

Happy to Make Your Acquaintance

A Musical Memoir by Mary Anne Anderson

CHAPTER ONE

“Day- O Day O, Daylight come and me wan’ go home

Day, e-say Day, e-say Day, e-say Day, e-say Day, e-say Day-o

Daylight come and me wan’ go home. . .”

Dear Harry Belafonte,

When I was seven, I told my mother I wanted to marry you. After all, you introduced me to Calypso - that magical rhythm of the Caribbean. There was even a song named for me: Mary Anne. It was all about sifting sand at the beach, my favorite place. Our apartment complex had beach access, and after it opened for the summer on Memorial Day, I was in heaven!

Mother would call me out at noon for lunch, then I had to wait an endless half hour to digest one little hot dog so I wouldn’t get cramps. Finally, I’d make a run for it over the hot sand and swim all the way out to the sandbar. I’d climb the rocky jetty and dive back in, then swirl around and around pretending to be a mermaid. This went on for. . . who-cared-how- long. But the day always ended too soon. I’d hear Mother’s voice in the distance, ignoring it for as long as I could,

then run into her arms. She would wrap a warm, dry towel around me, my finger-tips wrinkled and my lips blue.

“All day, all night, Mary Ann, down by the seaside sifting sand. . .”

I couldn't see your skin color from the radio Harry, and when I finally saw your face on the record cover, I wanted to have the same golden glow you had. I wanted to be a Caribbean girl, and with that the steel drum rattling its tinny notes, I shimmied & wiggled all around the living room.

I never told anybody, but this song made me want to become a night owl; or better yet, an around-the-clock-never-go-to-sleep kind of girl. I'd lie awake in my bed until sounds grew faint, night lights became prisms, and dream clouds floated around my pillow.

I couldn't understand the mystery of Father's nightly rituals, when I would wake up up to the sensation of fingers inching up my arm. That's the most I can remember. Mother said he was counting noses. But I never felt him touch my nose.

“When she walks along the shore people pause to greet

White birds fly around her, little fish come to her feet.”

Water, the ultimate healer. I am home there, at ocean's edge, safe in its swirling eddies. I feel those million grains of sand sift through my toes. White birds spread their freedom wings before me, and I fly with them.

“Day, e-say Day, e-say Day, e-say Day, e-say Day, e-say Day-o

Daylight come and me wan’ go home. . .”

(1958)

CHAPTER TWO

Dear Pat Boone,

“Poison i - i - i - i - i - ivy. . .” was blaring over the radio when Barbara Bonto came knocking at my door. “Pat Boone’s here! Pat Boone’s here! He’s visiting people across the street! Someone saw him park his car!” She took a breath. “Hurry!”

“Sometimes an April day will suddenly bring showers

Rain to grow the flowers for her first bouquet

But April love. . .”

Oh, Pat, you were one of my special heroes, ever since your songs touched me so deeply that just the thought of you gave me goose pimples. You, the teen idol, and I not even a pre-teen yet, still wearing my favorite undershirt, the one with the embroidered pink rose. I hated the thought of getting a bra, with those pointy bullets that the boys couldn't take their eyes off. Your voice was so pure, so soothing, and filled me with the hope that there were actually men out there who were gentle and kind.

I wanted to be like Shirley Jones, the girl in the movie. I knew all along you would get together, and prayed that a boy just like you would come along to Davenport Neck one day and sweep me off my feet.

*“On a day like today, we pass the time away
writing love letters in the sand”*

I wrote dozens of love letters in the sand, to the boy of my dreams. The way you whistled in that song reminded me of Father's whistling.

We could hear him from a mile away when he came home, especially when he broke into the Schaeffer Beer commercial, trills and all. *“Shaeffer is the one beer to have when you're having more than one.”* He always had more than one. I wished mother would make him wait a half hour in between beers, like she made me do after lunch at the beach.

Barbara and I stood lookout by the sand box in the parking lot to catch you before you left. And there you were! You even spent a few minutes talking to us - - - to us! All the next day, we wandered around like nymphs by the water's edge. I looked out at the little dot called Echo Island, and began to sing our new version of "Poison Ivy": *"Pat Boone i - i - i - i - i - island. Pat Boone Island."*

Beach. . . sand. . . water. . . oh, and the sweet melodies that came not just your lips, but from your heart, I was sure. I spent hours humming your songs and daydreaming as I climbed the craggy jetties of the Long Island Sound. I even forgot about the giant hole in the living room wall I saw one night after yet another fight. Mother had whisked us away but we returned, as always, to deal with the bruised furniture, Mother's silence.

"Now my broken hearts aches with every wave that breaks, over love letters in the sand."

(1960)

CHAPTER THREE

"E-E-E-E,E-E-E-E-E , um um um away

Aweemaway, aweemaway, aweemaway, aweemaway

In the jungle, the quiet jungle, the lion sleeps tonight.

In the jungle, the quiet jungle, the lion sleeps tonight."

Dear Tokens,

I loved escaping to Grandma Peg's for the weekend. Mother usually took us on the train, but we had to ride the subways through the underground jungle of New York City, all the way from from Grand Central to Penn Station at Friday afternoon rush hour. The swarm of people pushing and running every-which-way sucked the air out of my lungs and made me dizzy. Sometimes I worried my hand might slip away from Mother's, so I learned the signs and directions, just in case, but still feared the worst.

Once we were settled into our seats, Mother brought us tuna sandwiches from the club car, and I hummed to myself. *Aweemaway, aweemaway, aweemaway, aweemaway. Aweemaway, aweemaway, aweemaway, aweemaway* I swayed to the pulse and rhythm of the clank-clank, chug-chug and swerved with every curve. "Newark, New Brunswick, Trenton, North Philadelphia, 30th Street Station, Wilmington, Baltimore, Washington D.C.," the conductor chanted.

The rumble of wheels on metal, the sway of the curves, the sudden darkness of tunnels and blast of light drove me deeper into my inner sound track: "*Ee-ee-ee-ee-ee-um-mum away. . .*"

Thanks to the Mary Knoll Magazines I read at Grandma Peg's, I wanted to be a missionary in Africa, but didn't care much for the heavy habits they wore in such a warm climate. I wondered if they were allowed to go swimming, and if so, where, and what did their bathing suits look like.

