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Influences

By James Collins

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Influences

I think it was the Russian writer Tolstoy who said that the most significant revolutions were internal; in other words they happen individually and in your head. I can see what he meant, although if the old boy had been around in 1917 he might have bitten his lip.

We tend to think of revolutions as being violent and bloody conflicts, which of course they are, the French, Russian and American Revolutions being prime examples. On the other hand, the Industrial Revolution, which, in the end was more far-reaching than any of the other contemporary revolutions, was on the whole, peaceful.

At this point I have to do a little flag waving for Scotland. Well, I don't have to, but I'm going to. Three important inventions of the time, without which it's difficult to see how the Industrial Revolution could have made much progress, were all Scottish. In 1769 James Watt patented the first effective steam engine and subsequently had a unit of power called a Watt, named after him. Then there was the macadamised road, invented by – yes, you've guessed it – a man called McAdam.

Finally there was the pneumatic tyre, invented in Scotland not once but twice, and forty years apart. It was first patented in 1845 by Robert Thomson, used successfully for a while on bicycles and then, unbelievably, forgotten. Forty-three years later John Dunlop re-invented it, and the rest, as they say, is history. Robert Thomson, went on to invent the fountain pen, and he gets my vote for that, as I detest biro pens (excusez-moi, Monsieur Biro).

Just for the record I might as well mention a few other contemporary Scots inventions.

James Simpson – first doctor to use anaesthetics,

Joseph Lister – first to use antiseptics,

The Kelvin scale,

Maxwell's equations in Electro-magnetism (whatever they are),

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Marmalade,

The macintosh. A waterproof coat, invented by a Scots chemist called (why, of course) Charles Macintosh. He invented it whilst trying to do something else, but it still counts as a Scottish invention.

I'm tempted to add whisky to the list, but I have a feeling that this particular invention would have had the effect of slowing the march of progress to a walk, or possibly a stagger.

Fortunately we do not have revolutions anymore; we have elections. Not even that business with the holes punched in voters' cards in the Bush vs Gore election scramble caused more than the American equivalent of a Gallic shrug (and doesn't that seem a long time ago now?)

All the same, the earth has moved a couple of times in our lifetime (well, in mine, anyhow); once in the fifties and then again in the nineties, with the coming of the communications revolution, based on the silicon chip and the all-conquering computer. Incidentally, while we're on the subject, hands up all those who actually know what a silicon chip is. Hmm, I see you're all with me and Homer Simpson on this one. You remember when the doctor asks him if the alien life form he'd seen was silicon or carbon based, and he thinks for a moment and says, "Um, the first thing – zilophone".

Anyway, the fifties, as everyone knows, saw the rise of the teenager. Before the fifties, young people wanted nothing more than to grow up like their parents. They dressed like them and probably thought like them. If Dad wanted to wear his trousers under his armpits and have shoulder pads so broad that he looked wider than he was tall, then that was okay for Junior too.

All that changed with the coming of James Dean and Marlon Brando. James Dean was gone by the time I reached my teens, but I still went through the black leather jacket and white T-shirt phase. Dean had such an impact that he still seems modern today. It's as if he belongs to an entirely different world than, say, Jimmy Stewart.

It was the recent passing of two icons from my early years; the great Ray Charles, followed by Marlon Brando which set me thinking about my early influences. Inevitably a lot of them were American. At that time in the UK we didn't have many international stars, although throughout the history of the cinema there has been a steady trickle of actors from the UK who have made it big time in the US; Chaplin, Stan Laurel, Cary Grant (Tony Curtis's atrocious English accent as the phoney millionaire in 'Some Like it Hot' was based on Cary Grant's accent), Bob Hope, Hitchcock, the beautiful Vivien Leigh, picked from thousands to play Scarlet O'Hara in 'Gone With the Wind' ("I'll think about it tomorrow"), Elizabeth Taylor, Michael Caine, the dodgy Hugh Grant, Kate Winslett (Titanic) and Sean Connery.

The first film I ever saw, when I was seven years old, was 'Red River' with John Wayne and Montgomery Clift. I was taken by my dear foster parents and I have never forgotten it. The following week I was taken to see 'Winchester 73', starring the already mentioned James Stewart. Cinemas in those days were wondrous places with, it seemed to me, impossibly high ceilings and extravagant baroque decorations everywhere. This one had an amazing colour and light-filled organ, which came up out of the floor. The whole thing, the electric organ like a rainbow in the dark, and the ten-foot high cowboys clanking across the screen (we always sat near the front), made an indelible impression on

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me.

