An Audiovisual Inventory of Some Fanatic Consumer Behavior: the 25-Cent Tour of a Jazz Collector's Home

Morris B. Holbrook, Columbia University

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AN AUDIOVISUAL INVENTORY OF SOME FANATIC CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: THE 25-CENT TOUR OF A JAZZ COLLECTOR'S HOME

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'Mid pleasures and palaces,
though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble,
there's no place like home.

A charm from the sky
seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world,
is ne'er met with elsewhere.

Home, sweet home!
There's no place like home!

-- John Howard Payne (1823), Clari: Or, the Maid of Milan

ABSTRACT -

This paper pursues an extreme form of introspective participant observation to describe one type of consumer fanaticism. After offering a definition of fanatic consumption in terms of deep involvement, the author explains his use of photographs and musical recordings to communicate the story of his own experience as a jazz fan. He then leads the reader on a 25-cent tour of his musically lived world and concludes that the element of fanaticism found therein makes his house a home.

INTRODUCTION

Preview

As my contribution to the special ACR session on fanatic consumption, I shall provide an autobiographical and necessarily personal account of fanaticism in my own consumer behavior as a collector, appreciator, and sometime performer of jazz. Here, I shall focus especially on the tangible symptoms and emblems of my jazz fanaticism as they manifest themselves in the environment with which I surround myself. In other words, I shall dwell on the objects that fill my jazz-related material world and shall try to show how they illustrate the general phenomenon of fanatic consumer behavior. In pursuing this theme, I hope to provide a rich case study or thick description of some
In a recent popular piece, Nemy (1986) characterized deeply involved identity as "own sense of identity." As Bloch and his coauthors point out, this intrinsically motivated quality is "hallmark" (Bloch and Holbrook 1986). By the time it reaches the level of true fanaticism, this enduring importance "mark ff by excessive enthusiasm and often intense critical devotion." This is precisely the sense I wish to convey in describing the phenomena that characterize collectors, cognoscenti, and other committed jazz fans. Such aficionados display "enthusiasm" and "intense devotion" by pursuing the jazz consumption experience for its own sake, as an end in itself rather than as a means to some other personal or social goal. However, the term "fanatic" also carries the pejorative implication that this rampant enthusiasm or devotion leans toward the "excessive" or "uncritical." We do not call jazz fanatics "connoisseurs." Rather, we accuse them of pursuing their consumption activities with a level of passion grossly out of proportion to that experienced by other more temperate consumers of the same product category.

To cite a personal example, when I play a Chet Baker record such as his performance of Don Sebesky's "You Can't Go Home Again," you hear a rather feeble and clumsy trumpeter with a somewhat cracked and shaky tone stumbling through an unstylishly old-fashioned and syrupy piece that could please you most by ceasing to listen to others rather than merely to conduct a vapid exercise in egocentrism. Yet I am aware that, inevitably, some might interpret my co lent; from the latter perspective. I shall therefore begin by apologizing to these potential critics in advance.

Methodological Apologies

One stalwart member of ACR's 1986 Program Committee commented that our session on fanaticism in general and my contribution on jazz collecting in particular only push back the frontiers of self-indulgence and therefore deserve to be discouraged. I sympathize with someone steeped in the positivistic tradition who believes that we can best advance our knowledge of consumer behavior by tiddling around with the hypothetico-deductive method for a few more decades until perhaps we finally get it right and Truth majestically reveals herself to us. Indeed, I share many of these positivistic yearnings and still believe in the empirical testing of theory against data. However, I also believe that the development of theory and the creation of concepts can fruitfully draw on a variety of intuitive, introspective, and idiosyncratic insights and that, when we move in the context of discovery, we should welcome ideas that come from such self-revelatory sources (Deshpande 1983).

Further, even the most hardened advocates of logical empiricism in the social sciences increasingly acknowledge the impossibility of removing subjectivity and value judgments from our scientific procedures (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This postpositivistic recognition that observers inevitably intrude into everything they observe encourages impatience with anyone who pretends otherwise:

When scientists edit themselves out of their own internal representations of their work, or out of those fashioned for communication with colleagues and laypersons, they become the perpetrators of both self-deception and the deception of others (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1981, p. 134).

