



MARK PEARSON
MUSIC

Los Angeles Chronicle

I

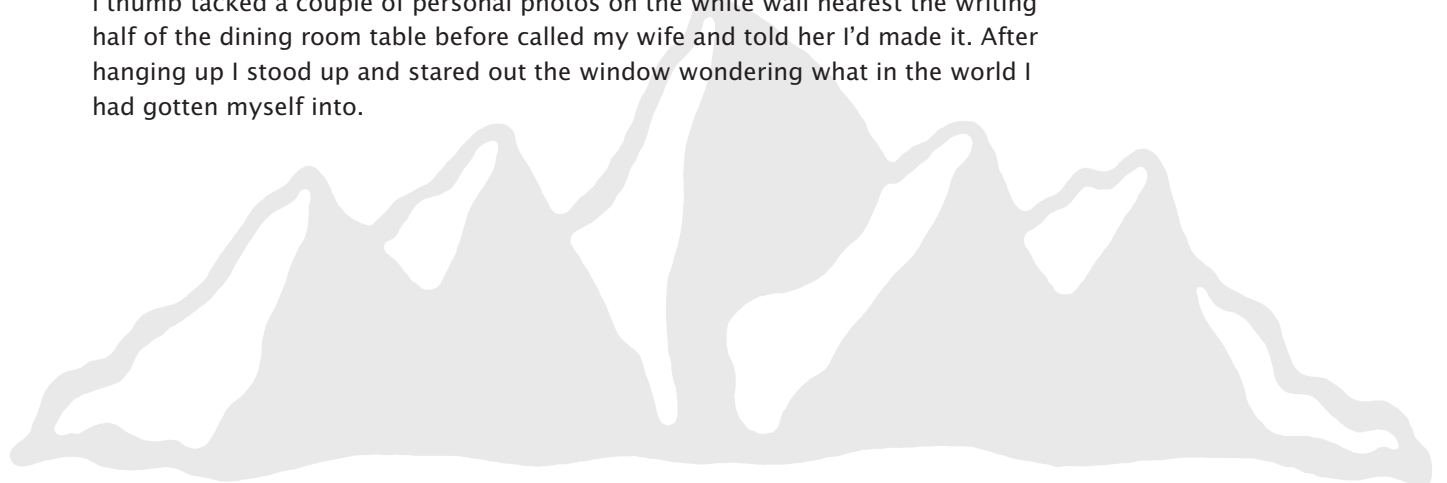
That's the voice Dave Niehaus calling the first pitch of the Seattle Mariners Baseball Club in April of 1977. After a couple years back in the Northwest writing songs, singing in clubs, and being told I needed to go where the action was I decided in September of 1977 to chase my musical dreams to Southern California while my wife an accomplished potter and ceramic artist stayed in Seattle. During the gas crisis of the mid-70's we'd replaced the van with a used VW Bug that I now packed with instruments, a couple of tape decks, portable stereo gear, a manual typewriter, clothes, linens, a box of books and a few kitchen supplies and headed south on I-5 listening to Dave Niehaus describe one of the last games of the Seattle Mariners baseball season. His enthusiasm as he described yet one more loss got me as far as central Oregon while my hopes of some personal victories got me the rest of the way to the City of Angels.

People familiar with LA had told me to live near Hollywood but not in it so one of the first things I did when I got there was spread out an LA map and put X's where the libraries were and then make a note of which of them were located near a park. I spent a couple days driving to and walking around different neighborhoods before deciding on a one-bedroom apartment with shag carpets in a six unit building in Studio City on Coldwater Canyon between Ventura Boulevard and the 101.

Not knowing how long I was going to stay I ended up renting a standard one bedroom package from a discount furniture outfit that included a couch and an overstuffed chair upholstered in that checkered fabric that is indestructible, shows no stains and even less personality. There was a coffee table and a couple of end tables. I put the record player and the radio on one of them and that became the entertainment center. The dining room table with its metal legs, fake wood top and four chairs with plastic covered seats became the command center. Half of that was where I ate and the other half with a lamp and typewriter on it they were my writing desk.

