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Same auld lang syne christmas song

I freely admit that this issue is an order of magnitude less important than the lame argument that Die Hard is a Christmas movie, but having heard the song for the first time in a while over New Year's, I feel compelled to weigh in. I am of course referring to Dan Fogelberg's winter of 1980 hit, "Same Auld Lang Syne." If you aren't familiar with the tune, take a listen. Yes, it's vintage 1970s easy listening (complete with overdubbing), but lyrically it is spot on. It remains popular, but while the events of the song (which are based on an actual encounter Fogelberg had with his ex-girlfriend) take place on Christmas Eve, the song is really about the passage of time, not the coming of Christ the King. I particularly like the structure of the song, which efficiently sketches a scenario that is both specific but also relatable. The refrain is also sparingly and includes some lyrical variations, adding to the casual feel. Finally, an instrumental solo at the end - which could have been a Christmas melody - instead reminds us once again of years gone by. The drive to link films with obviously incorrect these is in large part a social media stupidity, where bored journalists and commentators while the hours away between spurts of fake outrage over trivialities. One could, using the same logic, argue that The Big Chill is a college football movie, since it takes place during the fall, the cast actually plays football and is engrossed in the outcome of the Michigan-Michigan State game. But of course that's not what it is about at all, and while it betrays a spiritual bleakness, it also is a well-crafted character portrait. That's because it was based on actual events. I've said it many times before, but art drawn from specific experiences inherently has more power than something created out of pure imagination. It contains "the ring of truth," and the author's exposure to the actual circumstances of the event ensure that it presented with the proper sensitivity. One reason why modern productions are so awful is the loss of life-experience. Increasingly our creative class knows only what it has seen in videos or read online. They are also chained to a series of politically correct tropes which have no basis in reality. The truth is that life is messy and often filled with contradictions. This is how it is possible to simultaneously be happy with one's situation, yet still feel a pang of regret for things that didn't work out long ago. Dan Fogelberg's "Same Old Lang Syne," the worst Christmas song in the history of Christmas songs, landed on the Billboard Hot 100 about 40 years ago. Ever since, when it comes on the radio, usually when there is too much to do and bills are piling up, I pull over and listen closely. Traffic in such a situation would prove too much. I would collide with a reindeer. I can't be responsible for myself when this song is on. It was issued as a single in November 1980, included on Fogelberg's album "The Innocent Age," which was released 10 months later, and it is the worst thing to ever come out of Peoria.You know the song: It begins with a tinkle of piano and a singer's velvety whisper, reminiscing about the time he ran into an old lover in the frozen food section at the supermarket. They hug, she spills her purse on the floor, they laugh until they cry. It's Christmas Eve and they can't find an open bar so they buy a six-pack and move to her car. They "toast to innocence," they "toast to now." She's unhappy in her marriage; he's unhappy with the demands of being a successful pop singer. They try to "reach beyond the emptiness." They run out of beer. They kiss goodbye, and he watches her drive off.It's basically 1980 reduced to five minutes and 18 seconds. Despite being a Christmas song, the word "lover" and the phrase "frozen foods" stand uneasily close together. And it all ends with that most ennui-laced of smooth jazz sax readings of "Auld Lang Syne."It is also beloved."Same Old Lang Syne" is the cilantro of Christmas songs. Some vomit a little in their mouths at the mere mention, and some can not imagine holiday season without it. As of this writing, with Christmas bearing down, it's been streamed on Spotify exactly 9,397,307 times. So, yes, my dyspepsia over this holiday classic is far from a popular opinion.Further placing myself on the wrong side of history: The story behind "Same Old Lang Syne" is almost entirely true, an autobiographical Illinoisan Christmas miracle. Fogelberg had been a proud native of Peoria, and the song recounted a holiday visit in 1975. Even that parking lot they drink in on Christmas Eve, it's a real place in Peoria. You could go there and sit in a car, slam a six-pack and cry yourself through the holidays right now.Our story begins Christmas 1980,Jill Anderson (now Jill Greulich), a Peoria native who moved to Chicago after college, is driving to her job at TWA. She's a flight attendant, and she's headed to O'Hare before dawn. "I remember it was still dark out and the radio was on and the song sounds like Dan. I didn't remember him having a new song, so it was exciting hearing his voice, and the more I listened to the