

All About EVA

The Artist, part III

Washington, DC isn't exactly the most musical town in America.

And I'm not trying to set up a joke or make a snide comment about politicians here, either. It must be a difficult job to represent the needs and opinions of so many people. I'm not about to be judgmental toward those who are no doubt trying their best amidst a not-so-perfect system. Especially since I am completely unable to place myself in their shoes. Even my George W quotes in this book are used with great respect. Heck, I can barely manage my own household and career no less an entire city or nation.

However, as I wrote earlier, the farther away from the arts we get, the more frustrated our lives become. I think we need more leaders with banjos and guitars in their offices and less lobbyists.

A few short years ago, traversing the political fog of this stress filled town, there was a young woman who loved to sing. And like so many hometown artists in hometowns across this nation, very few people, aside from friends and family, even knew who she was. She sang in little blues clubs and coffeehouses along the east coast, rarely travelling more than a one day drive from her home.

But she loved to sing.

And she loved to perform. And she loved to wrap herself up in the blanket of affection her small audiences would give her. Like so many singers, she dreamed of the big record deal. Not so much for the stardom, but for success in having a career in music.

And like so many hometown artists, she came very close.

She made tapes of her music and mailed them out. She played

talent nights and eventually began performing her own gigs. Her family and friends were very supportive and all shared the joy of hearing her songs in the smoky clubs around Washington, DC.

Part of her problem was her shyness.

Another was her age.

She'd been at it for awhile and was now in her thirties. Conventional musik bidness wisdom dictates that the public will not buy the album of a middle aged new artist. Unless you can fit into jeans like Miss Britney you ain't got no chance, or so goes the claim. Well, she was beautiful but not a beauty and her commercial appeal was hampered by yet another restriction: she didn't write. Not that much anyway. Most of her sets in the clubs were of cover songs, of all things.

Who on earth was going to buy an album from a shy, middle aged human jukebox doing cover songs of other people's music? But those who knew her believed in her. Like so many others, they found delight in a very clear and gentle voice, an instrument that she used with delicate power and grace.

Much unlike Miss Britney, I should add.

One day, opportunity came knocking. A friend of hers had a friend who owned a recording studio. Her friend, after much persuading, managed to sway the owner to at least record a simple CD of this very deserving and sincere artist so she could at least have a shot. The studio owner relented and scheduled her for what is called a demo session. This is a basic recording session, not a lot of hours or instruments, just getting the songs down to hear what they sound like. Little did he know, but these brief sessions in his little studio would all but make history in just a few short years. Nonetheless, they recorded a very raw and sparse album of her cover songs and soon enough a locally produced CD of her music came out and quickly drifted under



photo of Eva Cassidy by Larry Melton

the radar of public attention and was lost into the darkness of obscurity.

And so, she returned to her clubs in her hometown.

Then, all too soon, she was gone.

It was found that Eva, at the young age of 33, had cancer. Before her voice could find her audience, before she could make something of her little album, the illness consumed her spirit, conquered her frail body and she died.

All too soon.

All too painfully and sadly soon.

Her musical life, her love and passion and the delicate sound of her voice, were all stored on a bedroom shelf in a few brown boxes of unsold CDs, left behind as a footnote of a life of lost opportunity and relegated to family conversations in years to come as that “*cousin who used to sing.*”

Or so one would think.

Three weeks after she passed in 1996, the Washington Area Music Awards, or WAMMIES, honoured her talent and skill. This is a group of area artists who give out mini-Grammy awards to local musicians and songwriters in the Washington, DC area. It was a nice thing for her hometown to do but obviously couldn't help her much now.

And then a tiny label on the west coast came forward, Blix Street Records. They heard of this young woman and loved her voice and so, working with the little recording studio, put together a collection of her precious few recordings and released a posthumous CD of this completely unknown singer. They called the album *Songbird*, a very fitting and poetic description of this lost angel's voice. The album was made up entirely of the cover songs she loved and was released to deadening silence. Aside from the few hundred copies sold in her hometown to friends and family, nobody else even knew who she was. Radio wasn't going to play it as the production was so simple. Alas, there was no artist available for press interviews, radio appearances, concerts, in-store performances . . . nothing.

