

## **[The Church of the Fallen Angels: Ninety and Still Dancing](#)** (click for Spotify playlist)



**May 25, 2020:** My mother turned ninety years last December. She was born on Christmas eve, two months after the great stock market crash of 1929. She has lived to see the COVID-19 pandemic, riding it out alone in New Jersey near the global epicenter of the outbreak. As a child, she suffered rheumatic fever and scarlet fever, taking away a heart murmur for her pains. Got married at twenty, raised three kids, managed a divorce, then spent twenty-five years in the insurance business, retiring as an honored and beloved fellow worker. Already into her 80s, she spent twelve days alone and without electricity in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. She is, in short, tough, tough as nails, tough as they come. “Come on, kids, you’ve got to make your own fun,” she used to tell us. Depression kid.

My mom is my hero for many reasons but perhaps, above all, is that into her nineties, she enjoys two stiff vodka martinis every night. Keep it going mom! I learned something about her the other day. I was thinking about her youth, with her fevers that sent her to a special school for a while, the Spalding School. Founded in 1908, the Spalding School was Chicago’s first school for kids with disabilities (it’s still going: <http://www.spaldingjags.org/>). My mom used to tell us about how much she hated the stewed tomatoes there. They did sound bad. So I asked my mom the other day, if and when she got over the feeling of vulnerability as a kid. And she thought for a while, but then said, yes, I guess I did, because I was in a gang with boys in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Mom! I think of that story when I listen to cut # 4 below.



My mom is also, to put it impolitely, a ball-buster. I’m nearly 65 years old and as recently as five years ago, during a visit, she sent me to bed in tears. I remember saying to her, I don’t know why I thought I could argue with you. Nobody pushes my mom around. I love that about her. The title and the tone of this mix reflects all that (not that I think my mom will or would ever enjoy on this mix; it’s in her honor, but it’s MY music). It’s all straight ahead, rocking, ball-busting, hard and tough. At least I’d like to think so.

About the title of the mix. Well, there’s a line in one of these songs about “My parents would be proud.” For whatever reason, when I hear that line I think of my mother, before I think of my father. I don’t think my mother has ever been particularly proud of my various (dubious) accomplishments, especially my work as a historian and a teacher. Which is ok, perhaps even appropriate. She memorably said to me once, “Johnny, you don’t really know anything about what happened back then.” But a few years ago, we were driving to my niece’s wedding somewhere in New Jersey. We were having considerable trouble finding the place. And I kept pulling out my phone to ask for directions.



I was, to say the least, a bit stressed, trying to get us to the wedding on time. The wedding was at the Church of the Guardian Angel. Flustered, I kept getting it wrong, speaking intently into my phone asking for directions to “the church of the fallen angels.” One might judge my state of mind from that, and perhaps my self-image. About the third time I did it and feeling completely helpless (although we were actually on the verge of getting there, on time, it turns out), I had to pull over and collect myself. My mom could not hide her laughter; she thought it was hilarious. But then she said, “it’s ok, John, you’re doing fine. We know you’re trying.” At that moment, I thought, hey, my mom is actually proud of me.

The “still dancing” subtitle also comes from that wedding day as well. My mom and I danced for a while with her great-grandson (my grandson) Lincoln (pictured on front cover, lower right). Even if my mom won’t and wouldn’t enjoy this music, I think she and I share a relationship to music. Neither of us have much talent in actually making music, but I remember coming home from school on occasions and finding her vacuuming with opera on the stereo full blast. That’s my mom and that’s me! Enjoy and keep going Mom.



**1. Ben’s My Friend - Sun Kil Moon:** perhaps one song on the mix my mom might like, recalling the great crooners of her youth; “a pretty slow and uneventful summer” – captures my coronavirus mood, as I miss my sports bar and trips to Sante Fe or wherever; “blue crab cakes,” so lovely. Attentive listeners will recognize why this is the lead song **2. Chinatown – Jets to Brazil:** it does seem to refer to my favorite movie, about a detective who thinks he knows but doesn’t: “I’m right again and I’m chinatown”; then it’s hard to hear but: “last of the pitchers catfish done hunting harry lundt” – Harry Lundt is the guy who pinch ran for Ray Chapman in 1920 after Carl Mays mortally wounded with a pitch; “I’m tired of fighting,” but I’m not really. Shall fight to the end, right mom? Of course, I fell in love with this song, with most songs, before I heard the lyrics correctly. I thought it was “I’m tired of Fridays.” Heh. **3. Shark Smile – Big Thief** Love this song, wanted to put it on my mix (in the works) for Katherine, Sally and Michael’s daughter (Lincoln’s sister), but the denouement of the song recommended against that – so it’s here instead; one of two songs about car accidents on the mix. I hate cars. **4. Stella was a Diver and She’s Always Down – Interpol:** ok, this one gets weird but somehow the opening lines conjure an image of my mom strolling along Central Avenue in Chicago as a young woman, maybe with her gang. **5. Bad Guy – Billie Elish:** I had this song before it went viral; I tend to avoid songs that are too popular, but the “duh” in this song is too much to resist. And, well, bad guy fits the general tone and tenor. **6. Byegone – Volcanic Choir:** This is the Bon Iver guy, Justin Vernon; Set Sail! **7. Do You Like Games – Jim Noir:** just so catchy **8. Drunk Drivers/Killer Whales – Car Seat Headrest:** The other car accident song, but so lovely. “My parents would be proud/Or fall asleep on the floor.” “But maybe if we can learn to live like this/Maybe we can learn to start again.” My cling-to-hope in the days of the coronavirus, that we’ll emerge, embrace the green new deal, and address climate change. **9. Biomusicology – Ted Leo and the Pharmacists:** opera and vacuum cleaners; come on out and hear the music. “All in all, we cannot stop singing. We cannot start sinking. We swim until it ends. They may kill and we may be parted. but we will ne’er be broken-hearted.” **10. Gravity Rides Everything – Modest Mouse:** About how we worry about crazy stuff, much of it that will work out ok in the end **11. Ladies and Gentlemen, We Are Floating in Space – Spiritualized:** We are indeed floating in space, but with each other. “All I want in life’s a little bit of love/To take the pain away.”