collector, Richard owns over 6,000 records. Despite Richard's tendency of speaking so openly about his hobbies and opinions, he often remains quite silent when it comes to matters of the self. This has led me to wonder on many occasions just who the man behind the records and 1950's memorabilia is.

It was Richard's hobby of record collecting that inspired this ethnographic piece. His particular interest led me to wonder what elements of his personality, if any, directed him to such a hobby. I chose to take a cultural relativist perspective throughout this life history, meaning that Richard's life within a cultural context must be analyzed in order to understand the development of his identity. Specifically, I was interested in understanding the influence of culture upon the development of Richard's record collecting hobby. I intended to seek out patterns within Richard's responses and reflect upon what such patterns said about Richard's culture and identity. I went into the interview with a list of list of questions. However, shortly into the interview I stopped asking Richard the questions I viewed as important and let him explain what he perceived to be the meaningful events in his life. After all, it is his life. Who am I to decide what is or is not a significant point of conversation regarding the life of another individual? Thus, I made it my mission to let Richard's voice be heard.

"Can you tell which is real and which is fake?" Richard asked me while holding up two copies of The Beatles album Abbey Road. The front of each record appeared to be identical, however when the records were turned around, the print on the back of one of the albums was printed upside down.

"That one's gotta be the real one," I said as I pointed to the copy with the print right side up.

"You're wrong! This one right here, with the words backwards, that's an original copy. They only printed so many, it's a real collector's item. I found this one at a yard sale for a nickel!"

"Do you have any other records by the Beatles?" I asked.

“Do I? I have every record they ever put out! Some of them I have multiples of!” Richard explained proudly.

Richard and I sat in his basement where he kept his records and 1950’s collector’s items. He designed the basement to resemble a 1950’s diner. We sat on an authentic neon blue booth that came from a diner in Florida that Richard had purchased in an auction. Directly above the booth there hung a four foot wide Coca Cola sign. The light it produced appeared to reflect off the checker board floors. To the right of where we sat was a separate room that housed his 6,000 albums. Floor to ceiling shelves supported the massive amount of records. The records were organized alphabetically by the name of the artist or group. Next to the diner booth where we sat was Richard’s guitar. He picked it up and began strumming and singing “Jailhouse Rock” by Elvis. We both laughed at his interpretation. Richard taught himself how to play the guitar at the age of 60.

“Have you always been interested in music?” I asked.

“I’ve always liked music and dancing. I remember watching “Bandstand” and Dick Clark on TV, going to dances. The dances back then weren’t like today where the boys and girls stand on separate sides of the gymnasium. Or if they do dance they look like they’re doing something sexual. But we would just dance and have so much fun. If I had a voice, I would have loved to have been a singer or something in the entertainment field. Since I can’t sing, I just collect records. The fun part is when you find the record you’ve been looking for at a yard sale right in front of your face. When I was a kid we didn’t have the money to buy records and I always wanted them. Now I have the chance to buy them.”

Richard was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1943. His mother was just sixteen years of age and his father was eighteen when he was born. “In those days down south, everyone got married and had children real young,” he explained. At the time of his birth, his father, also named Richard, was stationed in the Philippines fighting against the Japanese in World War II. His father was of English and Irish decent, while his mother was a member of the Cherokee tribe. When I asked him to recall if the family engaged in ethnic rituals or celebrations, Richard explained, “We didn’t. We celebrated all the America holidays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter. But we didn’t do anything Irish or Cherokee. You know, we didn’t even talk about that family stuff, really. I mean, I always knew I was Cherokee, but my mother never brought it up.”

I wondered why a family would choose not to share their cultural traditions with their children. Likewise, I was puzzled by the fact that Richard never felt the need to question his parents on the topic. Tracing my family roots has been an interest of mine for quite a while. As a member of ancestry.com and other online family history resources, I have collected a tremendous amount of data on past generations of my family. I found it strange that I seemed to have more knowledge on the names and stories of past relatives than my own grandfather.

At the age of six, Richard’s family left Tennessee for Gloucester City, New Jersey. His father was originally from Gloucester and made the decision to move the family for financial reasons. “It just wasn’t us who had no money, no one had any money after the war,” he recalled. When they moved to New Jersey, the family lived in a house they shared with other relatives. In total, there were three families living under one roof in a small row home in Gloucester City.

It was difficult for me to imagine what it must have been like growing up in an environment in which money was not always so readily available. Unlike Richard’s working class upbringing, I was raised in a middle class family. I grew up in a fairly large four bedroom, three bathroom home in the suburbs.

While Richard shared a bedroom with his siblings, I had the luxury of having my own bedroom. I never doubted where my next meal would come from or whether I'd get new clothes for school. I always had enough. In fact, I had more than enough. Aside from monetary differences, our childhoods also differed in terms of siblings. Richard is the oldest of three siblings, while I am an only child.

