

# Take Us to your Conductor

“Dum tedum tedum tedum tedum tedum tedia daa, dum tedum tedum tedum tedum tediddly dee. Dum tediddly dum tediddly dum tediddly dee, dum tedum tedum tedum tedum tediddly dee.”

So they heard, scanning the skies one night. And so they came.

They had been listening for intelligent life for quite some time and were now listening to the first awakenings of a culture that had invented radio. The signals were emanating from a distant part of the sky. They were not alone. There was intelligent life out there.

It did not take long to put a band together for the trip. All the while, more complex and varied signals were being heard on these radio frequencies. This was a culture with a deep and varied history.

The band selected for the mission would not have long to wait before they met the alien race. They had recently developed ships that were able to travel at a high sub-harmonic of the frequency of light. Years passed on the trip, but not many, and they were patient. While they travelled at near light speed, they were unable to communicate with home or to listen to more of the signals from the newly discovered civilization.

They dropped out of sub-optical speed near the star where the sounds were coming from, and waited, listening, somewhere above the ecliptic near the third gravitational harmonic. The third harmonic itself was caused by a blue and white sphere, a planet much like their own.

They listened and they learned.

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The sphere itself was like this: as the planet turned it revealed land masses one by one. Some high notes introduced the treble for the first movement, which was soon accompanied by its bass part. When this ended and after some small treble intermezzos, in came the treble of the second movement, accompanied by a solid bass. The Second Movement Treble was sustained for a long time, intricate descants and the odd bass passage accompanying it until it faded out in a series of high notes and First Treble was introduced again.

This was the day, and this was the sound of the day, the shape of the world.

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There were now many more radio signals, at different frequencies. Many were accompanied by other sounds. There were some sort of scratching sounds; indeed some radio signals consisted only of these mysterious sounds, a sort of animal vocalization. Some times these sounds were set to music, so that gradually they were able to interpret the many ways these sounds were used to convey meaning. The music itself was considerably more varied, all these decades on, than the first lonely signals they had heard. The original tune was still there, emanating from time to time from a small passage in the upper scales of the Second Movement.

They listened and they learned as the world told its story.

The story that it told was of the sweep of history, of empires cascading and fading, harmony and disharmony as movements came and went. Sometimes they could glimpse something of the world from its music: the great gates of some ancient city; the sounds of a market waking to the dawn.

Following the world as it turned, they listened to the music of the peoples of that world. In the Second Treble movement was a mix and a layering of sounds; instruments and orchestras, strings and drums telling of a deep and turbulent history. Middle passages told of histories ancient, of distant gods of chaos and order, the sounds of many-handed dancing. Turning further were old and timeless musics of a middle Kingdom, scales in strings and wind harking back the ages. A separate, bass part of this Second Movement brought the sounds and harmonies of the earlier Second Treble, strangely displaced with, shining through it like a thin shining line, a memory of a dream time.

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It was clear that some of what they were hearing was of the here and now with, in amongst this, the music of the past. They were hearing things in no particular order, here a song or a dance, there a complete opus, more orchestrated. It took some time to see how they all fitted together, tracing and tracking the references and influences back and forth from one piece to another in this ongoing global conversation.

The earlier influences seemed to come mostly from what they saw as the Second Movement geographically. There were words for the parts of this movement, in the scratchy noises they called language. Sounds like europa and asia for the treble parts, and africa for the initial strong bass part of that movement. The upper parts of that movement continued on long after the bass part ended, a complex and ancient music, the deep tonality of empires come and gone, running as a silken banner across the lower reaches of that treble part, that europe and asia.

In the early passages of the one called europe there had been a silent age for a thousand years or more, harmony and proportion stilled by the flat chanting of some theopathology that took the region for a time, while life went on to the south and east until, finally, someone appeared to hear a snatch of something from the landmass called africa, a place where music and harmony continued timeless and articulate. This was a genius called bark or bach – they later found these were the same individual, spoken of differently by different speakers of the scratchy noises of language. The music developed and deepened, from classic lines of symmetry to more baroque patterns. As the music took hold and spread across that Second Treble landmass called europe, so came progress and movement, constructions and harmony, a march of technology that finally accounted for the appearance of those radio signals.