My friend Eva's mother was French and wore an itsy-bitsy bikini like in the song, but got a bad reputation for it. I thought she was pretty brave.

They called Wilmington "Up South," and my Grandmother had a full time colored maid named Clara, who cooked the best stewed tomatoes. She always put on a hat when she opened the ice box door so she wouldn't catch cold. Her husband Weymon worked outside, and hardly ever came into the house. He hummed Negro spirituals all day long as he tended to the grounds.

"Nobody knows the troubles I've seen." I felt sorry for him and wondered if he ever wanted to go home to Africa, and if his ancestors were slaves. But no one talked about those things.

We made many escapes to Delaware, where the lion couldn't hurt us.

"Hush my darling, don't fear my darling, the lion sleeps tonight."

"Hush my darling, don't fear my darling, the lion sleeps tonight."

(1961)

CHAPTER FOUR

"Say hey Good Lookin' what 'ya got cookin'

How's about cookin' somethin' up with me.

Dear Hank Williams and Kitty Wells,

One early early Saturday morning, my Uncle Ted pulled up in front of our house on his not-so-trusty motorcycle. He'd ridden all the way from Delaware and spent most of Friday night in Greenwich Village, the cultural hub of beatniks, jazz musicians, dope fiends, and chess players like Uncle Ted.

"Hey, good lookin'," he called to me in a twangy voice. It was seven a.m. and I hadn't even brushed my teeth yet. "I got something special for you." And from out of his black leather satchel, he presented me with your LP Hank, "Memorial Album". That slick cowboy hat and apple-cheeked smile invited me into a brand new world. I soon mastered the Alabama drawl. I could yodel up a dead cow back to life and yowl near to crying when I belted out, "Yer cheatin' heart."

I tried, I really tried. Wanted to be the star of the seventh grade class. Wanted to be someone, me, the slightly chubby, unwelcome interloper of the natural order of the Westchester country-clubbing cliques. I hated my new school and trembled every time our English teacher bounded into the room. I could diagram sentences in my sleep, but when it came time to go to the chalkboard, my confidence waned, my pleated skirt askew, and my polyester blouse smelled like cat piss under my arms. I finished drawing my compound-complex roadmap, potholes included. Sister Denise snapped her pointing stick at my mistakes, then smiled. "Good start. Better than most others," she barked, eyes circumnavigating the room like a mosquito looking for someone to bite. I aced every diagram after that, and still got teased (that's what they called it then) by the

old guard. “Oh look, there’s a spot on your sweater,” Irene May yelled for all to hear after she squirted me with ketchup in the cafeteria. I needed an escape plan.

Back home after school, my sister off on her bike and mother at work, after my peanut butter toasts, after my tears and loneliness began to bore me, I sang my heart out, wailing and howling with my newfound twang. On his next visit, Uncle Ted gifted me with your record, Kitty, “Queen of Country Music”. And were you ever a queen to me, so different from the kids at my Catholic, conservative academy. I wanted to become a Southern Baptist, and make myself a gingham dress. Why, I even bought a pattern, but wasn’t allowed to use my sister’s new Singer after I broke the needle on her old one.

Still friendless, every Saturday morning, alone in the house and after watching the latest episode of “Sky King”, I turned off the Zenith television and lifted the lid of the Magnavox, mother’s pride and joy. I played and sang along with “*It wasn’t God who made Honkey Tonk Angels*” so many times that the grooves in the record were in serious danger of disappearing altogether.

Thanks to you, Hank Williams and and Kitty Wells, I found my escape plan: I was going to star at the Grand Old Opry!

“It wasn’t God who made Honkey Tonk angels

As you said in the words of your song

Too many times married men think they’re still single. . .”

(1963)

CHAPTER FIVE

Dear John, Paul, George and Ringo,

One cold Saturday morning in January, my friend Leonore called. “Meet me at the record store. They open in a half hour and there’s gonna be a line.” “Wha. . .?” “You’ll see. This’ll change your life.” She hung up.

When I arrived, I found Leonore standing in front of all the other girls waiting for the listening booth. She happened to live close enough to the record store to get there first. We entered the booth as if it were a shrine. Several other girls squeezed inside, pretending to be our newest best friends. But Leonore had control of the tone arm and the volume.

“Oh yeah, I tell you something I think you’ll understand

When I say that something I wanna hold your hand. . .”

She played that song so loud it rattled the glass window. We listened to it three more times, until the owner tapped on the pane, head shaking, finger pointing to the clock on the wall. We

pretended not to hear him and listened to the B-side,

“Well she was just seventeen, you know what I mean and the way she looked was way beyond compare. So how could I dance with another, ooh, when I saw her standing there.”

That summer, I begged and begged and begged some more until my parents finally agreed to let me go see, *“A Hard Day’s Night.”* After all, I’d gotten good grades at Ursuline, the best high school around. I really didn’t care where I went at this point, since Father told us he was NOT going to be transferred to Switzerland and I would NOT be going to a boarding school. Now there was nowhere to escape except into music, music, music. Your songs helped to muffle the arguments and transported me to another world, a world I knew existed just outside the one I was stuck in until I turned eighteen. They called it “The British Invasion” and were we ever ready for that! I dreamed of living in London and joining the “Mods.” I even bought a pair of white go-go boots with my babysitting money, but those prissy nuns warned me of the evils of looking like a slut and the eternal damnation that followed.

Leonore’s father was going to drive us to White Plains and wait in the car while we filled the theatre with our screams, dizzy and sweaty from the summer heat.

I loved you all, but must admit I was a little scared of you, John, and the power you had over everyone. And George, you were just too skinny for a girl like me, even though you played the

best riffs. I dismissed you, Ringo, because all the girls who liked you the best were goofy and giddy. So it was you, Paul, dreamy-eyed and so cute.

“Well my heart went boom when I crossed that room and I held her hand in mine. . .”

When you shook your head from side to side the way you did, I screamed again and again. And boy could you hit those high notes, which I confess, made my panties a little moist! But the greatest thrill of all, Paul, was the belief that we really COULD change the world! That all you need is love!

