The Last Mixtape
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When you're invited to deliver the LaFollette Lecture, you find out a year ahead. The great thing about that is you have so much time to think about it. The downside is that you have SO MUCH TIME TO THINK ABOUT IT.

I've been spending a lot of that time thinking about **music**. And I've brought some with me today. **Curated**. You've been listening to a few tracks as you arrived. Some years ago, Jennifer taught me these are called **artifacts**. I'll be looking carefully at these **artifacts** to explore how they're built and what they mean. She taught me that's called **unpacking**. So, buckle in because I'm going to be unpacking artifacts like crazy. She loves it when I talk like that.

I've been teaching **Theater** and **Film** for 37 years. 32 of those here at Wabash. So today, of course, I'm going to talk about **neither one**. You fairly may wonder why. Because for as long as I can remember, music has been my friend. When I was lonely, it kept me company. When I was confused, it gave shape to feelings I couldn't name—sung in the voice of someone who'd already been there, who knew. In my darkest times, it comforted me. It's the one friend that never moved away, never grew tired of me, never let me down. Music is the one thing my father gave me that I'm grateful for.

Now, I've also loved staging **plays**, and I've loved teaching **film**. Truly. What a blessing that this College let me do those things—with tons of support, and very little interference. But music was my **first** love. It feeds my soul. Maybe you understand.

And here's the wild part: for the last going on five years, right outside those doors, the College has actually **paid me money** to set up shop in the Music Department. It's like going to your high school reunion and running into your first **real** girlfriend. You're gray, you're forty years older, you're a little worse for wear… but she looks **exactly the same**. She leans in and says, "Hey baby, you wanna pick up where we left off?" And you say, "Yes. Yes, I do." In the real-life analog of this story, the role of the girlfriend was played by Todd McDorman. I just like the picture of that.

But music isn't my ***real*** focus today. I'm more interested… in **love**. And **vulnerability**. And how you can't have one without the other. And how music so often shows us that. Or reminds us. Makes us feel it. Literally. Vibrating the tiny bones in our ears. The Humanities mingling with Physics.

So, let's get to it.

I cried when Brian Wilson died in June. He always felt like a kindred spirit. His song *In My Room* said everything I knew about creating your own safe space as a kid—awkward, unsure, living under the shadow of an angry father. And when you look through Wilson's catalog, you find it everywhere: loneliness, alienation, the ache of not belonging. What made him extraordinary was how openly he carried that into his music. That openness was the source of his genius, but also the wound that never healed.

The day Brian died, I made a playlist of my favorite songs and played them through the house. When Zoe came home, she sat and listened with me. Later, we cued it up in the car on our way to somewhere.

So, on the night he died, it struck me: without thinking, I had reached for an old habit of the heart. It was a kind of self-soothing, but it was also a way to build a **story** out of what felt like a loss. I had made a **mixtape**. And it helped.

Since then, I've been thinking about what it means to live—and to teach—with a **mixtape mind.** When we **share** what we love, we put ourselves at risk. But it's such a **hopeful** gesture. Do you remember? When she hears this one song – right after the one I put before it – she will finally understand me.

It's vulnerable work, saying: *Here, I love this. Here's what moves me. Judge my heart.*

A mixtape was never just a pile of songs. It was a channel of communication. You made one when words weren't enough—when you needed music to say who you were, or how you felt about someone. It's also a way of shaping memory. The act of **choosing** and **ordering** songs—rewinding, dubbing, listening back—it turns loose tracks into a story.

And unlike a playlist now, a mixtape had **friction**. Time limits, hiss, the possibility of messing up the pause button. It required attention, effort. That's part of why it felt personal—you invested **labor** into the gift.

So, when I talk about this lecture as a mixtape, I mean it that way—finite, imperfect, stitched together with intention. A message and a mirror.