At some point one of the stringed instruments from one corner of this movement, something of that music of the middle empires, was picked up and spread across all parts of europe and beyond, for songs and for dances. They called it guitar. Someone electrified it. From here things seemed to develop quickly, the new radio making it easier for influences to pass back and forth between the old world and the First Movement, what they called america; a new world.

In america the music reached a crescendo, a result of flights and migrations, explorations and optimisms, people bringing with them the dances and jigs of old europe and its islands, woodwind

echoes of the older cultures of the americas sounding between the clefs, old world strings meeting new world wind and voices, a reimaging of an old empire they called latin, brass instruments and the borrowed strings of that guitar. Voices from the Second Bass movement they called africa were added, singing funeral songs as they came. Other stories continued and grew, cabaret and swing, big band sounds as wars took place. African harmonies meeting fiddles and guitars adopted and adapted, movements in twelve bars bringing old stories and aiding in the telling of the new. These sounds came together to make the blues, jazz and newer fusions with the music of the country, fiddles and plucked strings, different communities reaching out into one another's sounds, steel drums and back beats, wind in metal or wood. The world rocked to the sound, the movement rolled on.

Back in the Old World, in an island passage, something call the Fab Four (four of what was unclear) brought those rich american sounds together with their local skiffle style to lay the foundations of a long musical conversation that echoed to and fro between these regions and beyond, rock and metal borrowing from reggae and ska, feeding into later innovations in techno, house and the sampled innovations of something variously called rap and hiphop in which, finally, the scratchy sounds of language were brought more fully into the conversation. Radio introduced the world back to itself: Township jazz, Fado, Reggae, African and Celtic connections coming together more intimately than before.

So in America, where the sounds of the old world hung heavy in the air, the swell of destiny carried the music across the continental divide until finally there was no more last frontier. And so they landed.

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They came down by Old Highway 80 near the Mexican border, a discordant line of high metallic staves scoring the landscape. There was little traffic. On a small dusty piece of ground next to the highway, in the middle of the afternoon, their strange craft shuffled down, displaced some dust for a beat or two, and settled into silence.

Something opened. Something else came out, hesitantly at first. It stepped away a little. It sampled the air, listening or sniffing or both. After some moments, it trumpeted.

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“Did you hear that Elmer?”

“What?”, patiently.

“A sort of hooting sound. It came from over there,” she pointed.

Elmer Hammond and his wife were driving west along Old US80, taking a gentle detour from the long Interstate journey for the last little stretch towards San Diego, heading home to Valhalla, a small township just this side of the city.

Elmer looked off to his right. There was certainly something there. A commotion, a shuffling. Noise. Some shapes. Hard to make out.

“Elmer stop stop!” cried Louise.

Elmer swung the car off into the dust at the side of the road. He stopped the engine, got out stiffly. Louise opened her door and looked out.

“What are they?” she said. She got out, putting on a straw sun hat.

They were an indistinct group of shapes. All different, it was hard to tell where one ended and another began. Protruding here and there were odd pieces, tubes and long necks with strings along them. Here and there something like a trumpet end stood out. Behind them something shimmered in the heat.

There was a sort of tuning up noise. From something came a clearer sound, directed seemingly at Louise and Elmer as they stood looking.

“What was that?” murmured Louise.

The sound came again. It was a series of twangs and tweets, hooting and whistling. Now they could make out what might be words, sounded through the instrumental music like something from a children’s TV show, like Sparky the Magic Piano from their childhoods.

“Take ... Us . tooo Your .... conDUctor”

“Say what?” said Elmer, “Take you to who?”

Again, with more bass: “Take Us too, your condUctor...”. High harmonics hung in the air.

“They’re saying take us to your Conductor,” said Louise.

“I guess they mean Take us to your Leader,” said Elmer. “OK, so who do we take them to? Where do we go now? These must be aliens or something.”

Just then the Sherriff drove up, crunched off into the gravel.

“Everything alright here?” he asked, before looking up the curious shapes ranged in the sun a little further away from the road. “What are those?”

“Aliens, we think,” said Elmer.

The Sherriff, a white man of slightly grizzled middle age boggled. “Aliens, you say?”

“Seems to be. Want us to take them to our leader or something.”

“ConduUctor” sang the aliens. “Take Us toOOo your condUctor.”