(1964)

CHAPTER SIX

Dear Leonard Bernstein,

Mother took me to the New York Philharmonic as a graduation gift. We usually attended Sunday matinees, but on this night, we dolled up, dined out, then made our way uptown to Lincoln Center. She even splurged for parking twice. Stravinsky and Schuller came first, and my eyes fixated on every move you made.

At intermission, Mother lectured me about what I should and shouldn't do at college. I'd heard it all before, so I just smiled, and then I slipped away and wandered about the lobby. I was looking for a secret place to smoke, something mother disapproved of, although she smoked herself! Why was she acting so disagreeable? Why couldn't we just enjoy the music and each other?

Rachmaninoff's piano concerto dominated the second half of the concert, his music and passion creating a whirlpool of images in my head. College. . . freedom. . . discovery. . . love. . . sex. . . wonder. . . all wrapped up in a future that dangled before me.

"Your father and I are getting divorced," Mother announced as we entered the Cross County Expressway. "Finally!" I blurted out. "He's such a. . ."

"A what? Why don't you respect your parents? I've tried so hard to keep this family together, blah, blah, blah. . ." From that point on, her words were muffled syllables. I stared out the rear view mirror reflecting New York City's maze of lights, and cars, and people. Oh, I wanted the music I'd just heard to keep playing, to drown out the the memory, to mute the words I couldn't say to Mother, the truth that had smothered my happiness for the past four years. "Father got on top of me," just wouldn't come out. Neither would, "And you didn't protect me. You ran away to Grandma Peg's every chance you got. And once, when you left me alone again with him for the weekend, he got drunk and. . ." the rest of the story got stuck inside my throat.

“Mommy, mommy,” I wanted to cry and fold myself into her comfort. But she held on to the steering wheel like it was a life preserver. In truth, I didn’t know who she was, and she didn’t have a clue who I was. Mother was so busy working, playing bridge and driving here there and everywhere. . . I thought she would never stop long enough to see what was happening in her own home. The secrets choked me. I couldn’t speak, I could only lose myself in the music.

“How will we survive?” I asked as we reached our exit. “We’ll manage,” Mother said, knuckles white from clutching the wheel. “Could you light me a cigarette?” she asked, her voice shaking. “And help yourself to one..”

(1967)

CHAPTER SEVEN

There’s a high-flyin’ bird, flyin’ way up in the sky

And I wonder if she looks down as she goes on by. . .

Dear Richie Havens,

Your new album “*Mixed Bag*” had just come out. It rattled my bones. I was a mixed bag myself then, a bleary-eyed East coast co-ed with a bent for pathos stuck in boring Saint Louis. One

Friday night I sat in a basement gym at Washington University with about a hundred others as we bounced and bobbed along to your songs; we, the young idealists who might some day change the world (with a little help from the Beatles, of course). You broke five guitar strings with the force of your strumming. And your voice sounded like a lion's roar. Not like the lion I knew at home, though; you were a strong, yet tender lion.

My college had a well-known theatre department, but the real drama was in the story of my Russian Lit professor, a Diplomatic attaché who escaped communism, "in the dead of night, bullets whizzing overhead." I saw myself as the reincarnation of some forlorn countess. People said my high school picture looked like Lara, from Doctor Zhivago. I gave acting a try, but soon I realized I'd spent most of my life wanting to be someone else. Now, I wanted to find out who the real me was. And what better way to do it than through writing. My first protest poem appeared in the local free press.

When April 4th rolled along, I was ensconced in Tolstoy's "War and Peace" and worried about the book report that was due. I'd spent the previous night speed-reading all five hundred and some pages, then planted myself at the Wash U library until closing time. Then I tried to hitch my way back to my own campus. A VW pulled over. It was Tom. From the paper.

"Get in," he said as he opened the door." Martin Luther King's just been assassinated. We're going to the CORE headquarters to do an interview." I gasped, then muttered, "Committee on . . . Ra-racial Equality? Aren't they . . . violent?" "We'll be fine," Tom said.

“Mmmmm, Hey look ‘a yonder tell me what you see

Marching to the fields of Birmingham

Looks like Handsome Johnny w/ his hand rolled in a fist

Marching to the Birmingham War, hey marching to the Birmingham War.”

Richie, the men at the headquarters were less than friendly - not like you. They separated us, then they made me stand at attention in a cold dark room that smelled of coffee and cigarettes, while they drilled me with questions like, “Are you a liberal?” I hesitated. “Yes.” “Do you know what a liberal is?” I stiffened. Someone else said, “A liberal will hang a nigger from a low tree.”

We never got the interview. I was visibly shaken. As we left the building, Tom said, “There’s more to come and you’re not cut out for this. Stick to your poetry and lay low for awhile.” So I did. A week later, some Weathermen blew up a radio tower nearby. Tom disappeared.

(1968)

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Plaisir d’amour, ne dure qu’un moment

Chagrin d’amour dure toute la vie”

Dear Joan Baez,

My best friend in college and I were known as “Sunnie and Stormy.” Stormy’s real name was Jane - a red-headed heiress with more flair for drama than I could ever muster. Then there was me - the singing blonde hippie babe. We paired well musically and dysfunctionally, seeing as how we were both children of chaos. When Stormy told me you’d be visiting Pittsburgh to give a private concert at her stepfather’s coffee house in Shadyside, we flew standby from Saint Louis on the Friday night redeye for \$29.

I’d been weaned on your music throughout high school, Joan, and tried to sound like the bird that flew out of your lungs. When I got my first guitar at sixteen, I learned all your songs. Plaisir D’Amour was one of my faves, especially since after a few years of French in High School I could roll those rrrr’s like I was gargling. Then came the Portuguese,

*“Até Amanha o depois meu amor
sinto miuto nao possoo ficar
e remedio mellor pra nos dois
eu partir e voce esperar”*

. . . and I fell in love with the exotic sound of the language. Some day I’ll learn it, I promised myself.

The night we met, I told you a little bit about myself, that I'd I played the circuit in Greenwich Village, from Bleeker Street to the Bitter End. Someone heard me sing and offered me a recording contract with Vanguard Records. You said I should leave school and pursue my career. Follow my path.

I wanted to drop out, be free. But when Father said he'd rather rot in jail than pay alimony to my mother, she insisted that he at least pay for my college education. He agreed, and that was the end of all of his contact with me.