It was only later, when I started to read the likes of Dee Wells' 'Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee' that I began to realize that the Western myth, powerful as it was, had another side. When you grow up, you realize that everything has another side.

As for books, I suppose I read mainly English writers, from Kipling to John Galsworthy and G.K.Chesterton. Chesterton could be poignant, as in;
'With monstrous head and sickening cry,
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.'
The Donkey

and he could be funny in an odd sort of way;

'The souls most fed with Shakespeare's flame
Still sat unconquered in a ring,
Remembering him like anything'.

Chesterton once dedicated a story to his readers – 'So many of which belong to the human race'.

One of my favourite writers at the time was Henry Williamson, a contemporary and friend of T.E.Lawrence, 'Lawrence of Arabia'. His best-known book was 'Tarka the Otter', a gritty, realistic story about the life of an otter in North Devon. Much later I was disillusioned to find out that he was a Nazi sympathiser, and I think he once actually met Hitler. I can only think he was attracted by the idea of 'purity'. Well, we all know where that leads.

I read a lot of science fiction in those days, starting with H.G.Wells, Arthur C.Clarke, C.S.Lewis, and going on to the American writers, Ray Bradbury etc. That's probably how I discovered American writers in general; Hemingway, John Steinbeck, who wrote East of Eden, from which the film starring James Dean was made, and the wonderful James Thurber, whose elegant and witty prose deserves to be better remembered than it is. Perhaps he really belongs to that black and white era in which Spenser Tracy always wore a suit and Katherine Hepburn would glide through a marble hall bigger than most people's houses today.

I must also mention William Faulkner who wrote about the Deep South and the mythical Yoknapatawpha County. In all his novels he explored the sometimes convoluted relationship between the races. He also wrote one humorous story, 'The Reivers', which was made into a film starring Steve McQueen. For me, he was one of the best mid-century writers, although apparently he was not much

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liked by the local farmers, who referred to him as 'that writing fella'. Perhaps he got too close for comfort in his stories. Or maybe it was his habit of retiring to bed for a couple of weeks every once in a while with a bottle of whisky and a copy of Shakespeare. You can never tell what these writing fellas are going to do next!

Finally in this tale of influences, it was as far as I remember, a book I'd been given for Christmas that first kindled my interest in art. It had pictures of boats and water – mostly oil paintings – and I was fascinated by the way the reflections in the water had been portrayed. They looked so real, and at the same time you could tell they had been painted. I still try to keep that feeling in my work today. Later on, at art college, I think one of the tutors described painting as a dialog between reality and illusion, but I think what he meant was – it's magic.

James Collins

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So You Wanna Make Music and Change The World?

By Gary Konigsberg

SO YOU WANNA MAKE MUSIC TO CHANGE THE WORLD?

What do Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, the Beatles and Mozart all have in common? And what do they have in common with practically every other artist who's creativity has changed the world?

They are all unique.

But there is something in common.

They each changed the popular music of their times by combining already popular forms in a new way.

Elvis – on that famous and fateful day in Sun Studios in Memphis he let it all loose and brought it all together again differently... the blues, country, gospel and regional elements that were his influences in his youth all came together into rockabilly, rock and roll, something that had not been heard before. Elvis on Ed Sullivan also brought together the new music form and the new medium – television in a new way which has influenced generations of rock icons to first pick up their guitar.

Bob Dylan... they pulled the plug on his concert when he dared to bring out electric instruments, drums and a backbeat to his folk and protest music. But Dylan had his own vision of his music and it

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contained his influences from Woody Guthrie but also the last decade of rock and roll and other influences.. again.. he combined popular music forms in a new way.

The Beatles... well they set the world on fire with their style and their hair cuts and all that. The Beatles on Ed Sullivan – still one of the great moments in rock and television history. But do you know that in the mid 60's they didnt release a CD for almost two years and then came out with Sgt Pepper – the orchestration, song structure and the bringing together of elements in a completely new way is what made history.

Mozart? Well, see the great movie, Amadeus, and you will understand better than I can illustrate here. But it is another case in point.

Another one that could be mentioned here is Johnny Cash. As Bruce Springsteen said (not an exact quote)... Johnny Cash broke down barriers to communication and artistic styles and, not only did he break those barriers down, but he showed why it is important to do so. Cash's music contains many elements brought together for the first time in different parts of his career.

So the point...? If you want to make music that changes the world, don't just be the latest kid on the block, the latest rapper in the hood, the latest rocker in the backstreet clubs. Do something that has not been done before by combining elements that are already popular in a new and creative way.

Perhaps this unique combining of other art forms is so impactful because it aligns with the derivation of the word "art" itself. The derivation of the word art basically means... to join together.

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