

Your Teenage Self is *Still* Choosing Your Playlist

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We all have a song that transports us to our adolescent days. Maybe Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" reminds you of hapless teenage attempts at an 80s mullet. Maybe the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" elicits memories of uncoordinated hip gyrations and tight leather pants. Or maybe, Beyonce's "Single Ladies" induces flashbacks to middle school imitations of the music video's signature hand-flip.

Though such recollections are often hued with a sort of lighthearted cringe, your early musical recollections could be more influential than you think. In fact, the songs you listened to during your middle and high school days may form your music taste for the rest of your life.

This theory has been proposed by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, a data scientist who elaborated upon his insights in a [New York Times op-ed](#). Having obtained a collection of Spotify data about the listening habits of men and women by age group, Davidowitz proceeded to analyze the frequency that each group listened to a particular song.

Surprisingly, the information gleaned from Spotify showed clear delineations in music taste by birth year. Specifically, the data showed that people were far more likely to continuously listen to the songs that were popular during their adolescence. For example, 38 year old men proved far more likely to enjoy "[Creep](#)" by Radiohead than any other age group (the song came out in 1993, when these men were 14). Such patterns persisted for countless artists and songs—if you listened to a lot of Linda Ronstadt in your youth, chances are you still think "[You're No Good](#)" is...pretty good.

Furthermore, the analysis was able to narrow down the specific, 3-year window that had the most profound effect on music taste. Boys, Davidowitz claims, form the majority of their music taste between the ages of 13 and 16. For girls, this period is earlier, with the period of music taste formation falling between the ages of 11 and 14. The difference, Davidowitz proposes, could be a result of the difference in biological development by gender—girls [go through puberty earlier](#) and mature faster than boys do. Through research that shows [puberty's effect on re-shaping neural connections](#), this hypothesis would make logical sense—our music tastes are literally wired into our brains.

After reading the results of Davidowitz's analysis, I had the opportunity to witness firsthand just how strongly age affects music preferences. Recently, I bought tickets to the sound check for Paul McCartney's San Jose performance, which promised an

hour's worth of exclusive pre-concert rehearsal. Needless to say, I was thrilled by the opportunity to see McCartney "unfiltered," his jangling notes resonating among an intimate audience of about 75 super-fans.

McCartney has such a vast catalog of Beatles, Wings and solo songs that even a typical 3-hour concert still leaves him with a surfeit of unplayed hits. However, in support of Davidowitz's point, McCartney proved he isn't immune to the effects of nostalgia. For the sound check he chose to play several cover songs. His choice of borrowed material—including Carl Perkins' "[Blue Suede Shoes](#)" and "[Honey Don't](#)," Buddy Holly's "[It's So Easy](#)," and Jesse Fuller's "[San Francisco Bay Blues](#)"—featured songs that were released during his formative teenage years.

In fact, the release dates of those four cover songs couldn't be more perfectly coordinated with the New York Times's findings. "Blue Suede Shoes" and "San Francisco Bay Blues" were released when McCartney was 13, "Honey Don't" when he was 14, and "It's So Easy" when he was 16. The four songs formed a chronological progression of the development of McCartney's musical taste, from the jaunty, sensual notes of Carl Perkins to the playful, blues-influenced sounds of Buddy Holly. Though McCartney's song choice could be simply attributed to his sentimentality for the past, the precise relationship between the age range proposed by Davidowitz and the songs' release date is unlikely to be coincidental.

At the end of the night, I mused about my own sentimental connection with Paul McCartney's music. I was 15 when the Beatles broke up. Perhaps, I am simply nostalgic for the years in which I had few responsibilities and unlimited time. Or perhaps, my adolescent brain was subconsciously shaped by the ubiquitous music of the Beatles. In either case, my love for the Beatles has stayed with me throughout my life.