When I returned for my second year of college, I learned that plane flew on to San Francisco. We landed in Saint Louis. I sat frozen in my seat for an extra minute or two, with a check for five hundred dollars made out to me. I held it so tightly it began to crumple. This was supposed to pay for my lodging. "Saint Louis, San Francisco. . . hmm. What if I stay on the plane? . . ."

But I wasn't ready. I wasn't strong enough. I didn't know who I was, not yet. That was clear to me. And I couldn't do that to Mother.

"Plaisir D'Amour, ne dure q'un moment

Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie... ."

(1969)

CHAPTER NINE

“Jennifer Juniper lives upon the hill.”

Dear Donovan,

You were my Innisfree, my refuge, while all around me the castle walls were crumbling. It was a time of war, revolution, and uncertainty. You sang to my spirit, of my spirit, described that vague, mist-filled lake where I belonged: far, far from reality. I was Jennifer Juniper. I wore my love like heaven. Everything was Mellow Yellow, since my boyfriend introduced me to grass, the portal to another world, the world of unleashed imagination.

He was an artist, with wild chestnut hair, paint-splattered jeans and tender eyes that begged forgiveness; I didn't know why, but it didn't matter. I loved the smell of paint that seeped from his skin. We held hands, we jumped in mud puddles; he climbed trees and sketched as I wrote poems. When I went home for the summer, he wrote love letters on the back of pictures he drew for me.

The New York heat was unbearable, my mother's apartment too small, and I had nowhere to swim, to rinse away the sweat. But I found comfort in your music, Donovan. Mother and I fought so much. One night she called Father out of the blue. “I'm sending your daughter to you. I can't handle her any more,” she said. He'd been completely out of our lives for over a year.

When I arrived in Wilmington, he told me it would be fine to live with him and his new family in their dark cavern of a house, but I had to sever all ties with Mother and the rest of the family. I

never unpacked. I took the next train back to New York and crashed at my cousin Mary's tiny studio in the city until Mother came and got me. At her insistence, I saw a psychiatrist. But I refused to talk.

When I got back to St. Louis, I discovered why my sweetheart's eyes looked the way they did. He was already engaged to someone else when we met. Now all I had to cling to was your bucolic images, Donovan, and the lilting ballads, enhanced by more and more grass. I floated in the welcomed vagueness until. . . I burned my flesh with a cigarette on a daily basis. I swallowed cheese sandwiches whole, and stopped talking altogether. Mother flew out to St. Louis after the doctors told her I should be committed. I refused. I was eighteen. She left. I took the pills they gave me and slept for three days.

"Way down below the ocean, where I wanna be, she may be. . ."

When I woke up, I heard voices coming out of the walls, saw spirits roaming the dormitory halls. I walked day and night and wandered the streets, taking different turns. I knew every crack in the sidewalks, how many steps in every block. Your songs played over and over and over again in my head. Finally, I could cry.

"In the chilly hours & minutes of uncertainty I want to be

In the warm hold of your lovin' mind

To feel you all around me & to take your hand along the sand,

Ah but I may as well try and catch the wind."

(1970)

CHAPTER TEN

Dear Bette Midler,

A college friend of mine's older brother had connections in New York. I was home for the summer, so he brought me to a downstairs dive to show me how to "break in" to the business.

"Just remember" he said, as he sipped on his whiskey neat, "you've gotta wow them." I'd heard about the "it" factor, but I wasn't really sure what "it" was. Or if I even had "it."

The piano player came over to our table and asked what song I wanted to sing. I saw a twenty pass hands. "Somewhere My Love? Doctor Zhivago was my favorite mo--"

"Sure sweetie. We'll call you up." He cupped the bill and left.

I went on first - kiss of death. As soon as he started to play, I knew it was in the wrong key. I gave him that "help me" look, but he just kept going, so I continued, squeaking out the song in the highest soprano voice I could muster. I heard scant applause, then ran to the bathroom to hide. How could I forget to tell him my key?

When I finally returned, you stepped on the the stage, Bette, like it was Carnegie Hall, and you wowed the audience with a blustering version of, “Honkey Tonk Women,” and got a standing ovation. My confidence flew up the stairs and out the door on to the upper West side. The next singer, a very handsome black man with very tight pants, placed a stool at the edge of the stage, and made his voice sound like a flute, then a guitar. I finally caught my breath and ducked into the the ladies room again, only to find you there. Your nose the height of my boobs, you looked me over and nodded approval. “Here to sing?” you asked.

“Uh-huh. I- I went first.”

“Uh. . . missed it, sorry.” You smiled at me. “You’re pretty. But pretty won’t make you famous. Do something different.” Then you smacked your bright red lips on the mirror. I stood right next to you, but could hardly see my own image.

“Like that guy out there who sounds like a flute?”

“Yeah, Al Jarreau. Hmmm. He’s different, all right.” You winked, then growled.

You weren’t very pretty, but you sure wowed them, us, me. What was I missing besides choosing the right song, singing it in the right key, and having that “it” factor? Sure, they loved me in the local St. Louis coffee houses, but this was New York.

“Gotta run.” You propped up your boobs. “Big time gig at the Baths. Wish me luck,” you said, and wiggled around for a minute. Then you strutted out of that bathroom like you owned the world I felt like a squatter in.

“But you gotta have friends, the feeling’s oh so strong

You got to have friends, to make that day last long”

(1970)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“A long, long time ago, I can still remember how that music used to make me smile. And I knew if I had my chance that I could make those people dance and maybe they’d be happy for awhile.”

Dear Don McLean,

I had just finished the first hour singing at my “pitch”, a good place to play, on Portobello Road in London, and took a stroll. According to the unwritten law of street singers, or “Buskers” as we were called, if someone else was waiting for that pitch, you had to step away for at least an hour. So I packed up my trusty autoharp, “Ezmarelda,” and headed for Ceres grain shop restaurant. They had the cheapest macrobiotic food in town. I took a seat among among fellow buskers, hippies and Hare Krishna dropouts. I’d never have admitted it but every evening, on my way back to cousin Mary’s flat, I indulged in a diet coke and a tube of Rolos. But for now a bowl of rice would do. I smothered my measly meal with soy sauce and took a bite. A song I hadn’t heard before streamed in from the radio in the kitchen, a catchy tune.

