

# That '20s Show

by BROCK WEIR

It's always a jarring feeling when 'your' past ' in this case, our collective past ' comes back to' haunt us? No, not necessarily. Rehashed? Maybe. Romanticized? Perhaps.

This past weekend, I was in Toronto on my way to an event when I stopped to get a little extra dose of caffeine ' it was an early morning and every little bit helped ' but was stopped in my tracks.

Before me was a bus shelter with a huge poster advertising a local radio station.

'Your favourite throwbacks!?' was the gist of a slogan, placed in graphic harmony below a portrait of Britney Spears.

What stopped me was not the larger-than-life image of the Toxic singer, which is not necessarily the first thing you expect to see when you round a busy city streetcorner; instead, it was the description that caught my eye.

'Throwback?!' I thought, as if it hasn't been a quarter of a century since Spears came out with ??Baby One More Time.?

But throwback indeed ' 1998 doesn't seem like that long ago in my mind's eye, yet the quarter-century span can't be denied.

Then it hit me, as it does for everybody once they pass the big three-oh (and, in the interests of full disclosure, I'm well past that benchmark), that my formative years are now somebody's nostalgia.

Somehow, it never occurred to me that our generation would be looked at nostalgically.

This, coming from someone who grew up watching That 70s Show in the late 90s to the mid-2000s, a sitcom which certainly looked somewhat wistfully at that decade through rose-coloured glasses. Midway through the run of the show, the television gods graced us with That '80s Show. While I never watched this particular program, it should have been a sure-fire sign that nostalgia was marching in my general direction ' but, apparently, I was blissfully oblivious.

The return of fashions that were, for better or worse, the hallmark of my elementary and early high school years didn't go unnoticed, but maybe it just went unprocessed; as did the reboots of '90s sitcoms, a rehash of garish graphics and colours (think the opening theme for Saved by the Bell) of the decade, and the very much lamented return of the mullet.

What plugged me back into a reality I have been wilfully ignoring? All it took was Britney Spears, I guess!

As I considered this reality, I finally plugged myself into on the walk to the annual Fan Expo Canada, an event that is never anything short of eclectic. It hit me: As much as I might be considered a 90s kid, I wasn't really.

Although I hate the expression of being an 'old soul' as, to my mind, it brings to mind images of Miss Havisham or Dorian Gray, I never really jived with my peers as far as pop culture and fads were concerned.

Trying to keep a Tamagotchi or Furby alive never seemed like the best use of my time. Heck, instead of cold, hard cash, the Tooth Fairy left packets of I Love Lucy trading cards under my pillow, at my request.

While I always threw R.L. Stein's latest Goosebumps offering into my Scholastic book order just to seem 'with it?', without really knowing what 'with it?' was, the bulk of the shipment was historical fiction.

I might have been bitten by Spice Girls fever at its zenith, but, if I'm honest with myself, as far as music is concerned, the late 90s renaissances of Tina Turner, Tony Bennett and Cher were more my jam at the time.

So, while most of my peers in 1998 were living in, well, 1998, my heart and soul was somewhere between 1957 and 1981. That's not necessarily a problem in retrospect, but when you can't converse with your friends and peers on the what's hot on the big screen, small screen, and the Top 40, it can leave you feeling slightly apart, even alone, amongst peers.

How I wish I had the chance to visit an event like Fan Expo Canada in my youth.

If you're not familiar with Fan Expos and Comic-Cons, think of it as a clash of pop-cultures that somehow come together as a harmonious whole.

From celebrations related to classic films, to superheroes, to your favourite horror movie slashers, there is something for everyone and just about every interest, niche and ?fandom? is well represented through events, gatherings, the presence of celebrities and more.

It's reasonably organized chaos.

People of all ages and backgrounds attend each year to celebrate not just the ?fandoms? but each other and themselves ? and the beautiful quirkiness they might not be able to exercise in very many other venues.

Many attend in simple street clothes, but some of the more enthusiastic don the most elaborate of costumes paying tribute to the characters and genres they love. They attend as individuals, in friend groups of similar interests, and families in coordinated costumes ? all celebrating their interests and their passions, and even making new friends along the way.

There's no judgment, no criticism, no feeling of being out-of-place or out-of-step from the pack, regardless of how outlandish the attire or how obscure the image on your t-shirt ? just a celebration of everyone and everything they love.

In short, at these events people find ?their people? and that, in itself, is reason enough to celebrate. And sometimes it feels like those opportunities are getting fewer and far between.

As the 2023 ? 2024 school year approaches, I can't help but spare a thought for students who are about to embark on the next chapter of their educational journey, whether they are leaving their hometowns for college and university, perhaps experiencing trepidation as they prepare to enter high school, or even just starting elementary school.

Over the last decade-or-so in this job, I've always been heartened to see how school environments have changed since my own days in the 1990s.

As an outsider looking in, it seems like today's schools are much more welcoming, inclusive, and celebratory of students' unique abilities and interests than they were a decade or two ago, giving students even more outlets to explore the world around them and discover who they are.

It's a movement which should be, well, celebrated.

But, at the same time, it feels over the last two or three years, the pendulum has started to swing back in the other direction, not necessarily in the school environment itself, but in the world around us, and that can sometimes creep into the classroom. What makes us unique, stand out, or even see the world a little bit differently has come under increased scrutiny or even, sadly, misplaced backlash.

I hope the true lived reality is much different for the individual.

To all students who are embarking on the next leg of your journey next week, whether you identify as a 2010s or 2020s kid, an old soul, or simply intent on forging your own authentic and unique path in life, I hope you find a supporting and caring environment that celebrates you and, perhaps even more importantly, in your next chapter, I hope you ?find your people.?