



Does Truth Matter

Years ago I was watching Johnny Carson. In his monolog, he told of something that really happened to him. He said that there was remodeling going on in his house, and things were in some confusion. After taking a shower, he found a can of spray deodorant he wasn't familiar with, but used it anyway. And he liked the scent. So he used it for the next week or so, until he discovered that it wasn't deodorant at all, but room freshener.

The audience howled with laughter; it was a pretty impressive bit of entertainment. Then it dawned on me that this would not have been a funny joke at all, except for the fact that it was a true story.

This brought up a question that I always wrestle with, as an arts dabbler: Does truth matter in the arts? Do you have to know the makeup and situation of an artist, singer, songwriter, painter, photographer, and the truth of their product, before you can appreciate it? Now that's a pretty broad question, and I almost didn't write this Whither Zither because of its breadth, but I keep coming back to it. It hounds me. So this episode just touches on the tip of this tricky subject, in hopes of unloading my sleepless nights of agonizing onto others.

Years ago a story made the rounds about someone who woke up in the middle of the night to the buzzing of a squeezer, grabbed what he thought was bug spray, and, in the darkness, sprayed his whole bedroom with black paint. That was a funnier story than Carson's on the surface. But if you think it didn't really happen, it wouldn't be as funny as Carson's. If you think it really happened, it would be funnier than Carson's. That is so weird.

A video popped up recently and went viral, showing a bride, groom, priest, etc, all tumbling into the water somehow.

This footage circulated until it was proven to be a set-up, and not an actual mishap. Viewers were outraged, as though their laughter had been stolen under false pretenses!

So in this sense, the answer to the question "Does truth matter?" is yes, it seems to, at least with humor. And maybe, taken further, the sadness of a sad story is deeper if you think the story is true. Maybe adventure stories you think are true are more thrilling than fiction adventure stories. Maybe erotic stories are more sexy if you think they really happened. And so forth.

Then there's another level to all this: how you come to think something is true. Carson, a comic genius, could have made up his story, and knowing his audience, knew that if he TOLD them it was true, he'd get a bigger laugh. So you have to know the artist well enough to know if he or she is telling you the truth when they say they are. If you want a strong reaction from people to your art, you have to maintain your reputation as a truth teller on some basic level, at least to the point where you somehow let it be known when you are lying that you are lying.

Because, of course, if the story is strong enough, it can stand on its own, even if it's not true. That's what fiction is. Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill are stories that obviously are fabricated. Those tall tales actually poke fun at the idea of truth in story-telling. Garrison Keillor is completely out front about his stories being phony baloney, so he has done all right for himself.

There are more nuanced considerations. Think of Carson telling the story, but saying that it happened to his wife, or his neighbor. It would have been funnier than if it was obviously made-up, but not as funny as it was with the punchline happening to Carson. Why is that? Is it because you can feel the opportunity for fiction to creep in the cracks if Carson is telling a second hand story from a person whose truth-creds are unknown?

This all figures more or less into my chosen role as one who sings his own

songs. Though there are no rules written in stone about all this, you have to wonder what is accepted, what is expected, what is self-defeating, what is deceitful beyond the pale, when it comes to the use of untruth in this job. Or is creativity just plain another term for lying, and to hell with truth? Songwriters have often been scoundrels when it comes to the truth, as with all the cowboy songs written by Tin Pan Alley writers who had never been west of Utica.

The folk music subculture is constantly dealing with truth questions. Did Alan Lomax teach songs to the prisoners so he could come back later and record them? Did Bob Dylan really write Blowin' in the Wind? If you go to see a folk singerish performer, and they sing a song about their mother being a drunk but nonetheless supporting a family of eight and an ostrich, does it matter to you if the story is made up or not? Do you have to put your appreciation of a painting on hold until you find out about the character of the artist? Does it matter if that glorious photograph of sunset over Famous Footwear involved Photoshop? I mean, it does affect your reaction, if the Johnny Carson phenomenon is a factor, but should it? Have you ever had your opinion of a song or other work of art change after hearing some back-story about it? Does it matter that young white people sing first-person blues by old black people, or that blacks make Native American art, or that Japanese do rosemaking? If I told you now that I made up the whole bit about Johnny Carson and his deodorant story, would it make a difference?

Sometimes in this world of 3D animation, synthetic wool, sampled piano, photoshop, statistics, and nonfat sugar-free ice cream, I find myself looking out the window of an airplane at the view and thinking, "Gee, that's realistic."

And sometimes I think my favorite philosophical blockbuster of a lyric is "Row row row your boat, gently down the stream; merrily merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream." But does that matter?