“Bye bye Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry.”

“Number One on the Hit Parade,” an American guy said and smiled as he sat down next to me.

“Hey, I heard you singing at the market. You’re pretty good!” “Thanks. Who’s the guy on the

radio?” “Oh, it’s Don McClean. Great stuff, isn’t it?” I knew he wasn’t talking about the food.

Could it really be YOU, Don? I ran back to Mary’s and asked her about the song. Yes, she told

me, it was really you. Just released. Big hit in the states. Oh my goodness! Our mothers played

bridge together, and once when I came home from college with my guitar, you taught me how to

finger-pick the Leonard Cohen song, “Suzanne.”

“Something touched me deep inside the day the music died.”

February third, 1959. That was the day I sensed that the world as I knew it would never be the same. We lost Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper, the soundtrack of my nightly pleasure. I wept.

I cried a lot in London too, mostly from the bone-chilling dampness and cold, my forever hunger, and the darkness that lasted all winter. Some days I never emerged from the miles and miles of tube tunnels and where I would jump the exit turnstiles to get out without paying. I sang, I rode, I waited for my “pitch”. My scuffed wooden clogs hurt my feet, and the green suede jacket Mary gave me was worn thin. I’d sold my return ticket to New York for a hundred dollars, so there was no turning back. I was an official ex-pat, and didn’t want to live in America any more. I was

disillusioned, and afraid; distrustful my of my government. And when my cousin Jerry was killed in Viet Nam, I said goodbye to American Pie.

“They were singin’ Bye Bye Miss American Pie. . .”

(1971)

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dear Joan Baez . . . again,

This might sound crazy, but your music got me out of jail in Paris! I was crashing at a friend’s apartment near the Arc du Triumph, the perfect jumping off spot to the Metro stop at Étoile.

Annie worked in an office and left early, so I had the tiny mansard flat all to myself most of the day. The smell of old wood and coffee filled my senses as I climbed the five flights of stairs, which kept me fit. After a month, Paris already felt like home. My French was improving, I’d made a few friends, and had a routine: a light breakfast - café au lait, an apple, and the remains of Annie’s baguette smeared with cheese - followed by hours of writing and practicing new songs on Ezmarelda, then off I trotted.

The Metro strike was over, a welcomed relief because the cooler temps of late September made outdoor playing difficult. A fellow busker told me about the best spot in Paris: Châtelet Les

Halles. I found a great “pitch”, opened my case, propped up the “Merci” sign, and began to play. The cavernous entrance provided an echo extraordinaire. Thirty minutes into my set, the case was almost full with what looked like several hundred francs, about eighty US dollars. In France, Joan, folks didn’t just pass by the buskers. They stayed and listened. I counted about twenty people clustered around me until suddenly:

Five or six gendarmes came trotting down the stairs blowing their whistles. The crowd stirred. I froze. “*Les flicks*”, as the French called them, approached me and spouted off something legal-sounding, something about a permit. One of them closed the case, patted it, and held it to his side. I hugged Ezmarelda. Another gendarme took my passport, then my elbow, and led me up the stairs and out of the station while the crowd hissed and booed. I took a bow. The halls echoed with applause.

I rode with the gendarmes in the back of a paddy wagon. One of them offered me a cigarette; another one, chewing gum.”*Vous chantez tres bien, mademoiselle!*” I decided at that point, I didn’t speak French. I used the old “I don’t understand” gesture. A third one offered me some popcorn from a paper cone. Right, pop corn and gum. I settled for a cigarette. When we arrived at the station, I sat at a long wooden table surrounded by my captors, still clutching Ezmarelda. Dried out drunks and bums stared at me from behind bars, their stench wafting through the room. I had visions of deportation. I couldn’t afford a ticket home. Mother thought I was still in Amsterdam.

Finally, someone important-looking came in and sat down, a little too close, and examined my passport. He said, “Je suis le Capitain. Vouz comprenez, Mademoiselle ?” I shrugged again like I didn’t understand. He continued, “I am ze sheriff of Texas, bang bang.” I blinked. “You can play a song en Francaise please?”

“Then will you let me go?” He nodded. The gendarmes nodded. The drunks and bums nodded.

Joan, I played your song, Plaisir D’Amour and rolled those r’s like a real Parisienne. Everyone applauded. The gendarme who had been guarding my bulging case handed it over with a smile, and escorted me out of the station while everyone waved, calling, “Au revoire, mademoiselle. See you on ze television!”. Then my escort told me in broken English that I should play my beautiful musique on the Left Bank from now on, that I wouldn’t get busted there. I said, “Merci.” He bowed and kissed my hand.

(1972)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“So far away, doesn’t anybody stay in one place anymore. . .”

Dear Carole King,

As I walked through the fields of the Loire Valley in France, I played your song, "So Far Away" on my little cassette. My daydreams floated beyond the bright yellow carpet of mustard as its light splashed silence into the late afternoon shadows. Memories of home, so far away, a heart drained of comfort, I welcomed the oncoming unknown. Lanes of lavender framed the hillsides, its fragrance an elixir, an invitation. I ambled on, filled with a longing I will never forget.

Those days, nobody stayed in one place very long. We were the explorers, the travelers, the draft dodgers, the American Expressers, the buskers; kids who glommed together according to taste in music, art and poetry, and how long we could stretch out our freedom run until the real world came calling.

*"One more song about moving along the highway,
can't say much of anything that's new. . . "*

We were on our way in a VW van to San Tropez to wow the French and German tourists with our music and camp out in the vineyards for the summer. Everything was long - - our hair, our dresses, our songs, our nights. There was Bruce, the barefoot alpha male from Berkeley who chanted "Zapatos no buenos", and played rhythm guitar while his Danish girl, a seventeen-year-old beauty, wise beyond her years and frightfully sexual, cooed. Charles and Maurice, the inseparable duo on percussion and percussion. Galloises cigarettes hanging from their bottom lips, they tried their worst to act straight. And Marc, Marc, Marc, the brooding Jean Paul Belmondo, could slide his fingers along the fretboard like a dancing dervish. Oh, we fought all

the time, mostly about song choices, arrangements, and his poor treatment of women, not to mention the ripe odor that trailed him like the steam from a train. I was the lead singer, the American fresh-out-of-college chick, easy on the eye and plump from wild abandon for Camembert cheese and pastries.

