



L A U R A N Y R O

J I M F A R B E R

A W I D E R A N G E O F S T A R S C L A M O R E D T O R E C O R D H E R W O R K

What kind of music did Laura Nyro make? Was it jazz? R&B? Theater music? Art song? Motown pop? Girl-group pastiche? Or something from the classical world?

All those genres had a hand in her inimitable style. The unconventional keys and startling tempo changes indicated jazz. The theatrical melodies spoke of Broadway. The introspection in the songs said singer-songwriter, while the soulfulness of the tunes played straight to the heart of Berry Gordy.

No wonder so wide a range of stars clamored to record her work. Between 1968 and 1972, a daunting array of big-name artists took Nyro's songs far up the charts, from the 5th Dimension to Three Dog Night, from Blood, Sweat and Tears to Barbra Streisand.

Yet it denigrates Nyro's talents to resign her to the writerly sidelines. Although it took the more conventional

styles of other stars to smuggle her work into the mainstream, only her own performances brought out the uniqueness of her compositions. Nyro's own, more eccentric recordings paint her as a precursor to some of today's edgiest artists, from Sufjan Stevens to St. Vincent to Of Montreal's Kevin Barnes.

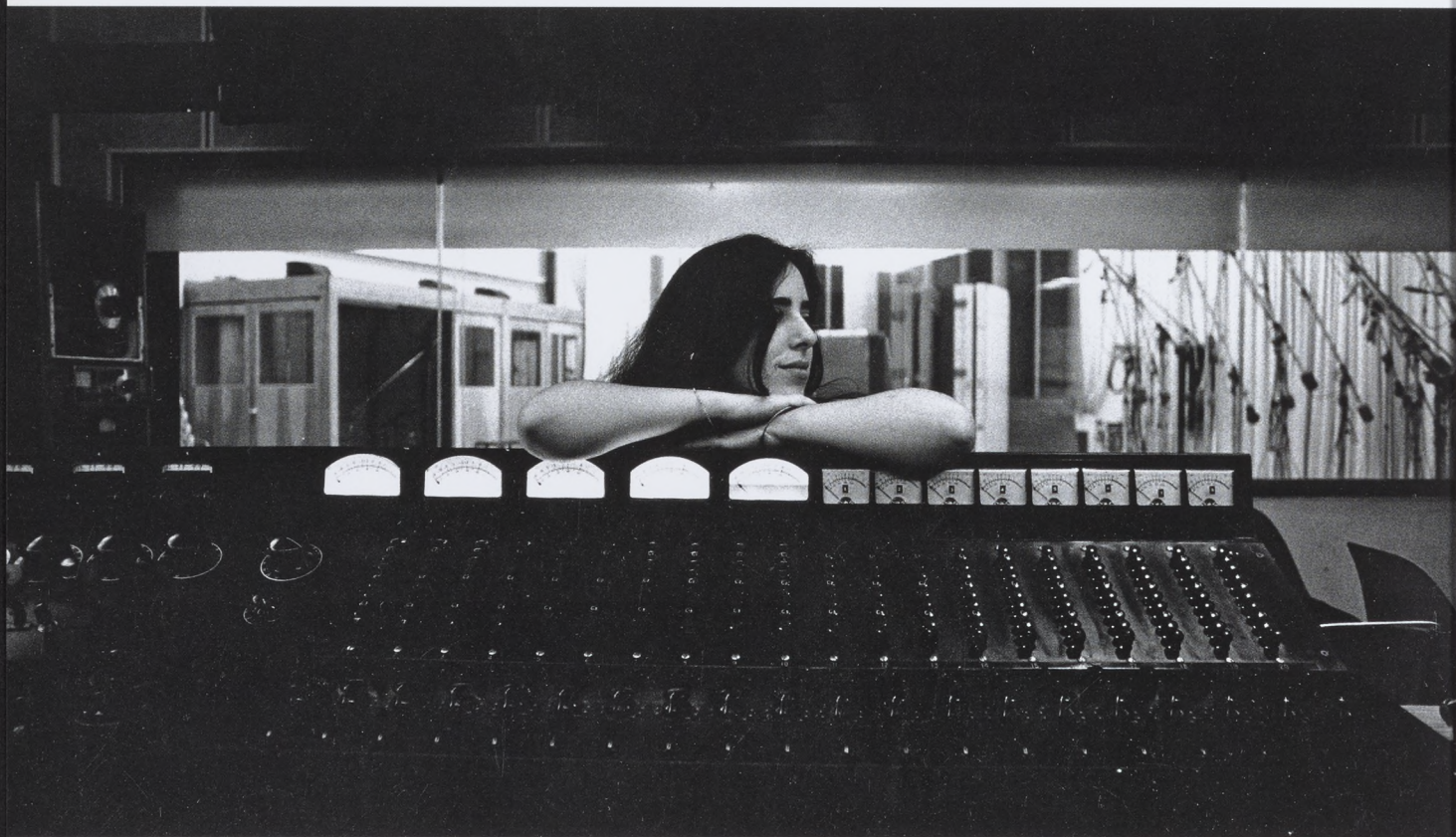
Her music also boasted a heightened sense of place. The songs spoke unmistakably of the clamoring language of Nyro's home city, New York. No other artist connected more divergent sounds and cultures from this sprawling town. In her singing and songs, you can hear the grandeur of the Grand Concourse, the striving of the old Lower East Side, the chic of Riverside Drive, and the soul of Harlem. It's the sound of uptown and down—sophisticated and earthy, lovable and strange.