For the past ten years or so at Wabash, I've boiled my teaching down to two things I want my students to learn: how to **see**, and how to **love**. Just those two. How to stop—just **stop**—and really look, or really listen. How to find **words** for the love that's already in them, words chosen with **care**. It takes a vulnerability they've rarely tapped, and a vocabulary they don't yet have. My job is to make space for one and give them tools for the other.

And of course, that's our work, isn't it? The humanities in action: disciplines that teach us not just to analyze, but to feel, to give shape to experience …to practice loving—in a way that requires our soft selves.

I'm here today to model that practice. Putting myself out here. Hoping you won't laugh in the wrong places. Hoping music will help me find the words. Hoping you'll understand me better—and maybe carry away something I most want to give you.

Just like a mixtape. This is my mixtape.

Drop the needle on the Beach Boys and what you hear at first is sunshine—surfboards, cars, endless summer. But beneath it all stood a young man in Hawthorne, California, who didn't know how to surf, who was deaf in one ear from a blow delivered by his father. Brian Wilson could hear harmonies the way others see color, fusing doo-wop and jazz, weaving them into something popular music had never known.

The Beach Boys began with beach anthems, but Wilson's restlessness drove them past novelty into songs like "Don't Worry Baby," "The Warmth of the Sun". Each song more tender, more intricate - until 1966 when he delivered *Pet Sounds*, arguably the greatest pop album ever made. Suddenly pop was orchestral, oddly-textured, intimate—Brian was the first popular musician to turn the studio itself into an instrument. Fans were confused. The record label freaked out. The Beatles, though… went straight to *Sgt. Pepper.*

A key part of his genius was how he used the band's voices like a composer choosing instruments. Brian routinely gave his best melodies away, assigning them to the voice that best served the song. His brother Carl sang lead on "God Only Knows," the most beautiful song Brian ever wrote. Carl also lead on "Good Vibrations," Brian's most complex song.

Mike Love was the voice of the sun-drenched hits: "Surfin' Safari," "I Get Around," and "California Girls". But Brian saved the most vulnerable and introspective songs for himself: "In My Room," "Don't Worry Baby," and "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times". The contrast in those titles tells the whole story.

An early glimpse of this inner world is tucked onto the album *Surfin' U.S.A.* from 1963, a song most people skipped right past. No surfboards, no cars, no girls. Just "Lonely Sea". Maybe you think you know the Beach Boys sound. But maybe not.

[Song: *Lonely Sea* by the Beach Boys]

Here's Brian writing in C major and somehow making it sound fragile and mournful. So, why does this song ache the way it does?

If you look at the song chart, you can see it's full of chords that don't belong in the sunny key of C major.

In fact, it contains more **non-diatonic chords** – that just means chords that don't belong in this key - than diatonic ones. Brian's genius was to take the brightness of C major and shade it with the darker tones of its parallel minor. It's not a key change—it's a **mood** change, a color shift. We **think** we're in a surf ballad, but the harmony keeps slipping into shadows, a major key haunted by its minor twin: C minor.

To add more texture, he has the bass and percussion play in triplets, giving the song a swaying 6/4 feel instead of a standard 4/4 march. And the tempo is slow, around 66 beats per minute, which is about the tempo of the human heart at rest. It's a Beach Boys record, but it's a pure Brian Wilson song—a precursor of the magnificent, orchestral pop he would soon create.

He enhances this feeling with a few other masterstrokes. He sustains his melody notes while the chords change underneath, creating the feeling that he's floating on the water as the harmony sways and undulates beneath him. That 6/4 time signature rocks him gently, like the tide.

To appreciate how radical this was, you have to remember what pop music sounded like in 1963. You had teen idols like Frankie Avalon, and even good songwriters like Smokey Robinson, but their sad ballads were built on predictable musical foundations. A song like *Blue Velvet* is haunting, but it's three chords dressed up. Brian was using a different language entirely. And he was just getting started.

The only pop artists operating at this level were The Beatles. You can hear this same kind of painful, mature introspection in Paul McCartney's "For No One", a perfect chamber piece about the quiet end of love. "And in her eyes you see nothing." No pleading, no drama—just painful inevitability. But that song was released on *Revolver* in 1966. Brian Wilson was already in that space three years earlier.