Hence, consumer researchers turn increasingly to approaches that involve participant observation and introspection (Hirschman and Holbrook 1986). As indicated by Hirschman's (1985) traversal of research styles (Mitroff and Kilmann 1978), acceptable postpositivistic procedures include everything from telling stories (Tucker 1967) to phenomenological accounts (Fennell 1985) to thick descriptions (Hirschman 1986) to personal anecdotes (Holbrook 1986).

I ask the reader to regard the present paper as an extreme form of introspective participant observation. It describes a consumer subculture -- namely, the world of jazz fans -- from the viewpoint of an informed, integrated, and deeply involved member. It provides a self-report by someone who has in fact pursued a life-long fascination with jazz and thereby supplies an insider's view of the phenomenon investigated by this special topic session. The advantages of self-revelation as a mode of research include both its expediency and its ethics. With respect to expediency, one avoids the need to obtain respondents' signatures on permission forms or to conduct laborious member checks and research audits. With respect to ethics, one skirts the danger of exploiting others or invading their privacy. A countervailing disadvantage concerns the threat that subjectivism might run away with us. Here, I suggest that, as researchers, we must learn more to trust ourselves in this respect. We must learn to accept our own subjective, personal, introspective reactions as one (though only one) source of data and to interpret what these responses mean about the nature of consumption. As consumers, we enjoy a head start in understanding consumption experiences -- if only we don't waste this resource by fearing our capacities to interpret our own phenomenological worlds. In this sense, as I shall try to make clear, hermeneutics begins at home.

Fanatic Consumer Behavior

Let us begin (at home) by interpreting the meaning of the term "fanatic" as it applies to consumer behavior. My copy of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "fanatic" as "mark ff by excessive enthusiasm and often intense critical devotion." This is precisely the sense I wish to convey in describing the phenomena that characterize collectors, cognoscenti, and other committed jazz fans. Such aficionados display "enthusiasm" and "intense devotion" by pursuing the jazz consumption experience for its own sake, as an end in itself rather than as a means to some other personal or social goal. However, the term "fanatic" also carries the pejorative implication that this rampant enthusiasm or devotion leans toward the "excessive" or "uncritical." We do not call jazz fanatics "connoisseurs." Rather, we accuse them of pursuing their consumption activities with a level of passion grossly out of proportion to that experienced by other more temperate consumers of the same product category.

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Deep Involvement

The mind set of the fanatic consumer appears to reflect an advanced stage of the phenomenon described by Bloch (1982) as "enduring importance" (Bloch and Richins 1983) or "enduring involvement" (Bloch and Bruce 1984):

- At very high levels, enduring involvement may be termed product enthusiasm and is characteristic of product enthusiasts such as car buffs, wine connoisseurs, or avid video gamers. Product enthusiasm entails a strong, abiding, hobby-like interest in the product class in question which transcends the temporary purchase process and is characteristic of product enthusiasts such as car buffs, wine connoisseurs, or avid video gamers. Product enthusiasm entails a strong, abiding, hobby-like interest in the product class in question which transcends the temporary purchase process.
- By the time it reaches the level of true fanaticism, this enduring interest attains proportions that I shall characterize as deep involvement. The hallmark of such deep involvement is that it focuses on the consumption experience as an end in itself:

The emphasis is on the product itself and the inherent satisfaction its usage provides, rather than on some outside goal such as purchase optimality (Bloch and Richins 1983, p. 72).

As Bloch and his coauthors point out, this intrinsically motivated quality is the very essence of leisure or play activities (Calkszentmihalyi 1975; Deci 1975; Holbrook et al. 1984; Unger and Kernan 1983). Moreover, deeply involved consumption say play a crucial role in shaping one's own sense of identity.

