

Carly Simon
in song, 1971



CARLY SIMON

HER NUANCED AND SOPHISTICATED
SONGCRAFT HAS RESONATED WITH AUDIENCES
FOR FIVE-PLUS DECADES.

BY HERB POWELL

Over twenty years ago, a television host introduced Carly Simon with such words as “exploded onto the charts” and “one of the most prolific singer-songwriters.” Simon shunned those descriptions, calling them too hyperbolic. Her rejection of such praise is a significant clue as to who she really is. More importantly, it reveals her great creative gift, which is consummate honesty.

Simon’s musical gift of creative honesty began almost as a parable on how an impediment can be transformed into magical artistry. When she was around 8, she developed an intense stutter. In her 2015 memoir, *Boys in the Trees*, she recalled that “if up until that point words and life were easy, and limitless, my stammer made me aware that life could also be tough. There was very little it would not affect about me.”

Simon’s mother, sensing her emotional pain, suggested her daughter sing her words, providing a melody and cadence to her phrases. Simon noted, “I’ve never forgotten that moment. It was a turning point. . . . I could sing it instead. Maybe I would be a singer!” Thus emerged the possibility of a blossoming career.

Simon’s musical career would come to flower with her sister Lucy. The Simon Sisters had what’s been called the “blood harmony” of singing siblings: an innate ability to sound as one, even with different textures and ranges in

their voices. The duo performed on the Greenwich Village stages of the Bitter End, the Gaslight, and others. As their popularity grew, they became an opening act for many up-and-coming comics, including Joan Rivers, Woody Allen, and Dick Cavett. In 1964, the Simon Sisters released the first of three albums, scoring a modest hit with “Winkin’, Blinkin’ and Nod,” a folk-music reimagining of the nursery rhyme.

When Lucy started a family, Carly was on her own. Though she was a songwriter at heart, others pushed her to become a solo performer. Her debut started well enough – with musicians of high caliber, such as Al Kooper; Mike Bloomfield; and the Band’s Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm, Rick Danko, and Richard Manuel. Working with them was made possible through manager Albert Grossman, a relationship that also had its downside. Grossman and the project’s producer made persistent sexual advances toward Simon, and she wasn’t having any of it. The blatant disregard for boundaries and Simon’s refusal to play along caused her album to be shelved. This dehumanizing experience would remain with her for years. She would say these events were the beginning of “what would turn out to be many difficult experiences with men in the music business.”

But Simon persevered. By the spring of 1970, she had put together a five-song demo. She signed with Elektra Records, and her self-titled debut album was



THIS PAGE: With Lucy as the Simon Sisters, c. 1964.
OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Newly minted star, 1971; 1,000-watt smile, 1978; with children Sally and Ben Taylor, in New York City, 1983.

released in February 1971. Her first single, written with cherished friend Jake Brackman, “That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be,” rose to the Top Ten. The song’s theme was her perfect introduction to the world. It showcased Simon’s unique ability of metamorphosing the typical love song – maturing the form into something more authentic, something less fanciful.

But before Simon’s songs could help us face our relationships more authentically, she had to face one of her own phobias – stage fright. When Elektra arranged for her to open for Cat Stevens at the Troubadour in West Hollywood, Simon tried everything to avoid being center stage. Knowing drummer Russ Kunkel was on the road, she told her label, “I’ll only play if I can have Russ as my drummer.” In a twist of fate, Kunkel was indeed available.

Despite Simon’s nervousness, she received a standing ovation that night. The success of her debut album led to her winning the year’s Grammy for Best New Artist.

Her sophomore effort, *Anticipation*, with its tremendously successful title song, changed the trajectory of her career. She says she wrote the now-classic in fifteen min-

utes while waiting for Cat Stevens to show up for a date. The LP’s lesser-known single, “Legend in Your Own Time,” again amplifies her innate ability to cut through the veneer to expose the genuine: “And though I know you still have the heart of that small boy / Well, you lend it out far too much / And no one woman loving you can ever feel that she’s been really touched.”

In November 1972, Simon married James Taylor. Two months after their wedding, in January, they were pictured on *Rolling Stone*’s cover: “The Honeymooners: An Interview with James Taylor and Carly Simon.” They were crowned the king and queen of the singer-songwriter movement, and their celebrity as a couple added to their musical aura and possibly contributed to both having continued success. The union would last ten years.