By the time he got to *Pet Sounds* Brian was doing things no one else was doing. Listen to this clip from *Good Vibrations* and see if you can track all the sounds Brian recorded.

[Song: *Good Vibrations* by the Beach Boys]

What are we hearing? Theremin, cello, harpsichord, jaw harp: tambourine, sleigh bells, maracas, Hammond organ, a purposely out-of-tune piano. And layer upon layer of vocal harmonies and ad hoc sounds.

At this point in his career, Brian Wilson starts treating the recording studio like a **laboratory**. For him, technology wasn't just there to erase mistakes; it became the palette he used to construct his intricate soundscapes—whole worlds of longing and joy, fragile and immense.

And that move—turning knobs and tape reels into extensions of himself—points to something bigger. For Brian, technology wasn't neutral; it was expressive, even confessional. Every splice and overdub was a way of wrestling with the gap between the inner room where he felt safe and the outer world where he never did. That's why his music hurts the way it does: you can hear both rooms at once.

Brian's music keeps circling that tension—private ache versus public mask. Few artists in popular music have borne it more vulnerably, more honestly, or more painfully, than Brian Wilson.

Growing up in the '70s, I was bound to be drawn to the remarkable singer-songwriters of that era: Paul Simon, Carole King, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon. And I had all their records. But everything—and I mean ***everything***—changed for me when two knuckleheads in black suits and thin ties appeared on Saturday Night Live.

And then this happened.

[Video: *The Blues Brothers* opening]

On the surface, *The Blues Brothers* looked like a joke stretched too far: the sunglasses, the deadpan delivery, the cartoon car chases. But the key was that they played it **straight**. Belushi and Aykroyd didn't wink at the camera; they put on those suits like they were punching a clock for work.

The reverence was real, and it came from Aykroyd. He grew up in Ottawa with a deep obsession, listening to late-night blues and R&B stations out of Chicago and Detroit. He was the one stockpiling Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf records. Belushi wasn't a blues fan at first; he was all about The Who and Zeppelin—hard rock. But one night, he wandered into the speakeasy Aykroyd ran in New York, heard the records and the jams, and got hooked. That's the **real** beginning: not a comedy bit, but one friend converting another.

Within two years, they had a #1 platinum record and a hit movie. They surrounded themselves with a band of killer players—Steve Cropper, Duck Dunn, Matt "Guitar" Murphy—and then brought in the legends themselves: Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, John Lee Hooker, and Cab Calloway.

For me, and for a lot of kids, that's exactly how it worked. Comedy got us in the door, but their real achievement was smuggling soul and blues into the ears of a generation that might never have gone looking. The Blues Brothers weren't a parody; they were a conduit. They put the canon of Black American music on a big screen and made suburban kids stop laughing long enough to really listen. To stop. And listen.

The Blues Brothers themselves were fun, but they were a gateway. The film's radical move was to simply stop and let the music **play**. The plot of the movie steps aside for a **dozen full-scale musical numbers**, which take up a third of the film's runtime.

James Brown gets a full six-minute gospel fury sequence, Aretha stops the movie cold with "Think," and John Lee Hooker performs on Maxwell Street, shot almost like a documentary. These are complete numbers from beginning to end. Most comedies would chop those down to fragments. This movie said: "No. Stop. *Listen*." It's worth remembering that Ackroyd, who co-wrote the screenplay, saw the movie as a **musical** from day one.

Let me show you what I mean.

In the gospel sequence, Jake and Elwood step into the fictional Triple Rock Baptist Church, and the narrative simply halts. James Brown, as the Reverend Cleophus James, takes the pulpit. Now, the choir behind him is the legendary Reverend James Cleveland Choir, and the man himself, James Cleveland, is a pivotal figure in American music. He was the music director at the Detroit church where Aretha Franklin grew up, and where her father was the minister. James Cleveland did two things that changed music forever: he taught Aretha how to play piano, and he taught her how to sing.

