

Sometimes something important is seeded in our youth, but takes decades to come to fruition. A palette and a canvas is set up in a room in our imagination, but we don't find the paintbrush for 35 years.

I went on the road with my father the day after I graduated from St. Bonaventure High School in Ventura, California. I got a bunk on his tour bus, marched through airports with him and his entourage, frequented used bookstores in nearly every town we visited (his passion, which became one of mine), and went from the Iowa fairgrounds to the Swiss Alps and back again. I began writing songs then, and composing music to accompany the awkward poems I had been writing since I was a pre-teen. And every night I sat in the wings while he performed, curious about the subtleties of his relationship with his audience, deconstructing the emotional map of that forged kinship for myself, and learning about what it meant to respect your audience, to honor their faith in you, to show up, to surrender to the spotlight while keeping your skills sharp enough to manage and mold the energy in the room from the far corners of the auditorium to the front row. After a couple of years, I started to get restless. I wanted to grow up and move out of my parent's orbit. I moved to London for six months, returned to Tennessee to go to college, then moved back to California to enroll in the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute in Hollywood.

Early in that two year tour, in the back of the bus one day, my dad was strumming his guitar while I was sitting near him. He played a song and I asked what it was. He looked alarmed. ‘You don’t know that song? Do you know this one?’ He played another. It wasn’t familiar. His voice took on an urgency. ‘If you are going to be a songwriter, you have to know these songs.’ He found a yellow legal pad and a pen and wrote across the top of the page, ‘One Hundred Essential Country Songs’. His face took on an intensity, and he began to write. He sometimes paused for a long moment, looking into space, thinking of the next song. In my memory, I still see that look on his face so clearly. I went to the front of the bus, came back, and he was still working on it. An hour or so went by. He finally put down his pen, and handed me the sheet of paper. ‘This is your education,’ he said.

It was. It is.

There were songs from every part of the roots music canon: early folk songs, history songs, protest songs, Appalachian narrative ballads, Delta blues and Southern gospel songs, 1950’s country radio hits, Hank Williams to Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Don Gibson to the Carter Family. I saved that list for the next 35 years, taking it with me in my boxes of letters and memorabilia, wherever I moved—to London, Los Angeles, Nashville, and New York City. In all honesty, I forgot I had it.

A few months before my dad died, I was going through my papers, and I came across the list—his large printed

letters in black ink still strong on the yellow legal pad page: 'One Hundred Essential Country Songs'. I showed it to my husband, John, and I put it away again.

A few years later, after my dad's death, I was thinking about making an album of cover songs, and John said, 'The only album of covers you should make is of songs from that list.'

We went through the list. Some songs were clearly unsuited for me to sing— 'The Ballad of New Orleans', or Jimmie Rodgers' 'Waiting for a Train' seemed too incongruous for me to pull off with any authenticity. But others— 'Take These Chains From My Heart', '500 Miles', 'Motherless Children', 'Girl From the North Country'— were like jewels waiting to be tried on. Some songs intimidated me because of past iconic interpretations by great artists. In fact, I argued with John about whether I should include 'She's Got You' because Patsy Cline's interpretation was so deeply seared in my musical consciousness that I couldn't imagine the level of hubris it would require for me to approach the song with any sense of ownership. John, coaxing me along as he produced the album, convinced me to try it, and in the vocal booth, I sent a prayer and a plea to Patsy, asking for her blessing. She seemed to say, 'Go ahead. You do you.'

We released the album *The List* on October 6, 2009, six years after my dad's death and thirty-six years after he created an ad hoc document of what he called 'my education'. But it was more than a document— it was a legacy, an heirloom, a piece of his DNA, and also a piece of mine.

Two months before he died, shortly after finding the list in my box of memorabilia, I was visiting him at his home in Nashville. He was very ill. My stepmother had died two months before, and his grief and illness had obliterated his energy and spirit, and his ability to think cohesively. He was distracted by physical and emotional pain. A documentary was being made about Appalachia and a small film crew was at the house to film a short interview with us about *The Carter Family* and their music. He gathered all his strength to sit in the living room in front of the cameras. We started talking when the cameras rolled, and I reminded him that he had made me a list of songs when I was 18 years old and that he had written 'One Hundred Essential Country Songs' at the top of the page. He seemed dazed, and as if he didn't quite comprehend what I was saying.

'I did?' He said. 'What was on it?'

Let me remind you.