

A long-playing love affair with Jones Beach

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The Ramones paid a three-chord tribute to Rockaway Beach. Bruce Springsteen immortalized the Jersey Shore. The Rolling Stones dedicated a song to a Montauk motel.

Alas, no prominent musician has been moved to celebrate the beach that beats them all - the King of All Beaches, as it was once called. Jones Beach.

Despite lacking a signature song, Jones Beach has been the soundtrack of my life. Its own organic music - crashing of waves, squawking of gulls, breezes rippling through the dune grass - has provided accompaniment to some of the most memorable and significant moments of my 52 years. There have been points when the Jones Beach song grew faint, and times when it segued into a sad, minor key. Still, it always comes back in a resounding crescendo that seems to swell as high as its 200-foot-high water tower.

Jones Beach sings to me today as sweetly as when I was a young child. My priorities, passions and attitudes have changed as I have aged, but somehow, Jones Beach has managed to accommodate them and to reflect them as clearly as the glint of morning light on the West Bathhouse spires is mirrored in my sunglasses. My elementary school, my grandparents' home in Queens and other beloved places of my youth exist preserved under memory's glass. Jones Beach is one of those magical places, but it's also dynamic.

I go to Jones Beach and feel not mere nostalgia but possibility and promise. There's a forward-looking sense that may explain why I still get a childlike flush of excitement seeing the outlines of the tower in the distance as I drive down the Wantagh Parkway.

If we could put that past and present - my Jones Beach music - on vinyl (or disc) it would be a double album, one side for each part of my life. The particulars of my experience may be different, of course, but if the beach has played a part in your life, too, I'll bet you can sing along.

Side 1:

The song of my childhood at Jones Beach: Acoustic, lyrical and uncomplicated, which is how the beach seemed to me back then. The vastness of Jones Beach didn't really impress me at the time. I was more interested in the details. The grains that spilled through my fingers when I grabbed a handful of sand. The boardwalk splinters we tried to avoid in our bare feet. The occasional jellyfish splattered on the shoreline.

On this part of the album, my dad plays lead. Watching him knife into the water and swim out to what seemed the edge of the known world worried me; I was afraid he might not come back. Then I'd see the reassuring stroke of his arms, rising from the water.

My grandfather, who lived in Czechoslovakia and visited us every other summer, was part of the ensemble, too. Josef Hanc couldn't get enough of this beach. One of my most vivid childhood memories is of him during his first visit in 1966, erect and dignified, walking along the boardwalk, puffing on a cigar and wearing a Jones Beach cap my father had bought at the souvenir shop.

Grandfather would continue to visit until 1976. At the end of every one of his summer visits, we'd have to take one last trip to Jones Beach. Every time, he wore that same Jones Beach cap.

Side 2:

This is where we plug in the guitars and turn the amps up to 11. Alice Cooper sings lead here; his 1972 "School's Out" ("School's out for summer. ... School's out forever") was the song my teenage friends and I blasted as we toiled down the Meadowbrook Parkway.

Our destination was West End 2. Once known as Short Beach and opened in 1960 to handle the growing crowds at the main part of the state park, the 2.5-mile-long West End section of Jones Beach had become a popular destination for Baby Boom teens. West End 2 was a sort of seaside Woodstock, a party that went on ... well, for most of the 1970s. Illicit behavior was in the air, literally: A cloud of smoke seemed to perpetually hang over the place; couples wrestled in the dunes; teens would walk to the Jones Inlet jetty and try to hop from rock to slippery rock.

In my song of Jones Beach, the West End years are one long, sustained jam, and like most such jams, this one eventually got tedious. In the mid-1970s, I recall thinking I was getting tired of the scene. More likely, I was starting to grow up.

Side 3:

In 1980, an unseasonably warm day in early March compelled me to make a trip to the scene of my adolescence. I drove down to the West End, where, in the parking lot, I struck up a conversation with a red-haired girl driving a green Toyota. About a year and a half later, we were married.

She and I spent a lot of time at the beach. We'd meet after work, walk the shoreline or just plant a blanket in the dunes and stare out at the ocean. We talked a lot about how much we liked Jones Beach. In retrospect, we should have spent more time discussing what each of us wanted out of life. It turned out we wanted different things, and four

years later, we split up.

The morning she moved her stuff out of our apartment, I ran the Long Island Half Marathon, which was then run down Wantagh Parkway to Jones Beach. I remember pulling into Eisenhower Park, where the race started, and hearing the Beatles' "Golden Slumbers" on the car radio. It has that memorable opening line, "Once there was a way to get back homeward." The way home for me seemed clear: Straight down the Wantagh Parkway, accompanied by about 10,000 other runners, with the Jones Beach tower a glittering beacon in the distance. My wife had left, but Jones Beach still embraced me. We would go on to make more beautiful music together.