I'll come back to her.

[Clip: *The Blues Brothers*]

That performance occupies six minutes of the film—that's an eternity for a comedy. Even an actual musical musical - like West Side Story - doesn't have a number that long. And the moment isn't parody; it's revelation. The movie pauses to let a Black gospel service explode at full tilt.

You can hear it all in the mix: the call-and-response choir, the driving handclaps, the Hammond organ, the walking electric bass. – and the choreography by Carlton Johnson contains callbacks to ecstatic dancing in Black churches: the shout and the praise break. It's a film of reverence in so many ways. The film treats this music as the wellspring of soul and R&B. It gave Jake and Elwood their "mission from God." And it gave a 17-year-old kid from Indiana a whole new musical roadmap.

I can testify. My sister Laura is here. Laura, my best friend Mike Frye and I – did we or did we not dress up like Jake and Elwood and drive around town blasting soul music from a loudspeaker attached to my Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. Did we or did we not? We did.

This crazy movie…it changed my life.

So…that preacher with the hair in *The Blues Brothers*? My first stop after the movie was to learn about that sweaty force of nature called James Brown.

[Song: *Get On the Good Foot* by James Brown]

On this track, Brown's voice is pure percussion. He's not really "singing" in a melodic sense; he's riding the pocket, chopping up syllables and **dropping grunts like rimshots**. To hear how he builds the groove, you have to listen to the layers. The drums lock into a steady, syncopated funk beat. The bass lays down a simple riff. The rhythm guitar plays a staccato scratch, and the horns fire off stabs that answer his vocal cues. Call and response.

Each part is a piece of a rhythmic jigsaw, and they all point back to the first beat of the bar. That's what musicians call "**the one**." And this is James Brown's great leap: he realized you could park a whole song on one chord and still make it combustible, but only if every single instrument in the band—including his own voice—functions as a drum.

Now I have to be honest—James Brown was kind of **scary** to me. As a small-town kid, I didn't understand the world he came from. His intensity, his absolute command—it was a long way from the singer-songwriters I was used to. My mother hated him, and I think a lot of white America at the time felt the same. He wasn't just making music; he was projecting a kind of power and unfiltered Black identity that was intimidating to people who weren't ready for it.

His music felt like a different language. And I couldn't understand **his** rendering of love. Because it wasn't soft. It was proud. It was defiant. And often it was of a people. I couldn't fully access it. But his music? Man, I loved it.

Of course, soul music isn't only about the dance floor. Around the time of my "soul conversion," I made a **consequential** decision: I stopped watching *American Bandstand* and started watching *Soul Train*. I remember seeing Marvin Gaye on that show, not long before he tragically died, and the way the audience and the host, Don Cornelius, treated him—it was like he was a god. I started digging through his catalog and found this:

[Song: *Inner City Blues* by Marvin Gaye]

Instead of Brown's explosive funk, Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues" begins sparely: piano chords, a pulsing kick drum, and syncopated congas. Then thirty seconds in, Marvin's secret weapon emerges: the bassline from The Funk Brothers. The Funk Brothers were Motown's house band—the invisible engine behind that sound. From 1959 through the early 1970s, they played on more hits than the Beatles, the Stones, and Elvis combined.

When that bass jumps in, it isn't background support; it's another voice. In fact, if you listen carefully, you'll hear it's **double-tracked** with two bass lines recorded separately, mixed together. Not even McCartney was doing that. It's melodic and restless, it tightens the song into a hypnotic loop. I can demonstrate it for you.

If you want a master class on R&B bass playing, listen to this whole album - *What's Going On* - with headphones on.

This is the foundation over which Marvin works. Where James Brown pushes outward, Marvin Gaye pulls you in. His tone is weary and conversational, and he delivers outrage through silk. Even when the lyrics bristle with frustration, his voice never erupts; it floats upward in a falsetto that sounds both hopeless and hopeful at once. It's anguish without theatrics.

