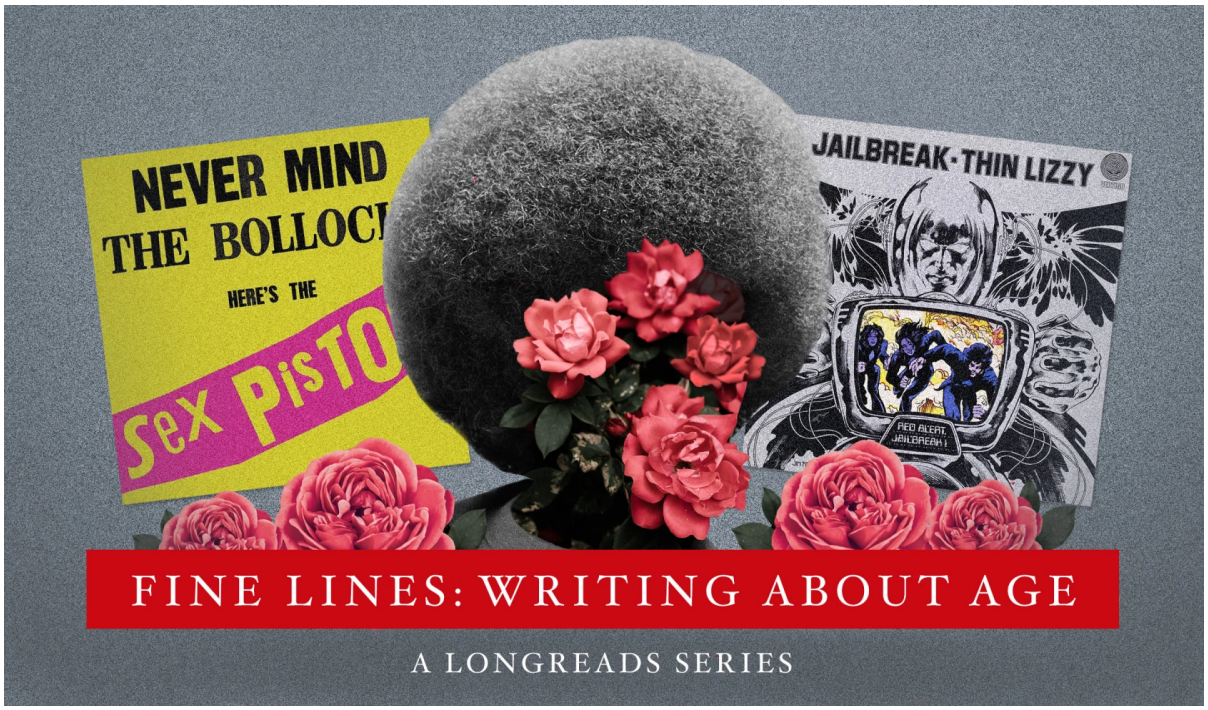
Johnny Rotten, My Mom, and Me

Kimberly Mack recalls the ways in which rock music bonded her with her African American mom, and how those fierce sounds helped them cope with the poverty, violence, and despair both outside and inside their Brooklyn home.



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"Will you sing to me?"

My mom's pain had subsided for the moment, and her voice was strangely perky. Happy even. The morphine had kicked in. She was strapped in tight, on a stretcher, at the back of the ambulette. An assortment of pillows and towels cushioned her body to protect her from the impact as the wheels slowly rolled over each pothole, each bump, each uneven patch of street.

I had been warned that the ride from Midtown Manhattan's Roosevelt Hospital to the Lincoln Tunnel would be the worst of it — a minefield for my 68-year-old mother, whose stage-four uterine cancer had

metastasized to her liver and lungs and, as her palliative care doctor characterized it, "filled her entire abdominal cavity." It was the pain that finally got my mom to visit the doctor seven weeks earlier. There had been other signs, but she had refused to go to the doctor before that, only repeating to me what I'd heard her say when I was growing up: "Doctors look for problems…they *make* you sick."

It was August 2015. We were now headed by an ambulette service to my new home in Toledo, Ohio, ten hours away, where I was a college professor. The plan was for her to first spend a few weeks at a skilled nursing facility, so she could relearn how to walk after her recent long hospital stay. That would give us time to order a hospital bed and other medical supplies before bringing her to our house for in-home hospice care. I had been looking forward to showing my mom our new home ever since I texted a picture of it to her after we found it in June.

"Look, Mom!" I wrote. "I can't believe the house comes with such colorful flowers. There are dark pink rose bushes in the backyard."

