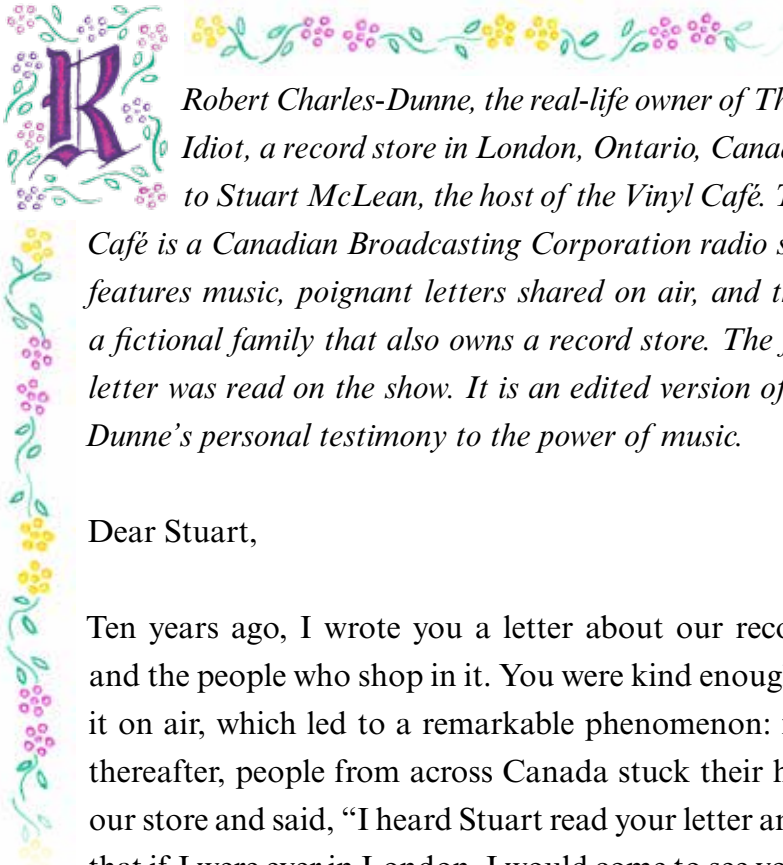


“A Wretch Like Me”: A Musical Pharmacist



R Robert Charles-Dunne, the real-life owner of *The Village Idiot*, a record store in London, Ontario, Canada, wrote to Stuart McLean, the host of the *Vinyl Café*. The *Vinyl Café* is a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio show that features music, poignant letters shared on air, and the life of a fictional family that also owns a record store. The following letter was read on the show. It is an edited version of Charles-Dunne's personal testimony to the power of music.

Dear Stuart,

Ten years ago, I wrote you a letter about our record store and the people who shop in it. You were kind enough to read it on air, which led to a remarkable phenomenon: for years thereafter, people from across Canada stuck their head into our store and said, “I heard Stuart read your letter and vowed that if I were ever in London, I would come to see your store.” Thus far, the *Vinyl Café* listeners who traveled farthest to our store came from Nunavut. . . .

That our store still exists . . . is itself a minor miracle, for

a variety of reasons. The Sam “The Record Man” and Music World chains are both gone, as are others. The HMV chain was recently sold for a pittance, and has been rebranding itself for years, in the face of declining music sales. What are known as Mom & Pop shops . . . have been closing in record numbers, and others teeter on the brink. Yet our store is now twice the size it was when I last wrote to you, and it could double in size again if only I could find a retail space in the same neighbourhood [sic] large enough and had the resources to stock it. . . .

The entire music-buying landscape has shifted dramatically, and the economic hardships of recent years have only further hobbled what was already a diminishing business. The mixed news is this: compact discs are now on the endangered list and will soon be declared dead, to be replaced by downloads, but vinyl sales are on the rebound in ways that nobody would have imagined when we first opened our store. In fact, when we opened, everyone we knew either predicted our imminent demise, or suspected it would occur but were too polite to say so. Who opens a record store after the vinyl

format has been officially declared extinct by labels that would no longer manufacture it?

When you read my letter . . . my partner Patty and I were elated. But a few days later came September 11, 2001, and, along with the rest of the world, we grieved in stunned disbelief, our temporary high deflated into insignificance. Life is fleeting, and what matters most is not always obvious. But music is tremendously powerful therapy, even when the universe unfolds in dreadfully unexpected ways. Suddenly, people had a special need to reconnect with the essential benefits only music can provide. And through other circumstances, I soon became one of them.

Much has happened in the past ten years, Stuart. Eight months after my last letter to you, my sweetheart and store partner Patty was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died five excruciating months later. I will not dwell on this point . . . Patty received the finest treatment humanly possible unto the very end. I have always been a hugely proud Canadian, but was made even more so by the respect and loving attention Patty received toward the end of her journey. . . .

The loss of so loved a partner reduced me to an empty shell, [and] now left [me] alone to raise two adolescent boys and run a small business when I no longer had the heart to continue. The record store had been Patty's dream, not mine. In the 1970s and 80s, she had worked for many years for Sam "The Record Man," while I had been a music industry weasel

in a variety of roles. Until her illness, we hadn't planned that I would work much in the store. But with her illness, I had no choice but take the reins and make the best of a bad situation. The past nine years since her death have been devoted to creating a store of which Patty could be proud, and someday I will achieve that goal.

In retrospect, I now realize that these twin responsibilities, the boys and the shop, helped me to remain focused and to cope when I might otherwise have succumbed to drink, drugs, and despair. They were dark and trying times, Stuart, and the greater the gloom, the more I invariably, even unconsciously, turned to music to soften the pain.

In the process, I realized in concrete terms what I had long known but hadn't ever articulated. There are two types of people who buy music at our store, and I presume do the same at other record stores: those to whom music gives great joy, and those to whom it gives refuge from pain that might otherwise be overwhelming. For the former group, I run a record store where they can find things they like. But for the latter group, I am a musical pharmacist who dispenses reasons to continue in the face of daunting odds. As I said earlier, music is tremendously powerful therapy, even when the universe unfolds in dreadfully unexpected ways. I like to think that I've become a more empathetic person as a result of my own difficulties, and those I now recognize more clearly in other people.

And the potency of music to alter lives . . . scientific studies have shown the importance of music. It can rewire and stimulate the brain. It can serve as a bridge between us and those who are suffering dementia. It can help teach foreign languages. It can connect peoples of different cultures who otherwise may have little in common. It can help transcend tragedy. It can impart great personal joy. It can spark glimpses of the divine. It can unite nations and impart needed wisdom. It can help people to fall in love. And it can save souls. I know, because it saved a wretch like me; a lyrical line I wouldn't know were it not for music.

Robert Charles-Dunne
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