

OPINION

LYDIA POLGREEN

Why Is Everyone Suddenly Listening to a Staple of My Angsty Adolescence?

Aug. 8, 2023



Credit...Illustration by Sam Whitney/The New York Times

•



By [Lydia Polgreen](#)

Opinion Columnist and host of “Matter of Opinion”

As one might expect, the soundtrack of the delightful new “Barbie” movie is dominated by the jaunty beats and dulcet tones of some of the reigning queens of female power pop: Dua Lipa, Lizzo and Billie Eilish.

Then comes (spoiler alert) the pivotal scene where Barbie is leaving Barbie Land to go to the real world for a crucial mission. As she drives in her pink convertible on the road that leads out of her idealized candy-colored home and into the great unknown, she sings along at the top of her lungs to a song on the radio: “I went to the doctor. I went to the mountains./I looked to the children. I drank from the fountains,” accompanied by a cascade of acoustic guitar strumming. “There’s more than one answer to these questions/Pointing me in a crooked line./And the less I seek my source for some definitive,/Closer I am to fine.”

Yes, the leitmotif of the biggest movie of the year is a 34-year-old staple of my adolescence: the Indigo Girls’ “Closer to Fine.”

On one level, it should have startled me to discover this. The Indigo Girls are a pair of middle-aged lesbians, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, who have been friends singing together since they were kids in 1970s Atlanta. They make a good living as working musicians, touring regularly to delight a loyal fan base that certainly includes a lot of middle-aged lesbians (guilty as charged). But their music — songwriterly, acoustic-forward, aggressively emotional — hardly seems a good fit for our strange and cynical times. They are, as the kids would say, cringe.

Cringe: the ultimate insult of our era. It implies a kind of pathetic attachment to hope, to sincerity, to possibility. Cringe is not exclusively female; the musical “Hamilton,” written by a man, Lin-Manuel Miranda, is [definitely cringe](#). But in these hardened times, it implies a kind of naïveté that so often gets coded as feminine, a silly belief that human beings, through sincere effort, might actually improve themselves and the world. That things might, somehow, get better. Feminism? [Definitely cringe](#). And if feminism is

cringe, then lesbians are double cringe. And the Indigo Girls? We're talking cringe squared.

And yet I wasn't surprised that Greta Gerwig, the director of "Barbie," decided to put that song at the heart of her movie. Gerwig's music choices are always interesting, and she isn't shy about embracing big feels, cringe be damned. The Dave Matthews Band song "Crash Into Me," a beautiful and supercringey song, was central to her directorial breakout film, "Lady Bird."

I asked Gerwig why the Indigo Girls were in "Barbie." "The Indigo Girls were part of my growing up," she told me in an email. "'Closer to Fine' is just one of those songs that meets you where you are, wherever you are. It has spoken to me throughout my life, like a novel you revisit."

I can relate. Long before I saw "Barbie," the Indigo Girls, a staple of my angsty adolescence, had found their way back onto my regular playlists, pushing aside the hip-hop, modern rock and dance pop that usually feeds my earbuds. And it's not just me. Just about every person a decade or so on either side of 50 who I told that I was writing a column about the Indigo Girls over the past couple of months — long before the "Barbie" bomb exploded — responded with something to the effect of, "I love the Indigo Girls. It's funny you should mention them, because I've been listening to them a lot lately."

Gay, straight, men, women, race or creed — it really didn't matter. A straight male colleague who was born the same year as I was cooed about how much the band meant to him as a teenager growing up in Berkeley. (No surprise.) A straight female friend immediately remarked how the Indigo Girls have come back into her rotation as well. But none of them could quite tell me what drew them back to this music.

Listen to 'Matter of Opinion'

Music is, pace Proust, the most reliable engine of nostalgia. But I've never had much use for nostalgia, especially for my chaotic childhood. Nostalgia, it always seemed to me, required a sort of amnesia, a belief that things were somehow better in the gauzy past. But as I get older, I've come to see that nostalgia is not just about looking back at good times. It can also be a remembering of the exquisite pleasure of longing, of anticipation of the life you want so badly, of the self you will make of the materials you collect along the way.

The Indigo Girls first spoke to me in 1989, when their breakout self-titled album was released. Like a lot of Gen Xers, I had my musical tastes formed, for better or worse, by

the preferences of my boomer parents, a limited but rich aural diet of the LPs my parents happened to own — the astonishing cycle of Stevie Wonder albums from the early 1970s, “Blood on the Tracks,” Steely Dan, the Sugarhill Gang. And “Rumours,” obviously. Lots and lots of “Rumours.”

Then in the mid-1980s, I violently rejected their music in the early stirrings of adolescence, first for teeny-bopper crushes like George Michael and Terence Trent D’Arby, then graduated to the new stars of hip-hop (Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul) and finally to modern rock — R.E.M., the Sugarcubes and, above all, Jane’s Addiction, a Los Angeles postpunk band whose frontman, Perry Farrell, was angling to be my generation’s Jim Morrison.