And he stacks his own vocal tracks, singing with himself, an octave apart — did you hear that? Listen… I extracted his vocal from the mix so you can hear it.

His chest voice is grounded on earth, his falsetto reaches for the spirit. This technique gets to the very definition of the genre. Soul music was always about carrying the sacred fire of gospel into the secular world of pop and R&B. Marvin's phrasing is steeped in the church, but his lyrics are political and worldly. That **tension**—the holy in the everyday—is the very **essence** of soul music.

And it's why soul music is such a **humanistic force**: it documents **lived** history; it wrestles with politics and protest; and it insists that the Black experience is inseparable from the story of what it means to be human.

When you place these two artists side-by-side, you begin to see the vast emotional territory of soul music: a full **spectrum** of expression. On one end, James Brown sets fire to the stage; on the other, Marvin Gaye lights a candle in the room. They both **burn** with their own **truth**, just at different temperatures.

(And if you stop and think about it… how is Prince not the love child of James Brown and Marvin Gaye? But that's another lecture.)

So…**what if** there was a singer who could live on **both** ends of that spectrum? Who could dig into that raw, gospel plea but also deliver that lush velvet? **What if** there was someone who could bring **all** of it together whenever she wanted?

Sometimes, in the **same song**.

In case **you** don't remember the Queen of Soul, I'm going to slow down a bit for Aretha. As my grandmother used to say, I'm gonna love on her a little bit. I feel no need to justify this choice.

When we ask who the greatest artists of the 20th century were, we're not just asking about record sales or chart positions. We're asking: who carried the full weight of human experience in their art? Who embodied both the private ache and the public cry? By that measure, Aretha Franklin stands at the very center of the conversation.

Her foundation was always gospel. The **church** is where she learned that **musical truth** isn't about perfection; it's about **surrender**. It's the willingness to give your entire self to the song. She carried that sacred fire into secular music, and as I've said that fusion ***is*** the definition of soul music.

Aretha was more than a singer—she was a cultural force. "Respect" became an anthem for both the civil rights and women's liberation movements. She sang at Martin Luther King's funeral and at presidential inaugurations, carrying the voice of a people in moments of grief, joy, and protest. For five decades she remained vital, singing not just soul but pop, gospel, even opera. The time she stepped in for a sick Luciano Pavarotti at the Grammys and sang "Nessun Dorma" on a moment's notice? She brought the house down.

Every singer who came after her was measured against her. Whitney, Adele, Alicia Keys, Beyoncé—she is the trunk of the modern vocal tree. And they've all acknowledged her. If such things matter to you, she was the first woman ever inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. And years later, *Rolling Stone* named her the Greatest Singer of All Time. Not the greatest *female* singer, not the greatest *soul* singer. The greatest. Period.

While some musicians embody raw, power and others restraint, Aretha held both extremes within her. She moved between them with a grace that made her the axis around which all of soul music turned.

At her most volcanic—think "Respect," or "Chain of Fools"—she channeled a kind of James Brown urgency. The shouts, the cries... her entire body became an instrument of sound. She didn't just sing notes; she hurled them, bent them, broke them wide open. You can feel the stomp, the sweat, the sheer physical force.

[Song: *Respect* by Aretha Franklin]

Now, when you hear that, you **might** compare her to James Brown, who was all about pure eruption. But Aretha's power was different. Her fire was always forged into **musicality**. A fusion of melody and rhythm that stood outside James Brown's grasp.

But that's only **half** the story. She could just as easily live in Marvin Gaye's world of quiet intensity. Think of "Day Dreaming," or "Until You Come Back to Me." Here, her voice is a masterclass in breath, in space, in the power of what is ***not*** sung. Her quiet moments just **shimmer**—proof that **intimacy** can carry as much weight as **catharsis**.