Identity

In a recent popular piece, Nemy (1986) characterized deeply involved fanatic consumption as a displaced form of security blanket, carried from childhood into adulthood by virtue of its symbolic transformation into a socially acceptable guise. For example, she describes the security-evoking musical consumption habits of George-Paul Rosell as follows:

Music is where it's at for Mr. Rosell. It's the only thing he needs around him when he's alone, when he's depressed, when he's not depressed.... The very fact that the records and cassettes are there to play are, in fact, such comfort that sometimes he doesn't even have to listen to them -- the security can be transmitted by
Sociologists explain such phenomena via the process whereby objects and their display to self and others help to develop a self-image that lies at the core of one's personal identity (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981):

"men and women make order in their selves (i.e., "retrieve their identity") by first creating and then interacting with the material world. The nature of that transaction will determine, to a great extent, the kind of person that emerges. Thus the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are (p. 16). ... objects have a determining effect on the development of the self, which is why understanding the type of relationship that exists between people and things is so crucial (p. 53). ... the impact of inanimate objects in this self-awareness process is important. ... Things... tell us who we are, not in words, but by embodying our intentions (p. 91)."

By far the most common locus for building and experiencing one's self-defining material world is the family household: "Thus household objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as shapes the pattern of the owner's self" (p. 17). It follows that the most direct embodiment of how people see themselves and want to be seen by others appears in their homes:

The importance of the home derives from the fact that it provides a space for action and interaction in which one can develop, maintain, and change one's identity. ... The home is a shelter for those persons and objects that define the self; thus it becomes, for most people, an indispensable symbolic environment (p. 144).

Home

In her book called Home-Psych, Kron (1983) follows Douglas (1979) and others in regarding household possessions as part of a language of symbols that communicate:

The furnishing of a home, the style of a house, and its landscape are all part of a system -- a system of symbols. And every item in the system has meaning... People understand this instinctively and they desire things... because things are necessary to communicate with (pp. 19-20).

Sometimes, such symbolic objects only serve to convey impressions of social status. Often, however, the objects with which we surround ourselves reveal deeper aspects of our personalities. They play a role in personalizing our home environments in a manner that expresses things about ourselves:

Personalizing is... putting your personal stamp on a space and its contents... custom tailoring your space to your image, monogramming it with your crest, imprinting it with your geist, spirit, personality, and life style (pp. 44-455).

Such expressions of personality and character occur with special vividness when we for collections of cherished or otherwise honored possessions and then proceed to array and arrange these objects in ways that we find satisfying:

The personalized form of expression in the world of objects is found in patterns of arrangement that are not exclusively intended as statements to others and are not solely dictated by the intrinsic characteristics of the objects themselves. To a larger extent these patterns seem to be statements of a person to himself (Ruesch and Kees 1956, p. 143).

Often, such collecting and arranging behavior attains a compulsive or addictive quality (Kron 1983, p. 200) and results in the kind of room-filling clutter that inspired the exasperated woman in a recent New Yorker cartoon to ask her husband, "Edgar, don't you think it's time you donated a wing somewhere?" (Miller 1986).

Invasion of the Musifacts

This tendency of a collection to grow until it takes over a living space and threatens to crowd out all inhabitants lies at the heart of my own particular consumption fanaticism. Specifically, I acquire and use but never dispose of multitudinous musical artifacts. Much as in the case of Pollay's (1987) "advertisques," these "musifacts" fill my home and slowly encroach on all aspects of family life. They serve as an emblem of my devotion to jazz that can interpret as a symptom of its fanaticism. Hence, the array and arrangement of my musifacts reveal much about what matters most to me as a consumer. My musifacts signify my most deeply involved consumption experiences.

FIGURE 1

THE RECORDINGS

Fanatic consumers experience such intense communion with the objects of their consumption that they invariably feel the need -- almost the obligation -- to share that experience with others. This paper manifests that impulse. I want the reader to feel the depth of my commitment to jazz. At the same time, I despair of adequately conveying that deep involvement through words alone. Thus -- in an effort to communicate more vividly -- I turn to photographs and recordings.

Photographs

Last year, Levy (1985) chaired an ACR session on the use of photography in consumer research. The session's participants (Heisley and Levy; Rock; Wallendorf and Westbrook) showed photos and video tapes of consumers engaged in preparing and eating dinner, celebrating Christmas, and contemplating cherished objects. They also discussed techniques for extracting meaningful conclusions from such pictorial records. For example, Heisley and Levy described a procedure known as "autodriving" in which the researcher shows respondents photographs of their own consumption activities and then asks for retrospective interpretations.