Two reel-to-reel tape decks, one for recording and one for copying, ended up on the fake wood four drawer dresser in the bedroom and every couple weeks that room became a rudimentary recording, copying, and editing studio.

I thumb tacked a couple of personal photos on the white wall nearest the writing half of the dining room table before called my wife and told her I'd made it. After hanging up I stood up and stared out the window wondering what in the world I had gotten myself into.



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

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II

*I tried, I tried, I tried not falling in love
Not falling in love with you
What was I to do?*

That's part of a song I wrote in LA called *I Tried Not Falling in Love*. I was lucky in that if I lived frugally I could spend most of my time writing songs or singing at showcases and open mic nights while trying to develop relationships with people in the music business. The novelist, Tom Robbins, once said that when he's working on a book he tries to go to the same place at the same time every day. He made it clear he doesn't go there to find the muse, he goes so the muse will know where to find him. In LA for me that meant at 8:30 finding my way from the bedroom to the dining room table in my not too big apartment. It's amazing all the things I could find to do before finally finding my way to the chair.

For me a song usually starts with a key word or a phrase. I've never had any formal songwriting training I have read a lot of books on songwriting. My favorite at that time was one by a country songwriter named Tom T. Hall called "How I Write the Songs, and How You Can, Too."

After a few hours at the writing table a break from songwriting usually involved a run that included a circle or two around the nearby park. I hate to say it but I was still smoking back then and lots of times when I completed a run I'd light up. William Hurt's character in *Body Heat* had nothing on me.

Once I had a few new songs I liked I would try them out at open mic nights at places like the Blah Blah Club on Ventura Boulevard or the Ice House in Pasadena. The audiences were primarily other musicians trying out their songs so the evenings were a strange mix of camaraderie and competition.

Every few weeks I would record the best new songs onto a 10?-inch reel-to-reel master tape. Once that tape had eight or nine new songs on it I would prepare three song tapes that I would bring to various publishers to listen to. It was always a combination of research, experience, and guessing to decide which three songs to bring to any particular publisher. After a few months I had developed relationships with a number publishers who were usually willing to see me.

Because I added an easy to see leader to the beginning of each of the songs and because typed lyrics were folded in the tape boxes sometimes a publisher would scan the lyrics and listen for a few seconds before fast forwarding to the beginning of the next song. A meeting I had spent days preparing for might be over in matter of minutes. While sometimes that was hard on me personally I soon realized it was nothing personal. For them it was all business and whether they thought the songs they were taking their time to listen to might make them money.

There were funny moments with publishers. One time I had an appointment at Universal Studios. I walked up to what I thought was the entrance of this big black building and there was an arrow pointing to the right and it said, "use other door." So I walked around to the next side of the building there was an identical arrow.

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The same sign was on the third side of the building as well as the fourth. It wasn't until I got back to where I started that I realized that these were double doors and the signs were simply telling people to enter the building using the door on the right side.

In the early spring of 1978 the publishing company Peer-Southern contracted *I Tried Not Falling in Love*. They pitched it to a new artist from Switzerland named Suzanne Klee who was trying to establish herself in the American market. That song was chosen as her first single and that summer she sang it at a musical festival in Japan. A part of me help my breath hoping that that might be the break I was waiting for.

III

*Friends are like a pair of hands
So good for each other
Friends are like a pair of hands
No one quite like another
One hand can do a lot of things
Alone it does just fine
But so much more with another hand
I'm glad to give you mine*

That's a song from a story I wrote when I was living in LA called *The Beginning of the Rainbow*. It's the tale of a gnef named Ivan. You may or may not know that a gnef is a tiny creature a distant relative to both gnomes and elves. One morning Ivan woke up to find himself all alone and his colorful existence replaced by a black and white world. The story is about Ivan's adventures trying to find his family and get back home. Along the way he is given two gifts. One the gift of a shadow so Ivan will never be alone and the other the gift of tears so he can always wash his face inside and out.

