

'Keep on loving you!' [Corrected 06/26/2022]

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FULL TEXT

Dear Illinois, I can't fight this feeling anymore. It's time to bring this ship into the shore, and throw away the oars. We sailed on together. We drifted apart. But I know, if the world turned upside down, I know you'd always be around. Your hands build me up when I'm sinking. The search is over. You were with me all the while. After all the rain, I will be the flame. I did it all for the glory of love. Now my life has meaning.

Home sweet home.

A love like ours is hard to find. How could we let it slip away?

But Illinois, you have an image problem. On paper, your chief exports include machine parts, medication, corn, pumpkins and dump trucks; in the nation's imagination, your exports are dysfunction, casserole as pizza, Blues Brothers cover bands, Cubs hats and Kanye West. That's the way of the world. Still, I would argue, the solution for your PR woes has been staring you in the face – or rather, crooning in our ears – for decades.

The main export of Illinois is the power ballad.

Now hear me out. Pennsylvania may be for lovers, but Illinois is the home of bombastic love sagas about standing naked in front of your true heart and declaring, you're just a part of me I can't let go. Soaring. Emotive. Majestically corny. Songs full of sailing metaphors and outsized passions. Songs named "Right Here Waiting for You" and "The Search is Over" and "The Glory of Love" and "You're the Inspiration." Songs by homegrown cornerstones such as Styx, REO Speedwagon, Chicago, Richard Marx and Earth, Wind & Fire. Even Cheap Trick and The Smashing Pumpkins have dabbled.

Songs that dig in, and never fade, even when you wish they would.

In fact, many of those performers are on tour this summer. The larger their venue, the better your chance of hearing a power ballad probably composed to reach the very last row of a stadium. Power ballads discourage subtlety even as they urge sensitivity. "Could we play these in smaller rooms?" asked Jonathan Cain, Schiller Park native, Journey pianist and principal songwriter of the signature ballads "Open Arms" and "Faithfully." "We'd risk making them loungy."

Some might say, more loungy.

After a couple of decades of extreme proliferation and musical ubiquity, around the onset of Nirvana in the 1990s, the power ballad became a source of irony, a kind of shared embarrassment, clichés tucked into cornballs.

Something happened along the way, and yesterday was all we had. Or perhaps, you could also argue, the power ballad just ingrained itself so deeply we stopped noticing. We accepted its inevitability. We forgot there was a time before the toughest voices in popular music sounded casually vulnerable. We took an entire genre, nourished in the Midwest, around the Chicago suburbs and the flat stretches of Champaign, for granted. The power ballad never died. Next time a Disney princess lets it go from an ice castle, remember: Styx was there first.

Lady Gaga, Olivia Rodrigo, Phoebe Bridgers, Adele, even disgraced Chicago hitmaker R. Kelly – they shouldered power ballads into the 21st century without irony or pause, remaking them into odes of self-improvement. The power ballad became more of an aesthetic than a genre. I think of those kitschy decorative wall hangings sold at big box stores that say things like "Live Love Laugh" as power ballad decor. What's "Top Gun: Maverick" but a power ballad about Tom Cruise?

The power ballad is both yesterday and right now.

Even our classic reaction to the power ballad – a stadium of lighters held high, swaying – has been standardized. "I went to see Coldplay at Soldier Field the other night, and that was all power ballads," said Marty Lennartz, the morning host of WXRT 93.1-FM. "But the most amazing part was you got a wristband going inside, and it changed colors depending what the song was, so it would sync up everyone's color in the stadium."

The power ballad, gentrified.

Like any romance, our relationship to power ballads ebbs and flows, but generally, it remains more alive than we care to acknowledge. They are Dear John letters to us, our hearts stripped bare. They are insufferable and unexpectedly poignant. As a 50-year-old woman explained to me at a Chicago concert in Moline earlier this spring, "The best power ballad not only reminds you of some specific time in your life, they remind you of you."

Yes, I drove to Moline to see Chicago.

I talked to a few founding members too. I visited several acts that got their start in Illinois and are known for power ballads and asked them about their own relationships to these enduring, financially rewarding, yet often mocked and unappreciated creations.

Turns out, they have complicated feelings, too.

