**The Long Way ‘Round**

**Editorial intro from Sarah:** We are a year into the Trump presidency and the only thing I can tell for sure is that hindsight, while it may or may not be 20/20, certainly feels better than the uncertainty of the present and future. My friend from around Washington, DC here pulled together this online chat with his old friend during the first months of the Trump administration. They reminisce about politics in the early 90s. And music. And Boston. And friendship. It’s a pleasure to share their story.

**Editorial intro from John:** My friend Wrence and I met in Boston in 1989 or so. I had moved to Boston in 1984 to attend Boston College, where I became very active at the student radio station, WZBC.

Boston is blessed with a lot of college radio stations that can actually be heard in large areas of the city. MIT (WMBR), Harvard (WHRB), Emerson College (WERS), Tufts University (WFMO), and Boston College (WZBC) all devote significant airtime to punk, indie and avant-garde music. With so many “competing” alternatives on the dial, the different stations have organically differentiated their programming. There was plenty of overlap in the 80’s (everyone played Joy Division and Husker Dü). But WMBR tended to favor “less pretentious” punk and indie stuff. WERS devoted more time to reggae than the other stations did. WZBC, where Wilson and I were DJs, devoted more time to avant-garde music - with 40 hours of programming per week set aside for music with “No Commercial Potential.” Wilson and I both had No Commercial Potential (NCP) programs in the 80’s and early 90’s. Wilson’s was called The Widow’s Walk. Mine was called The Kraft-o-Matic Bed o’ Nails.

Wrence grew up in Boston and sang in a local punk band called 007 (later Dub 7). I graduated from college in 1988. In 1988/89 I shared an apartment with a fellow WZBC alum, who we will call Wilson. In 1989, Wrence and Wilson moved to a different apartment together, where I was a frequent guest. We spent a lot of time listening to each others’ records in those apartments.

In 1991 I moved to Berlin. I left all my records with Wrence and Wilson for safe keeping. They sent me mix tapes, which featured a combination of tracks from all of our collections – including my own! In 1995 I came back to the States for grad school. Wrence and Wilson happened to be moving abroad that year, so I took the combined record collections with me to grad school, and sent occasional mixes to them.

Wrence still lives abroad. Wilson has since moved back to the states and reclaimed his records. The 3 of us are still in touch, but not always regularly.

The following online chat (in several installments over 2 months) between Wrence and myself focuses on a mix that he sent to me in Berlin in January of 1993. I had not listened to the mix for many years. Wrence had not heard it since he made it 24 years ago.

**JAN 28TH, 1:46PM**

John: Hey Wrence, … look what I found in a DC record store yesterday:

{Photo of a Dub 7 record in the bins at Red Onion Records in DC.}

Wrence: Wow! I'll upload the Dub 7 pic to the 007 Facebook page (<http://007-boston-dub7.com/)>.

[insert screenshot from facebook page]

John: I’m currently listening to a cassette you sent me in early ‘93 when I was living in Berlin and all my records were back with you and Wilson! The mix is called PRESIDENT CLINTON. I'm burning it to CD-R.

{Picture of PRESIDENT CLINTON cassette here.}

Wrence: Cheers! I'm going to dig out old cassettes someday and get digitizing! That mix is from back when we still believed in Bubbah. Haha!

John: Clinton had just been inaugurated. The eventual “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” compromise had not yet been conceived. Clinton had said in some speech as President-elect that he planned to issue an executive order to keep his campaign promise about ending the ban on homosexuals in the US military. The Joint Chiefs and Congress were freaking out. George Stephanopoulos and Bill Clinton are quoted in the NPR piece saying they were going to consult the military about how to do it - but it was going to get done.

Wrence: Right, it's all coming back now.

**MAR 7TH, 5:59AM**

Wrence: Did I paste Bubba's face on the tape like that, or did you?

John: Writing on spine is definitely you.

Photo of Clinton is clipped from a newspaper by you. It was cut to exactly the size of a cassette cover. I took it out of the cassette case and turned it sideways to scan it for the cover of the CD-R I sent you, just so the face and the cassette spine would be oriented the same direction.

