

The Pretender - April 24, 2007

By Bob Lefsetz

*“I’m going to be a happy idiot
And struggle for the legal tender”*

I don’t start early. Nighttime is too exciting. It’s when the phone and e-mail quiet down and the world is my own. Obligations are history and I get to choose my course. Winding down is almost impossible. Do I want to surf the Web, read the newspapers or flip through the hundreds of channels? The lack of interruption allows me to mellow out and marinate in my selected activity. Pompous assholes say my late night lifestyle leaves me out of the loop, a day behind, but really, I’m a day ahead. The “New York Times” goes live at 9 P.M. As does the “Wall Street Journal”. And I can read the L.A. “Times” online at midnight. While you’re sleeping, I’m getting a jump on you. But the end result is I miss the sunrise, the early morning hours. Actually, the morning scares me, the hustle and bustle, but today I had to get up to go UCLA Medical Center for a kidney scan.

The light is different in the morning. It’s full of promise. It’s not fading, but getting brighter, the sun is ascending. It gives one hope. And as I pulled out of my garage, I heard “The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald”.

I’m beginning to believe Sirius sounds better than XM. It’s rich in a way that the D.C. service is not. There’s bottom, the music breathes. Maybe that’s why “The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald” sounded so good. Then again, everything sounded good on my way to Westwood.

After entering the Peter Morton building, I was surprised to experience efficiency. I was out in twenty minutes. And flipping through the Sirius stations as I ascended the ramp I heard James Taylor’s “That’s Why I’m Here”. Which I don’t think I’ve ever heard on the radio. But then came “The Pretender”.

I didn’t want to go to law school. But I went for two reasons, my father paid and I was in a bad spot, I needed a change in my life.

Richard Nixon said the only thing you need to get through law school is a lead butt. I’d like to tell you the law is an intellectual pursuit. That the cases you read are masterpieces of literature. Rather, it seems minor minds rule, hashing out the differences. Oh, a few intellectuals are peppered in. But if you’re looking to be stimulated, don’t go to law school.

But contrary to common wisdom, law school wasn’t tough. My college education was much more difficult. Oh, there was the drudgery of the reading, but I was dedicated to something else, music.

The highlight of my law school experience was driving downtown every day listening to the radio. And I remember that first fall of '76, hearing Hall & Oates’ “Rich Girl”, hearing Jackson Browne’s “The Pretender”.

*“I’m going to rent myself a house
In the shade of the freeway
I’m going to pack my lunch in the morning
And go to work each day”*

L.A.’s an ugly place. Without irrigation, it would be a desert. And in the harsh sunlight of the morning, you can see its dry dreariness. I tend to ignore it. By staying home, by leaving town so much. But what if you’re stuck here? It’s depressing. I’m sitting on the 405 on-ramp, you’re always stuck in traffic in L.A., thinking how bad it would be to be a happy idiot, getting up each day to drive to a job more about money than fulfillment.

*“I want to know what became of the changes
We waited for love to bring
Were they only the fitful dreams
Of some greater awakening
I’ve been aware of the time going by
They say in the end it’s the wink of an eye
And when the morning light comes streaming in
You’ll get up and do it again
Amen”*

Sunday was my birthday. Thank you. It’s weird to get to an age where you want to put on the brakes. For so long you’re looking to get older, so you can drive, and drink. So you can shave. But then your hair starts to fall out, suddenly you’re sliding down instead of climbing up. And finally you reach a point where you realize this is your life. That all your choices, whether conscious or not, added up to this. Oh, you can still do a minor amount of steering, but big changes aren’t possible. You’re not going to become a doctor. You’re not going to be an ingenue. You’re just going to be you.

Everything your parents said is now true. That it goes so fast. And that education matters. And that you can get sidetracked spending time with losers. But none of that counts. All that counts is love. Are you getting any? Not sex, but intimacy, companionship? And, if not, what are your choices? Jettisoning the one you’re with? Psychotherapy? Crying?

*“Caught between the longing for love
And the struggle for the legal tender”*

On the east coast, one pooh-poohed money, even though it was so important. Whereas in California, the students said they wanted to become lawyers to get rich. What is rich? Is it money? Is it possessions? Or is it something inside?

Now we've got Intel inside. People go to school to study business. We revere hedge funders. And our stars rail on how fucking good they have it. The bigger questions, they're not even asked. But they were up front and center once. In society and music. The reason musicians could change the world, could raise money for political candidates and causes, is because their fans believed in them. Come on, can you believe in John Mayer? And he's considered one of the good ones!

Time marches on, but people remain the same. Nothing really changes. Whether you light candles or flick on the fluorescent bulb. Inside, you're still human. But how much of your thought process, your natural curiosity, lays dormant, is squeezed out by the community.

***“Where the ads take aim and lay their claim
To the heart and the soul of the spender
And believe in whatever may lie
In those things that money can buy”***

What kind of crazy fucked up world do we live in where corporations are seen as friends. The same entities that pollute our air, that headquarter themselves offshore to avoid paying taxes. Oh, they've got money to sprinkle over the arts. But if we take it, we're complicit in the conceit. That everything can be bought and sold, that personal integrity never enters the equation. What did your father tell you? Stand for something, or you don't stand for anything at all? What are you standing for? Money? You want to work at CAA? Or be a fat cat at the major label? At least Google has a mission, to make all the world's information available at the population's fingertips. What is the mission of MTV, or Live Nation? They're the same corporations we decried back in the sixties. It is any wonder it's these same people who say taking the corporate money is a good thing, that it doesn't hurt your career? Music used to be an agent for change. Now it's just the carcass divided by businessmen for profit.

***“Say a prayer for the Pretender
Who started out so young and strong
Only to surrender”***

Get old enough and you lose faith in institutions, in people, you can only believe in yourself. It's not only business, but government. I mean really, what is Dick Cheney thinking?

Are you thinking? What are your values? What do you stand for? Can you be sold to the highest bidder? Do you ever say no?

These are the important questions. It's got nothing to do with cash.

I passed the bar exam. Even practiced law for a few minutes. But it wasn't for me. It was never for me. I couldn't relate to those people. Used to be, I could relate to you. But that was before you stopped being a fan and became interested in getting paid, a lot. Before you believed that your riches and power made you as important as the act.

When did we stop believing? Could be in that fall of '76. Could be that "The Pretender" was the last hurrah. After that it was all corporate rock and disco. And then we were all happy idiots in front of the tube, watching performers in spandex dancing for dollars.

Are you pretending? Do your choices really make you happy? All that money, all that groveling to get ahead, has it worked for you? When you hear "The Pretender", do you think of yourself?

Bob Lefsetz
"The Lefsetz Letter"

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