In 1990 my life was abruptly turned upside down. We moved half a world away, to Ghana, where I knew not one single soul. I could bring only one suitcase, and somehow “Indigo Girls” was one of a handful of CDs that made the cut. I had a few of my other favorites, but for some reason, I kept reaching for that album. It became my companion in a lonely, strange and confusing time. As I’ve listened again, more than 30 years later, I realize that what these women were telling me was this: It was going to be OK. All the pain, the confusion, the loneliness — I’d figure it out. As the song says, “It’s only life, after all.”

The Indigo Girls had a big moment with that album. But they never got to be superstars. A toxic brew of equal parts misogyny and homophobia held them back. Maybe they are getting their retribution now. In addition to their central role in “Barbie,” the other major Indigo Girls event of 2023 was the release of a new documentary about their career, “It’s Only Life After All,” which screened at Sundance and Tribeca and generated some buzz and conversation.

The documentary features a string of videos that made me physically wince, including a 2005 “Saturday Night Live” sketch in which Rachel Dratch and Amy Poehler play Amy and Emily as a pair of insufferably earnest bores.

“If you guys had asked us to play on ‘Saturday Night Live’ and then you made fun of us, that would be OK,” Amy Ray says in the documentary. “But it hurts when it’s like, ‘You’re not going to get that opportunity, and you know why you are not going to get that opportunity. It’s ’cause you’re not cool.’”

Amy told me that they would have been game for some ribbing if they had been invited to perform on the show. But the musical guest that week was Sheryl Crow, who appears in the sketch.

There’s another song that gets played a few times in “Barbie,” the 1997 hit power ballad “Push” by Matchbox Twenty. It is Ken’s favorite song, and he serenades Barbie with it as he strums his guitar.

The song is the definition of cringe. But cheesiness hardly stunted Matchbox Twenty’s career. On Spotify, “Push” has been played more than 260 million times, more than five

times as many plays as for the Indigo Girls' biggest hit. There is something sweet in the roles being reversed in this movie; Matchbox Twenty — and by extension, its rock star frontman, Rob Thomas — is the butt of the joke.

I asked Tegan Quin, one of the twins in the queer pop duo Tegan and Sara, how the Indigo Girls reached her. She grew up in a house with a jukebox filled with CDs by female singers — Sinead O'Connor, Shawn Colvin, Tracy Chapman and, of course, the Indigo Girls.

“My mom was in her 30s, and she was having sort of like a second wave of intense independence and feminism,” Tegan told me. “She had just left my stepdad and got really into social justice and all that. Our friends used to joke that my mom was trying to make us gay, and clearly it worked. I’ve just spent 20 years watching their career and thinking so profoundly about how to model what we do after them. The longevity and, like, connection to their audience and how their songwriting continues to evolve. Like, all of that now is a model for us.”

For all our current troubles, we live in a world in which one of the most acclaimed supergroups of our time, [Boygenius](#), is made up of a bunch of queer women who write songs about their feelings. The singer and songwriter [Brandi Carlile](#) has credited them as paving a path for her to have a huge career in music as an out lesbian.

My wife said to me the other day that you know a song is great if singing it

makes you feel you can actually sing. Neither of us can carry a tune. But I knew right away what she meant.

Songs change us, but we change them, too. There is a chemical reaction that happens; the DNA of the song fuses with your chromosomes and becomes something new. To be able to sing it — to make it your own — is to fuse it with yourself.

I asked Amy and Emily about this.

“The songs that I grew up loving, they’re not just something I listened to — they became, you know, cellular,” Emily said. “They encoded life events that became memories. I’m sure it boils down to physics in some way, but it feels quite mystical to me. There are so many songs I would have changed the way I wrote that line or I could have made it a better song, in terms of how I think about crafting a song. But in the end, it doesn’t really matter.”

We live in dangerous, frightening times. We’ve been through a pandemic and stared down a global recession. Rights that seemed secure — to control our bodies, to marry whom we love, to vote — are under attack. We’re once again reminded of the ever-

present threat of nuclear war and confrontation with China. It's likely the hottest summer in [recorded history](#). You can respond to these circumstances with fatalistic cynicism. Or you can meet them with a sense of possibility, grounded in reality, loosely tethered to something like hope.

To me, this is what the Indigo Girls are all about. Sincerity coupled with wisdom, which is a recipe for something durable: solidarity. A sense that we are in this together. The Indigo Girls are great. Cringe but true. That's because the kernel of who we are is cringe. That is what it means to be open to the world. To be open to the possibility of a future different from who you are now. When we are young, we feel that way because we don't know any better. Eventually you get to a place where you know all the ways it can go wrong and feel open anyway. Like Barbie, we choose to live our flawed, messy, human lives.

As the song goes, "It's only life, after all."