

LORRAINE FEATHER'S SONG COMMENTS—AGES

I began this project right after my 60th birthday. I remember being troubled about turning 30, seriously alarmed about turning 40, and at the edge of screaming horror when my 50th birthday approached, but 60 did not bother me at all. This was, I think, because the years from 50 to 60 had been the most interesting of my life. I had worked extensively as a lyricist, had released five albums and performed a lot. The experience of adding words to the compositions of Fats Waller and Duke Ellington, then co-creating songs with my brilliant contemporaries and having the adventure of recording all these, made the decade very full. I began thinking about an album focusing on different stages of life and completed it over the course of a year. Some of the songs are more about me than others, some only “based on actual events,” as they say on TV. This is the most collaborative project I’ve done, many aspects of the songs shifting and changing along the way.

1) “A Lot to Remember (Zero to Sixty)”: This was inspired by Charlie Christian’s recording of “Waiting for Benny,” which had no piano or bass (there was a pianist who played literally one chord on the original and was never heard from again). Eddie Arkin and I decided to bring Mike Valerio in on bass in the middle, though, and end with a bass solo. Grant Geissman and Eddie were the two guitarists in a band together long ago and had a few yuks about it at the date. The “Cool man, cool” adlib is a nod to Grant’s album of that name. Gregg Field, the drummer, really burns on this kind of swing groove. In the third verse I mention seven of the eight parts of speech. Eddie and I wrote this song entirely over the phone.

2) “Peculiar Universe”: I was browsing around on Amazon one day and suddenly had a yen to listen to the banjo genius Béla Fleck, whom I’d always admired tremendously. I downloaded *Tales from the Acoustic Planet* (which included the Grammy-nominated bluegrass tune “Cheeseballs in Cowtown”) and became mesmerized by his eerie “Circus of Regrets.” The song said two things to me: loss, and space. I learned later that he had dedicated it to Bozo the Clown, shows what I know. Anyway, I did a little demo of the song with my lyrics and sent it to Béla; he approved of the words and agreed to play on the recording. Russ did the arrangement. I kept the melody as close to the original banjo line as possible. This is one of only two pieces Béla ever wrote on piano, and is in three different time signatures.

3) “I Forgot to Have Children”: In the 80s, someone gave me a card that had a cartoon of a retro-type weeping woman on the front, saying “I can’t believe it. I forgot to have children!” You can still buy the refrigerator magnet. I thought this would be a good title for a song about a 40ish woman. Shelly Berg and I began writing our three pieces for the album at a club called Nighttown in Cleveland, after a sound check. Whenever we met on the road we’d work on them a little more. I don’t have kids but have always had pets, though never ferrets as mentioned in the lyrics` (it’s illegal in New York City, and all of CA, in any case). The song is comedic but the bridge is wistful, and Shelly changed the mood there so nicely.

4) “Old at 18/Dog Bowl”: This was inspired by a groove that my drummer husband Tony Morales played on a dog bowl. I conceived the verse to be a languid vocal over the dog bowl groove, and Eddie wrote the 60s-cool-jazz melody and chords to float over those sections. He sketched out a loose idea for the ending and at the session, the guys played the perfect thing under my adlibs on the first take. The lyrics are about the way I felt when I went back to Manhattan at 18 to be an actress. My roommate Lynne and I (and a cat) lived in an apartment the size of a walk-in closet; I used to tap on the kitchenette cabinet before opening it so the roaches would have time to scatter. Eddie’s arrangement gave Warren Luening a lot of freedom to solo on trumpet throughout the tune, in between the vocal lines.

5) “Perugia”: 1994 was the year of the dreadful Northridge quake in California. My parents’ house was trashed and they had to move into an apartment, which hit my father (the writer Leonard Feather) particularly hard; he was so used to working at home in familiar surroundings, and had been getting frail. He was booked to review the jazz festival in Perugia that summer. My dad and I had never taken a trip together by ourselves, and my mother and I decided that I’d go with him. He became very ill in Italy but chose to finish out our trip, which included Assisi and Rome. Right after we got back he checked into a hospital, and died six weeks later. The music is Russell Ferrante’s interpretation of Felix Mendelssohn’s

"Venetianisches Gondellied." Russ told me he felt the music already felt something like a jazz waltz to him, and he made it subtly more so.