“Travelin’ round sure gets me down and lonely

Nothin’ else to do but close my mind

I sure hope the road don’t come to own me...”

I wanted the road to own me, Carol, to set me free. You wanted someone to be there at your door. I had no door, no plans, just the open road and thousands of mustard flowers before me. I was the one who went so far away. And for a brief moment, I was home.

(1972)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She packed my bags last night pre-flight, zero hour 9am

And I’m gonna be high as a kite by then. . .

Dear Elton John,

Zero hour was approaching. I was out of rocket fuel, out of sorts, and had just enough money for a one-way ticket home. I'd kept it stashed away, in case Joe ever hit me. Oh, he came close, and might as well have; his belittling words and bullying left scars that would take a long, long time to heal.

Joe was German and we lived in Munich over the winter, where I took a job as a checkout cashier at Hertie's department store in the "Lebensmittel Abteilung," or the grocery department. I'd learned just enough German to get by, but the real trial by fire came on the job, where every rule ever invented was applied. I ate so much wurst and pretzels that my clothes hardly fit any more.

Joe held the purse-strings and also held me hostage. I was the girl singer in his band, and played the foil to his bawdy behavior. I was also a handy travel companion who spoke enough French to beg for money, when we played at outdoor cafes and at the harbor in San Tropez in the summer. We lived out of a Ford Transit van we named after your song, Elton: "Country Comfort."

I started losing weight and looked pretty good, but Joe practically force-fed me so wouldn't attract other men. I stood silent as Joe abused pills, pot, and alcohol; then came the tirades, which I'd learned to put up with as a child, so it was nothing new.

We returned to Munich for the cold, grey winter. I took hours-long walks in the English Garden, and met an American named Steve, a GI stationed near Munich. He kept good me company

while Joe worked all kinds of crazy hours, or so he said. I brought my new friend home for dinner one night and he didn't last one hour after Joe started in on him with his insults. And that "I'll get you later" glare he used on me. In truth, Steve wanted me to take me back to the states with him. One night I tried to leave but Joe wouldn't let go of my suitcase. My passport was inside. I stayed, then fell into a depression that wrapped itself around me like a straight jacket.

"Don't let the sun go down on me. . ."

(1973)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dear Mel Brooks,

You probably don't remember me, but our little tete-a-tete is tattooed into my memory. I was living back in the sates after four years in Europe and so sick of the cold winters that I decided to try my luck in southern California, Hollywood, to be exact.

My friend Ro worked at Fox, and we had just had lunch at the commissary. I always dressed well when I went on the lot, and wore a French twist to tone down that big hair look; and a ruffled blouse with shoulder pads and high collar, adorned with my lucky charm broach. I was ready to meet any mogul who passed my way. You stopped me dead in my tracks with: "Nice broach!

Where'd you get it?" "Maggie Sweeney," I answered. "My Grandmother." "Well, next time you see her, tell her hi." "I can't just yet. She's dead," I didn't know what else to say! "Then I guess it'll be awhile," you said, and I stood there with my mouth wide open!

I suppose Ro introduced us at that point, but all I remember was feeling like a teenager who couldn't stop jumping up and down. Something like, "Stop by my office some time," or or maybe even, "Nice to meet you," came out of your mouth, but all I heard was the gwaah, gwaah, gwaah, like what Snoopy hears when humans talk.

Ro advised me to drop it off my resumé and my 8X 10 next time I was on the lot. She heard you might be casting for a new movie. All I had to show for myself was an industrial, a cabaret club, a play, some writing credits. And with all the brush strokes the photographer added to my photo, I looked all of eighteen when I was already thirty.

I waited a few days, not to seem too eager, though I was desperately and so far unsuccessfully trying to break into the business. Four more years had just flown by, and I was still jobbing it to pay the rent. I knocked on every door I could. Enhance the resume; look good at all times; try to be at the right parties, the "in" restaurants. Forget about all the big wigs who tried to bed me. I was sure you wouldn't, though, Mel; that Anne Bancroft was plenty enough for you.

I finally got the nerve to face your receptionist, aka "guard dog the gate," and left a note with my glossy that read: "From Maggie Sweeney's Granddaughter," before I was shooed away. The

very next afternoon, I was sitting at my kitchen table sipping a cup of tea when the phone rang. I let the answering machine pick up, but as soon as I heard your voice say, “Is this Maggie Sweeney’s Granddaughter?”, I grabbed the receiver, thankfully without spurting out, “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.” When I started breathing again, we had the nicest little chat, and then you told me that you weren’t casting but would keep me in mind, if ever. . . gwaah, gwaah, gwaah. . .

Thanks, Mel, for treating me with kindness, something Hollywood seldom affords girls like me.

“Springtime for Hitler and Germany. . .”

(1982)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“When you meet somebody for the first time

There are special things you’re supposed to say

Which you may not mean but they sound polite as can be. . .”

Dear Carmen McRae,

I went to hear my friend Bill Henderson, who was singing at Carmelo's jazz club in the Valley. I'd already finished my second wine spritzer, and had brought just enough money to pay my tab and leave a decent tip. Hopefully ADD: Lady Blue, my trusty 1966 Dodge Dart, had enough gas in her to get me home. You made your entrance and took a seat right up front - I was sitting at the bar. Bill gave you a big smile, and dedicated a song to you. . .

"That Old Black Magic has me in its spell. . ."

Times were tough for me then. Recently dumped by the one who got away, and trying to break into the music scene, my life felt more like a country and western song than a jazz riff. And since I didn't play an instrument, I was regarded as just another girl singer. There were plenty of us in L.A., but I did my best to make the rounds. Bill was a gentleman, and didn't try to hit on me, like most others.

I confess, Carmen, I always voted for Ella when the local jazz station had a favorites call-in. DeeJay Chuck Niles' bedroom voice echoed throughout my little apartment late at night. Chuck and I even dated for a while. Also a gentleman, he could have done big things for me, introduced me to all the right people. But I couldn't fool myself, or him just to get ahead. Never did, never will. Someone told me, "Wait 'til your pitch drops," but that wouldn't happen for another twenty years. So I took to writing lyrics, collaborating with anyone who had a melody that needed words. And jazz players were notorious for that. I always carried a cassette tape of home-made

demos in my purse “just in case” I ever met anyone who might be interested in recording one of my songs.

