

The Old Music

Each morning at 8.45, the doors of the downtown bus bang open to deposit Donovan Brown onto the footpath outside Captain Vinyl Music Store. The shop is nestled between Inx Tattoo Studio and Last Chance to Dance Pre-loved Clothing. When Donovan opens the door, the bell above tinkles and the familiar musk smell fills his nostrils in a welcoming way. This is his sanctuary, his home away from home.

Not that he seeks refuge, exactly; he loves his wife, Katya, and his two young children. It's just that lately he has felt out of sorts, misunderstood. Katya is preoccupied with motherhood and no longer has time for the frivolous or the unnecessary.

Donovan does his best to share in the daunting task that is parenting but his ideas aren't as good as Katya's – his ways aren't right. As a father, he feels incompetent, redundant, like a wisdom tooth or appendix; something that seems like it should play a part but it actually doesn't do much.

Here at Captain Vinyl, surrounded by wall-to-wall band posters and rows and rows of second-hand records, Donovan is at ease and proficient. An expert. People ask him things and he knows the answers.

Tuesday morning he is part-way up a stepladder, taping a poster of Bo Diddley to the wall. A girl comes into the record shop. She is wearing a cream lace blouse and wistful expression, as though her head is someplace cloudy and golden. Like a girl in a song, Donovan thinks. "Child of the Moon" by The Rolling Stones, or maybe Hendrix's "Little Wing".

"Hi," he calls out above the music. He's put a Dead Kennedys album on the stereo and now wishes he'd chosen something less stressful.

Smiling, she wanders over to the rows of wooden crates that hold the records. He steps down from the ladder. "Looking for anything in particular?"

Her skin is pale and smooth like the mannequins in next door's vintage clothing shop, lips a perfect heart. "I'm having a '60s party," she says. "We're all dressing the part so I want stuff from that era. What do you reckon?"

What do I reckon? As though lit from within, Donovan strides over, enthusiasm sparking like crazy. He realises he is rubbing his hands and instead reaches out and places one on top of a row of records. Since they are standing in front of the 'Js', he says, "Sixties, eh? How about some Jefferson Airplane? Or you can't go wrong with Janis."

"Joplin? I could go as her! Big hair, big round glasses. Who else have you got?"

"Whoever you want. Beatles, Stones, The Doors ... huge in the '60s were The Doors. And you can't go past Cream. Or Santana, for that matter. Second to none."

The young girl sighs. "So much to choose from. I wish I'd been there.

The fashion is so flamboyant and theatrical and the music so cool. It had – I don't know – integrity."

"You think?" he asks.

"Oh, yes. So raw; nothing synthesised."

Donovan's heart bumps. She understands!

Together, they choose a good selection of albums for the party, all the while extolling this and that band or artist. By now Donovan is so intoxicated by the whole experience that he throws in a few for free, then hands her purchase across the counter. "May I ask your name?"

She slips her wallet away and holds out a hand. "Saffron."

Has he heard right? "Saffron? I'm – I'm Donovan. How's that for a coincidence?"

"Oh, that song 'Mellow Yellow'; a guy called Donovan sang it, right?" The girl's eyes widen. "Hey, you should come to my party. You could go as one of The Beatles. Comb that hair down like a pudding bowl and you'll be perfect."

Donovan clears his throat. "I – I wouldn't know anyone."

"You'd know me."

Donovan's palms are clammy. He reaches over and turns down the stereo, his mind spinning. This is the part where he is supposed to wave her off, say thanks but no thanks.

Katya's face shimmers into view. She is wearing her frown of grave disapproval. Quick snatches of the children, their tiny heads peeping from puffy duvets, thin arms encircling his neck. This is his world: things involving home and family. Responsibility.

But does it have to be this way? Isn't there an escape clause in the area of commitment that allows time off for good behaviour? He would never do anything to hurt Katya, Jasmine or Sam. It isn't about being unhappy or wanting things to be different. It's just ... here is a girl – a beautiful girl – who is passionate about the same music and who represents youth, adventure, spontaneity – all the things that seem to have seeped almost unnoticed from his life. His middle-aged body aches to feel those freedoms again. He imagines the two of them sitting on a deck, sharing a bottle of wine and talking about music while the city lights glint like stars in the distance.

"I probably shouldn't," he says.

"Come on; you could be our mascot. After all, you were there."

"As a baby..." says Donovan.

Donovan adjusts his hired wig and knocks on the door of the villa. It is opened by a young man wearing a tie-dyed shirt and an abundance of facial hair.

"Hey, man," he says, looking Donovan up and down. Behind him, clusters of loudly dressed youths stand about blowing smoke and drinking from skinny cans.

Donovan clears his throat. He shouldn't have come. These people are years younger than him. Decades. "Uh ... Saffron," he says, lifting his bottle of cabernet sauvignon. "Is – is she ..."

And there she is, cheeks rosy, hair brushed straight. She has on a floppy white hat with an imitation sunflower pinned to it, a short mauve dress, and silver chunky-heeled shoes.

"Look at you!" she says, stepping past the guy with the hairy face to fling out her arms. "Let me guess: Hendrix." She hugs him and he is engulfed in sandalwood. "The Afro and face paint gave it away."