And the label was too small to spend much money on marketing.

So, like her own homemade records, the *Songbird* album

quickly slipped away under the crushing load of commercial releases and was buried from view.

Well, almost.

Blix Street, like many good small labels, mailed out a bunch of review copies of *Songbird*.

One of them went on an amazing, unplanned journey.

In 1998, two years after she passed away, a friend of a friend had a friend on a radio show in England of all places. So, into a little envelope went the CD and the friend of a friend mailed it across the Atlantic. It ended up on the desk of a producer for BBC 2 radio in London. Well, when a friend of a friend from across the Atlantic thinks enough of something to mail it to you, it's only polite to at least give it a listen.

So he did. And he was stunned. "This woman, this *Songbird*, has the most beautiful voice he ever heard," he thought.

So he listened to the whole CD and called his friend and, in despair, found out that the woman who possessed this magical instrument, this angel's voice, was gone. How sad. Not to be deterred, he walked down the hall and into the control room. As the DJ was speaking on the air he slipped the CD in front of him. The mic finally turned off as the next song played and the DJ looked at the plain, unremarkable CD cover from an artist he never heard of before.

"*What's this?*" he asked.

"*Something from the States . . . I think you'll be impressed.*"

The cover was opened up, the disc was removed and placed into the CD player. Trusting the judgment of the producer, the DJ decided to review it on the air. "*Here's a song from the States, a singer who we've never listened to before, let's play . . .*" and he glanced at the jacket, recognized the song title of track 10 and said, "*. . . a tune we all know from the cinema, an old song Judy Garland once sang called Over the Rainbow.*"

And the song played and both men stood in the little studio listening to this magical, feminine voice sing this oft-repeated song but with new passion, new brilliance, a new simplicity of spirit. It was just her and her guitar. The recording technique wasn't all that good, there was noise in the track and was certainly not major label material. If

anything, it was a rather low budget recording.

But that voice.

And that song.

And those phones.

The men looked down and, lo and behold, the phone lines were lit up like the Big Ben at midnight. As they were getting absorbed by the music the audience, *the audience*, responded with their voices, too.

Who is this woman?

Where is she from?

Will she tour England?

What is the name of the CD?

So many calls came in so fast that the DJ decided to play another song, a cover of Sting's old hit *Fields of Gold*.

And again the audience spoke.

On the TV side of the BBC studios another gentleman got wind of the commotion on the radio side. He was the producer of a BBC music video TV show.

"What on earth is happening here?" he asked.

And he heard the voice and he saw the phones and he felt the magic of this unknown artist.

"I must have her on my show," he said. *"When is she coming? What is her label? Get me the music video clip so I can play it on TV!"*

But, alas, there was no artist.

There was no tour.

There was no music video.

Disappointed, the men returned to their office. The TV producer had an idea. He could at least call the record label and let them know of the audience reaction in England. Perhaps the family would like to hear about it in honour of their daughter. So, he called the owner of Blix Street and in the course of conversation it was mentioned that the album the BBC played was recorded mostly live at a club and a grainy VHS video existed of that special night.

The producer thought a moment and said, *"Why not. . . . can you get me a copy?"*

And a few weeks later a package from California arrived in the

post at the BBC with a VHS dub-of-a-dub of the ailing singer in a dark blues club in Washington, DC, alone on a stage singing *Over the Rainbow*.

About a week later, they played it on television in Britain, on a show surrounded by other videos heavy with production and marketing budgets and PR people and promoters and managers and investors and press and bands on tour and interviews and advertising and in-store placement and heavy radio airplay.

And within days this grainy little VHS video clip became the most requested music video in the history of the BBC 2 Television. The record took off in the stores like a mini-rocket ship. Little Blix Street Records was suddenly hammered with orders pouring in from overseas. The little, low budget CD that had barely sold a few hundred records total was now selling a few hundred records a day in England.