The same month as her wedding, Simon’s third album, *No Secrets*, was released. Its first single, “You’re So Vain,” hit Number One around the globe. Her signature song’s provocative title quickly became the ultimate cutting remark toward a narcissist. Its directness told the world that Simon was not just another singer-songwriter:



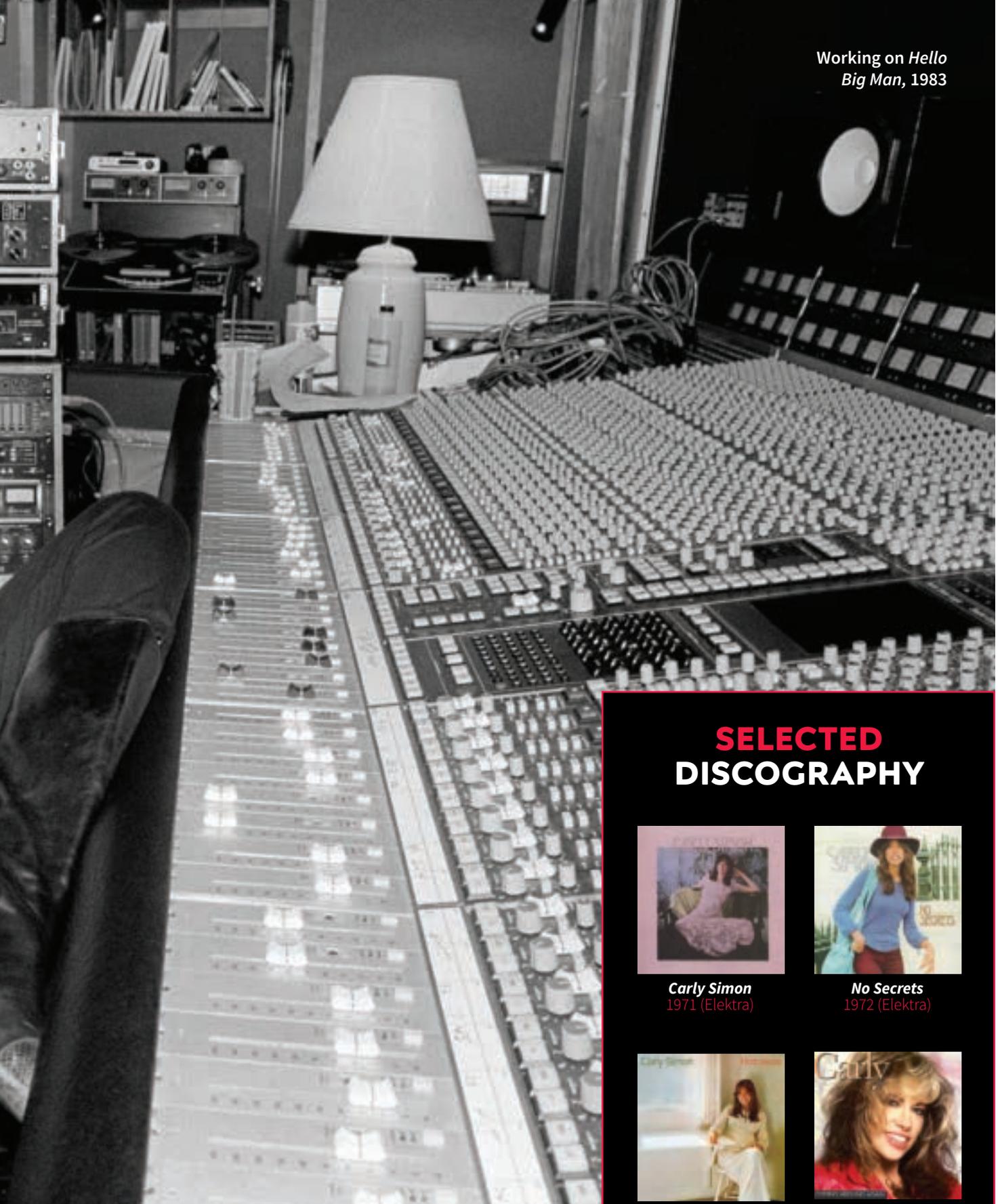


She had a unique compositional voice. Her songs were small stories, so highly personal in feeling that in their smallness, they embody a larger idea – as if we’re looking through a telescope as we listen and seeing universal truths.