"The first true power ballad we had was 'Keep on Loving You,'" said Kevin Cronin, of REO Speedwagon, "and what happened was I worked on it the night before I brought it into the studio and started playing it at rehearsal, and our guitarist, the late Gary Richrath, was not quite sure about it. We were a rock band. He plugged his Les Paul into a Marshall stack and, seriously, he started to drown out me and this song I kept playing. But the guitar sounded great! And when it was over, we looked at each other. It felt special. But generally, no, the band was not enthusiastic. I came out of folk clubs in Chicago. I was melody driven. They were straight rock. But 'Keep on Loving You' went No. 1, so I brought in 'Can't Fight This Feeling.' That was not warmly greeted. But by then they figured, 'If we have to play this (expletive) song, at least it'll be a hit.'"

Just before REO Speedwagon and Styx played in Tinley Park last month, I overheard a group of couples behind me. They were all middle-aged, and one of the wives kept asking when "The Loverboys" were going on. It's Loverboy, one husband said, and they already missed them. Crap, she said, she loved "Babe." That's Styx, he told her. OK, but The Loverboys have that song "Keep on Loving You?" No, that's REO.

She sighed.

"KEEP ON LOVING YOU!" another husband erupted, clearly drunk, grabbing the first husband, who squirmed out of a bear hug and groaned, "God, no – no power ballads."

"You know they're coming!" the drunk guy yelled.

Listening was like eavesdropping on a dissertation on the contradictions, uneasiness and history of power ballads. They are poetry for the unpoetic. They are associated with women but sound, as critic Ann Powers once wrote, like "male anxiety channeled." They carry connotations. Just doing this story, I wondered if using the term "power ballad" would offend. Indeed, Robert Lamm of Chicago told me right away that a writer contacted him recently to discuss "soft rock" and he refused: "Because if I hear that phrase, I see a certain kind of person with a certain kind of taste in music and the general lack of knowledge about anything else."

He's not wrong.

When you think "power ballad," you hear a very specific thing – and predictable structure: whispery tinkling piano keys or acoustic guitar strums that erupt into mounting vocals and crunching guitars, singers with eyes screwed shut, unleashing their guts. I see waves crashing against coastlines and broken men (mostly men) in the rain, watching outside windows where their lovers have just turned out the light.

Dennis DeYoung, who was an architect of the genre as the former frontman of Styx, said: "They can't just be soft and loud, they have to be about love. They should have a power chord lurking in the background. Rock was for the groin, Dylan was for the head and the power ballad is for the heart."

Sure, but whoa, whoa: Journey's "Lights" is about a romance with San Francisco itself. "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" is a power ballad to a Great Lakes shipping disaster. Several power ballads during the halcyon power ballad days of the 1970s and 1980s – think Aerosmith's "Dream On" – are about alienation. "We Are the World" was

a charity power ballad urging social activism. Later, Eminem created power ballads about obsessions. More recently, Billie Eilish's "Come Out and Play" – like other contemporary power ballads – is about self-empowerment. For a lot of performers, the power ballad is both a bond with their audience and a conundrum – albeit, a nice problem to have. "When I play 'Right Here Waiting for You,' be it Detroit or Sri Lanka, the audience goes nuts," said Richard Marx, who grew up in Highland Park, "but (that kind of song) is also a small part of what I've done. Yet they define you, and that's true of a lot of us who got our start playing more upbeat stuff on rock radio."

James Young, who formed Styx in 1970 when he was a student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, said that when DeYoung introduced the power ballad to Styx, "there was no doubt that a tension existed. I was very much against it. My taste was badass hard-rocking guitar, and Dennis kind of became the ballad guy."

DeYoung said he always chafed at the fear that for a rock band to act romantic "suggested we couldn't be real men." Jonathan Cain of Journey, who grew up sparring with "the greasers" of his West Side high school, said something similar, that his goal of injecting an element of romance and unashamed vulnerability in rock was a reaction to the traditional image of Chicago tough guys.

"But if anyone thinks there's some calculated formula with these songs, please send me that formula," DeYoung said. "That and the formula for a smaller prostate, I could use."

DeYoung jokes so much about his power ballads it's hard to say when he's serious. He wrote "Babe" for his wife's birthday, "in an attempt to not buy another piece of jewelry." "Come Sail Away" was written at a piano in Frankfort, Illinois, "during a terrible winter, when we were yearning to be in a better place as a band. First time I played it, tears streamed down my face." When he introduced the ballad "Lady" in 1973 – which some critics claimed as the first power ballad, patient zero for everything to come – the record company "complained we sound like The Hollies then end like Zeppelin. They doubted that radio would play it."