So Carmen, when Bill introduced us in the back parking lot at three o’clock that morning, all I could say was “um, uh, uh. . .” You leaned in close as I fingered the cassette in my pocket. You smiled like my mother did when she knew I was up to something.

“Are you a songwriter, honey?” were your kind words. I handed you the cassette. You nodded and smiled. I never did hear back from you, and I’m okay with that. I guess after all these years, now’s my chance to say thank you, Carmen. Thank you for your kindness, your strong but gentle voice. It gave me strength to carry on, because now I can answer your question with a simple “yes.”

“Happy to make your acquaintance. . .”

(1985)

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dear Caetano Veloso,

You looked like a beautiful woman, sitting there at the bar in Rio, wearing heavy eye make up and a billowy white blouse. My friend, Baby Consuelo, also a celebrity, introduced us and you gave me that kiss-kiss on both cheeks, I could feel the blood pulsing through my veins, but tried to remain composed. All the music that surrounded me there in Rio had my head spinning. Concerts, recording studios, private parties, chauffeurs. . . could life get any more exciting? And when I was offered a job singing at one of the most prestigious jazz clubs in town, I accepted without hesitation. Before I left I made a Macumba, a spiritual offering, to Iemanjá, Goddess of the Sea, placing flowers in the water as I hummed one of your tunes. But she shares responsibility for the ocean with another god, Olokun, who rules the dark and turbulent depths. There were forces waiting to get their grip on me, and I ignored all the signs: missing jewelry, nightmares, and unfamiliar smells.

I returned to Brazil a month later, with the perfect wardrobe, a satchel of sheet music, and the feeling that this was going to be my big breakthrough. But when I gathered the house band to rehearse, they said they didn't need charts. The drummer left after two songs to go surfing, and the piano player was already drunk on caipirinhas, a wicked drink of over 40-proof cachaça, sugar and lime. On my opening night, the set began at one a.m.

The band's first song lasted over thirty minutes, so I was left to squeeze in all the songs I could fit into in fifteen minutes with musicians who really didn't want to play for a chick singer in the first place.

The woman who introduced me to Brazilian music had brought me there as my agent/manager. But soon, she would disappear for days, leaving me alone in a high rise on the beach far from town. Oh, it was beautiful, Caetano; but I had no transport, knew little Portuguese, and wouldn't get paid until the end of the month.

One night, after the gig and the long taxi ride home at five a.m., I decided to put up a poster of Chico Buarque. His music put me in a world of happiness, frivolity, and samba, samba, samba. I stood up on the couch and lost my balance. Music stops. As I fell, my arm hit the glass coffee table. I spun around and landed on the floor, dislocating my elbow so badly that it almost protruded from my upper arm. I lay alone, naked, at six a.m., but managed to call the front desk. My porter - the boy who carried my bags to the taxis every night - came to the door, averted his eyes, dressed me, and rode with me to the hospital where I was told I needed immediate surgery. "Dona Mary," the boy said to me later, "you must be a great singer indeed. You woke up all the fish on Ipanema Beach with your screams!"

I returned to the states in a wheelchair, clutching the baggie with the remains of my elbow, only to endure five more surgeries and years of physical therapy. The pain has stayed with me, even until today.

*"Quiet nights of quiet stars,
quiet chords from my guitar. . ."*

But when I hear the music, Caetano, I am again transported into that world of beauty and enchantment.

(1988)

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Please baby can't you see my mind's a burning hell

I got races a ripping and tearin' and strippin' my heart apart as well. . .

Dear Melissa Etheridge,

My best buddy Larry invited me to a party at your house. He'd met you and Julie at Fox studios where he worked - - - and held court, I might add. We called him the "Duchess of Sweetzer" - the street he lived on in West Hollywood; and did he ever live up to his name, with his Friday night cocktail parties and more. . . . And now another party.

"I don't know if I'd fit in," I said. "Oh, so what if you're not gay. You're gay-friendly." He handed me a White Russian. "I love these drinks, but I'd rather have the real thing, if you know what I mean." I took a sip and almost choked it was so strong. "Besides, I came to your Ladies' tea, didn't I?" "Yes, because you passed." "Oh, just put on some sensible shoes and come." The party was fun, but you got called away, Melissa, so we didn't meet then.

Larry, Larry, Larry. Oh he had some of the best lines I ever heard. Like the time when too many people showed up at his house one Friday night, and he miraculously fed everyone. “Give a queen a bunsen burner and she’ll make hors d’oeuvres for a hundred.”

Once, when he knew he was going to get fired from a previous job, I told him to go in there in his best duds and be divinely polite. The CEO remarked on how nice he looked in his Yves St. Laurent suit, and Larry responded with, “What did you expect, basic black and a veil?”

Oh, Melissa, he adored you. He danced around his house to your music, while he dusted with his apron on. He loved Hollywood, and all the trimmings. We frequented local dance clubs, attended what screenings we could get invited to, and wore our best outfits everywhere we went. He always let me know when I had lipstick on my teeth or needed to fix my hair.

Then we started to lose people. First Jerry, then Bill, and more followed. Too many funerals. And the whispers, the waiting to see who’s next. Gentle Jerry went home to die and his parents slipped his meals under his door on a paper plate. Bill dwindled down to eighty-five pounds. Jackson finally admitted he was bisexual, and all the girls he’d slept with lined up at the clinics to get tested.

When you got Larry those front row seats at one of your concerts, Melissa, he was so happy! Oh, he cried when he told me all about it and the song you dedicated to him:

“But I’m the only one who’ll walk across the fire for you. And I’m the only one who’ll drown in my desire for you. . .”

Then he started to lose his hair from chemo. But he spiked what little he had left and said, “Like it? It’s my Bart Simpson look.” We laughed away so many tears. He even framed the letter he got from Liz Taylor on her purple stationary, and made sure to mention Project Angel Food in his funeral program. Remember, Melissa? He printed out programs! I sang, “How Great Thou Art” and That’s What Friends Are For” at the church service.