"Oh Kim, it's so beautiful," she texted back.

"I can't wait for you to see it," I replied. And that was true. Neither one of us had lived in a house before.

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It was hard to believe that this frail, soft-spoken person in the ambulette was my mom. After all, it was her voice — loud and strong, even booming at times — that had protected me from the pain and despair that surrounded us, inside and outside our home, while I was growing up. She defended the way she chose to raise me — offering material advantages she did not have growing up — despite my grandmother's disapproval.

"You act like those white folks you love so much!" screamed my grandmother.

"That's just ignorant!" my mom yelled in response. "Wanting what's best for Kim isn't a white thing!"

"Don't you fucking call me ignorant in *my* house!"

"My mother defended the way she chose to raise me — offering material advantages she did not have growing up — despite my grandmother's disapproval."

But my mom was not always able to protect herself. I learned to always be on alert, because I was afraid something might happen to her. One morning when I was 7, and we were still in the room we shared, mom opened her mouth wide and wiggled one of her front teeth with her index finger. "Marvin hit me and knocked my tooth loose," she explained, referring to her younger brother. Her tooth remained that way throughout my childhood. She never saw a dentist, probably due, in equal parts, to her fears and the expense. Of course, she eventually lost that tooth, and the others surrounding it.

It was her mouth that provided the boundary between the chaos and me. Sometimes she roared loudly in order to protect me. Other times, she used her voice to communicate softly to me that everything was going to be okay. Music was a comfort to us both. Mom introduced the Trashmen's 1963 surf rock novelty hit "Surfin' Bird" to me when I was 6, and I never got tired of jumping around to the craziest, most frenetic song I had ever heard. "*A-well-a don't you know about the bird? Well, everybody knows that the bird is the word!*" I would twirl around, flailing my arms like a bird, until I fell down with mom looking on, smiling.

Her outsized voice was encased in a tiny, 5-foot-2 inch, 100-pound body — although her huge Angela Davis afro, and later her braids, along with her 1970s-style clothes, with fringes, tassels and colorful patterns, helped her to appear taller than she was. Her voice made it so we could survive in our claustrophobic little room in our apartment in the Marcy Projects in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, as my mom resisted the limitations placed on her by her family and community. Marcy was also rapper Jay-Z's childhood home, making it an essential stop on the various current popular NYC hip-hop tours. But in the 1970s, the Marcy Houses were long-neglected by the city and in a state of grave

disrepair, extremely dangerous, and mostly comprised of people whose daily lives were marked by poverty, violence, and quiet desperation.

That included us.

But it was my mom who made it possible for me to one day become the first person on her side of the family to earn a bachelor's degree, two master's degrees, a Ph.D., and to become a college professor.

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I was a girl from the projects, but through a feat of my mother's imagination, I was set upon a path to become much more than that. My mom was from the projects too — I spent the first nine years of my life in the same apartment she had lived in from the age of 12 with her mother and four younger siblings, but she decided while I was still in her womb that my life would be better than her own. Because of my mother's intelligence and excellent grades, she attended Eli Whitney High School in Brooklyn in the early 1960s, then a predominantly white vocational school, yet she received little praise or support from her mother. My mother was the oldest, and probably, in some ways, too much like my grandmother. Despite all the ways they were the same, including their shared obstinacy and unshakable wills, my mother did the unthinkable: She decided she wanted something more for herself and for me. She chose to finish her high school education, she chose to make friends outside of the neighborhood, and she chose to work in white corporate America, which required her to take the subway every morning from Brooklyn to Manhattan.

My grandmother was sure my mother took a different path because she thought she was better than her, but perhaps more damning than that, she believed my mother wanted to be white. "You think those people give a shit about you?!" she would scream as my mother prepared her clothes for work the next day.

That whiteness wasn't necessarily reflected in my mother's outward appearance. Every morning she put on one of her silky rayon blouses — often in royal blue, her favorite color — along with dark slacks and high heels for her corporate job as a secretary at American Express in lower Manhattan. She wore her hair in cornrow braids, as did I at the

time, and at home she dressed casually in flowered cotton tops and bell-bottom jeans. She moved seamlessly between work and home without having to code-switch — her speaking voice always sounding the same. She used the same speaking style at home as she did when she took me with her to her office, or when she answered her work telephone. "You sound just like one of them," my grandmother would tell her.

