

For the April Sound Waves "Music Notes" column, I decided to write about someone who, on this board, is very close to us, our friend and colleague Bradley. Brad, thanks so much for putting up with my questions, for your candor, most importantly, for your friendship and inspiration (not to mention the Instant Messages!!)

My Friend Brad

By Mark T. Gould

As both a practicing lawyer and a music writer, hardly a day, heck, hardly an hour, goes by without me receiving an Instant Message from somebody. Most of them I can, truth be told, do without, but I have to say that I always look forward to the ones from my friend Brad.

Some days I don't get any Instant Messages from him, and, you know, for a lawyer/writer who sometimes, OK, many times, doesn't want to be interrupted, I really miss them.

Why? Because every single time, without fail, that my friend Brad sends me an Instant Message I learn something from him. Usually, it's a recommendation to listen to a particular musician or singer; sometimes it's about the sound or acting quality on a newly released or restored DVD. Once in a while, it's a perceptive comment about politics, or then again, life in general.

Suffice it to say that when my friend Brad sends me something, it's always, and I mean always, worth not only reading, but also taking the time to check out what he is saying and/or recommending.

My friend Brad's knowledge of music just blows me away. He may know more about country music than Chet Flippo and Hank Williams combined. Movies and DVDs? He puts Siskel and Ebert, plus their new guy, to shame. Politics and our way of life? I'd rather read what he has to say than just about any of the blogger know-it-alls out there.

My friend Brad is stimulating, interesting, intelligent, and, I think from his tone, a lot of fun.

One day, after about the hundredth time of amazing me away with his knowledge and his observations, I decided that I wanted to know a little bit more about him. I went to the music site/chat room where we both belong, and I looked up his profile. We all have them there. Our stereo components, personal interests, shoe sizes, the works. Well, maybe not shoe sizes, but you get the idea.

It was there that I found a link to my friend Brad's web site, and from it learned something else about him that just about blew me away.

My friend Brad is autistic. For those who don't know, or those who think they know it all simply because they saw the movie "Rain Man," autism, according to the Autism Society of America, is a complex developmental disability resulting from a neurological disorder that affects the development and functioning of the brain, in the areas of social interaction and communication skills.

As I read that paragraph back to myself, I started to find myself feeling sorry for those, like my friend Brad, who have this condition. Then, I snapped out of it, and remembered how my friend Brad told me, in an Instant Message of course, how he approaches it, himself.

"I really don't know any other kind of life, so being autistic is, for me, being normal," he told me. "I really don't have any limitations. Like everyone else, I do some things very well and other things not very well. That is true about everybody."

Indeed, my friend Brad does a lot of things very well. He is an almost 27-year-old high school and college graduate, employed at RFC Music Productions, a northern Minnesota company that sells electronic equipment over the Internet. And, clearly, his attitude and success are the functions of a loving, supportive home life.

“I am happy with myself because my mother taught me to accept who I was and who I am now. She always let me know that I had autism and we learned about autism together,” he said. “Having the skills I have is no different than the skills you have, or my mother has, for that matter. She has skills with things like sewing, knitting, cooking, etc. Mine are computers, music and sports like bowling and roller skating.”

I asked him how he acquired so much knowledge about music, movies, heck, about life in general, and how he can type so much information, so quickly and accurately, into his Instant Messages, some of which, comparatively, would give a good short story a run for its money.

“I did have keyboarding in school. However, because it is my way of communicating, it is self taught and my hands are my voice, so I guess that is why I can type fast,” he said. “The Internet is my world. I can talk to people that have the same interests as I do. But most of all, I can be myself, and be in my own world. There are no other people in the room and I feel comfortable not having to face anyone or talk about something I do not know about.”

OK, but how in the world does he acquire all this knowledge?

“The knowledge that I have is what I have learned and what I continue to learn about topics that interest me, like music, computers and trivia,” he continued. “I have never been able to read chapters in books. I do not have the comprehension to be able to tell what happens first. The reading that I like to do is reading the World Almanac and books of quick facts. I retain information from books like that because they are quick facts.”

And that incredible interest in music, country in particular?

“My interest in music started at about age 4. My first memory that my mother has of my love for music was the Bellamy Brothers and their album ‘Sons of the Sun,’” he remembered. “She told me I carried it around the house so that she would play it. I still have the album.

“I do not know if I feel or sense music in a different degree than someone else, because I do not know how anyone else feels about it,” he added. “It is just so comforting to me that I cannot imagine not having music in my life. I can get along without driving, reading books, TV, fancy clothes and houses, but I could not get along without music.”

Even though I’m now aware of his condition, honestly, not once in my many wonderful Instant Message conversation with my friend Brad has his autism ever crossed my mind. He’s a friend, he shares my many interests, and, frankly, that’s it. End of story. And, I suspect, that’s exactly how he wants it.

“I get frustrated like anyone else,” he added. “My mother and I both work through it together. My mother is my best supporter. I have said, ‘boy, I wish this hadn’t happened to me.’ But, so have you, in your life, if you think about it.”

Perhaps the last, and best, word about my friend Brad comes from his sister, Stephanie, who writes on her brother’s web site, “Bradley is a true inspiration. It is a true blessing to be his sister.”

I’ll go you one better, Stephanie. It’s a true blessing to be his friend.

Hey, Brad, I’m sitting here waiting. Where’s the latest Instant Message, my friend?