In this spirit, my own use of photographs in the present paper might be described as "auto-autodriving." In other words, in what I believe is an unprecedented methodological gesture, I take pictures of my own musifacts and ask myself what they mean to me. Here, I pursue the objectives of both discovery and presentation (Wagner 1979). With respect to discovery, I follow Ruesch and Kees' (1956) use of photography to explore "The Organization of the Material Environment as Personal Experience" on the premise that "the nature and arrangements of possessions say a great deal about their owners' views of existence" (p. 132):

"I can hear the music in my mint," he said. "But I have to know the records are there." (p. 73).

In the course of time, man accumulates a variety of things that threaten to clutter the home. ... The more objects accumulate, the more difficult is the maintenance of order, which in turn causes one person to leave a trail marked with debris and another to cover every trace. People have their preferred ways of storing: through piling, shelving, spreading, dumping, aligning, or through exposing or hiding (p. 135).
With respect to presentation, I adopt the use of photography as a vehicle for self-revelation -- that is, for showing others various autobiographical details of one's personal life so as to communicate some subjective aspects of one's own consumption experiences. In essence, this is what we do when we show our guests pictures of our wedding, snapshots of our camping trip, or slides of our vacation in Europe. We use photos to compile an inventory of our consumption experiences and then share that inventory with others as a way of communicating something about our lives as consumers that we think matters. Photography thus reveals the nature of one's inner sanctuary -- the otherwise private contents of one's home and the paraphernalia that one uses in pursuit of one's most cherished consumption experiences.

Recordings

However, as a visual medium, photography necessarily abstracts from the sounds, smells, tastes, and touches that comprise a real consumption experience. We can enrich the use of photographs further if we combine them with the sounds they represent. Hence, I shall embellish my presentation with musical examples intended to convey the nature of the relevant consumption experiences. Obviously, I cannot incorporate these into a written paper. I shall, therefore, follow a suggestion offered by Russ Belk and shall make the recordings available to interested listeners by means of a telephone number. Specifically, during the middle week in the month of August 1987, the reader may hear the musical examples used in this paper by calling 212-873-7324. If you do so, please leave a message after the beep so that I can keep track of my callers.

THE 25-CENT TOUR

Recordings

The sine qua non of fanaticism in jazz consumption is listening. Some jazz fans own expensive audio equipment. Some read voluminously. Some play instruments. But all listen avidly to the sounds of music characterized by swinging improvisation.

When I read hi-fi magazines and look at the "installation of the month" columns featuring massively expansive and expensive stereo systems, I often marvel at how little the millionaires who pay for all this fancy gear seem to devote to the storage of recordings. For example, an impressive sound system recently featured in Stereo Review cost $15,460, but allowed storage space barely sufficient to hold about 9 record albums, 18 cassettes, and 25 compact discs (Burton 1986). Another awesome array of audio equipment cost $14,221 but appeared to include no collection of recordings at all (Smolen 1986). This habit of displaying hardware in the apparent absence of software makes the systems maximally photogenic, but forces the conclusion that the more people spend on audio equipment, the more they tend to listen to the radio (assuming that they listen to anything).

The situation differs radically for the true lover of jazz. For the true jazz fan, records and tapes fill every nook and cranny of the home. In my own case, the clutter starts near my main audio system and spills out onto the living room floor, in giant piles that threaten to encroach on our communal space and that therefore demand constant reallocation to other parts of the apartment (Figure 1, Panel A). This conveniently located and rapidly growing mound of records on the living-room floor contains my most recently purchased vocal albums -- the ones that Sally and Chris can stand to hear without too much pain or suffering and, consequently, the only ones permitted to intrude into our common territory. Notice that, in describing these vocal albums, I say "recently purchased" and not "recently recorded" or "recently released." Often and perhaps typically, the recordings themselves represent old or deceased singers in performances from some bygone era thirty or forty years ago --such as Nat Cole's masterful 1951 rendition of "Walkin' My Baby Back Home."

When complaints from Sally reach sufficiently hysterical proportions, many of these vocal albums find their way into a cabinet on the other side of the living room (Panel B). Here, I keep recently auditioned records that we plan to tape for listening on trips in the family car. Typically, our tastes in this direction have been running toward gospel music, as in Al Green's recording of Joe South's "Don't It make You Wanta Go Home." Also, for purposes of late-night romantic listening on the couch, this is where I keep my prized collection of albums by Frank Sinatra and Julie London. Performances like Julie's version of "(Back Home Again In) Indiana" provide the jazz fan's answer to the Johnny Mathis style of music for necking.

