

I once participated in a church choir which was under tender direction of a huge leather-clad biker dude. The director wore a studded black leather jacket to church, and was heavily tattooed and sported much-blinded ears, nose and fingers. His hair was long, black and unkempt, and his manner was as gentle as a bear coming out of hibernation.

I have to admit being fascinated with his juxtaposition to the rest of us dark-suited, stuffy types, we who suppressed our inner wild things. There he was, the living expression of... I don't know, Cyndi Lauper and Burl Ives? He gave me a ride home after choir in his jalopy, a large Woody Wagon of 1970's vintage. The seatbelt was broken, the engine was rough, and the ashtray was stuffed full of ancient chicken bones. But his skills as a music director were actually among the best I had ever had the benefit of. He was gentle, and very particular. He understood the nuances intended by the composers. He was actually a real gem.

And that's Vancouver for you, and the West Coast in general. Always the swirl cake. The delicious sticky bottom of the melting pot. A sweet and spicy potpourri of people.

Sarah McLachlan is a Vancouverite. Although, like me, she has eastern Canadian roots, she is a BC girl, flourishing in the salty western winds that blew her to musical fame and success. One of her perhaps lesser-known albums is called "Rarities, B-sides and Other Stuff."

For the younger crowd, a "B-side" is a reference to an older version of musical recording called a 45 (named after the speed at which it rotated on an old record player). A 45 is a small vinyl disk with just two songs on it, one on each side. The B-side was the afterthought song thrown in on the off chance that the recording might generate two hits in the same release.

The B-side was still produced by an artist of sufficient renown to win over a record label. It had been engineered in a professional studio, and recorded by the same artist who compiled the A-side, and thus had potential. Among the most famous B-sides are The Beach Boys, God Only Knows, The Beatles, I am the Walrus, and Queen, We will Rock You. Of course the concept melted away with the advent of other recording systems, but the idea and its fading etymology, lives on.

Then there is Off Broadway, the various Fringe Festivals, and (painfully for hockey fans) the Canucks trading away Cam Neely. All of these are examples of someone digging beneath the surface of what might appear obvious, and finding a real treasure there, financial, artistic, or personal.

Financial Hidden Gems

If these were easy to find, they would not be hidden for long. The market has a way of sniffing out the slightest hint of expectation. And its public nature means that we see the darlings in full splendor the moment they become popular – usually well ahead of actual corporate profitability.

But Mr. Google might not help in this search. The problem being, there are hundreds and thousands of people who will tell you: "I've known a secret for a week or two. Nobody knows, just we two." Oh, really?

Some of the gems are hidden in plain view, the greatest shield of all, and will usually be ignored for all the wrong reasons.

The always quotable Warren Buffett gets to the heart of it: *"You need to divorce your mind from the crowd. The herd mentality causes all these IQ's to become paralyzed. I don't think investors are now acting more intelligently, despite the intelligence. Smart doesn't always equal rational. To be a successful investor you must divorce yourself from the fears and greed of the people around you, although it is almost impossible... Failing conventionally is the route to go; as a group, lemmings may have a rotten image, but no individual lemming has ever received bad press... The most important quality for an*

investor is temperament, not intellect. You need a temperament that neither derives great pleasure from being with the crowd or against the crowd.”

That might seem a little cryptic, but the gist of it is in swimming, not so much against the current, but in fundamentals which are divorced from popular ideas of that day.

As I said to a friend the other day, the goal is to take the sexy out of investing. The motto is “boring are us.” The simple truth is found in basic fundamentals and a whole bunch of obvious. Around Prince George you might hear stories of mighty hunters knocking down a moose at 600 yards in the blowing snow, on a full run. That’s the A-side smash hit most dream of. The truth of the matter is, most prey is taken on a clear day at 100 yards in more or less perfect conditions, right B-side the road.

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