Side 4:

It's an early May morning in 2007, and the sun is starting to break through the mist that rolls up the parkway, shrouding the peak of the water tower.

I'm back at Jones Beach, happily remarried, and with a new band - this time a band of runners I've met over the past 10 to 15 years. Once a week, we meet at Field Six, the easternmost terminus of the boardwalk. The music we make is steady and upbeat - the rumbling of our footfalls as we head down the boardwalk at first light; the melody of early-morning conversations and laughter.

I know this place far better now than I did as a kid. On top of all the other occasions, I've been here as a reporter and as an author, researching the beach's history. I've heard many other Jones Beach voices and learned many other songs: The sea chanteys and Irish ballads that old Pirate Jones, the beach's namesake, probably hummed as he walked this desolate new land in the early 1700s; the Big Band songs couples danced to in the band shell in the 1940s; the echoes of Guy Lombardo and his orchestra from the theater on the bay.

Jones Beach State Park does not conduct demographic studies, but the perception among some is that young people don't go to the beach as much as in prior generations. I'm not sure that looks true on a mid-summer Saturday afternoon, but it's certainly evident this morning. At this hour, the dominant colors of the beach are the greenish tint of the water, the brightening blue of the sky, and the graying heads that parade down the boardwalk. Perhaps this is because we over-50s, the Baby Boomers, and our parents, are truly the Jones Beach Generations. We all grew up here - our parents in the 1930s and 1940s, when the beach was new; their children in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when it was at its peak.

We just keep coming back.

This morning, my friends and I run past the souvenir store where my grandfather got his jaunty cap 40 years ago; past the West Bathhouse pool, where I once swam. At the end of the boardwalk, we cut across the sand and continue down the road to West End 2.

I'm thinking now about my next Jones Beach album. It will be different yet again. We'll have some thunderous, high-flying guitar solos to reflect the sounds of the precision-flying military jets I marvel at during the air show every Memorial Day. Maybe we'll need to include some Christmas music, since part of my holiday ritual is to come here with my wife and son to see the light show.

On my next Jones Beach album, we also may have to break out acoustic guitars once again, to sing for the West End. In the past 20 years, this former teenage hangout has been allowed to be reclaimed by nature. The huge parking lot here is often empty; the songs no longer sung by Alice Cooper but now the piping plovers, whose nests along the shore and in the dunes are carefully protected.

At the lonely West End 2 concession building, my four friends and I turn around and run back. We pass walkers and a few early morning sunbathers. Like us, they have seen many mornings here at Jones Beach, heard many Jones Beach songs of their own.

Back at Field Six, we pull up to a finish. The waves crash along the shore. A seagull on the fence railing shrieks. The wind sighs.

It's still music to my ears.

Lives united by an uncommon strand

In the summer of 1971, 15-year-old Shari Friedman of Plainview had long, lustrous dark hair, wore tight bell-bottom jeans and hitchhiked to get around.

Her primary destination that summer was Jones Beach, where, in the shadow of the landmark water tower, she found a gaggle of like-minded teens. Kids who, as she says, "didn't belong to a clique" at their high schools.

The group got larger, eventually growing to more than 200. They called themselves "The Jones Beach Bums" and spent every summer day in the early and mid-1970s hanging out on the stairs by the Central Mall boardwalk. They strummed guitars, bummed for quarters, played games in the sand.

Eventually, they grew up. But many never lost their love for the beach, or each other.

"I'm still a Bum," says Ginger Bonner, one of the originals. Now 49 and living in Syosset, she visits Jones Beach almost daily. She walks there, watches the sunsets and reflects on life. "When I'm having a bad day, my first thought is still, 'I want to go to the beach.'"

The bond with the beach has inspired several reunions, most recently in 2001. After that last one, Friedman - now Sharyn Fuller - decided to create a Web site to help keep everyone in touch. The site (jonesbeachbums.com), which she launched in 2004, includes then-and-now photos of many prominent members (including one Bum who went on to become well-known rock guitarist Joe Satriani); a detailed history of the Bums; personal

recollections of their adventures and a message board. The 89 Bums in the Web site directory, most of them now in their 50s, stay in touch, reminisce and plan for their

next reunion, which will be Saturday, July 28.)

The Bums come for each other, but also to revisit the place that beckoned them. In many cases, their perspectives have changed with age. "Sharyn Fuller sees Jones Beach totally differently than Shari Friedman saw it," says Fuller, now 51 and living in Raleigh, N.C. "I never realized how big and beautiful it is." By comparison, she notes, "Myrtle Beach, which is a mecca in the South for teens, is so tiny, the sand almost totally disappears when the tide comes in."

For the Bums, the only thing that disappears when they're back at Jones Beach are the years. "I put my iPod on, and I walk on the boardwalk, and I stand right there on the stairs where we used to hang out," Bonner says. "It's just a place of peace, a place to clear my mind ... it's my home."

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