Notice, however, that thus far I have mentioned only vocal recordings. The real music -- the mainstream instrumental jazz -- has been banished by popular demand to my study, where recent acquisitions live amidst telephones, working papers, and computer output in a painfully cramped and cluttered bookcase (Panel C). On the upper right, I keep new instrumental records that I have not yet had a chance to hear such as Red Rodney's album in the spirit of Charlie Parker with its title song called "Yard's Pad." After I have assimilated such newly acquired offerings, I place them on the lower right to await further disposition. On the left, I keep unwashed (top) and washed (bottom) second-hand albums that also await auditioning. Sometimes, as in the case of "Go Back Home" by Don Ellis, these sound pretty scratchy, but I love them anyway, especially since many of them are out of print and cost more used than most records cost new. Meanwhile, recordings associated with various projects that I am working on tend to accumulate in different corners of the room. For example, the stack sitting between my barbell and filing cabinet contains the albums from which I have drawn the examples relevant to this particular paper (Panel D).

Thus far, we have seen only little pockets of new acquisitions waiting to be shelved and special-purpose projects waiting to be re-shelved. The main collection fills most of another room (Panel E). Here I have managed to alphabetize all the jazz recordings by the principal artist's last name. Overall, these shelves contain roughly 3,500 albums -- about 2,800 jazz, 400 classical, and 300 miscellaneous (including rock). Content analysis of the shelves confirms that I admire some musicians extravagantly (as indicated by the number of their records that I own: Chet Baker (91), Bill Evans (61), Dizzy Gillespie (72), Hampton Hawes (35), Milt Jackson (93), Charlie Parker (49), and Art Pepper (86), to name a few. For example, I believe that I have managed to collect almost everything that Art Pepper ever recorded (Panel F). No one will ever duplicate his uniquely passionate sound. That sound conveys the intense pain that drove Pepper to a tragic life filled with drug addiction and other forms of criminality. On one grim occasion, after not touching his horn for weeks or months, he glued it back together, stumbled into a Los Angeles recording studio to play with Miles Davis' rhythm section, and produced an immortal version of Cole Porter's "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To."

Some may wonder what happens when the shelves of the main collection start to fill up. My first ploy was to discard books and let records consume almost the whole space, but I have exhausted that strategy because my only remaining books deal with music and are therefore indispensable. A second maneuver involves moving rock albums into Christopher's room. But Chris finally caught on that I was using his room as a garbage dump, announced that he would keep only the Dylan recordings, and made me relocate the rest of the rock-and-roll to a high shelf in my bedroom clothes closet, where innumerable old favorites like Simon and Garfunkel's "Homeward Bound" have become inaccessible and hard to find (Panel G).

As Kron (1983) points out, such problems frequently force people to acquire "a second home in the country to house the overflow" (p. 178). In our case, the house in question is in Lord's Valley, Pennsylvania. Here, I keep spillover that won't fit anywhere else (such as the Time-Life series on the history of jazz) plus all duplicate copies of my most cherished jazz records (Panel H). From this set of second copies, one can easily infer my most important preferences such as my aforementioned fondness for Chet Baker and his recordings of classics like "Love Nest.

Other Musifacts


REFERENCES


Due to length considerations, Figures 2 and 3 were omitted. These figures may be obtained by writing to the author: Morris B. Bloch, Peter H. Holbrook/Columbia University/510 Uris Hall/Graduate School of Business/New York, NY 10027.

Audio Equipment. Unlike many music lovers, I regard audio equipment as a necessary evil. I just want to hear the music. I do not worry too much about fancy gadgets or automated features. Because most of the jazz I care about is too old or too obscure to find its way onto compact discs, I have little use for digital audio or other state-of-the-art devices. By contrast, what I do need is music in every location where I might spend any appreciable amount of time (say, five minutes).

