Added to the National Registry: 2022
Essay by Rick Moody (guest post)*

Journey

“Don’t Stop”: On Journey’s Masterpiece

The passage through history in which “Don’t Stop Believin’,” by Steve Perry, Neil Schon, and Jonathan Cain, became a songwriting tour de force, an essential popular music composition of the 21st century, was not straightforward, not linear, not without reversals.

And this is why it is a story worth telling.

Let this be a place where this story is told.

There are many things that are superficially effective about “Don’t Stop Believin’,” the song at hand, and so a brief catalogue. First, the opening piano and bass guitar section, with all those fifths, and the improbable fugue-like melody in the left hand, which was composed (it is said), by guitarist Neil Schon, this is just unimpeachably catchy, perhaps even sublime. It alludes, this keyboard part, to the contemporaneous strands of minimalism and post-minimalism, to the fifths of Philip Glass, and prefigures a substantial borrowing from minimalism that would become commonplace in, for example, the piano parts in (songs by) Adele, in “Someone Like You” or “Easy on Me.” Here is a place this simplicity was done first with such winning clarity, with such directness and emotional candor. And it’s the G#m chord, fifth in the sequence, that’s the thing, that’s the magic, a little moment of gospel, that makes this chord progression so recognizable, but also unusual. Without that G#m, “Don’t Stop Believin’” would sound like everything else in the late seventies or early eighties, like middle period Elton John, let’s say. Or like Supertramp.

Second, in this catalogue of why and how greatness, there are the lyrics. These are primarily by Steve Perry, excepting the lyrical hook (which doesn’t come until the very end, and what a fascinating decision for the song, to delay believing until the very end), which is by Jonathan Cain. These lyrics are full of the existentialist ache that Steve Perry is known to have buried liberally in a catalogue of rather conservative, staid, Midwestern-sounding pop-rock songs.
Perry’s lyrical gaze was/is melancholic, almost everywhere, despite the anthemic and wholesome qualities of Journey compositions. You can see it right in the opening verses of “Don’t Stop Believin’,” in the he and she of it: “Just a smalltown girl/Living in a lonely world/She took a midnight train going anywhere/Just a city boy/Born and raised in South Detroit/He took a midnight train going anywhere.” It’s the “going anywhere” that is particularly instructive here, its heedlessness, but the “midnight train,” too, rises up into our attention, recalling Gladys Knight’s “Midnight Train to Georgia,” a song with a parallel thematic arc about dashed Hollywood dreams. And then, later, there is this: “Strangers, waiting/Up and down the boulevard/Their shadows/Waiting in the night.” The heavy Dantesque use of shadows here is foreboding, standing in for souls, and, in particular, we might allude to the souls that Dante first encounters in Canto IV, the limbo section of the “Inferno,”

There, as it seemed to me from listening,
Were lamentations none, but only sighs,
That tremble made the everlasting air.

And this arose from sorrow without torment,
Which the crowds had, that many were and great,
Of infants and of women and of men.*

Likewise the shades Virgil likewise finds in Book Six of the “Aeneid,” in his parallel journey into the plangent underworld,

His eyes fixed on the ground, his face in tears, Aeneas moves on, leaving the cavern, turning over within his mind these strange, dark events. His trusty comrade Achates keeps his pace and the same cares weigh down his plodding steps. They traded many questions, wondering, back and forth, what dead friend did the Sibyl mean, whose body must be buried?*

Verse two of “Don’t Stop Believin’” finds its genesis in Perry’s view out a hotel window after a show one night, a view of fans who would not disperse. This allusion to this limbo, this hem or edge of the underworld, ratchets up the lonesome tone of the compositional whole. And then there’s verse three, yes, with its observation that “Some will win, some will lose, some are born to sing the blues.” The accumulation of these lyrical allusions suggests the way that Perry can’t resist with: the existentialist ache. The ache remains, persists, the waiting, the unknowing, the outward unfurling, even in the midst of a perfect four-minute popular song that marching bands like to play.

And, further: there is the first guitar solo, the little four-note figure that Neil Schon plays over the piano section to inaugurate the presence of the full band, faster and faster, in a undeniably show-offy way, true, a solo which has some tonal similarity to, well, some less talented guitarists, but in a way, also, that gets ahead of the beat briefly, doing something that you’re not supposed to do in a pop song, especially not now, in the mechanistic present. He pushes against the groove. Only a great musician can do it so seamlessly.

* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow translation, 1867.
Also, and how could I have delayed: there is Steve Perry’s singing. Throughout. Is there any
doubt, at this point, that this was one of the very best singers to emerge from popular music after
the seventies? And it’s not just the astounding range. Actually, it’s the Dion DiMucci-meets-
Sam-Cook phrasing, and the luxuriating in the vowels, the melismas, the soul music borrowings,
so unknown in the middle-of-the-road bands of the same period (compare Steve Perry to David
Lee Roth, for example, or Bruce Springsteen, or John Mellencamp, and you’ll see what an
astonishing voice he has), especially in the end section, the hook section, when Perry climbs up
to “hold on to that feeling” improvisation, making “feeling” into a thing with seven or eight
syllables. Not only the indebtedness to gospel, to popular music by Black Americans, but also
the kind of naked sadness, the aloneness of Steve Perry (who said that he never felt part of the
band called Journey). Steve Perry alone in the underworld, emotions first, exhibiting a kind of
cheerful devastation.

And, finally, then there’s the simple repetition of the words “Don’t Stop Believin’,” the
sentiment itself, which don’t appear in the song until 3:22. Look, the philosophical system
sketched here, in this line, taken as manifest content, is somewhat superficial, we would all
concur; it’s a bromide, and it would be hard to swallow this bromide, for any thinking or feeling
person to do so, if not for the way that the repetition seems to imply, at once, the opposite of
what is manifestly advised. One only has to repeat “don’t stop believin’” at length to know that
one is in real danger of stopping believing at any moment. One only has to repeat to know that at
some point the repetitions must cease. If it’s the existentialist despair of the shadows searching
in the night, the shades of limbo, in the verses that first makes clear how complex is the
emotional field of the Journey song, by the time we arrive at Jonathan Cain’s bromide, we know
additionally that, as in Paul Tillich’s description of the Christian faith, there’s no belief without
the immanence of unbelief right beside it. “Don’t stop,” that is, occurs in this song less than a
minute before stopping will actualize, so that stopping and non-stopping are coterminous, are
aspects of one another, united in a oneness. It’s the very futility of believing that is so human, so
sympathetically described, and so heartfelt here, such that it merits a minute of solid reiteration.

These foregoing reasons, therefore, amount to some of the reasons “Don’t Stop Believin’” is a
fine piece of pop songcraft, groundbreaking in its somewhat conservative way, in its deep and
abiding wish to be in the top 40, if not the top ten, if not number one. But in no way did any of
these admirable features of its craft mean that “Don’t Stop Believin’” was to be understood as a
masterpiece, not initially. Indeed, exactly the contrary was the original perception of the thing.

Because, in all honesty, Journey was an easy band to resist. And I tell you this because I was
there. I was a college student in the Northeast, a college junior, at the very moment when “Don’t
Stop Believin’” was released upon the unsuspecting world, and though I liked that piano sound,
the intro section, and that sinuous and contrapuntal bass line, I was able to repel the charms of
“Don’t Stop Believin’,” and I changed the radio station when it came on. This was back in the
time when radio was a place where a song like this was liable to be played. Another place where
a song like this was liable to be played, in due course, was: MTV. That cable network of
confectionary video broadcasting launched just months before “Don’t Stop Believin’” was
released, and though Journey was not immediately a fixture, they were soon enough, a band that
ultimately attempted to profit from the being-seen of MTV, and, as with Van Halen, what made
them well-known, thereafter, was also what made them a bit annoying. Journey looked exactly like what you thought they’d look like, some normal guys with fancy hair, and very tight pants, perfecting outsized stadium gestures in a way that made much of what they touched seem like, well, *cheap perfume*. And yet: Steve Perry looked like he was going to weep sometimes, like he was always working hard at the onstage bonhomie in a desperate way, and so there was that too, posturing and despair both. The main thing was: this band sometimes seemed obvious, to a nearly self-conscious degree. They seemed like they might have given up on being interesting musicians (in, for example, a band called Santana) to be middle-of-the-road, perhaps utterly predictable, for the sheer selling-out of it all.

The truth, however, has a way of making itself felt, given time, and in the 30 years that passed after the *phase one* of “Don’t Stop Believin’,” when people stopped thinking much about Journey, especially when they got into the revolving door of Steve Perry-replacement singers, the internal meanings of “Don’t Stop Believin’” began, in the centrifuge of time, to assemble, to reassemble, to acquire new tonal colors, to stew into something new, dark, and powerful, something about the recognition of mortality and human failing.

