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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## What's the Long Island Sound?

By JIMMY L. WEBB

IS there a Long Island sound? I thought about that as my wife, Laura Savini, and I attended the first Long Island Music Hall of Fame induction in Patchogue last month.

I'm an Oklahoman new to Long Island. It's a fish-out-of-water situation brought about by my marriage to a WLIW vice president and my lifelong enchantment with the sea, a passion shared by Laura. We perch on a North Shore bluff in comfortable circumstances, not to imply that this Okie feels completely at home. I know whether I'm going east on the Northern State Parkway or west on the Southern. I know the North Fork from Southampton and that the S.O.B. is not a guy in the car behind me. But this is a long way from Oklahoma.

At the Patchogue Theater ceremony, I perused a list of inductees, looking for traces of a Long Island motif. Mose Allison, I read, emitting a low whistle upon recognizing one of my earliest and most potent songwriting influences. Then the cavalcade begins: Tony Bennett, Harry Chapin, Joan Jett, Billy Joel, Johnny Maestro and the Brooklyn Bridge, Little Anthony and the Imperials, Cyndi Lauper, Marian McPartland, Run-DMC, Neil Sedaka, Stray Cats, Twisted Sister, Vanilla Fudge. It's an embarrassment of riches for a single year's induction. But what makes it Long Island?

In Detroit, there was the cohesive and marketable Motown sound emanating from a back-street, one-room studio and blossoming into a whole school of interlocking artists and grooves, including outright phenomena like the young Stevie Wonder. Motown became a look, an attitude, an ambiance.

Chicago spawned the recognizable R&B stylings of Curtis Mayfield, establishing a salon whose influences, including inventive horn arrangements, reverberated down to "super groups" like Chicago and Earth, Wind and Fire.

In Los Angeles, there was the legendary "wrecking crew" — Hal Blaine, Joe Osborn, Larry Knechtel and Tommy Tedesco — who played on so many successful studio sessions in the 1960s and '70s that they actually created an L.A. sound, birthed by some of the most impressive musicianship around.

It should go without saying that there is a Nashville sound. Then there are countless subgenres, including the Muscle Shoals sound from Alabama, grunge out of Seattle and a saucy, shifty thing called the Minneapolis sound.

But what is the Long Island sound? If there is one, it's not so easily found. In Suffolk County, Sam "Bluzman" Taylor is the cornerstone of the well-established Long Island blues movement. But it would be stretching things to say Long Island is known for its blues.

Patchogue and Farmingdale have a history of producing gritty, hard-rock bands, but when we think of rock 'n'

roll do we immediately think Long Island? Probably not.

What about classical? The Chamber Players International, created in Sea Cliff, perform worldwide, and the Long Island Philharmonic, founded by Harry Chapin, plays with a skill and verve worthy of many larger metropolitan orchestras. Although classical players are attracted to “the light of city and sea,” as eloquently expressed by the Suffolk County poet laureate, Daniel Thomas Moran, the classical scene still struggles.

So where does that leave us? The list of Hall of Fame nominees for next year includes Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Walter Becker of Steely Dan, Pat Benatar, Blue Oyster Cult, Mariah Carey, Aaron Copland, Neil Diamond, Arlo Guthrie, Marvin Hamlisch, Carole King, Beverly Sills, the Ramones, Simon and Garfunkel and Barbra Streisand. Is this even possible? Could all these artists have come from or settled on Long Island? And what on earth do they have in common?

I think suddenly of Oklahoma, of the wizened, taciturn people of the prairie, of their toughness and the singularity of purpose that sometimes makes them seem aloof. I think of the unlikely list of famous musicians who hail from there — Chet Baker, Barney Kessel, Patti Page. There is something similar about these proud, self-reliant people. And, for me, they are one set of influences I can clearly trace. But American music is a rich tapestry, with influences from everywhere, including those you can't quite pin down.

At the Hall of Fame event, I suddenly realized I'm not really a stranger here on Long Island. I went over to Little Anthony and told him that had he not come first — he and the brilliant songwriter Teddy Randazzo — I wouldn't be here, either. I may not be able to put my finger on the Long Island sound, but whatever it is, it nourishes my own musical roots, mixed up with so much else.

At our little local post office one afternoon, the very nice woman behind the counter commented on an article that had appeared in that day's local paper. “Saw in the paper you're a songwriter,” she said without further comment.

I thought perhaps I should help the conversation along. “You know, I've been a songwriter since the age of 13, so it seems a natural thing to me,” I said. After a significant pause, she replied, “Well, there's nothing wrong with that.” Suddenly, I feel welcomed here, ready to add my voice to the lush texture of Long Island's musical cornucopia.

*Jimmy L. Webb is the author of hundreds of songs, including “By the Time I Get to Phoenix.”*

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