Ivan's adventures lead him to a child's open window into which is flowing a rainbow and for the first time since the story began Ivan's world is not simply black and white but now contains the colors of that rainbow. As the story ends Ivan is preparing to follow that rainbow into that open window hoping against hope that once inside he will know what it is to be home again.

While folk music has always been my passion and for the most part my profession there is a part of me that's always loved stories and story telling and when I got to LA I decided I was going to work on story telling and *The Beginning of the Rainbow* is the result.

In LA I also spent every day drawing and sketching. I had grown up drawing and sketching. I knew the only way to get better was to pick up a pencil and start filling pages so lots of evenings in LA I would put a photograph usually from a book or magazine on to that dining room table and try to copy it. After a while there were two cardboard boxes next to the dining room table. One contained story pages and the other pencil sketches.

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Because I can't listen to music and write songs evenings were also a time for me to listen to music. That year I listened to Art Garfunkel's *Watermark*. It's an album that contained Jimmy Webb songs. It also contained Paul Desmond's last studio recording. I listened to Paul Simon's *Still Crazy After All These Years* and Billy Joel's *The Stranger* and I marveled at Phil Ramone's production on both. I was also enamored of Gordon Lightfoot's *Endless Wire*, Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings' *Willie and Waylon*, and of course The Eagle's *Hotel California*.

For a baseball fan that year was also a chance to listen to a full season of Vin Scully creating word pictures of the National League champion Dodgers and Dick Enberg doing the same for the Angels.

Looking back one of the most satisfying parts of living in LA was the people I met, especially my neighbors, Vera McLerie and the Byers brothers. Mrs. McLerie lived directly below me. She was famous for her cakes. Our apartments were essentially the same except mine was filled with rental furniture and hers contained nearly 80 years of life and experiences including lots of plants and pictures. She was a little over five feet tall with hair a little under four feet long that she would let hang down in the evenings. A few years earlier she had moved from Brooklyn to be near her only child, Allyn Ann, who was a film and TV actress. The year I was there Allyn Ann was a regular on the Tony Randall Show. It was a half an hour sitcom taped in front of a studio audience. Mrs. McLerie often invited me to come with her and be part of that audience. Once in a while I joined Mrs. McLerie at the Little Brown Church that she regularly attended a few blocks from the apartment. That church is where Ronald and Nancy Reagan got married.

Mrs. McLerie's husband, the first person to fly non-stop across Canada, had died before Allyn Ann was born. Mrs. McLerie never remarried. One day I asked her if she'd ever considered remarrying. With the twinkle in her eye she said she never had until she met me. Oh, what a great, a compliment right out of *Harold and Maude*. When I left LA she gave me her Bible. I keep in my office to this.

The Byers Boys, three brothers from Ohio, they lived in the apartment next to mine. At the time they were all in their 20's. Brian had met Lyle Waggoner of the Carol Burnett show in a regional theater production in their hometown in Ohio and Waggoner urged Brian try his luck in LA. Brian is hilarious. His energy is reminiscent of Steve Martin in Martin's most hyper-comedic days. To this day it wouldn't be surprised if Brian appeared at the door with an arrow in his head. Brian's younger brother Brennan followed him to Hollywood and when I lived there Brennan was a regular extra on the TV show, *Happy Days*. Dan, the oldest, joined them after getting out of the navy. He is a wonderful artist and the quietest of the three. He ended up going back to Ohio and working for American Greetings.

If in Mrs. McLeary's apartment everything fit perfectly in the Byers' Boys it was crowded chaos in a John Beluchi Animal House kind of way. The place simply wasn't big enough for the three of them although the door was always open and I loved hanging out with them. I still do.

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IV

*It's all a dream away
It's all a dream away
It's all a dream away*

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That's part of a song from a concert that some friends and I put on in LA in June of 1978. A few months earlier I was having dinner with friends from Spokane who had moved to LA. One of them was an architect who had just finished working on a remodel of the Brentwood Playhouse and he could get a deal on renting the space. Another a successful attorney who knew people in the music business who we could invite. To this day I can't believe we decided to right then and there "We'll put on a show."

