

Fermata

by Mark S. Rosati

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Like monks breaking vows of solitude, one recent Sunday afternoon we ventured cautiously out of our home and drove to a local music club for a concert by a beloved singer. Now in her early seventies, the singer has been a fixture on the national folk-music circuit for five decades, but this would be her first live performance since the pandemic changed life by a magnitude usually associated with wars or earthquakes.

The concert, at a cozy spot on the fringe of a Midwestern university campus, was preceded by several days of emails from the venue and postings on social media, reminding that all attendees would need to wear a mask and come bearing proof of vaccination. A few patrons evidently did not see, or disregarded, the stream of warnings and were turned away by the polite but firm doorman; they left as unhappy as twenty-year-olds denied entry to a bar, growling over their shoulders that they would never return.

We queued up at the door, dutifully showed our vaccination cards, and made our way to our reserved table. The club had spaced out the little tables, but there were still four chairs at every one. We found ourselves sitting with a couple from Detroit, who had driven five hours to be in attendance. The woman introduced herself and her spouse and was quick to reassure us that “we both had the Pfizer.” (My guess, judging by the ages of the men in the room, was that the vaccine was not the only Pfizer pharmaceutical popular with the patrons.)

The club was not offering table service anymore, to help maintain social distances and keep human hands and their hordes of viral passengers

off of glasses and mugs. So, before the concert began, I went to the bar and lined up a few feet behind a silver-maned, black-masked man. He ordered two drinks and, walking past me as he carried them back to his table, said, “I think you and I are the youngest guys here.” He was probably right. When it was my turn to order, I asked the latex-gloved server for two black coffees—it was too early in the day for alcohol. I sipped a bit from my mug to avoid spilling it as I walked back to my seat. The coffee was bitter and lukewarm. I did not complain.

My wife and I had attended several of the singer’s performances over the years but had passed up many other opportunities to see her, always assuming we would have another chance soon. Her concerts served as touchstones for various stages of our lives—when we were dating, when we were first married, when we moved back to the city after a few years on the East Coast—but rarely after our children were born, when most of the concerts we attended involved elementary school bands and miniature “musicians” unfamiliar with the concept of daily practice. Concerts by professional musicians, and similar indulgences, took a back seat to the demands of raising kids, never-ending work responsibilities, extended family commitments, and household chores—dishes always need doing and lawns always need mowing. But then the pandemic arrived and reminded us, along with much of the human race, that “normal” life—or life at all, for that matter—should not be taken for granted. When we learned that the singer was coming to town, we hesitated briefly, but decided to put our trust in our vaccinations and masks and bought tickets.

After a few moments at our table, sipping our coffee and chatting with the couple from Detroit, the room lights dimmed and the stage lights came up. A small woman, cradling a guitar and wearing a billowy blouse and skirt with a red-and-green floral pattern and matching mask, made her way from behind the curtains and glided to the microphone at center stage. Even though most of the audience would usually recognize her at least as well as we would a neighbor who lives two houses down and across the alley, everyone hesitated until the artist pulled down her mask—not for the first time, I realized how much of our ability to identify other people depends upon seeing their entire face. Only then did the room erupt in warm and sustained applause. The singer’s glowing countenance was that

of a loving aunt seeing her nieces and nephews after a long absence. She bowed; her long flowing hair, once dark brown but now mostly a robust gray, fell to her waist and turned luminous in the warm blue light.

Even after some 50 years of performing, she was nervous—no doubt in part due to innate shyness, but probably more due to rust, brought on by the year-and-a-half enforced hiatus, isolated from all but closest families and friends. She said how wonderful it was to see all of us, and we believed her. She told us that she would be mixing her newest songs—all released earlier in the year, online, never before performed to an audience—with old favorites, and warned in advance that she might be so skittish she would forget the words now and again. But then she jumped into her first song, and her crystalline soprano, a “lark ascendant,” did not fail her, or us. The purity, the clarity of her music suspended time, eased pain, and at least for a moment blocked out memories of an endless succession of deaths and hospitalizations, and months of smothering silence interrupted only by the constant screeching of an orange man in a white house. The notes vibrated from her heart to ours, individual and collective, breathing and humming along as one. Framed in soft light and soaring from note to note, she infused us with sounds and memories, taking us back to a coffeehouse or church basement years ago when love was young, hope eternal, the future limitless.