When I asked him about his siblings he responded by saying:

"I was the oldest. I had a sister who was three years younger than me and a brother ten years younger than me. Now my sister was a little prima donna. She was in all these dancing schools and thought she was better than everyone. My brother was a spoiled little kid. Back then he had a great personality. He was real funny and everyone on the block used to feed him cakes and cookies because he made them laugh. That made him overweight as a child. I haven't talked to either one of them in years."

"Why haven't you spoken to them?"

"I just don't agree with the way they live their lives. My brother became a real nasty alcoholic.

My sister became a scam artist. She practically stole money from my father when he was old. She's always been looking for the easy way out, since she was a kid. She's lazy, has no pride."

"What about your parents? What was your relationship like with them?"

"My mother and father were both very strict. If I didn't do what I was told, my toys would be broken. My mother used to smoke a lot and she used to make me run down to the corner store to buy her cigarettes. Well one day, I told her no. I had just finished putting this model plane together and I was real proud of it because it took hours and hours to make. Well, with my mother's temper, she snapped my plane in half just because I told her no. She had a bad temper. I remember another time I talked back to her and she just took off her shoe right there and threw it at me. I ducked down and it missed me and broke the window. Today they'd probably call that child abuse, but that was ordinary in the fifties. My neighbors' families were all the same."

"My dad had a temper, too. I remember one time, actually this is probably my earliest memory, I got hurt real bad in school. I was probably in kindergarten or first grade. They had these metal desks and a kid in back of me, his name was Carney, pushed me. I hit my head, started bleeding everywhere, and had to go to the hospital. Well my father walks into the hospital. He was mad because he had to leave work early to come to the hospital. He walked in and started yelling at the doctor's "who the hell is running this hospital?"

Shortly into our interview it began to occur to me that Richard had a tendency of justifying his responses to himself by comparing his own life to the lives of others. The response "that's the way it was in the 50's" appeared several times throughout the interview process. In fact, he often ended more sensitive conversations with that statement. Specifically, he assured me that his parent's harsh punishments were the norm. Was this just "a sign of the times" or is it something more?

Like many young people, Richard struggled with what direction to take in life after he graduated high school. Because he was uncertain of what to do with his life, he decided to join to the United States Navy.

"What was it like being in the Navy?"

"I graduated high school in 1962 and two weeks later I was in boot camp. Boot camp was hell. They would tell you, "Boys, your momma ain't here now." They really put you through hell. You were constantly jogging, exercising. It was all just testing you to make sure you were gonna be a good soldier. So when they told me to do something, I just did it!

"Where did you travel to when you were in the navy?"

"My ship was the USS Boxer. We used to patrol all the little islands in the Caribbean. My ship was sailing right near Cuba when Castro took over and there was all kinds of uprisings. We went into Haiti and Santa Domingo to get all the Americans out when all this was going on in Cuba. After that we took a north Atlantic cruise to Le Havre, France. The French are a different kind of people. They're so laid back, too laid back, actually they're just plain lazy! Then we went to Plymouth, England for a while. The English are more like us, except they're more polite and I really liked that. We also went to Barcelona and Sweden for a while."

"When you were in Haiti and Santo Domingo helping to bring the Americans home, did you feel like you were in any kind of danger?"

"No. We got lucky. I never felt like I was in any real danger. In fact, I had a lot of fun. Like when we were in St. Thomas, I also had shore patrol duty. I know it sounds like a job, but really shore patrol was just keeping your guys out of trouble when they went off and got drunk on the islands. I remember waiting around at a hotel called Blueberry Hill in St. Thomas for my buddies to stumble in intoxicated. That was real funny. I also played on the ship's baseball team, which was neat because it got me out of certain duties. I played third base. It was really something being able to play baseball in beautiful places like Jamaica and the Virgin Islands."

"I never thought I'd hear about how fun the navy was!"

"No, no it was hard work, don't get me wrong. Remember, I said boot camp was hell. Sure, I had fun, but I learned a lot. It was a great experience, being in the Navy, because I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life. In those short years I was there, I learned responsibility and I grew up fast."

When Richard completed his service in the United States Navy, he returned home to Gloucester City and began looking for a job. He applied for apprenticeships in various trades. He received numerous job offers; however he decided to accept an apprenticeship in plumbing for the DuPont company. One of the main reasons he chose to become a plumber was because his father was also a plumber. After finishing his apprenticeship, he joined the plumber's union and later in life he started his own plumbing business.

In addition to finding a career after leaving the service, Richard also found his wife, Dorothy.

When he talked about his wife, his rather tense body language became more relaxed and a smile appeared on his face. I noticed that he only seemed to smile when the topics of conversation were either music or Dorothy. Such a reaction to the mention of his wife made me realize just how deeply he loved her.