Yet "Lady" is the only real power ballad that Styx performs these days.

"That song arrived during our formative years when we were learning to work together despite differences," said James Young. Unlike their other ballads, it's more akin to typical Styx. "Still, no matter how I feel, these songs succeed with the audience."

He described sitting in the basement of a Michigan arena recently, waiting to go on and hearing an audience singing along to REO Speedwagon's power ballads "so loudly that you would think these were new songs." Which is a nice way to describe it. At that Tinley Park show, the audience – middle-aged, with a decent dose of vinyl-discovering Gen Z – bopped along politely to the fast stuff but came alive with an almost primordial relief at the opening notes of the ballads, as they were closer to DNA than earworm.

A gentle strum, rising vocals, arms waving high, sound washing over.

I believe it's time for me to fly!

Cronin told me some of these songs linger for decades because they're less about a girl or a boy but more about emotion. You hear a love song, but he's singing about the act of feeling.

"We're corny in the Midwest," said Jim Peterik, who grew up in Oak Lawn and lives in the south suburbs of Chicago (not far from DeYoung). "I doubt any of this is coincidence. I doubt there's a good reason why. Turns out, we're not afraid to put sentiment in a song, declare our love, then rhyme the whole thing." He's been around. As a member of the Berwyn group Ides of March, his first brush with power ballads was "L.A. Goodbye," a hit on local radio in 1971. Then as co-founder and co-songwriter of the band Survivor – best known for "Eye of the Tiger" – his biggest power ballad became the 1980s staple "The Search is Over."

"I knew it would be a big prom song," he said, "so there was a risk – it couldn't get too soppy. But by then it was a bit calculated. It was good business. Each (Survivor) album needed at least one (power ballad) or we cut ourselves off from radio play. I remember being in a supermarket in Los Angeles, and 'Search is Over' came on that little speaker they have in the ceiling. I thought, 'Oh my God, now we have the pulse of America!'"

The golden age of the power ballad was undeniably the 1980s and early 1990s, a period so thick with the power ballad that the daily countdown show "Dial MTV" imposed a "Crüe Rule." After Mötley Crüe's corny "Home Sweet Home" was No. 1 for 14 weeks in 1985, MTV began to remove any songs on its chart for more than 30 days. The

'80s Hair Metal boom was a power ballad boom, at times so omnipresent it would become an unsettling reminder for a lot of true-believing rock fans of just how little separated a supposedly edgy band like Mötley Crüe from Phil Collins.

"Which meant acts like Cheap Trick" – the Rockford band that scored in 1988 with "The Flame" – "would have big songs on albums that were not really that representative of them," said Marty Lennartz of WXRT. "But then it was all about expanding the base."

The power ballad's roots, though, are real.

David Metzger, a professor of music history at the University of British Columbia, has long studied the genre, which he calls "a reminder of how much people value sincerity in pop music, which can seem so mass-produced." You may hear old folk ballads and early 20th-century torch song tradition in power ballads, but Metzger defines the genre more narrowly: as a ballad of steady escalation, building toward an emotional climax. He hears '60s crooners like Roy Orbison and Clyde McPhatter, '70s AM staples like Barry Manilow. "But the truth is, as we know them, there wasn't a lot of precedent for the power ballad." They seemed to arrive fully formed in the early '70s, pairing a new theatricality in pop with the decade's inward turn to self-actualization and confession.

Seventies weepies like "Without You" and "All By Myself" helped establish the overwrought cresting of big feelings on Top 40 that defined power ballads for decades, and though the form itself became synonymous with white balladeers like Elton John and Celine Dion and metal acts like Whitesnake and Skid Row, their slow burn and soaring vocals were always arguably an approximation of soul. In the '70s, Chicago's Earth, Wind & Fire – on tunes like "That's the Way of the World" and "After the Love Has Gone" – had a knack for creating power ballads minus power chords. Which, decades later, would grow into the orchestral bombast of The Smashing Pumpkins' "Disarm" and "Tonight, Tonight" and the mournful self-examination in Kanye's "808s & Heartbreak."

Ridiculed as power ballads could be, they humanized a lot of famous performers, said Metzger. "They became commercial reminders that these people are more well-rounded than we give them credit for."

