

Mr. Blue and Maria: A Musical Dream

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Sixty years ago in the late fall and early winter, a seventeen-year-old blue-eyed Bronx boy went by himself to see an afternoon showing of West Side Story on Fordham Road in the north Bronx.

He took the bus to the theater but walked the few miles home in a romantic daze, in love with Maria and yearning for a girl like that for himself.

The movie had mesmerized him, and though he knew about gang fights and the enmity between different ethnic groups, especially white prejudice against Puerto Ricans and blacks, he had never been involved in such violence.

It was real and not-real for him, and he was smart enough to realize that a movie was not real life and that great music had the anodyne power to enchant, and together with colorful moving pictures it could put one into a dream state that could be very powerful.

West Side Story (1961)

There was a reason why Hollywood was called the “Dream Factory.”

But he liked to dream and went to the movies to lose himself in fantasy like so many others. But *West Side Story* had hit him especially hard, and as he walked home through the winding streets, he felt unreal, as though the spell the movie cast on him was everlasting.

He wanted to be Tony, not dead but alive, and Tony taking Maria away from the violent streets to a somewhere place where love and happiness were possible.



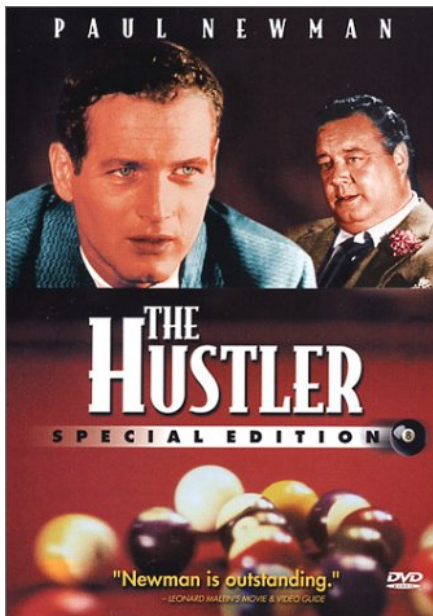
His fascination, however, was tinged with foreboding, a sense that despite what felt like a window of optimism and hope in 1961 with the new young president John Kennedy in the White House, something bad was coming round the corner or whistling down the sky since shortly before the U.S. and the Soviet Union had faced off with tanks at the recently erected Berlin Wall, and weird things were happening around the world such as the Bay of Pigs invasion earlier in the year and the recent death of the Secretary General of the UN Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the boy's heroes. (image right)

In those years before cynicism swept the country, people had heroes, as did the boy: his father, JFK, Hammarskjöld, Paul Newman, and the basketball star Bob Cousy, obviously different in kind and stature.

For the boy was a romantic at heart but his head thought dark thoughts. He didn't know why, but he felt an odd mixture of hope and dread, and he kept thinking of Tony and Maria and how they fell in love at first sight. He wondered if this was just a movie thing. Was it fate that Tony got shot?

He kept thinking back to seven years earlier when his seven-year-old cousin accidentally shot and killed his nine-year-old brother and the weirdness of accidents and horrible evil and love and sex and death and how his blue-eyed red-haired sister had married her Puerto Rican boyfriend despite the sick norms of the time – his mind was a merry-go-round of inchoate thoughts and impressions going in circles till the music stopped when he got home without a partner to share his deepest thoughts with, and no hand to hold – and so he went twice more by himself to see the movie, hoping to discover some secret embedded in its tale, thinking that perhaps the beautiful music hid a revelation and so he would have to listen again and again.

He kept all this to himself, not daring to share his heart's desires and fears with anyone, since he was an athlete and the only boy with seven sisters and his role was to be strong and brave and stoic and swallow his loneliness.



The previous month he had come out of high school basketball practice on East 85th St. in Manhattan in the early evening only to ask a stranger for the time. The stranger in the tan cap and coat was his hero Paul Newman, the star of the recently released movie *The Hustler* in which he played Fast Eddie Felson, the pool hustler.

The boy, who loved movies and went dreaming in them, had identified with Newman and his character's desire to win, and when Newman, who introduced himself as Paul, very nicely took a few minutes to ask his name and talk to the boy about his school and basketball, the boy was thrilled, and the thrill was compounded when Newman called after him as the boy was leaving, "See you later, Fast Eddie."