words, I started thinking, 'Uh, wait ... What? I was there — that's me!'" She is the old flame Fogelberg is singing about in the song, and what struck her was this: He describes almost everything in the song just as it happened that Christmas Eve. Years later a little girl would send Fogelberg a letter asking what he meant at the end of the song by "the snow turned into rain" — does it mean he felt warmer, having connected to an ex-girlfriend? No, he replied, the snow turned into rain.Fogelberg, if nothing else, was earnest.At least on record, he was sincere, sweet, romantic. In the late 1970s, when Fogelberg's career peaked, he was synonymous with a certain light schmaltz. This was the last days of disco, the era of punk, the rise of metal, the dawn of rap. Some of you kids are listening to Fleetwood Mac in 2020, but I assure you, nothing was more middle-of-the-road lame in 1980 than Fleetwood Mac — except perhaps Dan Fogelberg. Yes, the following year, when "Same Old Lang Syne" was included on "The Innocent Age," the double-album boasted, among other players, Emmylou Harris, Joni Mitchell, Don Henley and Glenn Frey of the Eagles, Chris Hillman of the Byrds. Still, Fogelberg had become stuck "in the mire of the singer-songwriter balladeer thing," said Jean Fogelberg, his widow. His signature, "Longer," remains a wedding staple. "Dan would say 'Longer' put him on elevators. But he was a great rock guitarist, and an excellent bluegrass player, and he was frustrated being stuck with that reputation for ballads.""Dan Fogelberg could seriously shred," said Peter Berkow, a music and TV producer for PBS. "Dan was a musician's musician, but if you hated soft rock, then you hated Dan."They met in the 1960s at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where Berkow managed the Red Herring, a Unitarian church converted into a coffee house that served as a hub for local music. (The Red Herring, now a vegetarian restaurant, is still there.) Fogelberg, a dissatisfied theater student, recorded acoustic demos at the Red Herring, and Berkow produced. "Dan was a bit of a rebel," Berkow recalls. "He was dropping acid, he was very political, he got booted out of his fraternity." Fogelberg also met Irving Azoff, a Danville native and U. of I. student with a fledgling artist management business. His first act was Champaign's REO Speedwagon, his next was Fogelberg. He developed a reputation for being as hard as his first acts were soft; he continues today, at 73, having steered careers as disparate as the Eagles, Van Halen, Nicki Minaj and Harry Styles.Fogelberg once told an interviewer he would sit by the Illinois River and think of its rushing water as a metaphor for his inevitable departure from Peoria. He was that kind of soul. He was the son of a pianist (his mother) and a school band director (his father), but Azoff, his manager, became his river. By the mid-'70s, Fogelberg was synonymous with a reflective, laid-back California sound. He had the dark beard and gentle face of a youth pastor. I can imagine him beside James Taylor and Jackson Browne in a police lineup but not the crime. Here was a singer so uncool, one of his big hits, "Leader of the Band," was a tribute to his dad. Indeed, Christmas Eve 1975 came at the end of a year in which Fogelberg, now a star, spent a lot of time in Peoria, tending to his ailing father.Jill Anderson and Dan Fogelberg dated throughout high school. She keeps a photo of the couple. They're in her mother's living room, her on the arm of a chair gazing down warmly at Fogelberg, him wearing a sports coat and waving playfully toward the camera. After graduation, she left for Western Illinois University, and he left for U. of I.; they stayed in touch. But then he moved to California, and she moved to Chicago; after working for TWA, she taught elementary school in Northbrook. Christmas Eve 1975, both were in Peoria, both at childhood homes in the Abington Hill neighborhood. They had lost touch. Neither had spoken in a while. He left the house to buy whipped cream to make Irish coffee. She left to buy more eggnog. The rest you know from the song, the silences, the awkward wait as a cashier rings up their purchases, the feelings of emptiness and longing to connect to someone. She seemed dissatisfied with marriage; he loved playing live but hated the traveling. Years later, backstage after a show, Dan apologized to Jill. He changed her eyes from green to blue because blue rhymed better. Also, she was married to a gym teacher; in the song, he's an architect. Either way, her marriage ended. In the early '80s, Anderson (remarried as Greulich) moved to St. Louis.For decades, Greulich told only close family members and friends that she was the inspiration for the song. Jean Fogelberg told me Dan himself kept her identity a secret because Jill was married then, and also he believed "in leaving a gentleman's silence."Fogelberg was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2004; he died at 56, three years later.A week after his death, Greulich told the Peoria Journal Star she was the woman in the song. Thirteen years later, a holiday doesn't pass without "tons of messages from fans of Dan, just thanking me," she said. When I called, her