

## True Stories and Other Dreams

BY JUDY COLLINS

**ANTICIPATING:** Describe what you think life on the road is like for a rock band or a singer or a truck driver or a construction worker or any other profession where travel is required. Describe a mythical typical day in this lifestyle: travel, readiness, working, recreation, wind-down, sleep, and problems.

*Monday, February 18, 1985/En route, Fargo to New York*



It snowed in St. Paul the other night, and when I left on the airplane the weather reports for the whole country were filled with warnings for flurries and inches. I got to Fargo with time to spare, and met up with my band. Weather has seldom stopped me, and I think in twenty-five years I have missed very few concerts.

(God must really want me to work.) 📖 The concert last night was in a hall that was built in 1915. Huge and barnlike, it is the scene of community functions in Fargo: the Chamber Orchestra, the school shows, the wrestling team—the Judy Collins concert. We dress in the motel across an alley covered with snow, so I tramp over ice and drifts from hotel to stage door, back and forth at intermission, my heels teetering on the slick, crusted surfaces. The concert is great, I feel nourished by the evening. 📖 “Why do you still do it? Why do you keep on traveling, keep on singing? What do you get out of a night of singing? Bette Midler says it’s for the money,” he says. The interviewer for an Ohio television station points a microphone in my face and waits for an answer. 📖

“It’s for the heart, and it’s great to make a living doing what you love to do,” I say.

“Is it only a living, then?” asks the young, eager interviewer.

nours before the snow, and we have much to do. Out of the aluminum Halliburton cases, opened up on the floor of the dressing room, has come everything a touring singer could possibly need: needle and thread, gaffer's tape, regular and decaf instant coffee, iron, safety pins, mouthwash, iodine, scissors, slippers, Wash 'n Dri's, Kleenex, steamer, mirror, guitar picks, toothpicks, lipstick, tweezers, Swiss army knife, bottle opener, aspirin, Q-tips, straws, press photos, business cards, black pen for signing autographs, shampoo. I head for the shower that opens off the dressing room.

"Maria," I call, raising my voice to carry over the sound of the running water, "is the nailbrush there?" Maria brings it, handing it to me through the steam-covered glass shower door. I think I could ask Maria if there was a prefab log cabin in the Halliburton, and she would pull it out. When I have finished washing my hair, my dinner has arrived, and while I eat, Maria sets my hair in thirty rollers. I devour baked chicken and steamed vegetables (I have never gotten over being famished on the road) and drink sparkling water. Then I put cream on my face and do my yoga while Maria leaves to have her own dinner. I am alone to continue the quieting that has begun. When she returns, I am sitting in the chair under the hair dryer, meditating, and she begins my makeup. Peace. Centering. On the door, a sign in Spanish and English says DO NOT DISTURB. I am in another world. Maria does her work with competence, and a knock comes at the door, forty minutes before show-time. Maria has transformed me, the meditation has centered me. The band comes in and we have a production meeting, determine the sequence of the songs, joke a little, connecting before we go out on the stage to connect.

"Shall we do the order from the last concert?" I ask Shelton Becton, my pianist. He is a slim black man of indeterminate age, handsome and extremely talented, who can play Chopin, Marvin Hamlisch, or Collins with equal skill.

"I think we ought to add that new song of yours, 'Dreamin.' It sounded good in the rehearsals, and we haven't done it on-stage."

"Fine, let's try it. And I want to ask you about the tempo last night on 'Clowns.' I thought I dragged it a bit. I'll pull it up a little." Warren Odze, my drummer for years, runs his hands through his black curly hair.

"The order was good last night. Let's put 'Dreamin' in, but let's keep the flow of it the same. It felt right."



and myself from hotel room to hotel room, from city to city, living out his dream for the joy of these moments on-stage when the actual becomes the mystical.

I stand on the stage in bright, bright light. I am singing "Shoot First," a song I wrote with Dave Grusin about violence and a child's game played in the park by two children. There is electronic music in the background, sirens and bombs, and then a lament by Thomas Moore, "The Minstrel Boy." If the audience is to go through an inner transformation during each song, I must go through it myself, and it is at this point that we are the same, the audience and I. Even from behind the bright lights, I can begin to see the faces, the eyes, the smiles, and I take energy from every pair of eyes. In the carbon arc light I am by myself, and the audience is out there, but we are together, united. I must make the song as fresh and familiar as though the audience knew it by heart, yet was hearing it for the very first time.

When I sing "My Father," sitting at the piano, very often my eyes are closed, and I think of the vivid details of the song—the Seine, the girls dancing in the light of a dying summer day, chiffon curtains ironed by my mother's hands blowing into the room, drifting in and out, breathing through the windows.