“Right,” said the Sherriff. “I see”. He got out his radio, started talking into it. “Yes. ... Aliens. ... No, the other kind. From space ... Yes really. Kind of musical sound they make. ... No, not Close Encounters. More like a kind of band. ... Yes, US80, about 2 miles out of town. ... OK, see you then”.

While the Sherriff was on the radio Louise started to hum to herself. After a minute or so something strange happened. The aliens started to join in. Quietly at first, they took something from what she hummed, added some parts and harmonies, sang some of her tune back in antiphony. An acapella of parts. Deeper strings came in, a bass and some rhythm. Elmer started to whistle. The piece developed, rounds and roundelay, strings and drums, Elmer whistling a jazz riff. The Sherriff came off the radio, started to clap to the beat.

No one wanted to stop. Louise, Elmer and the Sherriff, not quite understanding what was happening but feeling it was important, continued to hum and whistle, clap and tappity tap on the trunk of the Sherriff car. Parts of country music, echoes of the long road, a beat and song of the American South, of nearby Mexico just over the hill; rock and roots. Round and along, up and down the scales, in parts and harmonies of a range of music, given and echoed, human and alien, the hills were alive with the sound of it.

The Sheriff's deputy pulled up.

"What's going on?" he asked, taking in the couple by the car, the Sherriff, the band-shaped group in the sun. The music faltered to a halt.

"These aliens," said the Sherriff redundantly. "Want us to take them to our conductor. Leader I guess. No idea what the protocol is for that".

The Deputy was a younger man, thirty something with a buzz cut and a stiff demeanor.

"We should take them to the Navy Base in San Diego," he said. "They will have some process to follow. For this kind of thing," he added, uncertainly.

It was starting to get late. So they decided to make a start in the morning. The Sherriff stepped up to the group and explained as best as he could that they should wait here and they would see about introducing them to their leader, their conductor, in the morning. Elmer and Louise arranged to join them and booked into a room in a small motel in the town for the night. It took all three of them to say and sing this in various ways before they were sure the aliens understood. The Deputy did not join in.

There was no music in him.

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The next morning they gathered back at the same spot. There was no sign of the Deputy. The aliens were gathered in a loose group by their craft, a sort of scratch band shuffling impatiently and playing little snatches on the theme of 'Take us to your Conductor'. After an hour or so the Sherriff decided that for whatever reason the Deputy wasn't coming.

"Perhaps we should forget about taking them to the Navy. I mean, I'm sure it would be fine but they really want to be taken directly to our leader. I don't think they would react well if we start heading off in the opposite direction," he suggested.

Louise and Elmer both agreed. After some phoning around, the Sherriff was able to arrange for the school bus and its driver to take them on the road, along with some supplies for the first part of the journey.

And so they set off across America, this motley bus of indistinct, band-shaped beings, their human guides Elmer and Louise and a cheerful bus driver called Clarence, to take them to Washington DC and to their Leader. Conductor.

They took Old Highway 80 at first, joining the Interstate to cross the desert by Calexico, down Mexico way. And so, sometimes by Interstates and sometimes on the more leisurely US highways with their traffic lights and shopping malls they went to look for America.

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They crossed California, and came to Tucson Arizona, where Louise and Elmer had relatives. Here they made a plan.

Some friends of Elmer's had a little band that would play various venues. They told their friends they were travelling with a band, touring America, and would they like to play with them?

So they introduced their new friends, these indistinct but clearly musician figures. A small cohort of them shuffled off the bus to join the band as they played at a function, outdoors at a little restaurant somewhere. They taught and they learned, exchanging notes and jamming ideas into the warm night air.

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Elmer had an idea. They were staying with his cousin just outside of Tucson. The cousin had a bunch of sound equipment – things called effects pedals, that let you program in various sound effects such as echoes, reverberations, things with names like chorus and flange, all controlled by pedals. Chatting over a beer in the cousin's basement, Elmer was describing how he had started whistling along with the aliens on that first day, how he, who had never played a musical instrument in his life, was able to whistle along and join in with the music, to be part of it. What if you could take a whistling sound, which was after all a reasonably pure sound wave (in technical terms, a sine wave), and run it through some of those effects pedals?

