

WEEK

MUSIC

BOTH SIDES OF JUDY COLLINS

By Peter Jones

Judy Collins remembers her crossover moment.

"My fifth album had come out with the usual suspects," she said. "I did Dylan. I did Shel Silverstein. Of course, I did Pete Seeger. I did a wonderful Phil Ochs song. The next thing we decided is let's take a great leap and do something completely different."

By 1966, Collins had become widely known for her pitch-perfect soprano and ability to treat folk music as serious vocal art, even as many of the songwriters she covered, most notably

Bob Dylan, were playing up the rougher Woody Guthrie end of the spectrum.

When it came time for Collins's sixth album, Dylan had already redefined himself at least twice, folk-rock had become the next big thing, and the Beatles, a band once dismissed by folkies as dispensable pop, were feeling the influence of Dylan and the Byrds on *Rubber Soul*.

The back-and-forth influence between folk and rock would not be lost on Collins as she strived to break barriers of her own, recording music and covering artists that most on either side of the folk-rock divide might find ironic, if not jaw-dropping, in their audacity.

"We did orchestrated songs and also got into Bertolt Brecht. We did the wonderful Jacques Brel," she said, noting the collaborative influence of her then-arranger Joshua Rifkin.

Inevitably, Collins also tapped into the Beatles' catalogue with the song from *Rubber Soul* that would eventually give her transitional chamber-pop album its title.

"'In My Life' was on my top list of favorite songs, so of course we did that," the singer explained. "It was one of those watershed moments because we didn't realize how much trouble we were really in."

Any fracas caused by the

album was minor in retrospect. A decade later, by the time Collins had famously turned a Stephen Sondheim show tune into a Top 20 hit, the gig was up for musical conformity. By then, the Doors had covered Brecht, the Beatles were the stuff of classics, and even Brel had made the Top 40.

Collins, 76, who spent her formative years in central Denver, comes home again May 8 to send in the clowns and other favorites with an evening of Sondheim and more with the Greeley Symphony Orchestra at Boettcher Concert Hall at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

Born in Seattle in 1939, Collins's family moved to the Mile High City when she was 10 so her radio-host father, Chuck, a blind bandleader and announcer, could take a job at KOA.

"He was very important in my life," Collins reminisced. "He was a wonderful singer and an amazing songwriter. He talked about things many people were thrown off the radio for. He talked about Vietnam. He hated McCarthy. I was well trained musically, politically, socially. I realized it didn't matter much that he couldn't see. He saw more than anyone I ever knew."

Inspired by her father's free spirit, Collins followed her own passion for singing. As a child, she was classically trained on the piano and made her public debut at 13 with the Denver Symphony Orchestra.

After graduating East High School, "Such a great school," she said, Collins became a fixture on the small, but lively, Denver-Boulder folk scene.

"It was one of the wonderful, extraordinary times in Denver," she said, noting the importance of the city's then-resident folk impresario Walt Conley [interviewed in this column in 2003],



East High School graduate, Judy Collins, performs May 8 at Boettcher Concert Hall. PHOTO COURTESY OF AXS.COM

who ran the Exodus and the Satire Lounge, where he booked a scruffy kid named Bobby Zimmerman to open for the up-and-coming Smothers Brothers [interviewed here in 2009].

"He used to sleep on Walt's couch," Collins recalled. "He certainly hadn't started that extraordinary explosion of life-changing writing. He had not blossomed very well."

The unkempt folkie, eventually renamed Dylan, was among the artists Collins would turn to as a source of material when the singer relocated to New York City's Greenwich Village and launched her recording career, becoming a darling of the folk set.

She scored a Grammy and a Top 10 hit with a breakthrough version of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now."

Before long, Collins was romantically linked to Stephen Stills, who would write Crosby, Stills and Nash's "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" in her honor.

By the time Collins had made a hit of Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns" in 1975, her fans had long given up on filing the "art song" singer strictly in the folk bin.

"If I hear it and I love it, that's it. My job is to make it sound like Judy Collins, whatever it is," she said. "I was fortunate enough to get a letter from Mr. Sondheim saying, 'Thank you very much for my first Top 10 hit.' And by the way, it was his only."

Collins continues her eclectic passions to this day. *Strangers Again*, her latest CD, finds the singer in duets with 12 diverse male singers, from Willie Nelson to Michael McDonald, on a range of familiar and lesser known material.

"Sometimes people wanted to have more of a say and sometimes they wanted to do what I chose. So it was very much a dialogue," Collins said. "It was a lot of fun too."

Most remarkably, after 55 years in the business and struggles that have included an eating disorder, alcoholism and the death of her only child, Collins's voice still sounds much the same as it did on her angelic 1961 debut *Maid of Constant Sorrow*.

Collins may make pitch perfection seem easy, but it is all an illusion.

"Doing this is very hard work," she explained. "I have to be right on top of everything. There's no wiggle room. I can't smoke. I can't scream. I can't stay up all night. The road gets narrower, but I've been very lucky."

For tickets and more information, visit axs.com or judycollins.com. Contact Peter Jones at pjones@lifeoncaphill.com.



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