

NPR made me hip to my kids

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ONCE I WAS at least slightly cool. Back in that mythic late-'60s-early-'70s era that we fondly call "the '60s," I was a college kid with long hair and faded jeans who listened to Jefferson Airplane, the Stones, Hendrix and The Band.

I went to anti-war demonstrations, and I played the guitar. I was never really cool, but my lack of cool was far less obvious.

Today, however, I am a college professor with gray hair. I wear khakis, and I listen to National Public Radio. And I have kids — a boy and girl, both entering the adolescent world where cool is the currency, for whom it seems unimaginable that their father ever had any. Until now.

I'm not into music the way I once was. In college, I bought an album a week, but these days I rarely buy more than three or four CDs a year. Although I don't listen to music as much as I did then, I am always on the lookout for something that will give me the same rush I used to get from Joni Mitchell's *Blue* or the first Crosby Stills and Nash album. Meanwhile, I listen to Public Radio.

One day last summer, I was driving down the Interstate with the windows open listening to the local NPR affiliate. A rock-music critic came on and gave a rave review of a new album called *Welcome Interstate Managers*, by Fountains of Wayne. He played snippets of a few fast-tempoed pop songs with very clever, if somewhat adolescent, lyrics. Several of the cuts were quite humorous, and the reviewer took the time to explain that one of the songs, "Stacy's Mom," was about a high-school boy who has a crush on his friend's mother.

Remembering that I hadn't bought any music since Diana Krall's last, somewhat disappointing, offering, I went home and ordered the CD. When it arrived, I was instantly hooked. The songs were addictive — a bit adolescent, yes, but at my age it is reassuring to know that teenage angst still has an appeal. I found myself singing the songs in the car, around the house, in the supermarket. Singing them when I didn't want to be singing them.

My kids, on the other hand, were unimpressed. I played *Welcome Interstate Managers* whenever I had them trapped in the car, and I did my best to convince them that these funny, poignant songs were pure genius and that this could be our "Album of the Summer."

These might be songs that, years hence, would conjure up memories of our vacation in San Francisco and trips to the Dairy Queen. But each time I put on the CD, they said, "Yeah, Dad. Whatever," and donned headphones in an effort to drown out my music with the plaintive warblings of Clay Aiken or some other false god.

But then a miracle happened. Surfing an Internet music site, my 11-year-old daughter discovered that "Stacy's Mom" had become a hit. Was this possible? Could Dad actually be a fan of something that popular? Even more unlikely, could he have been a fan of the group before the song was popular? This was too weird.

Then school started, and my kids discovered that everybody was singing "Stacy's Mom." It was on the radio; it was the No. 1 downloaded single at the iTunes Music Store; DJs played it at dances; the video, starring supermodel Rachel Hunter as Stacy's mom, went to No. 1 on the VH1 video list; and all the kids at school knew the words by heart. Each new encounter with the song was reported to me at home, and a subtle change began to take place.

One day in the car, I heard my high-school-freshman son say, "Dad, that Fountains of Wayne thing isn't bad. Pop it in." I resisted the urge to gloat, and have since quietly supplied both kids with copies of the CD. Now they have joined me as involuntary singers of the songs.

But best of all, for a few moments, I turned out to be cool, after all. What, to my kids, once seemed like an insufferably nerdy, out-of-touch dad turned out to have hints of hip. Maybe he isn't so embarrassing, after all. I don't expect it to last, but I'm enjoying it while I can. Meanwhile, I keep listening to NPR.

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