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Love Letters Become a fan

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Love Letters: Miami

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Matthew Whitman Lazenby, Operating Partner of Bal Harbour Shops, is the fourth-generation leader in the family-owned business that began developing commercial real estate in Miami in the early twentieth century. Born and raised in Coral Gables, he is the grandson of Stanley Whitman, who founded the famed Bal Harbour Shops in 1965. He attended Palmer Trinity High School before graduating from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he majored in English. He is married to Kristin Arbuckle Lazenby, "who I've known since I was five because our parents were friends and we grew up in the same circles;" and is father to two young sons, William and Clayton.

Dear Miami,

So you are about two weeks late in wishing me a happy birthday, but you get a pass...particularly seeing as though we've been doing this since 1977. Together, anyway. And no, I haven't forgotten your birthday. It's July 28, 1896. And March 26, 1915. And April 29, 1925. And August 14, 1946. And a host of other dates as well. It's a wonder I can keep them all straight.

Sure, there was a time when we only celebrated July 28th, back when your boundaries were a bit more distinct. But times have changed. You have changed. When people say "Miami" they don't just mean the City of Miami. They mean Miami Beach and Bal Harbour and Coral Gables and just about any place and everyplace within the county boundaries. And while I loved every inch of you for what you once were, I love you even more for what you have become.

You know, I once had a box of letters and other important things way too meaningful to file away methodically so they lived haphazardly in a drawer by my bed. Years and years and years of stuff: A manuscript for a screenplay, a wooden "I LOVE YOU" booklet given to me by an elementary school girlfriend, stacks of half-written poems, a note my deceased grandmother wrote me shortly before her stroke left her unable to speak, reams of English papers I had written over four years at UNC, a few letters to the editor of the Daily Tar Heel, a eulogy I delivered at a friend's funeral, and two concert ticket stubs. One ticket was dated March 5, 1982 from a Johnny Cash concert in Sunrise and the other dated September 10, 1985 from a Bruce Springsteen concert at the Orange Bowl.

But that's all I can remember from that box of keepsakes; a housekeeper mistakenly threw away the entire lot many years ago during a move. So all I have are the memories. But what could be more memorable to a not-yet five year old Miamian than singing along to his father and Johnny Cash as both belted out "A Boy Named Sue" in the hallowed halls of Sunrise Theatre? Or Bruce

Springsteen playing "Born in the USA" to the delight of the thoroughly enraptured and convincingly intoxicated fans at the glorious old Orange Bowl?

But, Miami, that's not you anymore. You're bigger in almost every way. No, not all of your improvements have been met with broad popular support (like the Orange Bowl giving way to Marlins Stadium), but I love you because, despite your abounding growth, you have managed to remain true to yourself throughout your evolution and despite your international, "gateway city" prominence. In fact, you are better for it.

You are Casa Tua and Cipriani, Bal Harbour Shops longtime favorite Carpaccio, and Makoto, yes. But you remain unfailingly Joe's Stone Crab and Versailles. You are Pitbull and Flo Rida and Enrique Iglesias but Jimmy Buffet and Gloria Estefan through and through. You are The St. Regis Bal Harbour and the Four Seasons Surfside, but no more than the Mandarin Oriental Brickell Key and the Fontainebleau Miami Beach. You have been Madonna and Sylvester Stallone, but remain forever Jackie Gleason. You are Pain & Gain and you are Dexter, but you will always be Scarface and Miami Vice. You are Pat Riley and Dwayne Wade, but you couldn't NOT be Don Shula and Dan Marino if you tried. Not that you would.

Miami, a third-generation native myself, I think now with great pride and a father's hopeful anticipation of the two young boys my wife and I are raising and, simultaneously, of the final few lines from "My Hometown," a song Bruce Springsteen must have played at the Orange Bowl back on that summer night in 1985:

"I'm thirty-five / we got a boy / of our own now
Last night I sat him up / behind the wheel /and said son take a good look around
This is your hometown."

I love you, Miami.

Sincerely yours,
Matthew Whitman Lazenby