Maybe the song had to be *remembered* to be loved. I had a good friend who worked in Store 24 in those days (I mean she worked there in the early ‘80s), on Thayer Street, in Providence, RI, and certain songs that could conceivably have been played in the Store 24 in 1981, which I heard when visiting my friend, whom I devoutly cared about, inevitably have this effect *on me* when thinking back, which is to say they prompt a whole unstoppable cinema reel of memories, feeling, in whole cloth, the places of those times, the perceptions of those times, “Limelight,” by Rush, has this effect, and “Don’t Stand So Close to Me,” by The Police, “Flashdance . . . What a Feeling,” by Irene Cara, songs that I sort of disliked but which have narratives, epics even, written in them, of romantic loss, or of dreams dreamed, or of times forgotten. This line of reasoning would seem to suggest that “Don’t Stop Believin’” evolved into a mnemonic shifter, as with Marcel Proust’s madeleine, an artifact that in certain circumstances can easily summon up the past through any fragment of its melodic dexterity. I believe there is merit to this theory, the mnemonic theory, but it is less that this needs to be exhaustively true, and more that it needs to be plausible as an explanation for why the song came to be written into a certain screenplay by David Chase, screenwriter and showrunner, because, perhaps, it had this effect on him, too, this effect of mnemonic acceleration.

Because: out of the blue, or perhaps in the light of a streetlamp, in 2007, “Don’t Stop Believin’” by Perry, Schon, and Cain, suddenly appeared in an episode of “The Sopranos,” a television show widely noted for its use of music, in which, in a refreshed context, songs that we knew well suddenly had new meanings, new lives. “The Sopranos” wasn’t just any television show, either, it was a television show that revolutionized television itself, made it over again, created an alternate history of narrative work, found life where there wasn’t life, where there was mostly *cheap perfume*; this program was ambitious, deep, and fixed on history, on telling us something lasting about American life, about human beings, about what we’re trying to do here, something that we had not gotten from, say “Moonlighting,” or “Mad About You,” or “Friends,” however engaging these were.
And it wasn’t just any episode of “The Sopranos,” as you may remember, it was the last episode of “The Sopranos,” and it wasn’t just the last episode of “The Sopranos,” it was the last four minutes and 30 seconds of “The Sopranos,” the very end of, arguably, one of the greatest television shows ever made. And because the end of “The Sopranos,” by which I mean the last seconds of the last four minutes of the last episode of the greatest television show ever made, was an interval of cultural engagement much argued over, the dead stop, the song came in for some real attention. In fact, David Chase did with the song what the band had come to do live, which was to stop the music right on the words “Don’t Stop,” abbreviating the fade, creating a massive internal dissonance, a cognitive fraying between stop and don’t stop, and then he went straight to ten seconds of black screen, which is the part people are still talking about.

You may now choose to go back and see (for example, on YouTube).

There’s a lot to say about how the song was used in this sequence, beginning with James Gandolfini’s incredible, immemorial face (he who played the titular character, mob boss Tony Soprano), a face from the underworld, and his ability to show rage, paranoia, love, gratitude, despond, and reconciliation, all within milliseconds of each other. And there’s also how powerful it was to have Tony Soprano’s wife, Carmela (played by Edie Falco), come into the diner, where the Sopranos were about to dine in this the last episode, right during the piano riff at the beginning of “Don’t Stop Believin’,” and then there’s all those loaded, polymorphous lines of dialogue that are refracted by the song: “What looks good tonight?” and “He’s gonna testify,” and “Try to remember the times that are good,” moments of dialogue that seem to become lyrics to the song, and vice versa, and which are further illuminated by the mise-en-scene, the cinema of it all, of which we could speak at great length, Tony’s first gaze on the diner interior, etc. Let us be direct instead. We expect Tony Soprano to be assassinated throughout the song and every person who enters the diner where the Sopranos are trying to get dinner is the potential assassin.