Even though I was a young child, my mom treated me as a confidant. Sometimes she would talk softly as we lay in bed in the darkness. "I always wanted the *real* college experience," she would say to me. "I wanted to go away to college, and at the *right* age." She told me that when I was a baby, and she was 23, she took classes at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, hoping to complete an associate's degree. But then it was too difficult for her to juggle work, school, and me, so she had to quit. She also confided in me her disappointment that even though she'd flourished academically throughout elementary school and junior high, she ended up at a vocational high school instead of an academic one. "I always brought home As," she said, "and nobody cared. But you're not going to P.S. *anything*. You're not going to be like these girls around here."

My mom's decision to send me to Packer Collegiate Institute, a private, pre-K to 12, college prep school in upscale Brooklyn Heights, with children who were predominantly white and affluent, illustrated her determination to open up a world of opportunities for me. This was in direct contrast with the other children in my family, and in my community, who faced limited futures as they navigated neighborhoods filled with crumbling apartment buildings, rat infested vacant lots, and shuttered businesses. My male cousins, who were every bit as bright and eager to learn as I was, walked or rode to their local public schools, and learned as best as they could.

My mother taught me to read by the time I was 3 and to write soon after that, and she created a mythology around my specialness that helped manufacture a bubble of protection for me. Every chance she got, she would remind our family members, and me, how ahead of the curve I was. "Kim, you never crawled like other kids," she would tell me as I got older. "You rocked forward and back once, twice, three times, and then you leaped, like a frog, to the other end of the rug! "

In time, even my most out-of-control uncles saw me as off limits, so the angry words and the violence were never directed at me. This was not something I figured out later in life. I was acutely aware of it throughout my childhood. Despite the drugs and alcohol, the violence, the fractured families, and the economic despair, my mother and I looked beyond the grim project courtyard and planned my escape. It began with my enrollment in 1974 as one of a small number of black students at Packer.

I was the first to be picked up by the school bus in the early hours of the morning, and the last one dropped off in the afternoon. While it was still dark, my mom would walk with me from our apartment through the courtyard to "the chain," the long, metallic links cordoning off the entrance way into the north side of the housing complex and functioning as a landmark of sorts. Just on the other side of the chain, we would catch my bus. Known colloquially as a "short bus," it was a smaller version of the long yellow school bus that many children know intimately. This prompted kids in the neighborhood to ask, "Are you retarded or somethin'?" I dreaded having them see me in the mornings. It didn't help that I was not allowed to play outside without adult supervision. Since I was not in the courtyard as often as the other boys and girls, I was either shunned or mocked when they did see me. They'd ask, "Why you talk so white?"

My mother and I sounded white. While it seems odd that a socially-constructed racial category might be represented in a vocal quality, and it's difficult to nail down the characteristics of white verbal expression, I guess I know what it is when I hear it. Lots of black comics seem to as well, and at 7 I knew too. A cadence, an accent. Whatever it is, my mom and I both had it. It confounded the rest of our family that my mom could make her voice sound like Carol Brady's when she'd grown up in the same house and the same neighborhood as the rest of her siblings. My mom was proud that people mistook her for white on the telephone. It's hard to say whether I mimicked my mom's way of speaking, or if I mimicked the white friends I met at school. Maybe it was both. But I always sounded different from the people around me. Not black. Not like the others. Still, I insisted, "I don't talk white."

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When I was in the third grade, a boy of 13 or 14 began showing up around the time my bus arrived each morning. He threw rocks of varying sizes at it, sometimes narrowly missing the windows. Our bus driver, a middle-aged black woman with a giant orange afro, threatened to stop picking me up if he persisted, so one morning my 24-year-old uncle decided to intervene. This was the same uncle who'd knocked my mom's tooth loose. He was gentle and kind to me when he was sober, and he acted as a father figure. My own father was divorced from my mother, in the Army, stationed somewhere far away, and not in my life, so I appreciated my uncle's positive attention.

As the bus drove off, I, and the bus driver's children, who were there before the other Packer kids got picked up, watched as my uncle grabbed the boy by his collar and shook him around like a rag doll. I was mortified. Was he drunk? I couldn't tell. But my fellow passengers were wildly entertained. "Ooooooooooh," they screamed, pressing their faces against their windows as the bus pulled away. I looked down at my lap, and tried to make myself invisible. As embarrassed as I was by my uncle's actions, even then I knew he showed up for me out of love. Plus the boy with the rocks never reappeared again.

