



## Whistle Musings

John Morgan, one of my favorite Madison writers, regularly sends me his wonderful poetry and prose in the US Mail. His most recent story (**In The Hospital**, ©2016 John Morgan) had an ending that involved his whistling while waiting for the bus. The person waiting beside him thanked him as she got on the bus, and added, "Whistling's a lost art these days."

Needless to say there is a whole lot more to John's ending, and to his whole story, than that. But I couldn't stop thinking about whistling. The woman was right; you don't hear much whistling in these days of earbuds and cell phones. But whistling has played and still plays a large part in my life. And appropriate to this column, there couldn't possibly be a more folk-musicy behavior than whistling.

When I was a kid my teeth were crooked. I had an overbite, and my lower rack was aligned like a windblown fence. It wasn't a traffic-stopping mess, but it was noticeable enough that the other kids would tease me about it sometimes. The only things more mortifying than crooked teeth were the braces that I got to straighten them. These came along with zits and glasses and other puberty delights around 1960, when I was in seventh and eighth grade.

There was one peculiar benefit that came with my particular pre-braces configuration, namely, the ability to whistle through my bottom teeth. I could pout, you might say, sticking my lower lip out a little which would expose my bottom teeth, place my top lip upon the tops of my bottom teeth, and blow. The whistle would be created by the air swooshing through the unusual spaces between my crooked bottom teeth (and here I'm not talking about that whispery tongue-whistle most people can do with their mouth loosely open). Because of my teeth, I never was able to whistle through my puckered lips

like most people do. But when my braces were taken off in a couple years, the situation was reversed: I could no longer whistle through my teeth, but could now tweet away through the lips like a regular guy.

I had a friend who used whistling as part of a disguise. This was back in the mid 50s, when I was in third or fourth grade. My friend liked to think of himself as a junior detective, and when going undercover, he would borrow his father's raincoat and fedora, pull the hat down low, and walk around the neighborhood whistling. He called himself "The Whistler." All this was no doubt inspired by a TV show (based on a radio show and subsequent movies made in the 1940s) which came out in 1954 called **The Whistler**. I never saw it but I have to believe my friend did.

My second whistling memory from those elementary school days involves a contest I've mentioned before in this column. All the kids had to decorate their bikes and pedal to the high school football field. We dismounted, and at the given signal (a whistle?), had to run to the opposite end of the field, where we were given eight saltines. We had to choke those down, then the first kid who could whistle got the prize. (A whistle?)

But my third memory from those days was of the beautifully melodic, loud, and chirping whistle of an old man named Mr. Gill, who would often be walking home from work in the opposite direction when I would be walking home from my junior detective friend's house. It was such a lovely whistle, and in my memory it echoes across and down the tree lined streets of my boyhood home. Beautiful, though I imagine it went through old Mrs. Gill's head like a nail.

So what's the deal with whistling? Listening through the whistled theme songs of **Lassie** and the **Andy Griffith Show**, and through the whistles of Otis Reading's **Dock of the Bay** and the Lovin' Spoonful's **Daydream**, the Harlem Globetrotters **Sweet Georgia Brown**, and the songs ABOUT whistling -- **Give A Little Whistle** from **Pinocchio**, **Whistle a Happy Tune** from **The King And I**, **Whistle While You Work**

from **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs** -- it reaffirms that traditionally there is not only an upbeat mood associated with the art, but a more specific don't-sweat-the-small-stuff, carefree, and jaunty feeling.

But if you whistle, you probably do it at different times for subtly different reasons. Here are a few of mine:

One, in keeping with the above point, I whistle gayly when I'm alone, taking out the trash or changing the furnace filter. I think I whistle at these uninteresting times because creating melody is an interesting pursuit, and I whistle instead of hum because you can whistle blowing out or sucking in, so it's nonstop. I also think it subconsciously adds a comforting layer of order over the jumbled environment we trudge through.

Two, sometimes I whistle when shopping, so quietly that no one can hear me, but people can see that I'm whistling. I think I do this because I'm an old fart and don't want people to think I'm befuddled. If you're whistling, I don't think people perceive you as befuddled. But the joke's on them, because, of course, I am.

Three, when I'm walking through the woods and it's hunting season, I whistle loudly. I do a Mr. Gill. It's my audible Blaze Orange. Whistling travels further than singing, and I whistle not random tweets, but a melody. This may be the best way to let hunters in the area know you are a human and not Bambi. Gosh, maybe this is why and how music developed in the first place.

And four, I whistle studiously as a music composition tool, and even once in a while publicly as a musical instrument. My music partner and I have a dog song with an entire whistled bridge. Audiences have been known to whistle along, which is convenient because I often break into a smile during this part of the song, and that, ironically, prevents one from whistling.

No doubt there are other times when I am moved to whistle, but I have learned my lesson. I always take care not to eat eight saltines beforehand.