It’s the density of contrary emotions in the scene, the riot of despair that coexists with our love for Tony and for the story David Chase told over seven years, which changed the meaning of the song “Don’t Stop Believin’,” until, in its perfect deployment in this supercharged moment, we came to see that the song was doing all of this in the first place, that the song, for all its sunny, heartland, anthemic qualities, was always a thing of terrible foreboding and belief, all at once. Hope against hope. The drama of “The Sopranos,” here at the end (in an episode entitled “Made in America”), is unthinkable without the song by Journey, and vice versa. Think of all the songs that Tony Soprano flips past on the jukebox, before selecting Journey, some Tony Bennett (used, I think, in “The Godfather”), some Heart, etc. Little Feat even seems to be playing when he enters the joint. A strange choice, Little Feat, and not of epochal importance. None of this other music is exactly right, does anything substantial. Only Journey is capable of living up to this overpowering dead stop moment, expanding into it, inhabiting it, rising up in it, showing the great commingling of human longing and agony at once.

It’s not that the song, in “The Sopranos,” is about family, and about how hard family is, or about how hard romance is. It’s that the song is about how complex, contradictory, and anguished all relationships are, the very notion of being in a relationship with another human. The sunny moments in the “Sopranos” diner sequence--a grandfather talking to his Cub Scouts/grandkids in one booth, a young couple enjoying each other’s company (and laughing about it) in another--are attempts to rescue a sentiment like “don’t stop believing” from what appears, in the television
program, like inevitable catastrophe, like blood spattered on walls. Cutting off the song, even though the song seems inevitably to want to be cut off, like cutting off the show leaving only a black screen, this all reminds us of the tendency of violence to hover around American civilization everywhere in this 21st century, how every apparently placid cultural interior, the ice cream stand, the supermarket, the church, the elementary school, the hospital entrance, has crime-scene potential, perhaps even crime-scene *inevitability*.

“Don’t Stop Believin’” could not have predicted that it would be used in this way, couldn’t have known, perhaps might not have even wanted such a thing, but the fact is that “The Sopranos” created a transcendent layer to the song, a substratum of tragedy, an emotional murmuring about wanting to survive *despite tragedy*, that was not previously apparent, but which now seems essentially there, it’s an essence, it’s unignorable, part of the very fabric of the song, woven in, a complexity that was awaiting this song for its special expression, especially in the person of Steve Perry, in the enigmatic single couplet in verse three that is in the first person (which now seems, when it is not in Perry’s voice, to be in Tony Soprano’s voice), “*Working hard to get my fill*/Everybody wants a thrill/Payin’ anything to roll the dice/Just one more time.” A complexity is woven in, is everywhere you look in the song, even if no one in the room at the time knew that it was happening. In such ways does history reclaim or repurpose the art of particular eras, wrenching them out of their housing and then exposing a wellspring of feeling hitherto unseen, in a sort of nuclear fission of the heart, in a flash upon us.

You can tell, even in the very inventive “Glee” version of “Don’t Stop Believin’,” which postdates “The Sopranos” version by two years, that this historically-aware rendition of “Don’t Stop Believin,’” the one where Tony is always already assassinated, is an influence, not the early-’80s original, the happy arena anthem, the one they use for marching bands, but also the assassination-and-family version; you can tell it’s in the “Glee” version, and also in a performance video shot in the Manila in 2009, when sung by Arnel Pineda, the (then) scrappy young man from Southeast Asia who became Journey’s lead singer, who once lived on the street and who lost his mother when he was 13, you can tell that he sings the song with an uncommon sense of the double meanings, by which I mean the requisite wish to believe in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, the poverty and loss and ecstasy of life all at once. You can tell that “The Sopranos,” even when it is just a breeze that whispers over the surface of “Don’t Stop Believin’,” changed the song and made it something else, something flinty, purposeful, lofty, and that in this way the television show proved how lasting and important this masterful accomplishment really was and is and remains.

It’s true: this is the most streamed song that was not released in the 21st century (billions of streams!); it’s true, Journey continues on, in part because of this song, and can sell out arenas across the world; it’s true, with Arnel Pineda it becomes clear, as it was liminally with Steve Perry, that this is a band for all the people of the world, and now beyond these outward trappings of success there is the unsuspectable depth and woe and complexity of this outwardly cheerful pop song, the sorrow, the gospel chord, the loneliness, the shades, the rising above, the onwardly galloping of purpose and impotence together, in the hardest times, the shades both remembering and stretching out their dead hands with longing to kindle the sympathies of the living. Maybe the truth is that for all the efforts of the members of Journey, “Don’t Stop Believin’” could only have happened this one time, could have breached the impermeable lightness of the
contemporary only once in this way. Of such illuminations is the complexity of the popular song made clear.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.