

Palaima: Listen to the stories contained in a song

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Our city proclaims that we are the “live music capital of the world.” We may then be live storytelling capital of the world, too.

The songs played and sung in Austin’s many live music venues throughout the year and during our annual music festivals reach into our hearts and souls. The words and music make us feel happy and sad, sometimes at the same time. They take us outside of ourselves and to places deep inside we never reached before. They make us see how big small things are. They tell us we are not alone in our joys and miseries, that good or bad times don’t last always.

We can think of songs and music purely as entertainment and of musicians and songwriters as the entertainment industry. We can also view the stories we read, listen to, or watch on screens or stages as diversions from our real lives. More and more we are conditioned to view songs, music and stories as products.

This is not surprising. Books often come to our attention when they become New York Times or amazon.com bestsellers. Austin’s cultural treasure, BookPeople, which represents itself as “a community bound by books,” compiles monthly bestseller lists by categories. Movies succeed or fail as measured by box office tracking. And we can follow the fate of CDs on the Billboard 200, the Waterloo Records Top 50 or the Shiner TX Top 10.

Still, it is more than nostalgia to feel a loss when the stories embedded in songs, poems, books, plays and movies are promoted primarily as commercial products. We can unthinkingly act like consumers out to satisfy appetites rather than participants in a creative social process. We can forget what BookPeople's slogan stresses: stories are for, in and of communities.

Consumerism leads to irreverent behavior. As mere consumers, we may fail to appreciate the unique, never-again communal aspects of a live performance. As unthinking consumers we may talk drunkenly through a Blind Boys of Alabama performance or propose that Willie Nelson be engaged to play music during a conference dinner. I have had both experiences, but not passively.

Fortunately, there are ways we can get back in touch with reverence for the art of telling and singing and hearing stories. Last week in the School of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, lecturer David Junker and professor Tracy Dahlby collaborated to bring to campus lifelong master storyteller Gioia Timpanelli. They created spaces where she could tell and talk about stories her grandmother told in Sicily, stories the Inuits, the Japanese and the Irish tell, stories akin to American blues and the folk songs of Woody Guthrie.

The late Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Frank McCourt proclaimed, "No one in the world, yes, in the world, can tell a story better than Gioia Timpanelli." Timpanelli proved him right for almost three hours in the evening by lamplight. She gave us spoken proof that the art of telling hearth stories was not one-way communication or rote performance. Her stories came forth like jazz variations responding to the collective needs and experiences of us, her audience.

She spoke, like our own grandmothers, to our minds and to our hearts. She stressed, in one aside, that stories were "not useful." "You cannot buy stories," she said. "What would you buy?" She made us see how preposterous it was to think we can buy a defiant spirit, a deep feeling, a magical journey into timelessness.

Timpanelli riffed on Yeats and Keats. Stories were made from “memory and hope.” Stories were not utilitarian, but important for “soul-making.” Stories “make community”; tap into “tears, joy, ecstasy, sorrow”; help us to feel compassion and empathy; and get us thinking and talking about the many strange ways we have of being human.

Stories are true, Timpanelli told us. Life is hard. Giants do exist, and they always want more. Fairy tale characters live happily ever after. There is no guarantee we will.

My guitarist friend John Inmon has told me that, whenever he plays, he keeps in mind that music comes into being when it reaches the ears and then the hearts of the human beings who have come to hear him play. As we listen to great musicians in Austin, make sure they know we are there fully to accept and respond to the song gifts they offer.

And be generous at the tip jar.