

UNCATEGORIZED

# The America of Small Things

## “A Song for You”\*

July 8, 2019



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### WEEK OF JULY 24

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I don't watch TV. I don't know what anyone in any official circles did for the birthday bash of my adoptive country. Having grown up in communist Romania where the national holiday (August 23) always meant interrupted vacations, obligatory marching in overpowering heat, dressing in pressed uniforms, trying to hold your pee while in formation for hours, and so many other memories of state control, I don't do parades.

But I love to celebrate all those things that make the United States the place I love. Most of those “things” are the people in their beautiful diversity, with their words, looks, and especially songs. My family and I spent a good part of the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday week with dear friends, playing American music: Bob Dylan, Lester Flatt, Jerry Garcia, Elizabeth Cotten, Willie Nelson, Maybelle Carter, Townes van Zandt. Coming together around a song, bringing your energy to it and sharing with others in the joy of music — what is more American than that? Going around in a circle and inviting everyone to pick, lead, and follow. What is more American than that? Bringing shakers, cowbells, other noise makers and lyrics to encourage everyone to participate, any way they can. What is more American than that?

In 1892 Antonín Dvořák moved to the United States and wanted to show his love for this place by writing his *New World* symphony. What he wished to honor was especially the traditional music that has inspired so many of the people mentioned above. In his case, African American oral musical tradition was a strong inspiration and he believed it expressed what was most original about the

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culture of the United States. Because, what is more American than Miles Davis? What is more American than Duke Ellington? What is more American than Nina Simone? Or Ray Charles? Or Jimmy Hendrix?

Two weeks ago I was in Europe visiting Angers, Paris, Barcelona, and Madrid. All these cities were culturally familiar: great art, wonderful food, beautiful buildings and parks, elegant people. But I felt like something was missing in all these places. To me, the sound of a summer evening is the sound of New Orleans' Frenchmen Street around 11 p.m., when the horns and lively drum beat of a second line get your feet moving, compelling you to dance and be filled with joy. The street musicians I heard in Europe happened to be, ironically, from Romania. I loved to see these Roma men dig into whatever tune they thought their audience wanted to hear. They were very good! But none of their renditions of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" or "Rock Around the Clock" hit my heart the way I feel here. They just made me feel homesick. For my adoptive home.

\*With apologies to Leon Russell for stealing his title.

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