Elementary school can be difficult enough, but I had an hour-and-a-half commute each way from my apartment to Packer. I hated waking up at 6:00am when I knew some of my friends got up at 7:30 and walked to school. I feared, through a stroke of bad luck, running into one of my Packer classmates on the bus (operated by a private

company that picked up some Packer students by special arrangement). My bus driver's route began in Bed Stuy on the way to Park Slope, and then, eventually, Downtown Brooklyn and the Heights. But what if our bus driver decided to go a different way one day, and when I got on I saw one of my friends? I could not bear the thought of having anyone know where I lived.

My mom took great care to make sure I wore the same expensive, preppy clothes that my friends did despite the drain on her pocketbook — Osh Kosh B'Gosh overalls, plaid dresses, slacks with embroidered designs when I was younger, and Lacoste polos, Shetland wool crew neck sweaters, and Gloria Vanderbilt Jeans when I was in middle school. She took me on the subway to birthday parties and play dates at my classmates' houses, and she gave me money for field trips to museums in Manhattan, and for fancy cabin camping trips in New Jersey.

I never had a single Packer friend visit me at home, so no one knew how I lived. Even still, I never quite fit in. Some of it was because of my race, but most of it was because my family was working class, at best, and I remained mystified by my friends' lifestyles. A few of my friends owned horses that lived in stables outside of the City, while others would hobble to school on crutches on Mondays after their weekend ski trips.

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Packer had been my mother's idea and, at first, my grandmother was against it. In one of their many heated arguments, she warned my mother, "One day, you're not going to recognize your own daughter!" While my grandmother stood at about 5 feet tall, she still cut an imposing figure. When she and my mother argued, with the specter of the words turning to blows, even though my mother was two inches taller, I feared she was at a physical disadvantage. Yet my grandmother's words failed to deter my mom, and on my first day of school she proudly walked me through the immense playground known as "the garden" and into the little green schoolhouse designated for the youngest students.

"Since I was not in the courtyard as often as the other boys and girls, I was either shunned or mocked when they did see me. They'd ask, 'Why you talk so white?'"

Dressed in a grey suit, my mom held my hand as I, wearing a new fall outfit, made sure to walk on each and every pinecone in my path. I still remember that Packer smell. It sometimes comes to me in dreams. The crisp fall air seeping through the tiny cracks in the closed bay windows mixed with the musty odor of the 129-year-old building. I sat cross-legged in a circle with my kindergarten classmates while the teacher read to us from a giant picture book. I was a mere three miles from home, but in every way the distance was incalculable.

My mother also broke ranks with our neighbors, in a different way: She flaunted her love of rock music, playing her Sex Pistols, Boomtown Rats, and Thin Lizzy records at top volume on Sunday afternoons just before her mother and the other black church ladies returned from holy services. My mom was a rarity: She was a young black woman who not only grew up loving rock 'n' roll, but she also embraced its offshoot, rock music, even as it increasingly became viewed as white despite its largely African American origins. Mom enjoyed 1960s blues-based transatlantic rock artists like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Animals, and she continued her love of the genre throughout the 1970s and beyond.

That wasn't all she listened to. Occasionally she would play a disco hit single like "Le Freak" by Chic, or "I'm Coming Out" by Diana Ross. Once, while my grandmother was still at church, my mom, clad in her favorite blue jeans and a plaid blue shirt, put "Ring My Bell" by Anita Ward on repeat. Not only was it loud, but she easily played the song 20 times. It could have been more. I lost count. The important thing to know about that song is that it includes bell sounds and electronic bleeps, which everyone in proximity to our apartment couldn't help but hear. I was just a kid, and I found it maddening. I can only imagine

what the neighbors thought. But there she was, dancing and singing along obliviously in the living room: "You can ring my bell, ring my bell (ring my bell, ding-dong-ding ahhh)."

She rocked out just as hard to Johnny Rotten's sneering vocals. It was a way of drowning out her pain. I would soon do the same, blasting music of all kinds to escape the epic fights between my mother and grandmother. My grandmother would yell, "Don't you make me come over there and kick your ass!"

"You stupid old woman," my mother would reply, "why don't you just try it!"

My mother and grandmother fought hard. These arguments were about everything and nothing. They could erupt because of something small like my mother re-arranging some of my grandmother's food in the refrigerator, or something more substantial like my mother's decision to work a white-collar desk job rather than becoming a civil servant like her mother had. While they mainly engaged in screaming, cussing, threat-filled battles, occasionally my grandmother hit my mom, or threw boiling hot water that she heated up on the stove just as my mom escaped into our bedroom. But even though most of the time my mother emerged unharmed physically, the threat of a real fist fight between the two of them terrified me.

