



MARK PEARSON  
MUSIC

## Vashon Island

I

*When you're weary feeling small  
When tears are in your eyes I will dry them all  
I'm on your side oh when times get rough  
And friends just can't be found  
Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down  
Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down*

That's the first verse of *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. I remember hearing that song for the first time in the winter of 1970 when I was in San Francisco with The Brothers Four recording an album that included a song I had written called *I Will Be There*. I was driving alone in a rental car on an unfamiliar street when I first heard that rich piano sound followed by Art Garfunkel's calming voice, *When You're weary, feeling small...* I pulled over and let the simplicity and power and wonder of that song pour over me.

As a songwriter that song still moves and inspires and haunts me. An understandably amazing song and phenomenal recording I think part of its endless allure is that when I heard it I was a twenty-two year old kid who that same week for the first time was having one of my songs recorded, so I listened not simply as a fan but as someone suddenly able to imagine myself creating something (dare I say) similar.

There's a story that speaks to the power of inspiration and awe-inspiring excellence about a young artist studying Flemish painters. Someone asks her what she thinks of Rembrandt and Rembrandt's near contemporary, Frans Hals.

"Oh, Frans Hals," she says, "he is so good he inspires me to pick up my brushes and paint and paint. And then I see Rembrandt's work," she sighs, "he is good on a different level, he makes me consider breaking my brushes and never painting again."

Through the years *Bridge Over Troubled Water* has inspired me as a songwriter at times to want to write and write, at other times to put down my guitar and fountain pens and never write again. In a way that song and what it represents has become my personal Moby Dick, something I continue to search for and chase after as a songwriter. And while I may never have found my whale I've found my way.

II

*When you're down and out when you're on the street  
When evening falls so hard I will comfort you  
I'll take your part oh when darkness comes  
And pain is all around  
Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down  
Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down*

Writing songs and the business of songwriting are not the same thing. Beginning in 1885 the business of songwriting was centered in New York City specifically

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Manhattan, first on West 28th between 5th and 6th in what became known as Tin Pan Alley, and then starting in the 30's when radio and the phonograph supplanted sheet music as the driving forces of popular music, the business started moving uptown to places like the Brill Building, 1619 Broadway, as well as nearby buildings like 1650 Broadway that was built specifically as a headquarters for musicians going so far as to put the front door at the side of the building because at that time laws restricted musicians from entering buildings from the front.

Before artists like Bob Dylan, The Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel began selling lots of records with songs they'd written, singing and songwriting were considered primarily separate crafts. Often the most successful songwriters in the 1950's and early 60's were teams like Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller with songs like *Hound Dog*, *Jailhouse Rock*, and *Kansas City*, Burt Bacharach and Hal David writing songs like *Only Love Can Break a Heart* and *What The World Needs Now Is Love*, and Gerry Goffin and Carole King creating hits like *Up on the Roof* and *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*. There were also two ambitious kids both born in 1941 hanging out at the Brill Building anxious to learn their craft, Neil Diamond taking the subway from Brooklyn and Paul Simon from Queens.

When The Brothers Four arrived in New York City from Seattle in July of 1959 newly signed to Columbia Records there were hundreds of different offices related to the music business in the Brill Building and those around it. There were songwriters, publishers, arrangers, copywriters, artist's managers, producers, radio promoters, you name it.

Because The Brothers Four came into town with a recording contract, Mort Lewis, who a few years later would become Simon and Garfunkel's manager, agreed to become their manager. Often they strutted into the Columbia Records Building and they would hear various groups looking a lot like themselves singing on the sidewalk outside hoping to be discovered and given the keys to the kingdom as those four guys had been.

There's a story Naomi Judd tells about walking to the window in the office where she and her daughter, Wynonna, had just signed their recording deal and pressing her nose and against the glass.

"What are you doing?" she was asked.

"Making sure I will never forget what it feels like to finally be on the inside looking out."

The Brothers Four were under contract to deliver two albums every year for five years. Because they weren't songwriters that meant finding 20 or more songs each year deemed worthy of recording. Bob Morgan, the producer assigned to them by Columbia Records, introduced the guys to The Richmond Organization, TRO, owned by Howie Richmond and Alan Brackman. The company owned the rights to a treasure trove of songs written by Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and hundreds of songs, traditional songs compiled by John and Alan Lomax who had scoured the country making field recordings of countless songs of often unknown origin, folk songs, songs from the people of the people by the people.