The creator of that special nexus was born Laura Nigro on October 18, 1947, in the Bronx, of Russian Jewish and

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Italian ancestry. Her mother, Gilda, toiled as a bookkeeper while her father, Louis, earned his living as a piano tuner and jazz trumpeter. Laura taught herself piano as a child, absorbing her mother's recordings of stars from both the classical world (such as Leontyne Price) and the jazz world (such as Billie Holiday). She also heard her father play trumpet at resorts in the Catskills.

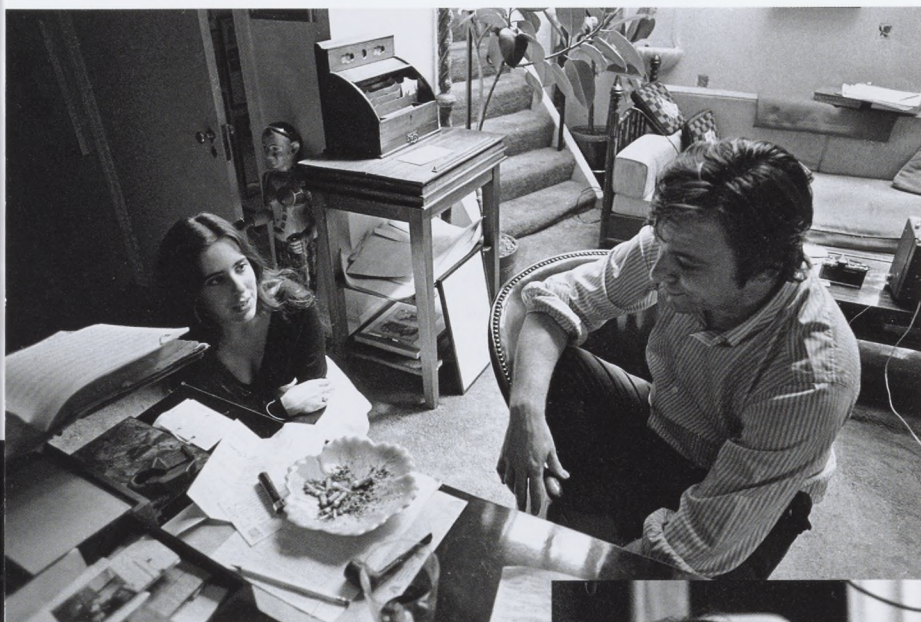
A true prodigy, Laura composed her first song at age 8. By high school, her taste and palate grew to embrace the more popular music of her day, including Motown acts like Martha and the Vandellas, elegant soul stars like Curtis Mayfield, and one of this past century's grandest interpreters, Nina Simone. As a teenager, she started adopting a stage name (pronounced *NEAR-ob*), tipping off her focus and ambition. Her father's music-biz contacts brought her to record company executive Artie Mogull, who became her first manager in 1966.



Soon Nyro had her first major song sale: to Peter, Paul & Mary, with "And When I Die," for five thousand dollars. Later, the song became a smash for Blood, Sweat and Tears. Nyro made her professional debut at 18 at the hungry i coffeehouse in San Francisco, by which time Mogull secured a contract for her with Verve Folkways Records. The company released her debut album, *More Than a New Discovery*, in 1967. (Later, in 1969, that disc was reissued as *Laura Nyro*; it was reissued again as *First Songs* in 1973.)

