

Musician's Dreams

This fall, I tuned in with great interest when Terry Gross interviewed Keith Richards on her National Public Radio show, "Fresh Air." As I'd hoped, Richards provided a more complete account of the creation of the song, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," than he had in his recent autobiography, *Life*. As he recounted it to Gross, he keeps a guitar nearby when he goes to sleep. He also keeps a small tape recorder next to his bed, so that if he wakes in the middle of the night he can record any ideas that he's had before they slip away. On this particular night, he went to sleep, and slept through the night without waking—but in the morning, he noticed the tape had been advanced to the end. Curious, he rewound it and played it back. What he heard was the famous repeating guitar riff of the song, and one line: "Can't get no satisfaction." He had no memory of waking up and recording it, yet clearly he had. He concluded that he must have dreamed it, and wakened just enough to make the recording.

In an earlier interview with Jenny Boyd, Richards said that many of his songs began this way. "I don't sit down and try to write songs," he said. "Songs just come to me. I wake up in the middle of the night, and I've dreamt half of it. I just need to pick up the guitar next to the bed, push 'record', and put it down. I'm not saying I write them all in my dreams—but that's the

ideal way. You don't even have to get out of bed!"

Richards' definitive account provides a perfect companion piece to the better known tale of how the idea for "Yesterday" came to Paul McCartney in a dream. As Paul tells it, he woke one morning with the lovely melody in his head. "I liked it a lot," he said, "but because I dreamed it I couldn't believe I'd written it." Like Richards, he immediately recorded it so it wouldn't slip away, but he had to play it to several other people to convince himself it was original and not something he'd heard that had been written by someone else. He worked on the tune with no particular lyrics in mind, using the phrase "scrambled eggs" to fill the space where the word "yesterday" would eventually open the song. "Yesterday" not only became one of the Beatles' most popular songs, but also one of the most frequently recorded songs of all time, with several hundred cover versions.

What strikes me, thinking about these two stories, is that the best known, most iconic songs of both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones—the two iconic bands of the sixties, and seminal influences on the popular music of the past fifty years—both originated in dreams! Another thing that's interesting about these accounts is that in both cases, the song was not "received" in its entirety. Instead, just the melody (McCartney) or a key

riff, a key phrase (Richards) came in the dream, and these became the seeds for further waking work to develop them into songs. McCartney labored for quite awhile before finding the right lyrics for his melody, while Richards took the memorable riff and his lyrical fragment to his collaborator, Mick Jagger, and they wrote the rest of the song together. The finished pieces were the result of both dream inspiration and waking craft.

Perhaps it's not surprising that it is the lyrics that are partial or absent in these accounts, since the parts of the brain that process verbal thought are less active during sleep, while visual and associative functions are highly active. Or maybe it's just that musicians tend to be less verbal *in waking* than many other professionals, and this continuity is reflected in their dreaming. In any event, in most of the accounts of songs coming from dreams, words or lyrics tend to be absent or a less important part of the dream.

What about the actual *playing* of the tune? We know that many professional athletes "practice" their moves in dreams. Can the same be said for musicians? A particularly striking account comes from blues guitarist Buddy Guy, who said that the very first song he learned to play he learned in a dream. He was lying down in the sun on a warm Louisiana afternoon, guitar in hand, when he dozed off and began dreaming. In his dream, he was playing John Lee Hooker's "Boogie Chillun." He woke to find he



was holding his guitar, and thought, "I'm *playing* 'Boogie Chillun!'" He was afraid to move his hands, because he might forget the positions his fingers were in, so he practiced what he had played in the dream over and over until it was committed to memory.

Remembering what was in the dream is a key issue. We all know how easy it is for a dream to slip away if we don't write it down immediately upon waking. This can be especially frustrating if one has been given a wonderful creative piece in the dream! For example, Don Henley said, "Over the years I had dreams where I actually dream a song and I'm really excited about it, then I wake up and I've forgotten it."

Nancy Wilson reports having a lot of musical dreams, many including full-blown arrangements with multiple instruments and orchestration—but trying to remember them is a challenge. "Melodies and songs will happen in a dream, and I'll wake up and try to recreate it. If you can ever catch that, you'll have the best music you've ever heard, but it's hard to catch. To me, that's probably the most spiritual experience, when you're dreaming and you hear music."