But the **true** magic, the singular **genius** of Aretha, was her ability to take this entire journey in the space of a single song. We're going to listen to "Ain't No Way," my favorite record she ever made, written by her younger sister Carolyn, who you can hear singing backup on the recording. This is from a miracle of an album called *Lady Soul.*

Before we dive into the music, I want to contextualize this moment in Aretha's career, because I think it's so encouraging for those of us who don't find our way for a while or have let others define our value. Aretha's success was **nothing close** to overnight; she spent **seven years** at Columbia Records cutting standards and pop songs that never quite fit. They simply didn't know what to do with her.

It wasn't until she moved to Atlantic Records, sat back down at the **piano**, and brought the **church** with her that everything clicked. A year later came *Lady Soul*—the album that crowned her, featuring classics like "Chain of Fools" and "Natural Woman" The legendary Muscle Shoals rhythm section is on it, Cissy Houston and the Sweet Inspirations are on it, even a very young Eric Clapton sneaks in for a guitar solo. And of course, Aretha herself is on piano for the whole album – and what a terrific pianist she was - her gospel touch driving the music forward. As you'll hear, her left hand lays down the foundation while her right hand does the more intricate work, adding these beautiful, bluesy fills that respond to her vocal lines. It's like she's talking with herself inside the song. So, this is the final track on that album, "Ain't No Way." Let's listen…

[Song: *Ain't No Way* by Aretha Franklin]

"Ain't No Way" begins in a hush. It's restrained, tender, like a confidential whisper. The band holds back, stays out of her way, responding in between the words, in between her piano riffs. The horns don't emerge until after she finishes the first verse, lifting her, responding to her as her plea intensifies. The bottom end of the horn section, holding back even longer, just before she starts to belt. The verses build, her vibrato widens, the tension tightens, and then—the chorus erupts. *"Ain't no way…"* It's a raw, gospel cry, rasping with emotion. And pushing her even **higher** is that operatic background vocal from Cissy

Houston—who, of course, gave birth to the most direct inheritor of Aretha's artistry: Whitney.

Then comes the bridge, and Aretha unleashes her whole instrument.

I mean, are you kidding me? She unleashes everything she has. Shouts. Cries. Pleads. Then, just as powerfully, she recedes. The song doesn't end with a shout, but with a fragile, heartbroken whisper. In three and a half minutes, she takes us from pleading restraint to righteous eruption and all the way back to humble resignation. And in that journey, she reveals the core truth of the song: that **to truly love** is to make yourself **completely vulnerable.** She's pleading for her love to let her in. To give her even **some** of the vulnerability she's given him.

For Aretha, expressing that truth was never about one mode or another. She didn't choose between the roar and the whisper because she didn't have to. She was both. A complete universe of feeling. *That* is why she is the Queen of Soul.

And to tell these stories, she had what was perhaps the greatest instrument in the history of popular music. A voice of staggering range and technical command. Nearly four octaves, from a deep, resonant chest voice to a supple, floating falsetto. She could bend time itself, stretching a single syllable into a moment of profound thought, or leaning so far behind the beat that the entire rhythm section seemed to orbit her.

In her voice, you can **hear** the **whisper** of Billie Holiday, the **phrasing** of Ella Fitzgerald, and the **testimony** of Mahalia Jackson. No other singer carried so much history in their voice, and yet always sounded so transcendently, unmistakably herself.

So, we can *hear* this mastery. But I want to show you what it ***looks*** like.

To do this, I used a tool to isolate her voice from the mix. It's not perfect—you'll hear a little digital artifacting—but it lets us zero in on her performance.

Two things should jump out. First, her incredible control of dynamics—the rise and fall of volume. Second, how she **shapes** that volume not just with her voice, but with her whole body. You can feel her leaning back for the big notes. At one point, she leans in too soon and overloads the microphone, causing it to clip—that little pop you hear. Normally, that's a technical flaw. But in the full mix, when Aretha is pouring her soul into the track, it just sounds like fire.