"How did you meet?"

"I was driving around Gloucester in my baby blue Ford Thunderbird and I saw my cousin walking down the street with a friend. Her friend immediately caught my eye and I asked for her name. It was Dorothy."

"Do you remember when you asked her to marry you?"

"Yeah, I made dinner, we were at my apartment. I don't remember what I made. It was probably something like Chef Boyardee out of the pantry. I can remember setting the table and being nervous. I did ask her father first. She said yes, of course."

"How did you know she was the one for you?"

"I knew when I first met her she was going to be my wife. She was just the real deal, nothing phony about her. Everyone loved her, no one could say a bad word about her. You know the vows you take when you get married? It seems like today nobody really means them. But your grandmother and I, we really meant them. That's the truth."

Listening to my grandfather talk about his love for my grandmother made me feel as though I was reading a love story or watching a film like *The Notebook*. I suppose I have become somewhat of a pessimist when it comes to love. I've witnessed quite a few loved ones go through devastating divorces, which has made me weary of marriage. I've declared several times that I have no intentions to ever get married. I've often questioned whether or not true love even exists or if it's just some type of marketing propaganda used by companies, like Disney, to profit at the cost of our naive thinking. However, hearing Richard talk about his love for his wife made me dismiss my previous views on love. He made me realize that love is out there and very much alive in the hearts of couples like Richard and Dorothy.

Richard and Dorothy went on to become the parents of four boys. When I asked him what his favorite memories of his sons were growing up, he reminisced about playing sports with them and coaching their little league teams. I asked him to recall any funny or embarrassing memories of his children and he discussed the several times one son in particular got into trouble.

"One time in basketball, he didn't get the call he wanted, so he just sat there in the middle of the court. He wouldn't move! I was so embarrassed. Another time, he didn't make the all-stars team, so he called the coach a big, fat pig! The coach was supposed to be a real tough guy. Anyway, the coach put his hands on my son! At that point, I didn't care what my son said, he can't do that to my kid! I was ready to go that day. Like I said, he was supposed to be a real tough guy, but he backed down."

"What are you most proud of about your sons now?"

"Well, they all grew up to be nice young people. With this economy a lot of people are just lazy and collecting unemployment checks, but my sons are so hard working. They take good care of their families. I may not like the way they do things, but they work so hard."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, not just my sons, I don't agree with the entire young generation. I think we're too permissive. We have lost our morals. The parents aren't taking care of their kids like they should."

"What was so different about when you grew up?"

"The fifties were very low key. Everybody was the same. Now no one is the same. People just care about themselves. Everything is so different. Music is even different. I know every era has its music,

but back then you could at least understand the words! It's not like this rap stuff. Did you know they booed Elvis off stage at the Grand Ole Opry? They booed Elvis off stage for shaking his hips! That shows you how wrong they were."

Attempting to defend my generation, I asked, "Well, since the older generation was wrong about Elvis, don't you think you could be wrong too about my generation?"

He sat quietly for a moment, staring at my forehead. I wasn't sure if he was thinking about how to respond to me or how offended he was by my question. He started chuckling and all he said was, "I know I'm right." I decided not to push my luck and changed the subject immediately. I could tell that he was not open to hearing alternate views, so I let it go at that. Richard suggested that we join the rest of the family upstairs for dessert, so I followed him out of the basement and into the dining room. While talking over coffee and pumpkin pie, I asked Richard to tell me about life now. He told me that being retired, everyday feels like being in the film *Groundhog Day*, in which Bill Murray relives the same day over and over again. Every morning, he and his wife have their breakfast together and go for a walk. After that, they read the newspaper. The afternoon is spent either playing the guitar, sorting through his record collection, or maintain his perfectly kept yard. Then it is time for dinner, television, and bed. Every Saturday and Sunday morning, Richard attends various yard sales in the hopes of expanding both his record and 50's memorabilia collections.

After dessert, we headed back to the basement. We spent the rest of the evening playing pool. The pool table was situated in the midst of Richard's records and collector's items. We played pool in two teams, Richard and I versus my father and uncle. Distracted by his records, I found myself constantly dragging him back to the game and away from his records. Throughout the game, Richard played various records from the 1950's and shared with us facts about the artists we heard. About an hour into the game, we attempted to change the music to something a bit more upbeat and modern. Richard wouldn't have it. He insisted we listen to his music. He made it clear that it was his house, his music. This was a familiar scene. Like earlier in our interview when Richard refused to think positively about my generation, I was once again exposed to Richard's inability to be open to anything but his own thoughts and interests. Further, I was able to see just how important Richard's music and records are to him.