Many years ago, at one of her concerts at a suburban Unitarian church packed with folk-music faithful, the singer shared a cute story about her then-young daughter. The details are lost in the underbrush of the passing years, but I do remember that everyone laughed, those in the audience with children probably more heartily and knowingly than those of us who were childless at the time. Today, she sang about her daughter, now a grown woman, falling in love with a man, and then another, newer song about the daughter’s recent marriage to that same man, at a wedding attended by only 13 guests due to the raging pandemic. In introducing the wedding ballad, the singer fumbled for the name of the well-known arts museum where the celebration was held, and during the song itself stumbled over some of the lyrics. As she apologized afterward for forgetting the words, everyone in the audience nodded, no doubt smiling gently beneath their masks, as most of us are prone to the occasional lapse

in word retrieval. Like a shared love of music, it was a bond that united us, friends for at least a couple of hours.

She then segued seamlessly to a song of pain and loss, about the passing of her mother just before the contagion arrived on our shores. The lights bathed her in azure, the creases in her face turning to small streams, filled by the tears gently falling down her cheeks. Judging by the prairie of gray hair in the room, everyone in the room had lost at least one parent and most probably had said farewell to both—orphans, in the way that a seventy-year-old feeling her mother's last breath against her face in hospice understands that with mom and dad both now gone, part of her has disappeared, too. Many eyes glistened along with the performer's as she sang of her mother, painting a portrait of a woman seen through a child's loving eyes but remembered from the vantage point of a distant land. The dusky stage lights caught the lines in her face, the seafoam of her hair, the floral prints on her blouse, transforming her into a blue-tinged mosaic. She was a Picasso come to life, in a Blue Period along with the rest of the world.

The singer forgot a lyric or two again, but no one cared; who among us could speak about a dead parent to other people for the first time without at least occasionally losing our train of thought? Her guitar and the accompanying pianist carried the melody along. After the song, she again admitted to nervousness and observed that she smiles and laughs a lot when she has stage fright—no one minded that, either. Netflix does not get nervous, and Hulu forgets nothing, but there is a literal screen between viewer and performers—as grateful as we all are for in-home entertainment, by the end of the sixth month or so of the pandemic, the fourth wall had never seemed as thick. Here, the artist herself shared with us, directly and very personally, her passions, her emotions, her creations, her flaws. In the room, there was intimacy of the old kind—no photos, no texting, no video streaming. The experience was shared by those present, and us alone. As the singer remarked several times, she was feeding off our love and support, just as we did from her. For an hour and 35 precious minutes, there was a bond, and life was back to normal.

Before one of her final numbers, the singer talked lovingly about a dear friend, a collaborator on many of her songs, who had died during the pandemic, and she remarked that the disease had probably brought tragedy

into all of our lives. Every head nodded, in memory of far-away deaths, funerals conducted over Zoom, and “wakes with words”—haunting obituaries in the daily newspapers, the number of which was dwindling precipitously in a country where everyone seemed to have their own set of facts, gleaned from an hour or two reading Twitter and watching YouTube, including on topics such as immunology and virology. She then launched into the song, a cappella, tears running down her cheeks again as she carved a transcendent tribute to her late friend that may outlast any headstone. What is the greater gift: to be able to create such magic, or to be a worthy subject of it?

She thanked all of us for coming, acknowledging that any trip outside the safety of our home “bubbles” these days was not without risk. We had inspired her, she said, and hoped she had done the same for us. She concluded with her best-known song, of which everyone present knew at least the chorus and many every word and chord, our voices shy and muffled through our masks as we sang along. She stumbled once or twice—audience members helped by calling out the lyrics, softly and politely. The singer would smile, nod, and continue, with never a break in the poignant melody she played on her antique guitar. At the end, she wept again, and bowed. We rose as one to applaud her life, her legacy, the beauty of her art.

The singer walked off the stage and lingered in the space between the tables and the bar. She has been a frequent enough visitor to our city that she recognized some of the hundred or so fans in a room that used to hold twice as many. We longed to approach her and tell her how wonderful she was, how moved we were by her performance, how much her music had meant to us over the years, and most of all how very special today was but, seeing the fans clumped around her, we hesitated, then stopped. Somewhere during the past eighteen months we had learned that one thousand virus particles can fit across a human hair, so the safest and wisest course, always, is to avoid anything resembling a crowd.

Reluctantly but resolutely, we filed out, keeping our distance from the other fans, even our new friends from Detroit. We left 1978 behind us and returned to the world as it is, one far different than any of us had planned. With new microscopic enemies evolving in the shadows, and the

airwaves roiled with news about breakthrough infections, renewed mask mandates and literal fights over life-saving vaccinations—has the world always been this mad?—we slipped quietly back to our car and drove home, returning once again to the safety of our cocoon, and to new life for old memories.



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