Between 1937 and 1946 there were sixteen Andy Hardy movies starring Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy. They were a forerunner to that idealized family TV show of the black and white 1950's that people my age grew up on like *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver*.

A couple of those Hardy movies featured Judy Garland as an aspiring singer named Betsy Booth. In 1939 Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland also starred in a musical called *Babes in Arms* directed by the legendary Busby Berkeley. The remembered dialogue leading up to the big production numbers at the end of those movies went something like this: "Hey, let's put on a show." "Yeah, we've got songs, wonderful songs." "And I've got the barn."

The Brentwood Playhouse is definitely a great barn. Like kids who grew up putting on shows for friends, families, and neighbors we just went for it.

We chose a Sunday afternoon at the end of June so Mike McCoy who was finishing up his first year of teaching first graders could be part of our show. A woman we had sung with, Alicia Avery, came down from Seattle as well. The Byers Boys knew an incredibly talented bass and guitar player, Larry Paxton, and he agreed to be part of it.

My wife rode down with McCoy and his wife and their two Newfoundland dogs. A friend of ours, Pat Sands, won a vacation to go anywhere in the world and chose to come to LA and be part of our event. Mrs. McLeary made cakes. Dan Byers designed shirts with the words "Pearson 1978 Tour." We made a point of not telling people that there was only one concert in the tour. We sent out lots of invitations put up lots of posters. And in the end a lot of people came including my folks.

My dad had just joined the Foreign Service and my folks were getting ready to go to South Africa. After the show we all had dinner at a restaurant on Ventura Boulevard. When we got done we were on the sidewalk and my folks were crossing the street to get to their rental car and we were all singing "Marching to Pretoria." A few weeks later there was a favorable review of the concert in *Billboard Magazine*. Andy Hardy would have been proud.

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V

*Oh, where does the time go
Where does it go when it has gone
Oh, where's the that's lost
I'm trying to find again in now in my song*

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There have been a few times in my life when I couldn't imagine a way forward when I didn't have a clue of where I should go or what I would do next. The fall of 1978 was one of those times. I didn't know how to keep going or when and how to quit.

It was as if my life was slowly losing altitude and I couldn't do a thing to stop it until one day I ended up on the ground and couldn't get up. The high hopes of June and the Brentwood Playhouse concert and the Suzanne Klee recording and the *Beginning of the Rainbow* story appeared to lead nowhere. I was losing an inner sense of purpose and confidence so those times when a publisher would fast-forward to the next song or a form letter rejection came in the mail for the *Rainbow* story my sense of self simply eroded more. Most significantly my marriage was ending. I had a lot to learn about the history of depression in my family and how and why depression affected me personally through the years. I didn't have words for it back then but I'm sure now I was feeling some of its affects.

At the end of October I headed back to Seattle with a few more boxes and a few less dreams than I'd arrived with 13 months earlier. After ten years in the music business and six years in a marriage I was returning to familiar ground feeling on so many levels that I had failed.

Because my wife had chosen to move out of the house I was heading back to I was heading back to a familiar house but it was no longer home.

And that's where and how this Chronicle ends, in a car-heading north toward a most uncertain future. I realize how easy now it might have been to keep the songs and stories from that time in an unopened drawer. I also realize how satisfying and important it has been to sing those songs again and to untangle the threads and untie the knots of memory and story and make them all part of a greater tapestry both personally and professionally.

As I conjure that thirty-one year old man in my mind I want to tell him how grateful I am to him. I wish he could know that thirty-five years later life would still be full of songs and stories and sketches and the journey, and that the daily challenge would remain to get up in the morning with enough pride to know that I can do the job and enough humility to know that I will do the work.

I want him to know how grateful I am to him for I realize now I couldn't and wouldn't have made it to *One of Those Times in a Life* without him and that with laughter, love, luck and time we will make it home together.



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