This includes the living room (Figure 2, Panel A), my study (Panel B), Christopher's room (Panel C), Sally's office (Panel D), Sally's desk (Panel E), the Oldsmobile (Panel F), and the house in Pennsylvania (Panel G). For other locations and for traveling, I also keep a backup collection of portable radios and tape players (Panel H).

Books and Periodicals. I have read books about jazz since I was a small boy and cannot bear to throw any of them away. As previously mentioned, they accumulate on my groaning shelves. Luckily, I have been more conscientious about reading and then discarding the sizeable number of jazz periodicals and music magazines that enter my home as welcome guests and sit on one corner of my desk for a period of weeks or even months until I can get to them.

Musical Instruments. Some jazz fans take the ultimate step and actually try to perform the music. This represents the supreme commitment to the fanatic consumption of jazz and demands an investment of passionate energy to which I only wish I could devote more time. My own skills as a jazz musician, while never highly developed, have grown increasingly rusty. Sometimes, after months of shameful neglect, I fear that I shall forget how to play altogether. But my collection of musical instruments serves as a constant, sometimes painful, reminder that I should be practicing. Most conspicuous among these, my beloved Steinway occupies most of what would otherwise be our dining room (Figure 3, Panel A). When the neighbors complain about its Herculean powers to project immense inundations of sound, I have some smaller keyboards to which I can turn (Panel B). Other musical instruments have long ago fallen into disuse and now serve only as decorative objects. For example, an ancient flute fills the space above a doorway (Panel C). Two antique guitars make a nicely matched pair of wall hangings (Panel D). My old trumpet and my grandfather's mandolin serve to enhance a room divider (Panel E). And a fine Deagan vibraharp doubles as a free-standing piece of sculpture (Panel F). Even when I don't have time to play these instruments (or never knew how in the first place), they surround me with a sense of keeping in touch with the heart of my jazz fanaticism. As symbols, these musifacts serve as constant companions and reminders of my devotion to jazz.

FANATIC CONSUMPTION AND THE HOME

I conclude with an analogy: ordinary consumer behavior is to fanatic consumption as a house is to a home. In the maudlin poem by Edgar Guest (1916) "It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home." Similarly, fanatic consumption takes us through a massive amount of lived experience that, in time, comes to form the boundaries wherein we reside, where we are centered, where we find our home -- our place of comfort, rest, and sustenance. Our houses contain furniture, food, clothing, and other material objects. But, if we are lucky, they also contain the central core of our consumption experience -- the deeply involved appreciative responses, the passionately committed activities, the emotionally charged reactions that inform our truest, most profound consumer behavior and that provide a niche in time and space where we can reside.

So I end on a serious note. I may have been giving you the 25-cent Tour; but, in my heart, this space that I've been describing is a 25-karat place to abide. My precious family lives there. My cherished jazz inhabits it. All my musifacts -- distributed far and wide on shelves or on the floor, in closets or in various other nooks and crannies -- dwell therein. Besides the people in my life, because I am a fanatic, certain objects come alive for me. They fill our house. They make our house my home.

Apparently, then, some forms of fanatic consumption are more than just aberrant behavior. They are a way of personalizing our spaces, of tangibly symbolizing the meanings in our lives, and of humanizing, dignifying, and even consecrating the houses or apartments where we live. Central to every experience of home is the implicit prayer-like wish that one's life in that place will somehow be blessed. Jazz musicians -- who are so often on the road, so often separated from loved ones, so often lonely -- must have a particularly strong sense of that yearning for a permanent feeling of home. This longing often shows in their work. Thus, all the tunes referred to in my paper have carried this theme: "You Can't Go Home Again," "Walking My Baby Back Home," "Don't Make You Want Go Home," "(Back Home Again In Indiana)," "Yard's Pad," "Go Back Home," "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To" "Homeward Bound," and "Love Nest." I shall conclude recalling the beautiful record made by the late pianist Bill Evans under the title "Children's Play Song," whose melody paraphrases the tune about home that we all used to sing when we were young:

Bless this house, O Lord we pray,
Make it safe by night and day;
Bless these walls, so firm and stout,
Keeping want and trouble out;
Bless the roof and chimneys tall,
Let thy peace lie over all;
Bless this door, that it may prove
Ever open to joy and love.

-- Helen Taylor and May H. Brahe (1932), "Bless This House"

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