Wrence: Excellent. You saw my excessive attention to detail and raised me some. Haha!

**MAR 8TH, 11:40AM**

Wrence: PRESIDENT CLINTON mixtape posted to Mixcloud in 2 parts. Anyone can hear the mixes (side 1 and side 2) at these links:

Side 1:

<http://bit.ly/PRESIDENT-CLINTON-part1>

Track List

1. **Samuel Barber** (composer), String Quartet No 2, Op. 11: II. Adagio,

performed by I Musici, Album (Label, Year)

**Peter Jefferies & Jono Lonie**, Side 2 of *At Swim 2 Birds* (Flying Nun, 1987)

2. Tarantella

3. Where the Flies Sleep

4. The Standing Stone

5. Aerial

6. Short Was Fast

7. Piano (two)

(Intermittent radio announcer: Central Artery Northbound clogged up, NPR, All Things Considered Headlines: Lifting Ban on Gays in the US Military, Fighting between Serbs and Croats, Weapons Inspectors in Iraq)

8. **Ann Peebles**, I Can’t Stand the Rain, VA: The Hi Records Story

(song released in 1974)

9. **NPR - All Things Considered**, Lifting the Ban on Homosexuals in the US Military

10. **Wire**, Feeling Called Love, *Pink Flag* (Harvest, 1977)

11. **Undertones**, You’ve Got My Number, Why Don’t You Use It?, 7” (Sire, 1979)

12. **John Lennon**, Jealous Guy, *Imagine* (Apple, 1971)

13. **Eric Dolphy**, Out to Lunch, *Out to Lunch* (Blue Note, 1964)

Side 2:

<http://bit.ly/PRESIDENT-CLINTON-part2>

Track List

1. **Can**, Butterfly, *Delay 1968* (Spoon, released 1981, recorded 1968)

2. **The Beatles**, It’s All Too Much, *Yellow Submarine*

(Apple, 1969 – song recorded in ’67)

3. **Television Personalities**, How I’ve Learned to Love the Bomb,

12” (Dreamworld, 1986)

4. **Television Personalities**, Sad Mona Lisa, *Privilege* (Fire Records, 1990)

5. **Mekons**, Slightly South of the Border, *The Edge of the World* (Sin, 1986)

6. **Mekons**, Oblivion, *The Edge of the World* (Sin, 1986)

7. **Neil Young**, Tell Me Why, *After the Gold Rush* (Reprise, 1970)

8. **Neil Young**, Birds, *After the Gold Rush* (Reprise, 1970)

9. **Tina Harvey**, Have You Seen Your Mother Baby, Standing in the Shadows,

*Tina Harvey* (UK Records, 1973)

10. **Tina Harvey**, The Long Way ‘Round, *Tina Harvey* (UK Records, 1973)

11. **Galaxie 500**, Cheese and Onions,

VA: *Rutles Highway Revisited* (Shimmy Disc, 1990)

12. Intro to someone’s version of Pere Ubu’s Final Solution?

**Finally - The Actual Chat:**

**SAT MAR 25TH 10:56PM**

Wrence: So, why this tape in particular?

John: Well, what’s interesting on Sarah's blog are the connections between the people who exchanged the tapes. Often the tapes were part of courtship. And now they’re artifacts left over from personal relationships that may or may not still be intact. The music itself is fun to discuss, but especially in the context of the personal connections.

The stories around the tapes that you and I exchanged are not stories of courtship - at least not between you and me.

And the fact that you mixed in NPR stuff about then recently-elected President Bill Clinton - it struck me as quite a contrast to the recent election and inauguration that we just experienced here in 2016/2017.

Wrence: True, we weren't courting in the romantic sense (maybe sort of a bromantic admiring of each other's record collections, right?).

I won't veer us off into national politics too much, but it is interesting that Trump just yesterday suffered his first major defeat from Capitol Hill with rejection of Trumpcare. In the news excerpts from 24 years ago, we hear the joint chiefs had to discuss gays in the military the very first week of Clinton's presidency.