Tonight I am energized. Light as an eagle, I am flying. On-stage, in the bright light of the carbon arc, sometimes I am Piaf, scrawny arms and a black silhouette; sometimes I am Peter Allen in sequins and silk; sometimes John McCormack's spirit comes over me, a clear Irish tenor in tails. I am all of them, none of them; I am myself. I am a singer alone on an empty stage—no guitar, no mike stand—singing a song a capella from the whalers of the Scottish coast. I sing about the work they did, and the voices of the singing humpbacked whales, played on a tape, fill the auditorium. (In their poignant, calling voices you can hear the slap of the tails on the water and the wind in the big sails of the little ship that followed the Greenland, right, and humpbacked whales from Bermuda to Alaska and back again to Newfoundland.) Now, I am a lovestruck girl with just guitar telling a story about a rodeo rider and how I would follow him anywhere. Then I sing "Marieke" in Flemish and French. At the piano I then accompany myself and sing in English the story of houses and lovers, then a song by Randy Newman. I love being funny on-stage. I love making people laugh and cry. I am the clown, I am the hero, I am all of these, none of these, I am the music. . . .

Off-stage, lights off, the show over, snowdrift and ice slush under my black high heel shoes (Where are my purple boots now that I need them!), we

We settle on a new set. Mike Sapsis, my road manager, writes it down, copying everyone, and as they leave the room, Zev Katz, my bass player, tells a joke. I respond with one I heard recently from David Braun about Gloria Steinem. . . . My band is a fine group of musicians. Tonight Shelton Becton and Warren Odze are teasing Zev Katz about something that seems to be confidential. I think musicians on the road must be just a little mad. I think I'm a little mad. It's a fragmented life, the life of a gypsy. These musicians are talented, and I tell them so. They leave at seven-thirty, and I begin warming up my voice. I do scales, I say clear vowels, run the voice up and down, a clear *Ah*. I warm up for a half-hour, and by the end of that time I have on my lipstick and my stage clothes, my hair combed out. My energy is high and I am eager to be on stage, doing tonight what I have trained all my life to do.



The moment when I step from the wings onto the stage is a sacred time, a spiritual journey in which I plunge into an air of lightness, made of the energy of myself and the audience. The audience wants everything, and they deserve everything. They have been there for me from the first night at Michael's Pub, sitting in the dark, waiting to have their lives changed, touched. They have sat in the dark and stood in the rain, marched with me, cried and laughed with me; they greet what I bring them with willingness, never holding back when I have changed again and gone in a new direction. They have grown up and had children and brought their children to hear me—an audience dressed in blue jeans, dressed in silk. They have supported me, bought my records, written letters to me saying that I have changed their lives. They have changed mine. One must not take a night of singing for granted, for the gods may be jealous and take it away. I have my set of rituals and prayers: God, make me good, bless my audience, let me be an instrument. I bring everything I have studied to be and everything I am onto the stage. I am as vulnerable and as prepared as I can possibly be.

When I walk out onto the stage, the audience is usually invisible beyond the footlights: in the shock of light they see me, but I cannot see them. I depend upon hearing and feeling who they are and what they are willing to bring to me tonight. I learned from my father on those nights when I watched him on-stage in cities like Fargo and Butte and Carson City how to sense an audience without seeing them. I learned how to perform at the feet of a master dreamer and gypsy, and now I, too, go on, hauling my bags and my guitar

and myself from hotel to hotel for the joy of these moments.

I stand on the stage and sing a song I wrote with David Braun in the park by two children who were bombed, and then a lone woman once is to go through it through it myself, and in the Even from behind the bars I smile, and I take energy by myself, and the audience make the song as fresh as yet was hearing it for the

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Off-stage, light black high heel shoes (W

pack up the gear and change clothes. Maria has everything together now, Halliburtons packed, clothes in the hanging bags. The promoter comes to pick up the Halliburtons. He is absolutely deadpan and sad as he tells me it was a "lovelyshow." I wish he had let me revel in my own excitement instead of almost deflating me with his sullen mood. I am flying, and he sounds like he is on Quaaludes. Tomorrow he has a wrestling team coming in to Fargo.

Back at the Holiday Inn, one of the old motels with a courtyard square in the center, the swimming pool is full of snow, the doors to the rooms opening onto the snow-patched path. In the trees, sleeping birds are stacked, piled, layered. They are roused and begin to chirp and flutter as we pass them on the way to our rooms. I dump my sheepskin coat and my heavy purse, kiss Maria goodnight, and then I'm on the phone, cotton in my other hand, taking off makeup while I dial New York and Connecticut and wonder where is Louis, why isn't he in? It's late, what can he possibly be doing? I know he went out to dinner tonight with David Braun and Irene Cara. Did he fall in love with Irene Cara—fly the coop?

I try the number again and reach him before I go to sleep. It's so good to hear his voice.

Octopussy on the tube, then a chapter of St. Augustine in paperback. Life on the road. . . .

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Though best known as a social activist, film producer, and actress, she has spent years.

Born in Seattle, Washington, she studied classical piano under her father as a teenager. She switched her major to film in the early 1960s, she has recorded several songs and romantic ballads, and she was actively involved in anti-war protests in the Vietnam War protest movement.

Collins produced *A Woman* (1974), a tribute to the actress, and was awarded a Blue Ribbon Award for an Academy Award for *Your Heart*.

Collins continues to be active in activism on a number of social issues.