



Lyrics recall Aaron's swing, style

Sunday, April 13, 2008

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Peter Cooper wrote a baseball song, one about Hank Aaron, his life, and the day he broke Babe Ruth's home run record. Why? Well, Barry Bonds was one reason.

"It just bothered me," Cooper said. "Not because I was terribly concerned about the steroid mess, but I felt something that was really noble was being replaced by someone who seemed to be not terribly noble."

Cooper, who writes about music for The Tennessean newspaper in Nashville, teaches a class at Vanderbilt University and just released his first album, "Mission Door," wrote the song, "715 (For Hank Aaron)." He liked the song, and he played it for singer-songwriter (and Beaverton-native) Todd Snider, his friend and neighbor.

"I like it," Snider said to Cooper, "but why do you like baseball so much?"

An odd question, considering when the two aren't sitting around listening to Bob Dylan, Cooper says they're sitting around watching baseball.

"Why would you write a song about Hank Aaron?" Snider said.

Why? Cooper thought hard on that one.

Because on April 8, 1974, Aaron hit a home run that moved him past Babe Ruth and into the history books. Because of the possibility and the promise and the beauty of that day, and because of how, in the face of so much hate and anger, Aaron kept his head up. He stayed above it all.

Since they aren't divisible by five, we don't celebrate 34th anniversaries. Bonds is the new home run leader. Remembrances of Aaron's historic swing didn't make much news last week, other than in mentions of Aaron's mother, Estella, who died Monday.

But "why?" is such an interesting question.

Anyone ever ask you?

Why do you root? Why do you care? Why do you invest time and money and emotion in what is, almost every season, for almost every team, a losing proposition?

"It's odd how much you can care about people you've never met, people who aren't doing anything that seems to be any direct benefit to you," Cooper said. "Hank Aaron's never lent me 20 bucks and Brett Favre's never mowed my lawn."

Yet there was Cooper, standing among the frozen, disappointed thousands at Lambeau Field in January when the Packers lost to the Giants in the NFC Championship game.

Back to the original questions. Why baseball? Why Aaron?

Cooper thought about it, and he remembered a moment. He was a kid in a hair salon in Atlanta, waiting for his grandmother to finish getting her hair done. He had on an Atlanta T-shirt, and a woman asked who his favorite player was. He said Hank Aaron.

"And she said it was too bad that he had broken that record and that it didn't look like they were ever going to let us keep anything for ourselves," Cooper says in rhythm over the end his song.

"Now I didn't know this lady and I had any part of that home record, so I was confused as to how Hank Aaron had taken it away from us."

Why do we care?

Because there's always the chance of that one moment of truth and beauty, a moment that can't be manipulated or taken away, no matter how hard someone might try. It could be small. It could be momentous, like Aaron's 715th homer. ESPN.com's Bill Simmons noted last week how quickly Bonds has disappeared from the spotlight.

Not Aaron. Aaron's worth remembering, as much for what he did as what it means. Aaron's worth singing about.

"I think maybe it shocked him that the more truth and beauty he put out there into this world, the more lies and ugliness came right back at him," Cooper continues. "Maybe that's how it works sometimes. Maybe that's the way it works a lot of the time. Maybe that's the way it works."

Maybe it is, but that doesn't mean you can't rise above it.