husband, James, answered the phone. I asked to speak to her, and he joked: "Why? Do you want to date my wife too?"Across the past five decades, "Same Old Lang Syne" has gathered steam as a kind of Christmas classic. "Kind of" because, despite the setting and legacy, it's not really a Christmas tune. "You know, I don't ever remember anyone saying we were cutting a Christmas song," said drummer Russ Kunkel, the only musician on the record still alive. (Fogelberg played most of the instruments.) But if it must be a holiday song, it's one rooted in melancholy, its aches more specific than the general good tidings of other carols. Its lineage is not "Jingle Bells" or "Blue Christmas" but "Father Christmas" by the Kinks ("Give us some money! Don't mess around with those silly toys") and Judy Garland not quite believing "Through the years we all will be together/ If the fates allow."Fogelberg was only 30 when "Same Old Lang Syne" was released. Kunkel, who also produced Jimmy Buffett's "Christmas Island" album, said: "As artists get older in their careers, a Christmas record becomes like a perennial seller. It's an annuity of sorts. But with Dan, you get this kind of song version of 'It's a Wonderful Life,' about losing faith. 'It's a song about the Christmas you get, not the Christmas you're promised.And it's about getting older and feeling disappointment.'What I always found profound about the song is it captures how alone many actually feel during holidays," Berkow said. "It's all vulnerability, because Dan wanted to write for everyday people." Said John Soss, a longtime collector of Christmas music (and a vice president of Chicago's Jam Productions): "It's not something I'd want to listen to while trimming my tree or sipping a cup of warm glogg. It doesn't hit me that way. It feels more like a solid middle-of-the-road radio song — which (Fogelberg) was really good at."Those who knew Fogelberg say that, beyond the sentiment, they hear his sense of humor in the song. The melody quotes playfully from Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." And the lyrics, Fogelberg once told an interviewer, began as a creative exercise at the piano, to see if he could write something as ordinary as seeing an old friend at the market. In other words, those plodding lyrics — "We took her groceries to the checkout stand/ The food was totaled up and bagged/ We stood there ..." — were knowingly plodding. It's as if "Silent Night" noted the night was nothing special, 42 degrees, a bit cloudy. The song is so specific I asked Jill Greulich: Considering it was December when they drank cold beer in that parking lot for two hours, did the engine run for two hours?"I have no idea," she said, "but probably. It was cold out."So, Fogelberg, sensitive '70s singer-songwriter version 1.0 and avid environmentalist with estates in Colorado and Maine, had his blind spots too. Still, no less than Jackson Browne once said that "Same Old Lang Syne" made him cry, and Fogelberg is lovingly cited these days as an influence on My Morning Jacket, Garth Brooks, the Zac Brown Band — anyone with a twang and a riff gives him a nod. Kate Atkinson, co-author of "Part of the Plan," a Fogelberg-inspired jukebox musical that debuted in Nashville in 2017, told me she recognized the love of her life as soon as he played her a Dan Fogelberg song; later, after an eight-hour road trip in which the only two CDs were by Donald Fagen of Steely Dan and Dan Fogelberg, she realized she had to write a Dan Fogelberg musical.I myself began this by telling you "Same Old Lang Syne" was the worst thing to come out of Peoria. I suppose ... I was wrong. I'm sure Peoria offers worse than Dan Fogelberg. I used to lump the song together with Christmas travesties such as "The Christmas Shoes" (boy wants to buy shoes for his terminally ill mom, so she will look nice for Jesus) and "Wonderful Christmastime" (repetitive Paul McCartney lyrics as torture device), but those are lazy kitsch dressed up as sentiment. Now I see, "Same Old Lang Syne" is sentiment and kitsch, but not lazy. It's full of self-pity, restlessness and the hope of recognizing something true. But once again in a Christmas classic, the fates won't allow.Such is life.Forty years later, whenever she hears "Same Old Lang Syne," Jill Greulich listens. She listens hard. "To every word," she says wistfully, "and my husband, he gets excited too. He's never been jealous." They're both in their 70s and retired in St. Louis. The high school where she and Fogelberg courted now sits on an honorary Fogelberg Parkway. Which runs right by that parking lot where they drank in 1975. None of it is picturesque. But fittingly so. Jean Fogelberg maintains a website in her late husband's name where she posts fan letters, a surprising number of which mention the writers are seated at their desk in their office and just noticed Fogelberg playing in the background. You can picture the wallpaper, window blinds, the employee cafeteria. This is Fogelberg Country. "Same Old Lang Syne" comes on softly, and time stops. "I have heard this song countless times," they write, "and each time, it gives me the chills."cborrell@chicagotribune.com

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