A concept related to relativism is arbitrariness. Arbitrariness states that "we all look at the same world, but attend to different parts of it." Much like the notion of arbitrariness, Richard and I both live within the same world and the same culture; however what we attend to is quite different. One explanation for such a divide in views is based on the changing culture of America. American culture in the 1950's was vastly different from American culture today. Culture is not fixed; rather it is a mechanism that is ever changing. Growing up within the context of 1950's American culture influenced both Richard's hobbies and sense of self.

The working and middle class families of the 1950's displayed interdependent personality types, rather than the independent personalities we often see within American culture today. The family, both immediate and extended, served as a source of economic support in the time following the end of World War II. The family working together as a unit helped ensure survival. Therefore, the needs of the family were of greater importance than the needs of the individual. Richard was raised in such an environment. Early childhood socialization influenced Richard's formation of beliefs that the younger generation's independent way of being is a negative thing. Statements such as "your neighbors were all the same" and "everyone was the same, now everyone is different" support this notion. A lack of an independent self is also evident in the choice of names.

For instance, Richard's father was also named Richard and he chose to name his son, my father, Richard. Continuing the name for three generations illustrates of a sense of tradition and belonging to a group, rather than being an individual that is unique from other family members.

As the culture of the 1950's began to change, Richard's interdependent self also began to slightly change. Artists like Elvis Presley brought a level of creativity and individuality to American culture that sparked an interest in the youth of that time. Adolescents saw the rock and roll music of the 1950's as a way to embrace their own individuality. In many ways, Richard continued to identify with the interdependent self in which his parents instilled in him. However, music became a way for Richard to feel unique.

Related to the idea of interdependent ways of being, Americans in the 1950's were concerned with displaying American pride. After the devastation of World War II and events like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans felt the need to demonstrate their patriotism. Richard's parent's lack of sharing their ethnic roots with their children reflects such views, especially considering Richard's father's service in World War II. Richard's mother's connection to the Cherokee tribe went against the traditional American rituals and values. Therefore Cherokee traditions were not celebrated or discussed. Richard's experiences were similar to those of Frantz Fanon, who was raised to embrace European culture and disregard his African heritage. Unlike Fanon, Richard did not question his parents due to the fact that he embodied the American way of life as a result of his interdependent personality.

Richard's experience of the ritual of boot camp is also associated with the level of importance he places upon being a member of the group, rather than being independent. Using exercise to bring about a state of exhaustion, boot camp sent Richard to a state of vulnerability, which made him open to embracing the values held by the U.S. Navy. As Morinis's hypothesis states, the pain Richard experienced in boot camp brought about a strong connection with the group. This rite of passage was indeed meaningful to Richard because he began to identify himself as a member of the group.

Traditions are still very important to Richard. However the traditions, interests, and values exclusively reflect that of white, middle class, American society. For instance, many of Richard's fondest memories involve baseball. Baseball has long been attributed as being "America's pastime." Consequently, it is likely Richard developed such an interest in baseball because of the sport's importance in popular American culture.

A theme which kept repeating throughout the interview was the importance Richard placed on hard work. Richard forms opinions about others based on his perception of whether or not they were hard working. This is a result of Richard being socialized to embrace the values of the Protestant work ethic. It is also connected to Richard's humble upbringing. During his childhood, Richard experienced firsthand his family's move up the social class ladder from near poverty, to middle class. His own experience regarding social class reinforced his strong beliefs in the Protestant work ethic.

The way in which Richard experiences his gender can also be traced to childhood socialization. For instance, when Richard got into an argument with another parent at a basketball game, he proudly discussed his ability to be "tougher" than the other parent. From an early age, American children are socialized to believe that men are physical, while women are docile. Seeing his father return home from war as a young child further reinforced the idea that men are to be tough, physical beings.

In many ways, Richard's fascination with records and all things related to the 1950's is his own way of embodying the values and belief systems of the 1950's. Unlike the many changes in American culture throughout the years, Richard's records remain constant. Music may change, fashion may

change, values may change, yet Richard can always count on his records to take him back to a particular place in time. They are not only a reminder of fond memories, but also a symbol of values that he feels we have lost. Feeling perhaps as if he has lost a connection with the younger generation, his records serve as a constant companion.

Throughout the years, my grandfather's record collection had become almost an annoyance to our family. We'd often half seriously, half-jokingly remark about how he cherished his records more than his own family. Nearly every conversation with my grandfather always ended up going in the direction of either the 1950's or his collections. I cannot say my experience with this case study sparked an interest in record collecting or even got me to like 1950's music. What it did do, however, was allowed me to see my grandfather in a different light. That's the beauty of anthropology. The discipline forces the ethnographer to put aside his or her own biases and come to an understanding about an individual. Anthropology's greatest contribution to the study of culture and identity is objectivity. By going into this life history project with an open mind, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of my grandfather and the significance of his record collection. What I once thought of as junk and clutter are now beginning to appear to me as gems.