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Photographs by Jeff Conlin

KWXY, AM 1340, Cathedral City

Music for desert driving

This is how it happens, every time the same.

I drive Interstate 10 east, following the curving concrete line out of downtown Los Angeles. I clear the Inland Empire, pass Banning and Beaumont, and when I see the T. Rex and the Brontosaurus, those fading plaster emblems of lost worlds, I know it's coming, that feeling I won't be able to control. I switch the radio dial to KWXY as the freeway bows south and then crests in a sea of towering, spinning white windmills. The car fills with the sound of lush strings, gentle voices, and tickled piano—Jackie Gleason visiting “Shangri-La,” the Norman Luboff Choir cooing “Tenderly,” Ray Coniff watching the fall of “Autumn Leaves,” and all I can see is what suddenly surrounds me: the vast, caked brown expanse of the desert. My eyes water, my heart aches, and I have to pull over. It's as if, to borrow the words of one of the Sublime's great advocates, Friedrich Nietzsche, I have put my ear to the “heart-chamber of the world-Will and felt the roaring desire for existence gushing forth into all the veins of the world, as a thundering current or as the gentlest brook, dissolving into a mist.” How could I not fail, as he put it, “to break suddenly”? It might not be a Wagner opera or a recital of eighteenth-century instrumental music and might just be the purring vanilla swing of The Ray Charles Singers, but this is my sublime, my desert sublime. This is where I break suddenly, where I put my ear to the world.

The whispery-voiced golf announcer DJs of KWXY still call the station's format “Beautiful Music,” a post-WWII FM radio format that stations like KWXY employed to characterize their “soft” and “unobtrusive” music. It was mood music for the imaginary quiet villages of post-war suburbia, its formulaic, nearly commercial-free hush meant to heal the ears of a country made tired by war, social unrest, and rock ‘n’ roll. “Isn't the rattle of your neighbor's garbage can lids enough without having to listen to freaked-out music?” one Beautiful Music station asked. “Pull yourself out of your old radio routine and get into something nice and sweet. They say many young people today will be deaf by the time they're 30. Their own music is doing them in. Life

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has gotten louder for the rest of us, too. The song bird, the cricket, the soft crunch of snow underfoot are all becoming lost in the roar of the Seventies. ... Fortunately, there's still one place where you can hear something beautiful."

Yet as Wagner himself once argued, even the beautiful, when stripped of its appearances and order, when its Apollonian nature is taken over by Dionysian impulses, can become the sublime—the beautiful can be where the sublime

begins. For me, KWCY's music is not only beautiful, not only a hush or a calm or a lull, but sublime, a soft roar that shakes me. Not topiary and manicured English gardens, but the swoon and sweep of awe, melancholy, and mystery.

I have spent most of my life coming to the desert. My maternal grandparents lived there for almost thirty years, at first as weekend golfers and bridge hounds, and eventually as full-time residents—two former North Dakota farm



kids, with Russian and Swedish family trees, reborn as retired Palm Springs desert rats with impressively low handicaps, the greens and sand traps of the eighth hole as their backyard. My grandfather was a volunteer police aviator. He flew over the Mojave weekly in his wire-rim sunglasses with chocolate brown lenses, looking down over its subdivisions, soaring above its vast aridity.

KWXY was my grandfather's station of choice. Back on the ground, he would listen as he drove, singing and humming along in his gentle voice to the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. When he was in the hospital, not long before he died, I asked him what it was that he liked so much about

the station. The music, he told me, is "olden but golden," a comforting sentiment for a man realizing that his own life was nearing its end. These were songs and artists, sounds and recording techniques, that were outdated and archaic, forgotten by most; surely all of them were, as my grandmother liked to say, "dead you know." Yet the dead lived, the ghosts sang, the olden became golden, the dinosaurs never really left. The end was not the end. Through music, the past outlived itself.