I lived in a constant state of vigilance when my mother and grandmother shared the same space. I became attuned to my grandmother's moods. If she was softly singing or humming one of her church songs, I felt relieved, less afraid she would pick a fight with my mom. Sometimes the singing would come after a big blow up, and then I knew the combat was over for that night. I longed to hear my grandmother's melodious voice, for it represented a temporary calm in our home. Most nights the peace came after the warfare.

On one such evening when I was six, the air had a familiar East Coast chill. Fall was giving way to winter, as Thanksgiving quickly approached. Nana stood in the middle of the kitchen, near the long, white, Formica kitchen table, with her hands on her hips. To me, my grandmother seemed possessed of herculean strength, which resulted in her being able to lift furniture a man might scoff at heaving, or carry multiple heavy bags of groceries or laundry without betraying the

slightest hint of fatigue. As she stood barefoot, feet slightly apart, wearing her old, flowered nightgown and tattered, polyester, yellow robe, she looked enormous to me.

My mother also stood in the kitchen, having changed out of her work clothes and into pajamas and slippers. Even though she was super thin, she was also quite physically strong. It was probably around 8pm or so, closing in on my bedtime, but instead of having been put to bed by my mom, I still sat at my "little table" coloring as my mother and grandmother faced each other down. In an effort to make me an independent child so I could learn to rely on myself, my mother made sure I had what the adults in our apartment had, only in miniature. So by the time I was able to feed myself, I had my own table that sat in the middle of our kitchen. It was a red and white folding card table sturdy enough to hold a tiny, six-inch, black and white television, and the Panasonic tape recorder my mom gave me that I used to sing my favorite songs and tell my favorite stories into. Sometimes I would belt out current songs, like "Boogie Fever" by the Sylvers, and when I was older I would sing disco hits like "Boogie Nights" by Heatwave. Eventually, I sang songs I wrote myself. One favorite was "Under the Deep Blue Sea": "*Where I live is lonely. It's dark, and degraded. If I could leave it, oh I'd take the chance. Help me! I'm stuck under the world! Help me! It's lonely down here…*"

My "little table" was also where I ate all of my meals until I was 9. When my mom and grandmother would argue, I would sometimes use the tape recorder. While sitting at my "little table" I would move the clunky black contraption to the center, press record, and begin the next installment in my makeshift radio show. My show didn't have a set play list or program. It was a hodgepodge of spoken word, where I would read passages from some of my favorite books, tell corny jokes, and talk about what happened in my day. I would also sing songs and record all manner of media off of the TV, radio, or my record player. In one such tape that I still have, I preface my singing with, "Now I'm going to sing two of my songs I learned in school. I like them very much that's why I'm singing them."

In my head, I can still hear the refrains of a recurring fight my mother and grandmother had.

"If you don't like it, you can get the fuck outta my house!" my grandmother would bellow.

"That's great language to use around your granddaughter. What a great example you're setting!" my mother would screech.

"I don't give a fuck what kinda example I'm setting. This is my house, and if you don't like it you can leave!"

"Whatta bully you are. You're wrong and you just can't admit it!"

"Get the fuck out!"

"I'll get the fuck out as soon as I can!"

At this, my grandmother would lunge like a wild cat at my mother. I was always amazed at how quickly she could move from point A to point B when trying to get at my mother during one of their fights, despite her weight, and later, in spite of her damaged knees, hobbled from years of scrubbing floors in order to support her five children.

After years of practice, my mother had become pretty adept at getting out of Nana's way when threatened with violence. My mom was never the physical aggressor, and the few times my grandmother was able to catch her and land a blow, my mother refrained from hitting her back.

This time, after watching the two grownups circle the kitchen table like a Tom and Jerry cartoon on an endless loop, my stomach flipped when my mother was finally caught. I was already a nervous child by that point, and I had in the last couple of years developed what would become a lifetime habit: biting my nails. I didn't just tear at my nails, I would maul my cuticles, and sometimes even chew the sides of my fingers. This worked predictably to quell my anxiety. It still does.

My grandmother grabbed my mother and rather than hitting her, she began to pull her toward our apartment's front door. I watched wide-eyed as my grandmother maneuvered herself behind my mom and began to push her with all of her weight to the threshold of the outside door. I was terrified, though I didn't cry or make any sort of noise. I was good at making myself as small as possible in these moments. Nana managed somehow to hold my mother while she unlocked the

two locks, opened the door, and shoved her outside. She locked the door behind her and calmly walked through the kitchen, down the hallway, and into her bedroom.