Elmer and his cousin experimented for most of the night. It turned out you could get a good, fat sound by combing some reverb with a flange or a chorus effect – these were both effects that took the simple sound that came in and replicated it several times, slightly changing the phase or the timing each time so that it sounded like a chorus of whatever it was that came in (or indeed a flange, whatever those are). Using a good quality mic and a pop filter – a little circular shield to get rid of any breathing and spitting noises – Elmer was able to hold a pretty good tune. With some practice he could whistle inwards as well as outwards and was able to control the starts and ends of the notes with some neat tonguing techniques. He was a musician now, able to join in not only with these musical conversations they often had with the 'band', where they were increasingly confident that they could understand and be understood, but also with the other musicians as they played various venues. With the addition of a looper pedal he was even able to start playing with harmonies.

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After a night or two staying with Elmer's cousin and playing with the band it was time to be moving on, on their road trip to meet their 'Conductor'. They knew this would be someone quite special. Even the name they gave for him was the sound made by one of their instruments, a loud brass note.

Someone in the band knew another musician further along towards El Paso who was doing a gig over the next couple of days and so they phoned ahead, recommending these curious new musicians to them.

From El Paso they headed on across Texas and followed the Red River to Texarkana. Clarence sang *a capella* and started to converse with the group on the basics of the sol fa system. He also knew other musicians, jazz singers and choir groups to connect with along the long road.

The US Highways system was laid out before them like a musical score as they followed the music, busking here and playing with a band there, finding the next music, the next venue. They went largely unremarked, even though they were hard to make out, to distinguish where one began and the other ended.

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Most of America is not the place you see on TV and in the movies, that amalgam of Californian desert and Vancouver city streets. America is like this: you drive along a roadscape of retail; a continuum of parking lots ringed by outlets for donuts and coffee, clothes, tires, drive through food of every sort, coffee again and back to donuts. Like a Tom and Jerry cartoon the scenery repeats itself. As you tune into this roadscape you start to see where the retail parks are new, where they have been there for a while, and by the smaller towns, places that resonate with an older America, an America of the fifties and sixties, of those old cartoons. The time fades in and out as money grows and fades with the fortunes of each town and suburb, outlying townships and city centers.

This was the rhythm of the road.

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They travelled and they listened. They listened and they learned, and they watched, putting sight to sound, learning more of this strange world and where its songs came from. The brass-rendered sounds of the old Second Bass world mixed with sounds and ideas from the Second movement and the First. They played and they sang, *a capella* and Gospel, Cajun fiddle and that old story in twelve bars.

In Louisiana they sang with a Gospel choir, deep harmonies mixed with sadness and those sounds of the old africa they were hearing so much.

The Conductor must be someone really special to preside over all of this.

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One evening, in a motel somewhere outside of Little Rock, Arkansas, Louise had an interesting experience.

Louise liked to meditate. Years ago she had gone on a weekend course in self-hypnosis, and she was able to put herself into a deeply relaxed state. On this particular evening she was in the motel room, Elmer had gone out with Clarence for a beer and the 'band' were in the bus doing whatever they did at night. Louise put on some headphones, selected some Western Swing from a band they had played with in Texas and put herself into a light state of hypnosis.

As she listened to the sound of the band she let her mind play games with the music, making shapes and lines, colors and swirling and things that in the end were nothing like visual things but seemed to exist in the same state, the same depths and complexities as vision. Sometimes there were bars in the music, like bars of a cage imprisoning and releasing the shapes and sounds of the song. There were shapes and shadows, high thin lines where a note was sustained, complex structures holding the works together, shifting and shaping the compositions.

Each track brought its own shapes and colors and textures, things which if she tried to describe them in words she could not; they were not quite like things you would see but if she relaxed and just let the music happen there it was, like a new sense. Hearing in color.

When she finally came out of her hypnotic state, Louise turned on the radio. Right away there was an extraordinary piece of music, colors and depths and things she had never heard before, until the vocalist came in and she realized this was a song she had heard hundreds of times before, something by Cliff Richard, whom she had never paid much attention to. So it was with the next song and the next. Louise was hearing music, where before she heard only tunes.