At the time, much of the left probably had hopes for the Clinton era. Now we're all so fed up with that neoliberal, sell-out Dem crap.

John: Having left the country in the summer of '91, I was very slow to realize that George H. W. Bush was not going to get re-elected. I was glad to be leaving the country right as the 1st Gulf War was ending. The whole country seemed to think that war was so great. I thought it was horrifying. I was glad to go live someplace where I didn’t even speak the language (yet) for a while.

And then even after the Rodney King riots... of course I followed the news enough to know that those had happened…. but I just didn't get that Clinton could actually win.

And then he did. And next thing you know the lead story in the news is about allowing homosexuals to serve in the military. I couldn’t believe that was even on the agenda. And listening to that NPR report from January 1993, with George Stephanopoulos as a member of Clinton's administration... and people freaking out about how the Joint Chiefs and Congress were nowhere close to being ready...

We now know in retrospect how easy it seems to have been to get past some of that stuff. But we also know how we're no better off in some ways than we were before the Rodney King riots.

Wrence: The current moment for the world is such a different period from 1993. In fact, 2017 is feeling like 1968, isn't it? (Hopefully not like 1938.)

And now you're the one who's Stateside, and I'm the overseas expat.

Funny that I even called the tape "PRESIDENT CLINTON," since most of it is really unrelated. But, yeah. The egomaniacs we elect to office get there often by making promises to their base voters that they'll do this or that the first week in office. Donny 45 promised at his hate rallies during the campaign last year that he would "on day one" repeal and replace Obamacare with "something great." Now that his own party slapped him back, he's typically hitting out at a scapegoat (the Ds who had nothing to do with the repeal and replace effort). With him, the buck stops somewhere else, always.

John: I guess before we turn to the music and other stories, I want to draw you out a little bit on one specific aspect of the presidential politics where you and I don’t see things exactly the same way. Probably makes for more interesting reading than the two of us agreeing about the uncomfortable similarities between the policies of Donald Trump and Adolf Hiter!

Anyway: When Bill Clinton got elected, I didn’t have high hopes. I expected him to just look at the polls and do whatever it took to get re-elected. You and many of my other friends had higher hopes. The further we got into his presidency, the more disillusioned you and my other friends became with Bill Clinton, but the more I was impressed with what he was able to accomplish – especially after Newt Gingrich and the Republicans got a majority in the House in 1994. But even before that, Clinton seemed to win every legislative battle by a single vote. It was always 51-49 in the Senate. It looked like total chaos every time, but that said to me that he was compromising the absolute bare minimum necessary to accomplish whatever was actually possible. Even before Bill Clinton had done anything as president, Daniel Shorr - the NPR commentator on your mix from January 1993 - was complaining about, “… the conflict averse, muddle through to consensus behavior familiar to those who have watched him as governor of Arkansas.” Even at the time I remember thinking that “muddle through to consensus” was pretty much exactly what I thought our democratically elected government was supposed to do. If Daniel Shorr wanted a president who was not “conflict averse,” and who was not interested in working towards consensus, well… he got his wish in 2016.

Wrence:

I'm one of those who expects the president to represent all citizens. Most strong partisans seem to expect a very partisan White House. I don't. The role is so constrained by so many institutional factors from Pentagon to Wall Street that it shouldn't surprise us that Obama and Bush policies weren't sooooooo different.

Two: Mainstream budgets (either D or R) always assume growth. We may be headed into a period of permanent global economic degrowth, and we may need to learn to live with it.

John: OK. Let's leave it at that. I do think the political stuff is interesting. But let’s turn now to the music.

Wrence: I had been recording Wilson’s shows on ‘ZBC for years before I met him. I didn't even know he was the same person as my fave DJ until around the third time he and I met.

John: Do you remember sitting around the apartment and pulling drawers from that desk where I kept my 45's? Each of us would take a different drawer (A-F, G-M, etc.) And one of us would get Wilson's box of 45's. And we'd take turns playing 7-inches. That would have been in 88/89 I guess.