"My mother rocked out just as hard to Johnny Rotten's sneering vocals. It was a way of drowning out her pain. I would soon do the same, blasting music of all kinds to escape the epic fights between my mother and grandmother."

It was nearly winter, and as such the cold could be felt out in the hallway. My mom wore house shoes and a flimsy night dress. I was scared she might die. Everything went silent. I stood up and looked toward the door. I heard my mother's knock, tentative, at first, and then more urgent. I wanted to open the door, but I was afraid of what my grandmother might do. Nana reappeared and walked past me toward the front door. I was afraid she might use a belt or maybe even make me go outside in my pajamas to pick a branch off a tree for a whipping, like those stories my grandmother told my mom and me about her own childhood down south. This had never happened before — and would never happen — as my mother threatened my grandmother with bodily harm should she ever lay a hand on me. I didn't know that at the time, though.

I also worried that if I stayed in my seat and didn't let her in, my mom might get very sick and die and leave me alone with my grandmother forever. So, shaking, I moved slowly toward the front door. I made quick eye contact with Nana. She had a bemused look on her face, almost sheepish. Perhaps she saw herself in that instant through my eyes and felt shame. I walked past her and slowly unlocked the door for my mother. Mom didn't speak; she just shut and locked the door behind her. Shivering, she peered around trying to get a sense of the

level of danger still present. There was none. Nana had gone back into her room, this time for the night.

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When I was 9, my family moved from the Marcy Houses to the Breukelen Houses in the Canarsie neighborhood in Brooklyn, where I lived until I was 12. Our living room in my grandmother's apartment wasn't very big, and the bed where I slept was just a few feet from the beaten up, plastic-covered, green sofa that faced the TV. Next to the TV was a turntable, receiver, and speakers. On the other side of the TV, in the right corner of the room, sat another couch. The living room wasn't much, but it was a haven for my mother and me. This was where we listened to music. Not together, like we did when I was very young, but in shifts. I had my bands, and mom had hers.

I sometimes liked her music. The Police, the Boomtown Rats, Thin Lizzy, and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers were bands whose albums I was happy to play. Otherwise, I mostly enjoyed making fun of her favorite bands — Neil Young's voice was high and nasally and Jim Carroll's song "People Who Died" was just a bummer: "*Teddy sniffing glue, he was 12 years old/Fell from the roof on East Two-nine.*" My mom liked and spun a lot of my records, too, such as Blondie's *Eat to the Beat* and *Parallel Lines*, and Cheap Trick's *All Shook Up*. She particularly loved "Dreaming" by Blondie. Of course she did. I know she saw herself as she sang along: "*Imagine something of your very own, something you can have and hold/I'd build a road in gold just to have some dreamin'.*"

When I listened to music, I would sit on the couch staring at the LP covers and re-reading the liner notes over and over and over again. With all the lamps on in the living room, and sometimes the kitchen light too, I pored over my mom's rock magazines — *Relix*, *Trouser Press*, *Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker*, *New Musical Express*. My mom's approach was completely different. Her music-listening sessions were like a ritual — there were specific, consistent steps that she took each time.

"OK, Kimberly," she'd say, "it's time for me to play records now."

Mom stood over me as I sprawled on the living room couch. I stacked her music magazines neatly, and put them under the end table. My

two well-worn favorites were the back-to-back June 1979 *Rolling Stone* cover stories about my favorite bands: Cheap Trick and Blondie. I loved Cheap Trick because their songs were heavy rock but catchy, and Robin Zander had an incredible voice. Debbie Harry was my idol. I admired her songwriting and her confidence. Before I asked my mom to buy *Parallel Lines* for me, I didn't even know it was possible for a woman to front an otherwise all-male rock band. I put Cheap Trick's *Dream Police* record back in its sleeve. By the time I stood up, mom had already turned the lights off. All of them. There was still light coming from the kitchen, but the living room was pitch black. She pulled out *Freedom of Choice* by Devo, put the album on the turntable, and cast a look in my direction that reminded me it was now time to leave the room.

As I sat in the kitchen, I heard the opening strains of "Girl U Want": "*She sings from somewhere you can't see/She sits in the top of the greenest tree.*" I mean, there was no way not to hear it. She played the music so loud everyone on our floor, and the ones above and below us, must have also heard. But she didn't care. I took a quick peek, watching her dance with her eyes closed in the darkness. I knew she was happy in that moment, and that made me feel safe.

