

# JFK: ADAGIO FOR BROOKLYN

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In 2018, after nearly forty years in broadcasting, I retired as Assistant Director of Engineering at NPR's WNYC-WQXR radio in New York City.

One morning in the 1990s while sitting in my office on the 25th floor of the Municipal building I felt my eyes begin to well up and my lower lip start to quiver. I was suddenly overcome with a wave of sadness so consuming I had to stop, take a breath, and gather myself.

When I finally settled down, I noticed that our FM station was playing a familiar piece of music. I recognized the melody but couldn't place it. It was a solemn, slow flowing piece with violins and cellos moving from dissonance to bright open resolves, then finally ending on what I thought sounded like a musical "amen." It was a very moving piece and I wondered, for reasons not yet apparent, if it's what triggered my reaction.

I walked down to the studio where Steve Post was hosting his morning program. In the 1960s, Steve was a pioneer in freeform radio at WBAI-FM in New York. Then in the early 1980s he began his 20-year career here at WNYC-FM around the same time I did. He became legendary not only for raising millions of dollars for public radio, but also for his ability to tick people off with his wonderfully wry style of humor. He was also a great guy who I had the privilege of calling friend.

After entering the studio and explaining what had happened, I asked Steve what music he'd just played. I was somewhat surprised that he didn't answer right away - instead he looked at me curiously and asked, "When were you born?". I paused - "April 26, 1960", I replied.

He nodded and told me that the music was Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings. It was played during President Kennedy's funeral procession following his assassination in November 1963. Since I was less than four years old at the time, Steve was surprised that I even had any recollection of the event at all - let alone remember the music.

I explained that there were certain things I did remember - vividly. Even the rainy Friday that followed the assassination as well as recollections of the turbulent aftermath. I remembered Oswald's haunting gasp when he was shot during the live coverage of his transfer from Dallas city jail. I remembered the tolling of church bells in my Brooklyn neighborhood as my family and I walked to gather at my grandmother's house. There, I remembered the grown-ups: my mother, my aunts, my cousins, all of them crying, although I didn't understand why. I remember stepping into the bathroom, wetting my finger in the sink, then standing in front of the mirror as I "painted" tears down my cheeks - maybe I didn't understand the sorrow, but somehow I just knew that I should be crying too. Those memories had always been the most unsettling ones of all to me - that is, up until that morning in the office.

Science says that the ability to store and recall sounds starts before birth. However, it's highly unlikely that a three-and-a-half-year-old "kid" could have held on to such detailed autobiographical memory - not in a way that lasted in my situation. They also tell us that a true "sense of self" - awareness of our place in the world - doesn't develop until later in childhood. But that night after work, after climbing the steps to J&R Music on Park Row to buy a copy of Barber's Adagio for Strings, I went home to Brooklyn and listened - and in spite of everything science says - I wept anyway.

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