"It is – it's shoe nugget."

"Cool. And I'm Marianne Faithful, see? Like my heels?"

She fetches him a wine glass and he follows her into the living room where they stand by the fireplace, the bottle resting between them on the mantelpiece. On the wall behind hangs a bevelled mirror around which a thick string of fairy lights pulse off and on like silvery-blue glow worms. One of the records Saffron purchased is on the turntable. Its raw, scratchy tunes fill the room while beneath a haze of smoke, the

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party guests shout at each other above the music. They wear wigs and hats and headbands. Paisley waistcoats and flared trousers and crocheted tops. A potpourri of yesteryear.

Donovan drinks quickly to cover his nervousness. "The Kinks," he nods toward the stereo, raising his glass in approval.

"Wonderful." Saffron is swaying now, a slender flower, and she motions for him to join her and then – just like that – they are dancing.

That's the power of music for you, he marvels. One moment feeling awkward and out of place, the next, part of a happy throng, all brought together by the magic of rock 'n' roll.

He watches Saffron dance and she becomes Katya, all those years ago; Katya with the bare feet and scent of patchouli, the wheat-grass hair and flowing muslin dress you could see through when the light fell a certain way. Man, they were free – no money, no sense of time, it seemed. No idea of the trappings of house, job, family. Joyful pilgrims on a journey through life.

Did Katya ever long for those times? He would ask her.

All this dancing is making him sweat and beneath the wig, his scalp prickles, yet he's having too much fun to stop. Now here's a song that transports him to a certain bonfire-lit night, sparks crackling against a backdrop of dark trees, Katya's face orange with the flames' bright glow.

"The past has gone," she is saying, her gaze fixed on his. "The future's yet to come. All we have is now."

What is it about this old song that connects him to that other place in time?

"Donovan, are you okay?"

He realises his eyes are shut and snaps them open. Saffron is looking at him.

"Fine, yes. I ..."

"Oh! Look who it is," her focus flits to the doorway and she rushes off to greet two guests.

Her departure leaves him feeling vulnerable. He sips the wine and gives his forehead a scratch where it is particularly itchy. The song is still playing and he would like to carry on dancing, reminiscing, but he feels awkward. Then needle scrapes vinyl – a horrible graze – cutting the music dead. Twisting toward the scene of the crime, he sees a brawny youth in a suede jacket manhandle the

record back into its sleeve and gapes, dismayed, as from a different part of the room pumps an unknown song with a cold, repetitive beat. The party guests cheer and erupt into wild dance moves, perhaps at last able to identify with what they are hearing.

Donovan looks to Saffron to see her reaction and finds her chatting, unfazed, to the newcomers, holding her wine glass aloft, her body still swaying as if nothing has changed.

Turning away, he sees his reflection in the oval wall mirror. A clownish, brown face framed by fairy lights. His own eyes peer out from the strange, muddy features and he blinks as if waking from a dream. His hands are clammy, his legs have turned to wood.

A prickly, unbearable heat crawls across his scalp. Who is this fool? What possessed him? These young people in their disguises; he can relate to their world as much as they to his.

Leaving the wine bottle and glass on the mantelpiece, he jostles his way through the crowd, tossing up whether to say anything to Saffron and in the end deciding to simply slip away.

In the cool and quiet kitchen, his hands are wrapped around a ceramic mug. He watches tiny flecks of cinnamon mill on the surface of his drink. On the chair beside him sits a flurry of nugget-stained tissues and the frizzy wig, round as a sleeping cat.

"You got it off your chest, then?" asks Katya. Her voice is gentle, only slightly mocking.

He sighs. "Funny how time goes. Things were so different back then, do you remember? New and exciting ..."

"They still can be." Donovan's wife is sitting opposite him in a robe of billowy, pink roses and green leaves. She smells of baby powder and something sweet like jam. A parenting self-help manual is open, face-down, on the table.

She reaches across and wipes a smudge of shoe polish from his temple. "Jazzy and Sam missed you. They wanted *Where the Wild Things Are*. Apparently you read it nice and loud, and better than I do."


"Really?"

Her hand circles his wrist and their gazes connect. "We need a weekend away, Don; just the two of us. Russell, or maybe the Coromandel. I'm tired ..."

Waitete Bay, Coromandel. That's where they'd been the night of the bonfire. It was summer and beyond the crackle of fire and the dark shapes of trees were the beach and oceans of stars. The old music had drifted in waves from a house on the lawn behind and blended with crickets' song and the song of the sea.

Donovan looks hard at Katya and sees dark circles beneath her eyes, the weariness in her skin. It is his job to protect her from exhaustion and discouragement and from growing old too soon.

He smiles, "I'll make a booking. A place right on the beach."

She smiles back and he can almost see the bonfire's bright flames reflected in her eyes. 

AUTHOR ANNE CLEARY

From childhood, Anne has always loved stories and the art of bringing characters to life through writing. The bush, beaches and culture of West Auckland have inspired her two novels, *The Sea Glass Box* and *The Space Between*. Anne lives in Tauranga with her husband, Glen. The couple have two young adult children, Lily and Bailey.



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