And then some other small town radio shows heard about the story of this departed singer with the angelic voice and they got their own copies of the album to play. And their audiences did the same thing. And DJs in Scotland and Ireland heard about it and they started playing the songs from this gentle *Songbird* album on the air.

No promoters called them.

No managers twisted their arm.

No press kits arrived in the mail.

No record company intern hounded them till they played the record. They simply played the album because the music was truly wonderful.

And the audience took over the promotion of the album. They began to manage the artist's career. The audience called the stations and demanded that record stores place the CD on the shelves.

And the album began to sell thousands of copies.

Now, the BBC is not only a big radio network and TV station, but they are also a major news organization. And the little *Songbird* album became newsworthy. So, a story hit the international wires about this unknown singer from Washington, DC who lost her fight to cancer at an all-too-young age and left this earth in total obscurity only to find a huge audience for her music years after she passed away.

And in America, a certain man who liked good music and

motorcycles read the story he found buried deep in his Sunday morning paper. Intrigued by the irony of the story, he logs onto Amazon.com and orders the CD. Surely, nothing in this life measures up to the hype, he thought. Days later, an envelope arrives with *Songbird*, he puts it in his CD player and expected to be disappointed.

He wasn't.

Actually, he learned a big lesson:

Music must be experienced as it cannot be described.

The experience of hearing *Songbird* so exceeded the written description of it that he was speechless. So, he brought the album to work to gauge what his coworkers thought. It was quickly decided that this story, full of heartache and lost opportunity of a lone artist rising above the ashes like a musical Phoenix, was the kind of refreshing, unusual and encouraging story that his TV show was most decidedly NOT known for.

So, Ted Koppel of ABC television did an entire *Nightline* broadcast on Eva Cassidy and her little *Songbird* album.

And America discovered Eva Cassidy six long years after she died of melanoma. Her album has sold over three million copies. *Songbird* made a number of noted music critics' year-end Top Ten lists in 1999, and earned Record of the Year honors on England's BBC Radio 2.

For the most part, commercial radio didn't play her songs.

She never did a concert tour.

She didn't have a big budget to work with.

Eva didn't schmooze the press.

Instead, the audience decided on its own that she deserved the mantle of their attention and praise. The audience, through word-of-mouth and genuine appreciation of the delicate power of this woman's singing, responded by buying her album all on their own . . . simply because she was good.

And as I sit here writing this chapter I can't help but wonder, I can't help but be moved, by the irony of Eva's journey. Could she ever have imagined, the day she sat in that studio and sang a few songs into the mic, that her voice would eventually be heard throughout the world when at the time she could barely even get a gig?

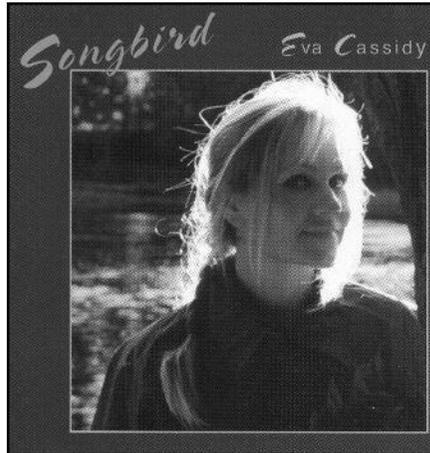
Could she have imagined, the day she sat alone in the doctor's office after being told the news of her cancer, that years later a folksinger in a farmhouse would be writing about her life and music?

Could she have imagined, the night she sang her last song in a smoky club in Washington, DC, knowing that she didn't have much longer to live, that her voice would indeed become a great legacy and a brilliant statement for artists around the world?

And could she have imagined, the day she put away her guitar for the last time and clasped the latches on her case, feeling the sickness and the depression and the failure, her heart weighed down with the loneliness of saying gooby to life and her family, that one day her voice would be lifted up and heard by millions who would adore her as the gentle *Songbird*?

That's why we should never take our art for granted.
Always do your best.

Because you *never* know who will end up listening.



The *Songbird* album is a wonderful, beautiful masterpiece. To find out more about Eva visit evacassidy.org