

Karla Bonoff  
by Catie Curtis

I remember spending much of the early '80s in a stiff Shaker chair by the record player in my parents' kitchen, hunched over my guitar, completely absorbed in the contentment of learning and playing Karla Bonoff songs. I was drawn in by the honesty in her voice, soaring melodies, and lyrics that seemed to spill from her heart like intimate conversations. I learned at least twenty of her songs when I was in high school, and would play them over and over. The experience of her music felt relevant to me, unlike much of what was coming over FM radio in southern Maine at the time. My friends were listening to AC/DC, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and ZZ Top. They took me to see Journey. But Karla... Karla was real. Karla spoke to me.



Growing up in the fertile Los Angeles music scene of the late '60s and early '70s, Karla and her sister, Lisa, were hoot-night regulars at the legendary Troubadour, watching then-unknowns such as James Taylor and Jackson Browne trying out their new songs. She soon teamed up with other Troubadour regulars Wendy Waldman, Kenny Edwards, and Andrew Gold to form Bryndle - the first singer-songwriter supergroup that was, unfortunately, just a few years ahead of their time. After making an unreleased album for A&M, Bryndle disbanded and the four went on to develop their own careers. Karla had three of her songs ("Someone To Lay Down Beside Me," "Lose Again," and "If He's Ever Near") cut by Linda Ronstadt on her 1976 Hasten Down The Wind album. This led to Karla signing a solo deal with Columbia and putting out four records, Karla Bonoff (1977), Restless Nights (1979), Wild Heart of the Young (1982), and almost a decade later, New World (1988) on Gold Castle Records.



After a few years' retreat from the music industry, Karla re-emerged in the '90s and had three more songs recorded by Ronstadt ("All My Life," "Goodbye My Friend," and "Trouble Again") for her Cry Like A Rainstorm, Howl Like The Wind album, with "All My Life" winning a Grammy for Best Pop Vocal Duo. In 1993 she topped the country charts with Wynonna's version of "Tell Me Why." And in '95 Bryndle reunited and released an album, touring together for the first time in fifteen years. Now, she has just released a retrospective on Sony/Legacy called All My Life: The Best of Karla Bonoff.

Even though her songs have been covered by some of the most impressive singers of our time, Karla's fans know that nobody sings them quite like she does. I can't tell you what it is, exactly. I can only say that when I hear her aching and unadorned voice, I slump in my chair in a deeply satisfied, melancholy way. Bonnie Raitt nailed it when she said, "Karla breaks my heart every time she sings."

The role of a singer-songwriter in the spotlight hasn't always been easy for Karla. As a shy person, she has struggled with the scrutiny and expectation that come with being a successful artist early in one's career. When Karla's cover of "Personally" became a hit in '82, she had to go on Solid Gold wearing a miniskirt and white go-go boots. This was pre-grunge, pre-Lilith Fair. Female singer-songwriters were not all over the pop charts, and the thoughtful folk sound of the '70s was on its way out. But against the backdrop of omnipresent electronic and heavy metal music, her straightforward, heartfelt, acoustic-based material sustained a legion of adoring folk-rock fans. Timothy White, editor of Billboard, summed it up best when he said, "Karla Bonoff's works are a bold expression of humanistic searching and belief during an often faithless era."

While Karla was providing us with a respite from the sounds of the '80s, she was also influencing the next generation of female singer-songwriters. Her melodic sense, personal lyrics, and vocal stylings have found their way into the work of everyone from Shawn Colvin and Jonatha Brooke to Sarah McLachlan and Paula Cole. And even though her thoughtful ballads like "Restless Nights" and "Goodbye My Friend" never had a chance to get radio play at that time, they paved the way for songs like one of the '90s biggest hits, McLachlan's "Angel."

