



In the first winter of the pandemic, a friend of mine gathered a small group of mutual musicians friends for a dinner party via video call. She missed live music; venues had been shut down for a year already. This call gave us a chance to share what we were ~~was~~ working on and experience some form of performance again.

At the time I was starting my foray into 1920s and 30s pop music. I had an idea for a project where each year I'd learn and record a few songs that had just been released into the public domain. I was working through 1925 and had Irving Berlin's "Remember" freshly (if roughly) memorized.

This would end up being the last time I played music for my friend Joni Sadler, who was in attendance, and who died of a brain aneurysm the next year.

We often get to choose the things that we want to be significant-- wedding dates, pet names, gifts. Other times, life-changing events land without warning, and suddenly a lot of meaning falls upon objects that were never meant to bear them. It feels strangely unfair, like they have not earned their significance.

Joni phoned me four days before she died. She had just finished a diploma from Concordia in web development and we talked about early career moves. I don't remember my last words spoken to her. My last text message was a joke about LinkedIn.

And the last song I will ever have played for her is "Remember", a lovelorn ballad that Irving Berlin wrote on a trip apart from his fiancée. It's as sweet and sincere as his best, but the lyrics are a bit clumsy and the arrangement lacks the flourish that characterizes his better works. It has largely been forgotten in Berlin's massive oeuvre. It is what it is, and it's the last song I played for Joni.

In exploring Berlin's life and work I learned that he was no stranger to tragedy. In 1912 he married his first wife, Dorothy. He was 23 years old, and she was 20. She contracted typhoid fever on their honeymoon and died five months later.

Berlin up to that point was famous for his upbeat tunes that capitalized on dance crazes. After some time away from songwriting, he returned with "When I Lost You", a slow lament of love and loss, devastating in its starkness and simplicity. There is no narrative arc, no wordplay, no lessons or resolutions. Sometimes the most significant things have no meaning, and a great loss leaves only an equal emptiness.

Lucas/Hsien
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"Remember"

"When I Lost You"

Written by Irving Berlin

Performed & recorded by Hsien

Mixed by Ky Brooks

Mastered by Markus Lake

Photographs from Bain News Service, photographers unknown, public domain

Typewritten by Nathan Medema

Thanks to Jessica Brown & Amy Macdonald