Simon’s penchant for helping us gain a wider view is apparent even in her seeming affirmations of love. Another single from *No Secrets*, “The Right Thing to Do,” on its surface gives the impression that love is the best course of action. But digging deeper, its lyrics voice the helplessness of falling in love, even as we know the significance of loving freely is rooted in our power of choice.

Her 1974 album, *Hotcakes*, contained a reimagining of a 1960s novelty record, “Mockingbird.” The playful song, a duet between her and James Taylor, arrived on the pop charts during their romantic and musical fame, and hit Number Five. At the same time, “Haven’t Got Time for the Pain” (another collaboration with Brackman) reaffirms the power of choice to not only endure but transcend our past to something better: “Suffering was the only thing that made me feel I was alive / Thought that’s just how much it cost to survive – in this world / ’Til you showed me how / How to fill my heart with love / How to open up and drink / In all that white

Working on *Hello
Big Man*, 1983



light pouring down from the heaven / Haven't got time for the pain."

In 1977 and 1978, Simon enjoyed two of the biggest hits of her career. The Marvin Hamlisch/Carole Bayer Sager composition "Nobody Does It Better," from the James Bond movie *The Spy Who Loved Me*, included a masterful horn and string arrangement by Richard Hewson - his orchestration was the perfect bed for Carly's distinctive alto to rest in. The Richard Perry-produced number is considered by many the best Bond film song, bar none. The following year, "You Belong to Me," co-written with Michael McDonald,

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Carly Simon
1971 (Elektra)



No Secrets
1972 (Elektra)



Hotcakes
1974 (Elektra)



**Coming Around
Again**
1987 (Arista)



The Bedroom Tapes
2000 (Arista)



**Songs From the Trees:
A Musical Memoir
Collection**
2015 (Elektra/Rhino)

FROM TOP: At the No Nukes Concert with John Hall, Patrick Simmons, James Taylor, Graham Nash, and Rosemary Butler (from left), Madison Square Garden, New York City, 1979; with her Oscar for Best Original Song at the 1989 Academy Awards.



gave a vivid lyrical account of the great grievance in romantic life – jealousy.

Simon’s work resonates with us because in her songs she is utterly open about her own emotional life. In an interview conducted by her sister Joanna Simon, she says that the origin of her 1986 masterstroke “Coming Around Again” was personal. “It was really me. I certainly had been through the breakup of a marriage and had to find in myself the faith that I was gonna love again, and that it was gonna come around again – for me.” Families are where relationships begin, and finding faith in herself has been hard-won for Simon. After grappling with her childhood stutter and feeling less loved than her sisters, she was shaken by her father’s death when she was 15. Then came stage fright and bouts of depression as an adult. But she emerged with an honesty that has been a musical gift to all of us.

In 1989, Simon won an Oscar, a Grammy, and a Golden Globe for her song “Let the River Run” – the first performer to ever win all three trophies for a self-penned composition – from the box office smash *Working Girl*. At the time, the Mike Nichols romantic comedy was an appropriate thesis on a smart, undervalued woman making her way in the male-dominated New York corporate world. Simon said she wrote the song as “a hymn to New York,” and it certainly sounds like one with its choir-esque background vocals and tribal drum groove. Her lyrics for the song affirm that we are part of something bigger, a continuum: “We the great and small / Stand on a star / And blaze a trail of desire / Through the darkening dawn.”

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After twenty-two studio albums and five children’s books, Simon’s creativity has never ceased. Even during her recovery from a breast cancer diagnosis in late 1997, she didn’t stop, turning out what may have been her most personal musical work in *The Bedroom Tapes*.

Carly Simon’s music survives in us because it takes root in places usually reserved for the solitude of one’s own mind. It also survives because of her questioning of the human experience of love. As she wrote in her mem-

oir, “Has anyone ever properly explained love’s weather patterns, low-pressure system, cold fronts, storms? Surviving its tides and seasons, I’ve found out, is a feat exclusively for the strong of heart.” Thank God for us that her heart is strong. Because that strength is crucial to Carly Simon’s music, where her keen spirit of observation deftly draws us toward our own honesty.

And tonight, adding to her long list of achievements, we celebrate her induction into the Rock & Roll of Fame.

Performing with
Sally Taylor and
Ben Taylor in
Bryant Park, New
York City, 2000