I met Karla Bonoff at her house near Santa Barbara. She's in the process of having a new home built, so in the meantime, she's living in a cottage that she has decorated in a colonial/farmhouse style. Her taste is unpretentious and down to earth, much like her music. She welcomed me in to sit in a creaky wooden chair at a beautiful old kitchen table, and our conversation was easy and open. At one point her cat jumped up on the table and became fascinated with the microphone. I kept having those out-of-body sensations, realizing, "Here I am, sitting in Karla Bonoff's kitchen, talking to Karla Bonoff about Karla Bonoff's music." Partly that's just the typical star-struck thing, because when you've lived with the album covers for long enough and then you meet the person, it's always surreal. But more importantly, I had this sense of reverence. Here was the person that first moved me to write and sing my own words - someone who seemed to care about music because of its ability to convey emotion. At the risk of admitting an unobjective interviewer status, I have to say I'm thankful to Karla for giving me such great tunes to ponder back then, and to still have kicking around in my head - word for word - after all these years.



Do you think it was important to live in L.A. when you were starting your career, and do you think it's important for people trying to make a living in music to live in New York or L.A. today?

Oh boy, I think then...my whole musical career would be completely different if I hadn't been there, only because at that time there seemed to be this beginning of the singer-songwriter movement - that California part of it, anyway - and it was really centered there. All these influences were there at that time, like hearing Jackson Browne playing new songs at open mics. I think the fact that we had places to perform where people who could sign us could hear us was an important thing. In that sense, it's probably still important to play somewhere where people can hear you, otherwise you are just in a vacuum.

I think a lot of the music scene there was so vital because a lot of the record companies and all the recording studios were there. So people would come there thinking "Well, this is where we have to go to get signed and make records." But now the whole music business is so different. Not that there aren't a lot of record companies there, but the whole nature of the fact that you can make your own record has changed that. Now I don't know if it makes any difference where you live. But, on the other hand, I don't know what it's like to be 19 or 20 in L.A. Maybe there's a music scene I'm not aware of that goes on. But, just from my perspective, it doesn't seem like you need to be anywhere in particular anymore.

Do you remember the first time you heard Linda Ronstadt sing one of your songs?

Actually, the first one I heard she learned out on the road. I heard through Kenny [Edwards] she had learned "Lose Again." They had played it in their sound check and she liked it and they were doing it in the show. I was like, "Oh, that's so cool." I saw them at the Universal Amphitheater, and they played it. So that was the first time I heard her do it, and I was in the audience. It was amazing for me, because I think when you're a songwriter - until you have that first moment when someone records your song and you hear it back - there's some part of you that goes, "Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm really not good, maybe I just think I'm good." But it takes somebody else mirroring back at you...and she just sang the shit of it (laughs). It was great.

These days, how do you approach getting songs written?



I guess for me it's just getting out of my own way. The best writing I've done comes from a subconscious, deeper place. And whatever writer's block I have comes from something in my head that's criticizing or editing what I'm doing, and not letting it just come out. For me the issue is about just avoiding that whole inner dialogue that's so paralyzing. That's the fascinating part, I think - where these songs really come from when that channel is open. Because I've had experiences where I have written stuff and then I looked down on the paper and went, "Wow, where did that come from?" So it's kind of non-intellectual.

Are you saying that the process feels less like creating than discovering...like you just found this song?

Right. Yeah, I think the innocence of not judging yourself along the way, "Oh, I don't like that chord," or "What would so-and-so think of that?" Yeah, I would really get into it playing these songs. And instead of just doing them for myself, I was thinking about what other people would think of them. All that stuff that people do in their lives - not just in songwriting. I think the lesson is to stop worrying what other people think of you. Just do what is purely you. It's the lesson for me in every step of life, especially songwriting. I don't know, I think when I was younger and I had nothing to lose, I felt like if I would write something great, then great. If I didn't, no one would hear it anyway. I think there is more at stake when you've had some success, then all those other voices start. For me it's really about getting back to the purity of doing it.