Wrence: Yeah, I remember you and I both were so energized by playing records, basically. We'd only just met back then and that was about our only shared activity at first. Others surely will know the activity, it was basically alternating turns at the turntable and saying, Oh yeah! Great one! Now I suppose it's what we do with Facebook, Soundcloud, Mixcloud, and whatever apps.

John: I liked your Mekons records. Of course we shared a love of the Beatles. You turned me on to Eric Dolphy, who I previous only knew as a Mingus side man. I did not “get” all your 70's Stones records at first, but came to appreciate them.

Wrence: You still have my meager vinyl collection, right?

John: You know, I also recently pulled out a WZBC aircheck from 2006. I was back in Boston and back on the air for a few years around then. Wilson was visiting Boston. He sat in with me for a great show! When Wilson came back to the states, he took your records and his. He talks on the 2006 aircheck about going to sell some of the records, but then changing his mind. He says you told him to sell them. But he couldn’t do it. I think he put the lp’s in storage for you somewhere. I think he still has the 45s.

Wrence: What was in that collection? Do you remember?

[picture of desk]

John: Off the top of my head… La Peste, Candy Flip, Virgin Prunes, Paula and Paula ... I'm running to that same desk, which I still have, with my 45's and old tapes....

… From a mix called, "John, Wilson and Wrence's Jukebox, Vol. I":

The Neats, ? and the Mysterians, Todd Rundgren, The Nazz, Mission of Burma, Colin Newman, Jane and Barton, Durutti Column, Bongwater, Eyeless in Gaza...

Vol. II track list seems to have gone missing. But Vol. II was apparently taped over my little brother's cassette of Siamese Dream by The Smashing Pumpkins!

Should we turn to track list of PRESIDENT CLINTON tape?

Wrence: The track I treasure most from the PRESIDENT CLINTON mix is Tina Harvey's cover of "Have You Seen Your Mother Baby, Standing in the Shadows?" This is kind of a tangent but I posted that cover to the FB group called "scattered smothered & covered: songs by others" and it didn't get the applause I expected. But, that group really is the most fun group for music on all of Facebook. Recommended. The contributors there are all top notch lovers of great, rare music.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/306636759391289/permalink/1251001331621489/>

Sorry for the detour. We can get to the track list now. 🙂

John: Tina Harvey is a track I was never able to place when I got the tape back in '93. I was guessing she was someone like Marianne Faithful or something. How did you and/or Wilson discover her?

Wrence: Wilson loved that track. We never knew where she came from. It may have been her only release. Wait, let me check Discogs…

<https://www.discogs.com/artist/1911626-Tina-Harvey>

[insert photo of Tina Harvey]

Very minor, but so great. It was a real find. Wilson had the lp.

John: Cool! And what about the classical piece that begins the tape? I never knew what that was, but it's something I’ve since heard in the soundtrack of big Hollywood movies.

Wrence: Yes, it's in many film soundtracks. Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings. It's the kind of thing you listen to when thinking of 9-11 or Hiroshima or The Holocaust. Very somber. I mean the bombing of Hiroshima. The city itself is actually a pleasant, vibrant metropolis now.

[insert photo of Samuel Barber cover]

John: So then you follow Samuel Barber's Adegio with all of side 2 of Peter Jeffries & Jono Lonie's *At Swim 2 Birds* lp.... and near the end of that you start switching to the NPR broadcast and back... Do you remember actually making this tape?

Wrence: At first I didn't remember at all. But... As I kept listening it did happen that 1993 came back to mind. I would say I don't recall the actual session of making the thing, but I recall the time when all of these would have been my listening, my personal playlist in the apartment. *At Swim 2 Birds* especially is something that I hadn't heard since that time, 24 years ago. And it sounds great even now, doesn't it?

[insert photo of At Swim 2 Birds]

John: Amazing! And I must say it was wonderful to hear it in 1993. That was one of my own records, which you and Wilson were keeping for me. It was a favorite of mine that I had not heard in about 2 years!

Wrence: Ahhhh! that explains why I hadn't heard it since.

I think WZBC listeners would feel right at home with this tape. Very “NCP” (No Commercial Potential), yeah?