6) "Things I Learned in High School": Shelly and I also worked on this song whenever we saw each other on the road. The week before we were to record it, he was in the midst of doing an Arturo Sandoval album in LA and I was at Palm Springs ShortFest to see my Fats Waller cartoon. We finally connected for a few minutes about our plans for the recording session. I asked Shelly if he thought it might be nice to do something suggesting a Bach invention at the beginning and end of "Things I Learned." He's very fast, and had almost finished it before we hung up. The drum feel that Gregg came up with at the date, opened up the 6/8 groove and made it feel freer and more spacious. Mike Shapiro plays various percussion instruments on the track, including a cajón (Peruvian box drum).

7) "Two Desperate Women in Their Late 30s": Russ wrote most of the music to the lyrics I gave him, while I was sitting there in his studio. Shapiro is the drummer on this track; Tony plays a trash can. The song is dedicated to my late friend Linda Lawley. Linda and I met singing backup for Petula Clark in Vegas, when we were both living in New York; reconnected in LA a decade later as struggling singer/songwriters, and became best pals. She once joked that we should start a publishing company called "Two Desperate Women in Their Late 30s," the age we were at the time. Near the end of this track, Mike Valerio stops playing the bass as a bass and starts whacking it like a percussion instrument, I do a little vocal percussion of my own, and Grant channels Gabor Szabo.

8) "The Girl with the Lazy Eye": This is the last song I worked on for *Ages*. I had a whole bunch of ideas for it that I gave Russell; it was going to be bluesy, we thought. We had a date to work on it the day after he returned from a Yellowjackets tour. When I got to Russ and Gerry's house in LA, Russ told me he'd been jet-lagged and had gotten up and written something in the middle of the night. He played it for me and the music was completely different from the concept we had tossed around, kind of a tone poem, and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. The girl is partly me; I do have a slightly lazy eye, and wrote morbid poetry when I was a little girl in grammar school.

9) "How Did We End Up Here?" Eddie and I wrote this in late 2008. It's about Tony's and my move to the San Juan Islands in Washington State, a magical place with an abundance of wildlife—including bald eagles and the famed jumbo-sized pileated woodpeckers—psychedelic springs and Gothic winters (I finished the lyrics in December, when the sun goes down at 4:15). The song is also about marriage. The part about a parent practicing all day long to remember the children's names is something a friend told me. The line about a wife taking a swing at her spouse mid-renovation is borrowed too; I'm not naming names! Eddie got the idea to have Bob Leatherbarrow double the vocal on vibes, and he did a stellar job as always. The solo that Russ plays at the end is very fiery and I never tire of listening to it.

10) "Scrabble": I've known the great Dick Hyman all my life, and worked with him closely on *New York City Drag*. Dick wrote a piece called "Barrel of Keys" that was dedicated to Fats Waller. He let me adapt it into a song about Scrabble—and a woman living with an annoyingly verbal boyfriend. I've played the game forever (Gerry Mulligan and Judy Holliday used to come over and play my parents from time to time. My mom told me that Judy was hard to beat). Dick asked me to mention a family friend named Dushka in the lyrics. The middle section used to be called "The Dushka Stomp." Figuring out how to work the name in took me almost as long as writing the rest of the lyric. I'm glad I was able to, though. The 392-point word at the end has actually been played, though never by me.

11) "I Always Had a Thing for You": A few years ago, Shelly told me that Monica Mancini was looking for material for an album. We wanted to write something sultry and I came up with the title "I Always Had a Thing for You," about a longtime infatuation. For some reason we didn't get around to writing the tune but I always liked the title a lot and kept it tucked away, then wrote the lyrics for this CD. When Shelly and I were performing near Seattle in February of 09, we had just finished "I Always Had a Thing for You" and tried it out at a gig. A club owner we had worked for a couple of years back had relocated to the area, but his wife had not yet joined him. He was crying after we finished the song, which we took as a good sign that we should record it.