This raises a question: Why does this 57-year-old record **feel more alive** than so much music made today? It's not that music has gotten worse. I don't believe that. I don't *think* I believe that. …I'm not sure. But its worth noting that the number 1 song of 1968 was The

Beatles' *Hey Jude*. The **number 2 song** of the year, which spent 5 consecutive weeks at the top of the charts was this:

[Song: *Love is Blue* by Paul Mauriat]

That's an instrumental called Love is Blue by Paul Mauriat...and it's awful.

So, the quality of music may or may not have changed. What I'm sure of is that the ***process*** of making records **has** fundamentally changed. Tools like compression and Auto-Tune are designed to smooth out the very human edges that made Aretha electric.

For contrast, here's a clip of another phenomenal vocalist, Lady Gaga, on "Hold My Hand."

[Song: *Hold My Hand* by Lady Gaga]

She starts soft and ends big – she's belting at the end. But look at the waveform—it's a solid block. The volume barely changes. That's what compression looks like. A compressor listens for the loudest parts of a performance and turns them down, allowing an engineer to then boost the overall volume of the track. The distance between loud and soft gets squeezed.

Now, compression isn't new—The Beatles used it. What's new is how **aggressively** it's used across the entire mix. The reason is that services like Spotify normalize every track to a standard volume. So, to preserve a bit of control, engineers squash the music themselves, making it as loud as possible *before* Spotify's algorithm does it for them. The result is music that's **loud**, but **flat**. It loses that dynamic journey.

This technical shift in music isn't just about audio engineering; it's a **profound humanistic inquiry**. It reveals how our tools don't just change our **sound**—they reshape our **aesthetics**, forcing us to ask what we truly **value** in art. Do we value polished perfection, or the messy, imperfect sound of a human being pushing their limits?

But before we frame this as a simple battle between the "**natural**" and the "**artificial**," we have to remember that our **idea** of authenticity has **always** been shaped by technology. If you listen closely to a Johnny Cash record from the late 60s—our poster boy for raw authenticity—you'll hear plenty of studio reverb and delay applied to his voice. The tools change, but the intervention is not new.

This brings us to a tool like **Auto-Tune**. When I hear it, I hear the machine—the software smoothing out the cracks and pulling notes into perfect alignment. But my students don't hear that. For them, that layer of mediation is invisible; what I experience as a manipulated

performance, they receive as *the* performance. They hear a voice. Not a processed voice, not an effect—just singing.

This difference isn't a moral argument about right or wrong. Or a qualitative one. It's an **aesthetic** one. And that makes me wonder—what if **their** sense of authenticity isn't **diminished** by the machinery, but **formed inside** it? What if what I hear as distance, they hear as closeness?

And tracking that shift is precisely what we're here for in the Humanities—not just to ask ***what*** we are hearing, but to ask what our hearing ***says about us*****.** It's our job to notice those shifts, to ask what they reveal about us, and to wrestle with what we choose to call **authentic**. Or **beautiful**. Or **human**. Music gives us a perfect laboratory for that work. The waveform becomes a mirror.

This is why I **love** to **teach**. And this is why to **teach** is to **love**. Learning to listen this way isn't just about catching the software at work; it's about learning to notice each other. To hear what someone **else** hears, even when it isn't what **I** hear. Or what I **like**. It takes generosity. It takes a kind of softness. And in that space—where we risk listening past our own assumptions—music becomes a way of **practicing** our humanity.

And I will say that I spent some of my early years as a teacher damaging that relationship. We should be very careful telling students they shouldn't love something because they're not yet educated enough to know why that song, that movie, that book actually sucks. It's the worst kind of arrogance, and we should shun it. Let them love what they love. Let them find their own way. I spent 30 years hating the Bee Gees because I was **supposed** to. What a waste. The Bee Gees are **fabulous**.

So, as I turn to the last part of my talk, I'll pivot one last time. It's a **big** pivot. We'll call this the bonus track at the end of mixtape.

