

A STORY FROM THE LEELANAU

The Leelanau peninsula is at the top left of the mitten of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, or as we say, the little finger. It comes from a Native American word for this land "ke-ski-bi-ag," which means "narrow body of water and Lake Leelanau, from a word "lee-lan-au,," which means "delight of life."

Living downstate as we have for the last many decades, we would take the trip up into the Leelanau whenever we could manage it, usually an all-day trip up and back, with mostly going up and back, and whatever time left spent in the Leelanau.

The leelanau is a large finger of land that one can traverse in less than an hour, either north-south or east-west, and we would. It was like having a natural-world smorgasbord of features compressed into a half-an-hour trip. We would trek out to Empire Bluff and watch the huge salmon swim in Lake Michigan a couple of hundred feet below. Or, we would hike to Pyramid Point Overlook where we could see the north and south Manitou Islands. Or to Sleeping Bear Dunes and the dune climb. Or tour the many orchards and vineyards.

Indeed, it was (for us) a magic place when travel took no time, and in the summer the weather was warm and the features were many. It was like a natural Disney World, one with many rides, all of them natural and native. We used to rent a cottage up on Cathead Bay a week at a time and I would look for Petoskey Stones in the waters of the Lake Michigan, while the kids swam. Or go to the town of Northport and climb the nearby lighthouse. And, on and on.

Here is a story from back in the days when I was running AMG, the All-Music Guide, All-Movie Guide, All-Game Guide, etc. For those who don't know AMG, it is the largest music review and biography database in the world (<http://allmusic.com/>), while the All-Movie Guide is one of the two largest film web sites in the

world, and so on.

Anyway, I founded and created AMG, was its president, and at the time of this story we had about 150 full-time staff and over 500 free-lance writers. Aside from a massive web site, we also produced a series of printed music guides. To make this happen meant that we had to divide up all of the great musicians and composers in the world among our music editors and the hundreds of free-lance writers we worked with, having each music writer doing this or that band or musician.

Of course, great musicians like Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday, and the like were picked by the most well-known writers, and so it went on down the line. When all was said and done, there was only a single group of musicians that none of our staff or any the free-lance writers wanted to do, and that was those easy-listening musicians you sometimes see selling their albums through infomercials on late-night TV, singers like Roger Whitaker, Tom Jones, Richard Clayderman, Roger Williams, and sometimes even John Denver and Barry Manilow. You know the type of commercials.

Many were crooners that you seldom saw on sale at record stores (except in the remainder bins), but they were all over the late-night commercials. You get the idea. This story is about one of those lounge singers, Englebert Humperdinck. Not one of the hundreds of writers working for us wanted to do his biography and rate his albums. The same was true for a number of these easy-listening types.

As the founder and head of AMG, it fell upon me to do

something with these elevator-music late-night wonders, and so I held my nose and just did it myself. This was years before I could openly admit to myself that I (when in the right mood) actually liked some elevator music. Anyway, that is off topic.

The bottom line here is that I wrote the biographies and went through the album chronology of many of these easy-listening singers and groups that seemingly only appear (selling their special kind of romantic elevator music) through late night TV commercials, and this included the singer Englebert Humperdinck. And that completes the prolog for this story. Now, on to our yearly family vacation.

My wife Margaret loves to go to the lake and once a year this usually involved renting a cottage somewhere on Lake Michigan and spending an entire week there. Now personally I hate vacations. To me they are the most boring times in the year, times where I sit around and tap my fingers waiting for them to be over. This was before I really got interested in nature photography. Of course, Margaret and the kids had a wonderful time, which is as it should be. I would just wait these vacations out, impatiently.

For me, because I love what I do, my day-to-day life already was a vacation, so, as they say, you can't salt the salt, thus my attitude toward vacations. This particular year we had rented a cottage up on Cathead Bay near Northport, at the very tip of Michigan's lovely Leelanau Peninsula. It really is a beautiful spot, but not a place I want to spend a whole week at, at least back then. I had no computer, no Internet, etc.

And so, there I was, bored out of my mind and counting the days until we could get home and back to normal life. I feel the same way about the week between Christmas and New Year. I was looking through one of those local event newspapers when I came upon the name "Englebert Humperdinck." Of course, I remembered him as one of those creepy late-night crooners that I loathed. As it turned out, he was playing at the Interlochen Center for the Arts, some forty-five minutes or so from the cottage. Of course, I was no fan of Humperdinck's, but I had done his biography and all of that... and I mostly I was bored.

By God, thought I, for a lark we would just go to that show and have a good laugh. It would be a diversion from the sand and shore that I was already so tired of. And so we did. I got tickets and when the evening of the performance came, with our oldest daughter Lotis minding the kids, Margaret and I headed off to Interlochen's great outdoor (partially covered) auditorium.

And we had good seats, right in the middle and close to the front. I was ready for this lounge-act featuring Humperdinck. As a professional music critic, I had reviewed all kinds of music, all kinds of singers, musicians, and so forth. So, I was totally ready to handle someone as inconsequential to my mind as a fellow named Arnold George Dorsey who had taken as his stage name a lesser-known 19th Century classical German opera composer. Give me a break. This would be fun. And then it began.

Suddenly Humperdinck was there on stage in front of me. In the flesh he looked much more human than the

musical caricature that I had envisioned in my mind. In fact, he was downright handsome and radiating charisma. Whoa... this was not what I had expected. And then he began to sing.

And did he sing. I was stunned. Before I knew it I was sitting there with tears running down both cheeks, absolutely mesmerized, thrilled by the music (I am a romantic at heart). Try as I would to hold the tears back, I couldn't help it. The music was overwhelming wonderful and I was swept away before I could catch myself and resist. That was just how it was.

And so it went. It was a great lesson to me and a great concert. Humperdinck had the audience, including me, in the palm of his hand and he took us on a trip we did not know how to take for ourselves. It was incredible. That is one story from the Leelanau.

[Here is a photograph of Englebert Humperdinck]

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish”

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