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"Mommmeeee, I'm not an animal!" I ran into the living room doing my best Johnny Rotten, catching my mom between songs. Rockstar style, I sang into a microphone, my legs at a wide stance. I contorted my face, imitating Rotten's famous sneer. The one I had seen in *Melody Maker*. It was 1979, and she had discovered the Sex Pistols after they had broken up, and John Lydon had already moved on to form Public Image Limited. My mom found the Sex Pistols through a Neil Young song. Young was one of her most beloved musicians, so when he sang about Rotten in his 1979 song "Hey, Hey, My, My (Into the Black)," she went on a mission to find out who Rotten was.

My mom was a fierce advocate for me, and she courageously battled every single obstacle placed in our path out in the world. Yet when it came to her romantic life — the vulnerable, personal, private space that had nothing to do with me — she was timid and fearful. I was 10, and by that time I had never known my mother to go on a date or buy a

new non-work outfit for herself. Perhaps rock music re-introduced a world — really a multitude of worlds — where my mom was simply Jennifer. Where she was that pretty, confident teenager whose eyes locked with Creedence Clearwater Revival's singer-songwriter John Fogerty from the front row of a New York City concert before I was born. When listening to Rotten's take-down of the Queen, and all that the crown stands for, my mom was reminded of what it felt like to be that young rebellious girl whose mother and younger sister had to track down at a Central Park music festival because it was late and they were worried for her safety. Of course, she was fine. She knew how to take care of herself. And she told them as much. Rotten's angry, shouted lyrics hurling from my mom's mouth took her back to that earlier version of herself.

Rock music had the same effect on me. Through my mom's old *Creem* and *Trouser Press* magazines, haphazardly strewn about the living room, I saw photographs of everyone from Mick Jagger to Iggy Pop to Robin Zander. Those images were always provocative, and the articles, which I read voraciously, were unflinching in their depiction of the rock 'n roll lifestyle, replete with unapologetic tales of sexual conquest, illicit drug taking, and all manner of wanton rebellion. I would burrow into the living room couch absorbing these magazines for hours at a time. Sometimes I would imagine myself on stage with the band singing back up, and other times I would settle for being Zander's or Blondie's drummer Clem Burke's date. Either scenario would take me away from the reality: I was a smart but awkward kid who didn't truly fit in at school or at home. The profound shame I felt about where I lived — some of which I inherited from my mother, who kept the truth of where she resided from her own best friend — and the violence in my home, compelled me to also lie about my social class and seek refuge in music and in the fantastical stories I would tell myself about a different, more glamorous life I might have in the future.

Mom played *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* night after night for weeks. As she sat on the sofa, I waved my hands around, scrunched my face up and screamed the words to "Bodies" as loud as I could. Of course, the lyric was actually "*Bodiieeees…I'm not an animal!*" rather than "Mommmeeee, I'm not an animal!" Much like my deliberate revision of PIL's song "Albatross," changing "*Getting rid of the albatross*" to the nonsensical "Getting rid of the fireman's

groooooow," the outrageousness of my misinterpretation was in direct correlation in my mind to the ridiculousness of the song. Mishearing, and getting my mom to laugh, were ways to strengthen our connection.

"This song is sooooo stupid!" I'd say.

"Kimmy!" she'd scream with laughter.

"What the heck is an albatross anyway?!"

I embraced rock music so I could bond with my mother. She didn't just influence me by playing some songs I liked. She left her impression by both coaxing me into making music more central, as that was going to be a way to communicate and grow together, and showing me that music can soothe pain. When I listen now to "Dancing in the Moonlight" by Thin Lizzy, or Devo's "Freedom of Choice," those songs allow me to grieve for my mom, while also keeping her close.

Music helped me to truly know my mother. It bonded us, and I carry our shared love of music with me today. The last rock show my mom and I went to together was the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Stone Temple Pilots, and Fishbone at Jones Beach Theater in Wantagh, New York, in August 2000. This was the year before I left for Los Angeles, where I would live until 2015. She was just a few years older than I am now, and these bands were from my generation, but she — *we* — had a fantastic time. She continued to embrace new rock and pop music until her death. I have inherited this from her. Not only do I anticipate listening to new music for personal enjoyment well into the future, but I have also made popular music part of my career as a college professor, music journalist, and literary and popular music scholar.