They shared blue eyes and for some reason blue now seemed to color so much of what the boy saw and felt, the blue of the open sky's freedom and the blueness of Tony's eyes and his death and the Virgin Mary blueness of the aptly names Maria of the dark eyes, just like the talismanic miraculous medal of Blessed Mary that hung around the boy's neck, kept there to protect and guide him to something that felt just out of reach and that perhaps he needed a miracle to reach. Who knows? He didn't, but he felt that something was coming if he could only wait in hope, something very hard to do with his impetuous and passionate nature.

He had just gotten into a stupid fight at a basketball practice with Louis Alcindor, who later became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, which left him feeling weird and wondering about young men and fighting and now he had just seen Tony get killed in a tragic twist of fate in a game run by forces bigger than the Sharks and the Jets could imagine. What did it mean to win? And even though Tony wasn't real, only an actor playing a part, his death resounded in the boy's mind, just as did Maria's anguish as she held her dying lover.

Somewhere someday, he thought, love might conquer all this madness and we'll find a new way of living and I'll find my Maria and it will be love at first sight.

The next year the boy went with a friend to The Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village. It was around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis when the world teetered on the edge of nuclear war.

The unknown blue-eyed Bob Dylan was performing there that fall and it was when he first sang

"A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall."

The boy kept hearing his words: "And what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?"

And what'll you do now, my darling young one?"

And a hard rain did fall, although nuclear war was avoided, Kennedy was soon shot dead for seeking peace between two gangs far more deadly than the Sharks and the Jets.



And the boy had to decide what he would do, for the music played on but nobody was listening and there were guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children and napalm and rifles in the hands of young men in distant jungles.

He wondered if there really was a place for us somewhere, a place to find a new way of living, for it didn't seem like this was the time for it with blood everywhere, bad blood, good blood, puddles of blood, streams of blood, blood in the songs and songs in the blood, Dallas, New York, Memphis, the city of Angels, Saigon, San Juan, Hanoi down through the years as he wandered in tears and wondered where it was all going, all this blood.



Blue entered his soul, a blueness of the deepest deep that was not a technicolor blue but a Billie Holiday blue, the Bronx buried Billie near the boy's dead young cousin Jimmy, dead with a bullet to the heart because of an adult's carelessness, the adults who made the wars in the ghettos and the jungles and caused the deaths of so many all across the world, those unfeeling ones who killed Billie and Bobby and Jimmy and Tony and Johnny and Bernardo, and did their best to try to extinguish blue skies in the hearts of young people everywhere, to drug them and wipe their minds clean of hope and idealism and the feeling that miracles could happen and the world is full of light with suns and moons all over the place, wild and bright going mad, shooting sparks into space because love is found and love abides.

For the boy, as he walked through the years and became a man, the blueness in his soul always also harbored a certain blue that counteracted the blues, a blue like singing the blues defeats the darkness. For him it was this inner image of Maria, Mary, Marie, the lady in blue, the Blessed one, the mother of all sorrows and hope that kept him company all along his journeys and sang to him as she held his hand.

Who can explain it, who can tell you why? He wasn't foolish enough to try. One day, the boy who became the man, now a reluctant young professor, walked into a room to teach a course on death and meaning, and there was his beautiful Maria looking at him, she of the long dark hair and dark eyes, resurrected, and he saw her and the world went away, death departed, they stared at each other spell-bound, and he knew this wasn't a movie but was real love at first sight. Time flew away and yet a hard rain kept falling and it's falling still.

The sky still weeps and the blood keeps a-flowing. The boy learned to tell it and "speak it and think it and breathe it and reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it," and is still doing his best. He and Maria, no longer young, just went to the movies together to see the remake of West Side Story.

The theater was nearly empty. He was expecting to find much to criticize. Instead, he found Tony and Maria again and the same old story, the fight for love and glory for a new time and place but with new faces in the same race to defeat the old hate that never seems to die. It was only a movie. But as he took Maria's hand he knew that love abides, and he whispered to himself: "Always you, every thought I'll ever know/Everywhere I go you'll be, you and me." It was a miracle, not a dream.

Edward Curtin, prominent author, researcher and sociologist, Western Massachusetts, U.S.

Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG)

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