Tune in to KWXY and, especially if former RCA Victor archivist Don Wardell is at the boards, you'll hear something like this: the sound of the station's trademark strumming



harp, Henry Mancini performing “Latin Snowfall” from *Charade*, a station I.D. that is more like a poem or a prayer (*across the blue of the sky, jet trails remind us of journeys long ago, and the sounds of the desert*), Erroll Garner playing “And My Heart Stood Still,” Percy Faith and His Orchestra doing “Theme From ‘A Summer Place,’” a weather report registering a 108-degree summer afternoon, Doris Day singing “Our Day Will Come,” and then an in-house choir released from an old open reel analog tape that reminds you what you’re hearing, *a musical rainbow, K-W-X-YYYYYY*.

Yet the music I most associate with KWCY, which after decades of airing on 98.5 FM has now retired to its new AM

home, is its endless parade of stereo-surround strings—a lushness that seems to float above the speakers, like aural clouds or angels made of sound—and the voices, all of those whispering and sighing choirs, exalting love lost and found, days rainy or sunny, nights in Old Monterey, or days of wine and roses. Though it’s also home to classic film scores and songbook standards, KWCY’s *lingua franca* is the “beautiful and familiar” instrumental cocktail music and singing choirs that blossomed in 1950s recording studios—a sonic balm usually mentioned right alongside the post-war, GI Bill birth of suburbia, the rise of the supermarket, and the sale of the first home air-conditioning unit. Closed-in



environments needed piped-in music, and studio arrangers like Ray Conniff were happy to oblige.

As muzak historian Joseph Lanza has written, “Conniff’s music connotes the mystically metallic clanking of shopping carts trailing down aisles, the rustle of cash registers, the tinkle of loose change, and the grunt of chromium doors automatically opening for the next phalanx of shoppers.” It was Conniff, a former regular with the Harry James band, who is credited with first pairing the studio choir (four men,

four women) with the delicate swing of orchestrated, symphonic brass played by over eighteen musicians. There was something always spectral about the Conniff choir and the choir craze he started. The voices were human but sounded disembodied, like ghostly echoes serenading from the grave, mystical shadows back to haunt the present.

Even though he did his time in Hollywood and was certainly out West long enough to shop at my grandfather’s clothing store and leave with him a signed autograph copy

of his *Somewhere My Love* LP, Conniff is not usually thought of as a Westerner. But the music he made in the '50s was quintessentially Western. It was music that cut right into the closed-in spaces of the developed West—the planned communities and shopping malls, the parking lots, the supermarkets and country clubs and tract homes and mobile trailer parks—and piped in some open space, some vastness, some *ooh* and some *ahh*, some *sublime*. It was also Western in its ghostliness, in its desire to use music and the technologies of recorded sound to speak with the past and not let the past go silent. “That’s the game The West invites,” Marianne Wiggins writes, “the game everybody plays out West: pretending we can see the past, here, in the present. Pretending we can call down the impossible, invalidate the present, and convince ourselves we’re in another time, another century. The West—true West—attaches to you like a shadow.” Conniff’s choir gave those shadows sound.

When I am in my car, facing the burning desert through the windshield and immersed in his angel choirs, I am pulled out of time and into place, into the aurality of space where my grandfather still lives, invisible but present, olden but golden, another dinosaur still hanging around the desert shadows. If the desert is what the theologian David Jasper calls “a theater of memory,” a stage for a cyclical return to the past as a means of returning to the present, then out on the side of the highway, breathless and teary-eyed

and sublime-sacked, I am center stage, my grandparents in the wings, Ray Conniff filling the packed house with angel voices, and I face the desert with my ears open wide, swarmed by noisy shadows.

Kiene Wurth, *The Musically Sublime: Infinity, Indeterminacy, Irresolvability*. Dissertation, University of Groningen, 2002. 172.

Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodson* (New York: Picador, 1994), 173.

Lanza, 103.

Marianne Wiggins, *The Shadow Catcher* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 13.

David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 44.

*A KWCY SAMPLER

Percy Faith Orchestra, “Theme From ‘A Summer Place’”

Ray Conniff Singers, “Autumn Leaves”

Tony Bennett, “When Joanna Loved Me”

Paul Weston, “Time After Time”

Norman Luboff, “Laura”

Henry Mancini, “Latin Snowfall”

Doris Day, “Our Day Will Come”

Jackie Gleason, “Shangri-La”

Gordon McRae, “Carousel Waltz”

Anita Kerr Quarter, “La Mirada” **B**