John: Well, the mix runs the gamut. Wire, Undertones, Television Personalities, Mekons... all very consistent with the kinds of rock that ZBC would play during the day. *At Swim 2 Birds* more nighttime “NCP.” But million-selling artists like John Lennon and Neil Young would not get featured very often on any show on WZBC. The Eric Dolphy thing would have been fine on NCP, but as a practical matter, WZBC did not feature much jazz on NCP.

Wrence: Yes. Very eclectic.

John: Back then, I had not listened to much Hi Records stuff besides Al Greene. The Ann Peebles on side 1 was a door opener for me. Great track!

[insert photo of Ann Peebles]

Wrence: "I Can't Stand The Rain" has one of my favorite grooves ever. God that is a good recording!

John: I visited Memphis. Got a tour of the Hi Studios by Willie Mitchel's grandson, who runs it now.

Happened impromptu. He just happened to arrive while my girlfriend and I were gawking outside. He had some time and invited us in for a quick tour. We got to take our pictures singing into Al Green's mic and stuff.

[insert photo of Hi Studios]

Wrence: omg

John: Stuff like that happened to us every day in Memphis. Show up after the BBQ joint is closed. They invite us in and feed us anyway....

Wrence: Ann really is like a female Al Green, eh.

John: I've bought stuff by Ann Peebles since. I don't think anyone is a female Al Greene. We went to his church too. He gives 2 services every Sunday. One for the real congregation. One for tourists. Pretty bad ass.

Wrence: Wow!

John: I’m wondering how spontaneous the NPR mix-ins were.

Wrence: I think it was very spontaneous. For kids reading now, these were the days before social networking apps and "gays in the military" felt very big and controversial at the time. Now it's kind of a big yawn. I probably just switched the hifi from turntable to radio spontaneously, as you say. The tape itself, by the way, is in places not so fun to listen to. All the scratchiness over the Adagio for Strings at the intro. The radio crap interrupting the musical flow…

John: Yes, the radio switches are a bit jolting. The final song from the Jeffereis/Lonie lp gets butchered!

But the Wrence spontaneity shines through. I had to laugh. It was like I was right there in the living room watching you do it! And imagining Wilson yelling from the next room, “Wrence – what the hell are you doing out there?”

Wrence: Were you living in Kreuzberg 36 at the time?

John: I was living with a pastor at the time - near Alexanderplatz - in the downtown heart of East Berlin. I can remember listening in my room in the pastor's flat in Mitte. He was divorced. He had a place big enough for a whole family, but he lived there alone. He let me live there for free for a year or so. He was one of my English students.

[insert photo of alexanderplatz]

Wrence: Did the pastor hear the tape, too?

John: Oh yes. He loved listening to the NPR passage and talking with me about it. He was very interested in learning what NPR was relative to commercial media like CBS, NBC, etc. And discussing the content of the piece. And getting to the point where he could understand the reports. It was perfect. They speak very clearly, but not in a childish way. And the content was also interesting. ... and he could rewind it and listen again to the parts that were hard to understand at first. He was less interested in the music!

Wrence: Großartig!

John: Ha!

Wrence: Thinking about how funny memory works. I can remember some moments from 1963 better than 1993.

John: Yes, that’s why rediscovering artifacts like this can be so powerful. Music seems to be especially powerful when it comes to memory. I was at a wedding recently. The groom's uncle was pretty far into Alzheimer's. He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t leave his wife's side. He would peer long and hard at every face, knowing it was someone he probably knew, but could not place. But he could sing along to Irish drinking songs! They played a bunch of those and everyone gathered around him and sang along with him. It was quite moving.

Wrence: Many of us must have brains that function along that continuum someplace. My memory seems both great here and lost there.

The connection between everything from the opening Adagio through to Eric Dolphy on side 1 of the mix sort of indicates to me that all that Widows Walk and Kraft-o-Matic listening probably added some new sophistication to the musical culture I'd taken as my own by then. I was rock and soul as a kid, then punk and dub in early 20s, then this period.

John: Some of the other tapes you sent me had typed track lists. You gave each side of the tape a title. Raucous, Out There, Blue, Soulful…

{Photo of a couple of these cassettes here.}

Wrence: That sounds like me.