I read that you did some work with a writing coach. What was that process like?

Well, I've always had a lot of writer's block, and someone recommended to me a writer's coach who had developed a system of tools to help you break through that. And really it's just learning the discipline of working on anything. So he taught me about writing in a journal everyday. There's also a book called The Artist's Way which has a lot of these same techniques in it...doing it every day, doing it right when you wake up in the morning before other things distract you.

So I'd feel like I had nothing to say or nothing to write about, but I would write in my journal for a week and then I'd just go read pieces of it to him. And he'd go, "There are so many ideas in there," and I'd go, "No, there's not." And he'd go, "Yes there are. There's this and that." He would just pull out a phrase and go, "What about that? You could write about that." I would go "No," and I'd be really negative. At one point as an exercise he just said, "Try to write a song about this. I don't care if it's bad. Just take that phrase and write a song. That is your homework assignment." It was actually this phrase, "daddy's little girl," and I walked out of there going "Oh, I do not want to do this...I hate this."

The amazing thing was I sat down to do this, and this great song came out. Even with all my negativity and everything, I realized that if you're good at this and you're talented at it - even with all that, "Okay, this is an assignment I don't want to do," - if you show up for your job and you do the work, then at some point the songs will get written. And it really proved to me that I could come to the keyboard with something I really didn't think was going to work and was negative about and write a great song. That just blows my whole theory about all of this, "Oh no, I have to wait until I am inspired." So, he really proved something to me.

However, knowing all that I still have a hard time. It's like anything else, I think. If you want to run three miles, you have to go every day and run a quarter of a mile, and then a half mile, then a mile...and then maybe after three or four weeks you can run three miles. But I'm always impatient. I want to go out the door, never exercise, and then I want to run three miles.

Because you've had those experiences where there are songs that do just come to you like gifts.

But I think you still have to be playing your guitar, or playing your piano, or you have to have those days where you just play for an hour and go, "I hate everything I just played," because then maybe the third or the fourth or the fifth day you'll play something you do like. But you can't just never play and then sit down and expect that you're going to write this really cool song. Although, like you said, sometimes that happens.

Why is it, do you think, that it's still important for you to write?

Well, I don't know...in some ways it's not. Frankly, I'd be fine if I didn't, but I think the process of writing a great song is so enjoyable, and I think there's a sense of well-being that a writer gets from creating. I like that feeling. I can get that from being creative in other things, too, but I just think it is such a positive reinforcement of who you are...for me, my identity is so tied up in that, if I don't do it I feel like, "Who am I? What am I supposed to do with my life?" And I think that it's the place where I'm able to express myself. And if there's any sort of fear around that - in terms of really being open and expressing yourself - I think that's the hurdle. If you get over that hurdle, then there's a great sense of relief in being able to dig down deeper.



Is there anything else in your life that you have applied the kind of intensity, focus, and desire to as songwriting?

Actually, not until these last two years. I've been building a house, and it takes that same kind of discipline. It's very creative - I started off just designing it, and now I am in the last three months of finishing it. But it's just one big, huge, creative project - it's like one big, huge song (laughs). You keep going back and questioning yourself, and so I've been really wrapped up in that and it's really drained a lot of my creative energy for writing. But I'm going to have to get back to the writing to pay for it (laughs).

It sounds like it's creating a balance to have another means of expression.

Yeah. I use a lot of things to distract me from songwriting. I get really into gardening, you know, "I'll just go out there for an hour and do some weeding and planting and then I'll come back in and write." Next thing you know it's five o'clock. "Oh no, now it's time for dinner - I can't write now, I have to make dinner. I'll play later." I don't know about you, but I think a lot of songwriters avoid it, because you don't go to an office, and you don't have to show up. I think that's the hardest thing about it - the self-motivating thing. You have to discipline your own hours and your own time, and nobody knows if you don't show up. So I find days just go by where I am wandering around and all of a sudden I'll realize I haven't written for weeks. So, to me that's really the hardest part of it. Somebody said to me, "the work won't get done if you don't show up for your job." That's true, I really don't show up very often (laughs). It seems like there are a lot of elements to this kind of life that are about not having control. Like if your voice goes out or whether a great song comes to you or not.