The last part of my journey is where my love of music collided with my love of theater: the American musical. My first role ever was a small part in *Annie Get Your Gun*. From then on, I tried everything—acting, directing, composing, playing in the pit.

So when I moved to New York for grad school, I thought I knew what musicals were. I **liked** them. I didn't **love** them. They felt…**light**. I didn't yet understand that living in that city, at the **peak** of his powers, was someone who would change **all** that for me - and for many of us who found musicals… quaint. Someone who **re-made** my idea of what a musical **could** be, who it was **for**, and why, at its best, it is the **highest** form of theater.

[Song: *Sunday* by Stephen Sondheim, from *Sunday in the Park with George*]

Sunday in the Park with George opened in May of 1984. By the time I arrived a year later, it had won the Pulitzer Prize, but it was limping at the box office. Which meant good news for a broke grad student—Columbia had free day-of-show tickets when productions didn't sell out.

Now, a bit of backstory. That summer my stepfather died of cancer. I arrived at Columbia in poor spirits. I felt like an outsider—the only student fresh out of undergrad, no professional credits, classmates from Johannesburg, Beirut, Brooklyn. And me? Frankfort, Indiana. At Wabash I'd been a big fish. In New York I felt invisible. Worse, I believed I had nothing to say. Nothing that would matter to anyone there.

But sometimes the universe gives you **exactly** what you need, right when you need it.

In early October, just before it closed, I saw *Sunday in the Park* three nights in a row. Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters were still there. It was pure magic.

Remember what I said about *The Blues Brothers*? How that blew my mind? This did it again. But it felt different. The Blues Brothers was an awakening to a history that had always been there. I just had to find it. Sondheim was **making** that history in **real time**. From *Sweeney Todd* through *Sunday in the Park* and *Into the Woods*, he was pushing the American theater forward in a way no one else was. And I was **so there** for it.

But for me it was more personal. Near the end of the show, the artist George—lost, disconnected, certain he has nothing left to say—is visited by the ghost of his great-grandmother. In a sublime moment of theatrical magic, Dot steps out of the painting. And together they sing "Move On."

From the moment I heard it—tears streaming down my face—it became my anchor. And it has remained so to this day. In my lowest moments it has reminded me that music, more than any art form, can be a balm to the soul. Dot steps out of the 19th century and speaks to George across the gulf of time. And what does she tell him? She tells him to **stop**. Just…stop. And **look**. And when he does, he begins to move forward.

It's our **work**, isn't it? Bringing our students to that **moment**. When art reaches **past its own moment** to steady us in ours, to offer meaning, comfort, and guidance when we've lost our way.

Brian Wilson does that. Aretha Franklin does that.

And now, as I think about my life after this place, Sondheim's message is still a beacon. A reminder to move on. That art is what we make **exactly** when there seems to be no path forward; or when we're at odds with the world we're living in. No one understood those

struggles more than Sondheim—the alienation, the self-doubt. He grappled so hard with them. They run through all his musicals before *Sunday in the Park*. But in **this** show, in **this** song, at **54 years old**, he found his way.

Now, in the theater, we make live music. Here is "Move On," from *Sunday in the Park with George*. Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Sung by Elizabeth Hutson and Juan Hernandez. Accompanied by Cheryl Everett and Zoe Abbott.

[Song: *Move On* by Stephen Sondheim, performed live, from *Sunday in the Park with George*]

So, before I play us out with another great soul artist: Curtis Mayfield…

It has been the privilege of my life to teach and to be taught here, and I am grateful for this chance to speak. What I've tried to share is that music does more than **accompany** us. It gives us a way to practice our humanity—to sharpen our seeing, to widen our hearing. And if our work endures it is because we learn to notice one another with care, and to love more deeply for it.

So as **my** mixtape winds to its end, I hope you will make **your own**—finite, imperfect, with friction and hiss, stitched together with intention. May you risk **sharing** what moves you. Because that is how we **see** each other. That is how we **love**.

[Song: *Move On Up* by Curtis Mayfield]