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In 2011, I was 41 and married, with plans to grow my family, and my mom was readier than she had ever been to be a grandmother. I looked at my mom moving in with us as the natural next step. As I spoke to her on the phone, I imagined her sitting on her bed in her tiny Manhattan apartment. She was 64 and had gained a lot of weight, now resembling her own mother. There was hardly a line on her face, but she had high blood pressure and difficulty walking, which she blamed

on the excess weight on her small frame. “I want to help you when the baby comes,” she said. “I’ll take care of the baby during the day. It would make me very happy to do that. I’m ready to be a grandmother now.”

“One day I looked in the mirror, and I saw a stranger. I aged years in a matter of weeks. Deep, dark circles appeared under my eyes, and wouldn’t go away no matter how much sleep I got.”

I slowly took in my mom’s surprising words as I sat on the burgundy couch in the middle of my Sherman Oaks apartment. My mom was from the boomer generation that believed those over 30 couldn’t be trusted, and she fought getting old with everything she had. I was just a few years away from completing my Ph.D. I knew I wouldn’t be where I was in my career if it weren’t for all that she had done for me. I looked forward to her playing the Beatles for our child. I imagined accompanying our kid to his or her first concert, as my mom did when she took me to see Cheap Trick when I was 11. My husband and I soon embarked on our journey as prospective adoptive parents, a journey we are still on.

But then, after an initial cancer diagnosis four years later, my mom’s health rapidly declined. In six weeks, she went from the promise of her tumor being operable, with the chance of remission, to the palliative care doctor suggesting in-home hospice care. The unpredictable shifts in my mom’s prognosis created in me a psychic whiplash, rendering me unmoored in a way that I had never before experienced. One day I looked in the mirror, and I saw a stranger. I aged years in a matter of weeks. Deep, dark circles appeared under my eyes, and wouldn’t go away no matter how much sleep I got. I didn’t consider turning to music. I imagined it would make me feel worse.

"Sing to me." My mother repeated her request as we were on the interstate headed for Toledo. I was startled, though I shouldn't have been. After all, it was music that joined my mother to me from the beginning. Talking about music. Arguing over music. Listening to music. This is what we did together.

I knew it was a choice between the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" and "Lola" by the Kinks. Those were two of my mom's favorite rock songs. My mom sang "Lola" to me often when I was a child. She might begin with the first verse in the kitchen after dinner, and I would join in for the second verse. Or we would engage in an impromptu call and response together before we went to sleep in our room. She would sing, "*Lola…*" And then I would sing in my child's voice "*L-O-L-A Lola*." And then she would finish sweetly with "l*o lo lo lo Lola.*" According to family lore, at nine months old, when I could only barely talk, I would hold on with one hand to the railing of my crib, letting the other arm swing lazily over the side. As I bounced up and down on my chubby legs, I would sing the "*Yeah, yeah yeah, woo!*" backing vocal of "Brown Sugar" with my mother. The British Invasion arrived in 1964, when my mom was 17. She liked the Beatles all right, but in the endless rock supremacy debates that pitted The Fab Four against The World's Greatest Rock & Roll Band, it was hands down the Stones for her all day, every day. "The Beatles are nice," she would say, "but the Rolling Stones are *dangerous*."

It made sense that in the back of this ambulette, she wanted what comforted her — the music and the daughter that had given her life. I reached for my phone to find the lyrics to "Lola." I didn't want to get them wrong. I cleared my throat, leaned in close, and in a quiet voice I began:

"*I met her in a club down in old Soho…*"

I looked at my mom. She had her eyes closed, and her face looked peaceful. I sang the whole song. She opened her eyes and smiled.

"Sing it again."

Here we were at our call and response rock 'n' roll best, all these years on.

The ambulette moved along. The ride was steady, as we were long out of Manhattan, and now on the smooth interstate roads. We still had hours to go. I hummed "Lola" to myself and grinned. As sick and delirious as my mother was, she recognized me, and she allowed me to comfort her. She let me soothe her pain with the Kinks — with music, the thing that helped her to survive.

It was then that I realized that in all of the craziness of the last several weeks, while my mom was still lucid, I had never shared what I wrote to her in the acknowledgments section of my dissertation. So I leaned in close:

"Mom, I dedicated my dissertation to you." She beamed, and I continued: "You're the best mother ever. I just want you to know that."

"Give me a kiss," she replied.

And then I kissed her on her cheek. She smiled again and soon fell asleep.

She died six days later.

* * *

Kimberly Mack is an Assistant Professor at the University of Toledo. Her book, Fade to Black: Blues Music and the Art of Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White, is under contract with the University of Massachusetts Press.

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