With this new sense Louise was able to listen to artists she had heard before and admire the depths and the textures of their work. The new sense did not wear off; perhaps it never would. The most striking effects she could sense were in numbers by Elvis, by Van Morrison, the Beatles and a few others. She tried to explain this to Elmer when he came in, but it was hard to explain how you could hear things in color, how there were things in sound that she had never heard, sights unseen in the music of the everyday. What she did notice was that the conversations they had with the aliens, that they had started on that strange day down by Old Highway 80, were a lot clearer now. The aliens were making things like colors and shapes all along, she just hadn't 'seen' them.

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They followed the shining Mississippi until they came to Graceland. Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee was where one they called Elvis had brought together so many of the different sounds of this world, adapting sounds from africa to a wider audience, mixing it with the sounds of old world europe to make a new american sound. Someone said that Elvis wasn't dead, which was obvious. It seemed that these creatures put a strange emphasis on biological life, on individuality.

The creatures of this world carried most of their music outside of themselves in separate contraptions and boxes, putting them somewhere else when they slept or ate, apart from their vocal and whistling parts. In a place they called Music City, or in their language 'Nashville', there were many of the creatures carrying these musical instruments, and many places where they played. The band joined in at several venues, covering a range of musical styles from country to gospel and many things in between.

The Conductor was not here. There was further to go. They continued following the score laid out in the highways, note by note to the crescendo where the Conductor would surely be.

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After dropping down to Chattanooga for an evening of blues they headed up the Shenandoah Valley, following the Blue Ridge Mountains on into Virginia.

Across Virginia on US 50, past horse farms and stone villages, onto Route 66 and the confluence of more of those rhythmic retail repetitions they came in their little yellow bus, across the Key bridge and into a city that, they could see right away, was built upon lines of pure harmony, geometry etched into the land to make what was indisputably the Capital of this nation.

Somewhere a train hooted, a long, mournful, lonesome sound redolent of the wide-open spaces of the distant West, strange cadences in the built-up city.

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“Anyone know where to find the White House?” asked Clarence.

“I don’t know. Pennsylvania Avenue. I guess we find that. Not sure which side it’s on,” said Elmer.

They found Pennsylvania Avenue and drove down it for a way.

Here the geometry of this capital city seemed to come to a focus, some center of gravity pulling the lines and angles to itself. This was surely where the Conductor lived. The road they were on came to a seeming end.

“What?” said Clarence.

“I dunno,” said Elmer, “Try right.”

Turning right, they were at the G Street, dropped to F Street, then another semitone took them to the E street. On their left was a gateway, heavily armored and protected. The bus swung in and stopped. There were conversations in that scratchy language sound that these creatures made. Louise and Elmer spoke to some individuals that carried what looked like instruments but were not musical, urgently explaining that they needed to talk to the Conductor in Chief. This was most irregular, apparently. Finally, with a squawking sound on a small radio that one of them was carrying, the order came to show them in.

They showed them past a rose garden and on into an office that was oval. There stood an individual, odd blue patches around his eyes and a sort of mane on his head. This was the one they called their Conductor.

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Buzz stood against the wall of the Oval Office, his colleague Ray across the room as they both remained alert for possible dangers. Neither of them approved this idea of bringing in this crowd of aliens, whatever they were. You could not tell where any individual one began or ended and all the stringed sticks and tubing sticking out them could have hidden pretty much anything. But POTUS had insisted.

“Welcome, welcome!” said the President. “Have you come far? So great to have you here, so great. So great. We have a moon, you know. And Mars. We are a space-faring nation now. We are going to Mars. We have Space too. So much space. I know Space. Do you know Mars? There is so much space out there you know. There is no wind. Literally nothing. Lots and lots of it. The biggest.”

There was no music in him.

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The front of this one’s head was made up of a single resonant cavity of bone, just like most of the creatures on this world. They tuned and measured, measured and pointed and focused. It did not take long to find the resonant frequencies of the bone cavity in each of three dimensions. They found the frequencies, focused around that bone cavity and scaled up the volume from a low hum until the whole room seemed transfixed on the singing bone behind the large wooden desk. There was a noise, a sort of

squelch, and the sound stopped. Red fluid appeared around the supposed Conductor's eyes as he toppled face first onto the desk.

