

A Song for Judy Blue Eyes

By Dennis Payton Knight

Judy Collins came to Denver at age 10 in 1949 when her father, Chuck Collins, a blind singer and radio personality, took a radio gig in Denver. He exposed his children to the American songbook, especially the music of Cole Porter and Irving Berlin.

Judy soon began studying classical piano with the renowned conductor Antonia Brico, and at thirteen, she made her debut with Denver's symphony orchestra. Brico predicted great success for her student in classical music, and she was eminently qualified to make that prediction because, at age 28 in 1930, she made her debut as a conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1938, she was the first woman to conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

But, to her disappointment, the blue-eyed East High School student discovered folk music, stirred by the poetic and socially conscious songs of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and other balladeers from an earlier generation. She took up the guitar and joined the hootenanny that was taking the country by storm in the fifties. Don't try to put Judy Collins in a box.

Collins became a regular in the New York City folk scene, playing in Greenwich Village at the Gaslight and Village Vanguard. Elektra Records released her first album in 1961, *A Maid of Constant Sorrow*, featuring several traditional folk songs.

Judy soon added contemporary music into her repertoire, including the songs of Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton and her own compositions. Her live act did well, and then, in 1967, from her album *Wildflowers*, she achieved her first commercial hit with the ballad "Both Sides Now," written by an until-then obscure Joni Mitchell. Collins won a Grammy for it in 1968.

Judy was romantically involved with Stephen Stills of Crosby, Stills & Nash, and it was for her that he wrote their classic, "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes."

In the 1970's Judy added the gospel song, "Amazing Grace" to her successes. Her music continued to evolve, hitting the charts with "Send in the Clowns" in 1973 from the musical, *A Little Night Music*, written by Stephen Sondheim. She got a Grammy nomination for that one, too.

In 1974 she produced and co-directed a documentary film about Antonia Brico, her piano teacher, receiving an Academy Award nomination for it.

Judy, approaching the age of 80, continues to compose and perform her songs, having written her memoirs, addressing the difficult topic of her only child's suicide in 1992, as well as writing of her alcoholism and bulimia. In 1995 she penned a novel, *Shameless*. She has been active in social and political causes throughout her life and career, and continues to campaign for women, minorities and children.

Once, when she became world famous, Judy Collins invited Antonia Brico to one of her Denver concerts. Meeting afterward, her former teacher took her by the hands and told her wistfully, "Little Judy—you really could have gone places."

Don't try to put Judy Blue Eyes in a box.