Backstage before playing in Moline in April, Robert Lamm, with Chicago co-founders Lee Loughnane and James Pankow, ticked off a dizzying array of influences. Loughnane and Pankow, while students at DePaul University, gravitated to early electronic music, avant-garde composers like John Cage, jazz heroes like Art Blakey and Miles Davis; Lamm, at Roosevelt University, was into jazz, the Byrds and the Beatles. But they all listened to WLS. Early on, Chicago was closer to progressive rock than its power ballad years in the '80s. So when bassist Peter Cetera brought them "If You Leave Me Now," the rest of the group "were looking at each other like, 'What do we do with this?' " Lamm remembers.

"But we would try it," Pankow said.

"If You Leave Me Now" went No. 1 in 1976, and the band became more associated with ballads. "I told Jimmy," Lamm said, "now when we play 'Searchin' So Long,' every time it kills me, because we were young (when we recorded it) yet it's mature – a ballad about a guy examining who he is, how he got here. Still, ballads like 'Hard to Say I'm Sorry' and 'You're the Inspiration' – I probably wouldn't have written those songs, though, when the emotion surges in, every time that gets me, too. It connects."

The awkward part – not unlike Styx – is that Cetera wrote many of those. He gave the band its bestselling album in the mid-1980s, then he left for a power-ballad-heavy solo career ("The Glory of Love," "The Next Time I Fall").

Chicago had more big hits, but, became gradually more synonymous with easy listening. In concert, '80s Cetera-penned ballads arrive bundled together, as if it were just a phase.

The best power ballad is Journey's "Faithfully."

This is just a fact. My 16-year-old self would have beat up my 51-year-old self for claiming that, but well, there you go. It's got everything: highways, trucks, circus lights, longing, loving, wishing, clowns, restless hearts, space, time. It lasts just four minutes and twenty-four seconds, yet in that time, it's epic: The guitar soars, Steve Perry's voice begins soft and tender, then sails even above Neal Schon's guitar; meanwhile a closing whoa-oh-oh-oh, whoa-oh-oh-oh brings together a sold-out arena of 15,000.

For songwriter Jonathan Cain, "It came out feeling grateful to just be in this big band, putting on our nightly circus,

sacrificing home lives, being on the road – really, it’s a country song.” He wrote it on a napkin while the band’s bus drove to a show in Upstate New York.

It was also another byproduct of '60s Chicago radio.

"I would listen every night to (DJ) Franklyn MacCormack," Cain recalls. "He would recite poetry! The music was a hodgepodge of styles, and I became a student of love songs."

Cain is not unlike his songs, romantic, earnest, still carrying the flush of youth. He makes his teenage years sound both impossibly picturesque and deeply dorky. "As a kid, I fell in love with Johnny Mathis. His 'Misty' is as vulnerable as a man could sound. I was a hopeless romantic. We would go into the forest preserves in Schiller Park and listen to love songs and get kicked out, but those songs we listened to, I wanted to write those! Chicago was different, intimate. My parents would go to Edgewater Beach Hotel and dance under the stars. Their love was powerful to me."

Years later, when he brought "Open Arms" there was hesitation.

Perry wanted ballads; Schon did not, Cain said. "But Steve got it. He brought the (song's) key up higher and higher until it soared." It reached No. 2 for six weeks in 1982. He's still writing ballads, often for his solo Christian records; recently, he gave one secular lyrics and reframed it as a new Journey ballad.

After we met, that night at Allstate Arena in Rosemont, Cain played "Open Arms" and "Faithfully" back to back, like an incomplete trilogy. The room swayed and sang and sparkled as thousands of cell phone lights created a mini constellation. Years ago, it would have been cigarette lighters, and when the show ended and lights came on, a fog of smoke would have hung over the crowd. But no one smoked openly now, and when lights came on, the audience looked like a big 35th or so anniversary high school reunion.

A 50-something woman held a friend's hand and led her quickly into the exiting crush.

"Linda!" the friend shouted. "I can't walk that fast now!"

Linda stopped, turned, smiled, hugged her friend and yelled, "FAITHFULLY!"

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CAPTION: Photo: Kevin Cronin leads REO Speedwagon during "Can't Fight This Feeling" at a concert in Tinley Park on June 4.; Photo: Fans sing and dance to "Can't Fight This Feeling" by REO Speedwagon on June 4 at Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre in Tinley Park.; Photo: Styx performs "Lady" at Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre in Tinley Park on June 4.; Photo: Styx fans sing the ballad "Lady" during a June 4 concert at Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre in Tinley Park.; Photo: Styx keyboard player Lawrence Gowan performs "Lady."; CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

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