Even this earliest album housed three songs that later

became smashes for other singers, including “Wedding Bell Blues” and “Stoney End.” A famously shaky performance at the seminal Monterey Pop Festival that year made Nyro reluctant to play live, but the date had an important side effect. The influential wheeler-dealer David Geffen saw



OPPOSITE PAGE

Nyro at Columbia Studios, 1968.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP With Stephen Sondheim, 1968; with Miles Davis, 1969.

her and stepped in to become her new manager, maneuvering Mogull out. Geffen got Nyro together with Clive Davis, then the Columbia Records czar, who—once beguiled—gave her the freedom and space to capture her wildly unusual work in the studio.

The story of her signing says a lot about one key aspect of Nyro's style. Davis wrote in his memoir that when she auditioned she turned off every light save one, from a television set positioned next to the piano she played. Bathed in that spare light, Nyro went on to perform songs that would end up on her second album, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* (released in 1968).

The intimacy and drama of that presentation underscores Nyro's unusual sense of dynamics. In key songs, her voice would break the silence like a spotlight falling on a pitch-black stage. It was a sound so shy and isolated it could seem nearly autistic. Slowly and quietly, piano chords would make their way around the voice, as if waiting for guidance. For minutes, vocal and keyboard ambled on, until suddenly, they erupted with spirit. The singing turned exuberant, the piano ecstatic, until together they formed a melody that couldn't be more winning, easy, or true. That high-wire approach is one element that made Nyro's performances so unpredictable. It's also part of what made her songs at once embraceable and elusive.



If her own recordings emphasized the latter, the many covers of her songs mined the former. In the year that saw Nyro's second album inch only to Number 181 on the *Billboard* Top 200 chart, other artists gave her songs the exposure that eventually turned them into standards. In four years, between 1968 and 1972, a panoply of artists took songs penned by Nyro and made them famous, including “Blowing Away,” “Wedding Bell Blues,” “Stoned Soul Picnic,” “Save the Country,” “Black Patch,” “And When I Die,” “Eli's Comin’,” “Stoney End,” and “Time and Love.” At the same time, her compositions greatly influenced other songwriters, including (most obviously) Todd Rundgren and Rickie Lee Jones, as well as Elton John, who later admitted that he “idolized” her.

Characteristically, Nyro enjoyed the biggest chart hit under her own name with a song written by someone else: “Up On the Roof,” by Goffin-King. It epitomized a style



THIS PAGE Nyro at the piano, 1970; Nyro flanked by Sarah Dash, Nona Hendryx, and Patti LaBelle (from left). **OPPOSITE PAGE** Nyro shared the bill with Miles Davis at the Fillmore East in 1970; Nyro leaves the stage, 1978.

she explored fully on one of her most striking releases, 1971's *Gonna Take a Miracle*. The album featured covers of the great sixties soul and girl-group songs that had so influenced her. Nyro recorded the disc in tandem with a pre-"Lady Marmalade" Labelle (Patti LaBelle, Nona Hendryx, and Sarah Dash). Together, their four voices created some of the most yearning and erudite harmony work in the history of soul. *Miracle* proved Nyro had a rare enough approach to arrangements, and a striking enough timbre, to make even the most ubiquitous covers her—and Labelle's—own. It also showed her power as a performer, aside from her more celebrated talent as a composer.

Likewise, Nyro's catalogue of releases defies the notion that she was primarily a studio rat, an idea cemented at Monterey. At least half a dozen live albums have found their way to market, with 2004's *Spread Your Wings and Fly* rating among the most electrifying. Recorded at the Fillmore East in New York City on May 30, 1971, it shows the full sweep of her vocals, as well as her power as a pianist.

Around that time, following an intense run of creativity, Nyro announced her "retirement." She was just 24. Happily, five years later, she un-retired, releasing the new album *Smile*. Nyro continued to record and tour for nearly two more decades, banking worthy performances and writing fluid material along the way, if all with less commercial traction. Her final album of new material, *Walk the Dog & Light the Light*, appeared in 1993, coproduced by Steely Dan's dial man, Gary Katz.

Three years later, Nyro was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The next year, on April 8, 1997, she died of that disease. She was 49, the same age that her mother had died from the same disease.

In death, as in life, Nyro's songs remain better known than their author. In one way that's sad, yet in another way, it's stirring. It proves how resilient and appealing her songs remain. Like the repertoire of Leiber-Stoller and Bacharach-David, Nyro's canon has thrived by putting sophistication and ease in ideal balance. The difference is those other song catalogues sprang from writing teams. With Nyro, as always, there was only one.





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