*Let love go forward from this time and place...*



Which brings us to an important element of the music *business*. When a song earns royalties, makes money, from a live performance or from being recorded or used in a movie or maybe on a TV show half the money goes to the writer or writers the other half to publishers or the publisher. Like many artists The Brothers Four realized if they took a song from the public domain one not protected by a copyright and changed it slightly they could make it their own and collect writer's and even publisher's royalties. They created a fictitious character, Stu Gotz, a play on words in Italian, who is credited as the main songwriter for the publishing company they created and named *Frigate*.

Well, when I moved to Vashon Island in September of 1972 it was to find my voice as a songwriter and hopefully to find a place in the songwriting business.

### III

*Sail on silver girl sail on by  
Your time has come to shine all your dreams are on their way  
See how they shine oh, if you need a friend  
I'm sailing right behind  
Like a bridge over troubled water ease your mind  
Like a bridge over troubled water ease your mind*

Those months on Vashon Island remain an important step and stage in this journey of a lifetime. My wife and I lived in a relatively small furnished summer cabin on the water on the Burton Peninsula near the south end of the island with a mercantile store on the corner of the main road marking the turnoff to our place. We entered the cabin through a mudroom complete with a well-used washer and dryer. There was a kitchen and small bedroom in the back, a dining area in the middle with a big bay window and a wicker chair next to a rotary phone tethered to a cord in the wall. We took two steps down to a small living room with a fireplace and a row of small paned wooden windows that looked out on the water. A short path down a low bank led us to a pebble rock beach.

Back inside the house there was a narrow staircase opposite the bay window that led to two small bedrooms above the living room, rooms made smaller by the tilt of the roofline. The owners kept one of them locked. We put a wooden table against the window in the other where I placed a manual typewriter, lots of fountain pens and carefully sharpened pencils, plenty of blank paper both in loose sheets and tablets, as well as Pee Chee folders that I would slowly begin to fill with song ideas and finished songs. I quickly grew a full beard, a look I kept for fifteen years, and my wife and I, both dressed in our now familiar striped coveralls and work boots, soon picked up a mix of alder and madrona firewood, and we were ready for the winter.

Looking back I realize I struggled to inhabit my life back then. I hadn't studied songwriting fearing I might somehow "dilute" the creative process and "purity" of inspiration. Too many days I walked up those stairs picked up a pen or sharpened a pencil looked out the window and wondered what do I do now. The fact that it was such an idyllic place made it even harder when inspiration remained elusive. I

*Let love go forward from this time and place...*



wasn't sure how to keep hammering away. I didn't know how to *own* the life so in a lot of ways I just borrowed one, borrowed from Hemingway on how an artist's life should feel, from Kristofferson on how a songwriter's life should look, and from my brother borrowed a dog who slept contentedly next to a rocker by the fireplace at the end of the day.

#### IV

*Like a bridge over troubled water I will ease your mind  
Like a bridge over troubled I will ease your mind*

Today as I journey around *One of Those Times in a Life* I'm remembering back 40 years ago to when I stared out those cabin windows on Vashon Island looked out at the waters of Puget Sound. And as I recall and recreate that time I'm looking out a window this time at the same waters of Puget Sound from my house on the Olympic Peninsula aware of what a role songwriting has played and continues to play as a way to express myself, to add depth to the strands of a career, as a way to connect with life and myself and other people and a way to share this life no longer borrowed but one I choose and am lucky enough to inhabit each day. It's been a hard chronicle to create and seeing that time from this window feels important as a way to rekindle the joy and the wonder and the sense of discovery that is so essential to this adventure.

As a songwriter I've tend to start with the words and usually write both the words and music. One exception is songs I write with a friend from college, Gary Drager. Our most satisfying song might have been one we wrote a couple years ago after he had suffered a stroke. Writing it somehow representing a step in his recovery.

And Drager played a big role during those months on Vashon Island. He would come from Seattle nearly every Monday afternoon with five or six sets of lyrics or story ideas and by Tuesday evening we would have created maybe half a dozen songs. There was a single bed in the room upstairs where he'd spend the night.

Sometimes my wife and I would meet him in Seattle and drive around town in his pink Cadillac. During those ride-about Drager would become Buffer Barnes, a fictitious character made real by one of our songs, my wife would become his sister, Beulah, and I'd become a guy named Lucky Swartz. Funny, nutty stuff. I'll be forever grateful for the energy and the faith that Drager brought each Monday during that time on Vashon Island.

Soon enough the spring came and it was time for the owners to take back their cabin and for my wife and I to load the van and head to Minneapolis to see where the journey would take us. Paul Simon had just released a new album, *There Goes Rhymin' Simon*. Drager thought if there was an album in my future maybe we should be call it *Here Comes Rehearsin' Pearson*.

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