Do we need to get the other tracks covered here? Or let the readers just go and listen if they like?

John: I don't think we need to do song-by-song. But if there are any stories that come to mind for a particular track or sequence... Actually, do you have any photos of us from back then? I have almost no photos of myself from the 80's and 90's.

Wrence: I'm going to be sorting through photos (stored up in the attic) today in preparation for the family gathering in Boston next week. Maybe I'll find something.

**Editorial note from John**: Wrence did not find any photos of us. But here are a couple photos of us taken in Boston about 1 week after this conversation:

{Photos of John and W in Boston.}

John: I’m now listening to the "Jukebox” tape that was missing a track list. I’m just going to blurt out the songs as they come on - non-sequiter style. But we can keep talking about whatever else.

Wrence: OK, go.

John: No Surfing in Dorchester Bay right now.

Wrence: Richie Parsons, Future Dads

I actually have to go soon and get packing for the trip and setting up my new iPhone before I leave for the states.

John: The reunions next weekend during your visit are going to be something! There are so many people in Boston who I met long after meeting you, but who knew you years before you and I met each other.

Wrence: Right, it is funny how two people in a vaguely common set of circles of friends know some of the same people from different periods. I know what you mean.

John: I never met Peter Gates until I moved to Berlin! (Peter Gates was a DJ at WMBR and moved to Berlin a couple years before I did.)

Wrence: It was so funny to see him in Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* - I'll never forget that moment in the theater!

But I have to go now.

Peter Gates and I first met at The Underground back in 1979, btw... that's going waaaaay back.

John: Will be great to see him next weekend! I had dinner with him last summer. He's doing well.

Wow – “Why Are People Grudgeful?” just came on.

Wrence: I don't even know it.

John: Joe Gibbs. Important Jamaican guy. I also don’t remember even knowing this song back then. The Fall covered Why Are People Grudgeful in the 90's.

Wrence: Will find and share on FB right now…. (Wrence posts the Fall version on his FB wall: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIS1-VUliZw&feature=share>) Haha. Oh, god this is goood!!

John: (Posts Joe Gibbs’ version from 1968 as a comment on Wrence’s post: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtaP2Yfq7dI>) Apparently you or Wilson had a Joe Gibbs record because it's on this 90's mix tape that I made of our 45's, and I know I didn’t have this in my own collection!

Wrence: Oh, this is some good old rocksteady, eh. May have been Wilson's. It's a mystery!

John: Actually, I’m now realizing that the song on the mixtape is this "version" of the same song by Lee Perry, “People Funny Boy”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_TIDBp_-0o>

Perry had just stopped working with Joe Gibbs and started making his own stuff. The song is a dig at Gibbs. Apparently Gibbs promptly recorded and released his own version in "I know you are, but what am I?" fashion. (Also cutting into the sales of Perry's record, which is widely cited as one of the first "reggae" songs ever recorded.)

Wrence: Greatness! It's like "Let Me Roll It" and "How Do You Sleep."

John: Some Boston 45 on now that I can't place. Something about Government Center. Riding on a bus…

Wrence: lol

**Editorial note from John**: I was kidding Wrence. “Something about Government Center. Riding on a bus…” makes it obvious that the song is Gravel Groove by Dub 7 (the single by Wrence’s old band, that I happened to see in a DC record store back in January when I first contacted Wrence about Made You a Tape.)

John: Kidding of course - but Gravel Groove really is on the mix. Breakdown at the end happening now.

Wrence: Modern Lovers' Government Center is better, tho. haha.

John: Now some cover of Maggot Brain.

Wrence: Funkadelic.

Gotta go.

John: Yeah, I think it is Funkadelic, but not the same as the lp version.

Wrence: So not organized yet. Leaving in two days. Starting to panic.

John: OK Wrence. Safe travels. One week from right now we'll be winding down after the party in Concord. Love you buddy!

Wrence: Love back atcha. Bye for now.

John: I'm going to lie down to sleep listening to this mix of our old records!

Chat Conversation End

Seen 2:04am