Afterwards, only those of us on the A-list, with gold-embossed invitations, got on to the Fox lot, where we planted a rose bush in his honor. We stood in the light drizzle on that chilly November afternoon. You played your twelve-string and sang a song, ignoring the rain, your eyes closed, your voice so soft. We hugged and hardly spoke, but we didn’t need words.

“Come to my window. Crawl inside, wait by the light of the moon. Come to my window, I’ll be home soon. . .”

(1984- 1992)

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I’ll Be Seeing You in all the old familiar places

That this heart of mine embraces all day through. . .”

Dear Rosemary Clooney,

Mother once told me introduced me to you while I was still in her womb, when music permeated our little apartment all day long. She couldn't get enough of those sentimental songs, when romance waited around every corner, or in every GI dance hall. She'd been a sergeant in the Women's Army Corps, and met Father met in New Guinea (she outranked him). They married in Manila, and held their reception in an old sewing machine factory. "We had to pick the bugs out of the wedding cake," she once quipped.

I guess Mother's introduction explains my love for the tender ballads, the swinging big bands, and that jazzy feeling that makes you snap your fingers and bob your head. Even if the world around you is falling apart, even if everything you ever dreamed was only that - a dream.

A lifetime of dreams has come and gone, some pleasant, others. . . well, that's life, isn't it? My only regret is that it took so long for Mother and me to become such good friends. "You finally chilled out," I once told her when I was in my forties. "And you finally grew up," she retorted. Then we both laughed. We didn't hug much. That wasn't her way.

Years later, I found myself wheeling Mother around on a balmy, South Carolina January morning, kissing her again and again, her cheeks, her forehead, her hands, her lovely hands. She waved them in the air like a conductor and tried to sing, but it all sounded like jibberish.

“You can’t take her outside,” the nurse chided. “It’ll kill her.” The stroke would surely end her life sooner than later; she’d refused a feeding tube. I shrugged, and wrapped the blankets around her, then pushed on.

Mother couldn’t speak, but pointed to the Spanish moss dripping from the live oaks. Too early for magnolias, the morning’s crisp scent of palmetto and sweet gum reminded me of one of her favorite quotes: “If winter comes, can Spring be far behind.” Sparrows and warblers accompanied us as we roamed the grounds, and I sang to her, “*I’ll Be Seeing You*”, then continued to fill her ears and heart with every song I could think of that I remembered from the womb. I stopped short when “*Skylark*” caught in my throat, but she hummed along until I could resume. We both chuckled over, “*Don’t Get Around Much Anymore.*”

Thank you Rosemary, for giving us these songs, these memories, and the tenderness that warmed Mother’s final days

(2004)

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Poets often use many words to say a simple thing

It takes thought & time & rhyme to make a poem sing

With music and words I’ve been playing. . .”

Dear Tony Bennett,

You hardly noticed me at the Art gallery in Carmel. I thought I’d stand out in my royal blue dress and shimmering gold shawl, but found myself buried among all the other finely-tuned and well-coiffed ladies who were waiting to buy your art.

Tony, I wanted to have a few words with you, to tell you how meaningful your music had been to me all my life. When I was in high school, I used to take my little transistor radio to bed and listen to a show called “Pillow Talk” late into the night. Your songs filled me with images of love and anything that would help me escape the bitter reality of my parents’ troubles, transferring to my third high school, and thoughts of dying slowly from loneliness. I had zero control over my life; and when I was sent to live with my Grandmother I felt like a stranger in paradise. But you rescued me.

Years later, when I began my jazz singing days, I took instruction from you phrasing, and how you told the story instead of just singing notes. You never let your voice get in the way. You delivered, over and over again.

And I'll never forget that thrilling performance you gave at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the night before your gallery opening. I thought I'd never get to be on the roster. I just wasn't well-known enough.

But, Lady Luck appeared when I ran into an old friend and writing partner from L.A.. I hadn't seen him in ten years. He just happened to be playing at one of the Grounds stages, and invited me to sit in with him. He was drunk as usual, and we didn't get to rehearse, so I would rate my performance. . . at about B minus. But it was the big time, and now it could go on my resume. I hung around all day wearing my my "Artist" button and found a seat in the seventh row of the main stage arena. It was late, cold, and foggy, as usual. You warmed us up with a few favorite standards, and when the first few bars of "Fly me to the Moon" began, the clouds parted.

"Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars. . . ."

And a bright bright yellow full moonlit up the sky.

"Let me see what Spring is like on Jupiter and Mars. . . ."

Some day, if we ever do get the chance to meet, Tony, I'll thank you and let you kiss my hand and assure me it was your pleasure.

"Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise, all lost in a wonderland. . ."

(2012)

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Darling you can count on

'til the sun dries up the sea

Until then I'll always be Devoted to You

I'll be yours through endless time. . ."

Dear Mary Anne,

Let me introduce myself, not that you don't know me already. I am the light that guides you, the truth behind every song you've ever heard - or sung. Music has been your anchor in that sea of chaos we call life. All the people you wrote letters to held some kind of promise; an escape, hope, comfort - all reminders of the soundtrack of your life. The glittering lure of fame and fortune didn't snag you, and maybe it's just as well.

You are one of the lucky ones. You survived your father's abuse, your first husband's bullying, economic distress. But you kept going, didn't you. No regrets, you say? How'd that happen?

I found my song, my voice, my comfort. . . from the East coast to the Midwest to Europe and Brazil and back, finally settling along the craggy shoreline of California; and on the enchanted island of Maui, I bathe in the clear blue waters, sway to the lilt of the slack key guitar, and the fluid motion of hula hands have cast their spell on me

Maui, where my spirit sings, where music surrounds me, in the parks, on the beaches, in cafés. I stroll along the water's edge with the love of my life, my rock, the one who stayed. We pass by the turtle sanctuary, as the calm breath of wind on palm trees whispers a song only I can understand. I have loyal friends who have lifted me up from the depths of despair, who have rocked me in their arms when I needed comfort. Every wrinkle can talk story. I have many. I am happy.

Then carry on. Sing, sing to your heart's fulfillment, sing to the birds, the forest, the heavens, and to your mother (she's still listening).

Sing away the blues, the misfortunes, and the pain. Sing in your car, in your living room, in the early morning, late at night in the close comfort of your love. Sing with him, sing with your sisters, sing in nature's beauty. In prayer. I am your song.