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POTUS was down! Shitshitshit! Buzz, standing against the wall of the Oval Office raised his service pistol in a two-handed grip and pointed it in the direction of the motley-shaped group and the three more obvious humans who had come with them, an old white couple and a black man of indeterminate age. It was hard to tell where within this shapeless group the threat was coming from. He fired once but nothing much happened, just a wheezing sound like an accordion going down. Nothing fired back.

This was bad, but somehow not as bad as thinking POTUS was in danger and that he needed to take a bullet for him. Also there was some way in which all those old movies and TV shows in which the President of the USA was some magical figure, the hopes and authority of a Nation vested in him, didn't seem to apply. That was the thinking of a lost era, one that had ended a few short years ago. Also he was already dead. Buzz's priority now was to protect the VP, who was now effectively POTUS. If he was awake.

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There was another character in the room, sitting back in a chair, arms crossed and eyes partly closed. This one had very short white hair on a head on which not a single feature or hair could somehow ever be out of place. If you put a bag over his head and pulled it off again he would still look exactly the same.

There was no music in him.

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There was that sound again, a very slightly different note and focused on a different part of the room. The VP keeled over sideways in his chair, blood gently pooling on the carpet to one side where it was coming out of an ear. Buzz waved the pistol at the group again, realizing that there was no obvious way for these aliens to know he posed a threat to them and wondering what would happen if they figured it out this time.

"Sing!" said the old white lady, beseechingly at him.

"She's right" said the Black guy who was with them, "Make some sort of music. Anything. Make sure they know you can hear and make music."

Buzz started to hum gently, swaying slightly in time to the music coming from the alien group, which had gone back to a more harmonious sound now. Across the room Ray was doing the same, shoulders gently rocking with the beat. The music now was a 'Hi ho' sort of song, a song of getting on with things, of soaring heights and new beginnings. A song of cleaning things out.

It was hard to account for what happened next. The security detail's next priority was to get to the Speaker, who was next in the succession and therefore now POTUS. And hope she could sing. Buzz radioed on ahead, passing on the word to the rest of the security detail that the Speaker was now the President and that they were on their way to the Capitol Building. The people hearing the message found it odd that he seemed to be reporting all this in song.

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They processed to the Capitol Building, the motley band of musicians and their human accompaniment, everyone caught up in the music as they danced along the broad sidewalks of Pennsylvania Avenue, crossing a parking lot, up some broad steps and into the Capitol building. In the House, Representatives took up the song, the Congressional Black Caucus providing a sustaining harmony. Some Representatives from both parties fell silent, perhaps more from the Republican side but by no means all, and in any case party affiliation didn't seem to matter anymore as any future business of the house would be conducted in song.

People across the whole nation had tuned into C-Span, the major news networks all switching to the Government TV feed, and so the music caught and spread. The world tuned in and tuned up, joining and swelling the new music as it resonated across the globe.

In the weeks and years that followed, House business was conducted in music, disharmonies reflecting where there was disagreement, the tune going round and around until harmonious solutions were found for the issues of the day.

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The world turned onward. Much was like before but the map was in a different key. Every day brought a new chorus.

Wall Street was first to adapt, international financial markets being set to music while investors reacted to rising and falling cascades of sound, placing orders on black and white keyboards. In Kasese, Western Uganda, a schoolteacher started to corner a large part of the financial markets, accompanied by the choir of the Humanist school where he taught, bringing much-needed inward investment to the region.

The world turned on and tuned in. Business found new harmony as notes were exchanged across finance, manufacturing, supply chains and all the rich diversity of human commerce.

Engineers sang the blueprints. In Kazakhstan a site engineer whistled a jazz improv for a full set of 'As built' drawings for a gas processing installation. Things were orchestrated and harmonized even as the world changed beyond recognition.

In British Columbia, at the end of the long Pacific Railroad, the End of the Line blues jam had been meeting for years, long-distance cargo wagons passing to and fro in the marshalling yard a few feet behind the stage, outside the broad windows of the pub. Now the band orchestrated the wagons, containers, wagons of grain, oil and other things, each with its own instrumental accompaniment marshalled in a different key for each destination.

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Clarence, Louise and Elmer were much in demand, showing people how to find their inner music, how to express it in song or whistling or in new instruments, and how to live in harmony as they taught the world to sing.

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Their opus completed, the band got back in their craft and headed back to their home planet, humming a little tune as they went.