Do you feel like there is something good about that element that you have learned in your life by being an artist?

I guess sometimes I crave having a more controlled life. You probably do, too, where you go to the office, and go to your work, and at five o'clock you drive home and it's done. Somehow when you do this, it's never done, it's never finished. It's this ongoing walk through life. Like you say, it's out of control, and yet I wouldn't trade it for anything. I mean, the fact that I have had this kind of freedom in my life and I have been able to travel all over the place...I really appreciate what is great about my life.

On the other hand, there is always that sense of insecurity. Where's the next dollar coming from? Where's the next gig? Will there be any more gigs? Will I make another record? Will my record be good? Will my record be bad? You are so vulnerable all the time. And when you lose your voice, it's such a terrible feeling, like someone has just cut off your arm or something. You are always at the mercy of, "What's happening next?" And I think when you're really pouring out your soul in this way, and you're putting it out there in the world and want people to like it...I think that the rejection - people not liking it...

At least now you can make your own records to some extent. But, in the days when you made a demo and then sent it out there to the record companies to see if they wanted you, you would get these rejections, and I think it just takes a lot of strength to have that kind of career. It's different now people can make their own CDs, and you can take them on the road, and you can sell your record, and you can promote your own career. It's a little less painful than waiting for some company to say "yes" or "no" to you.

How do you view your relationship with your fans? Do you talk to them at shows?

Yeah, I do. In the old days we never did that. When I was younger I was kind of afraid. Now I sign CDs after shows and I talk to people, and I think I came to appreciate them a lot more as I got older. My fans have hung in with me for so long and have been so supportive, and really hung in with so little material (laughs), with only four albums. I just appreciate them so much. I hear the same things from my fans like, "You got me through my divorce," or "We got married to 'All My Life'." I hear that a lot.

I think there came a point in my life where I realized that my music really did touch people, and had a healing property for people. When I was younger it was hard for me to accept that. I think. To accept the gift I was given as a songwriter, and as someone who could maybe express feelings for people that they couldn't express. I've really come to value that as a gift that I certainly have no control over having. But the fact that it's been healing for people makes all the stuff that we go through in this career worth it, because it actually does have a beneficial effect on people.

Since you emerged as an artist in the midst of the women's movement of the '70s, did you feel that it had any impact on your writing, your fan base, or the way your music was received? Or do you feel it wasn't really related?

I don't know. I've been asked those questions since the '70s... "How does it feel to be a woman songwriter?" (laughs). I can remember these articles that would be done on women songwriters, and they would put me and Valerie Carter and somebody else together. It seems like the same article is being written and it's 20 years later (laughs). But the thing I see now is that there is so much more acceptance of it. I mean, Lilith Fair could not have happened when my record came out. Women wouldn't play with each other on the same bill. And I think there's so much acceptance for women on radio now. The thing I remember hearing was, "We already have one female singer on the radio; we can't play another one." So it seems easier, in a way, to be out there doing it. On the other hand, there seems like there's a whole lot more competition - there are so many women out there. But I think the biggest change is really that women are playing with each other on stage. That really didn't go on before.

Is there anything new that you want out of your own music for your life?



Well, in a way I feel like I've been semi-retired for a while. I really have taken a long break from writing in a way that I think I needed to, because a part of me didn't want to do it. And now I feel like it's starting over and I feel like I can do it from a place of really doing it just for me. I think part of what happened for me was trying too hard to please other people or make the kind of record I thought I had to make, and I think in the time I've taken off I've watched music change to the point where I really see songwriters - and women in particular - being able to write about what they want to. So it encourages me to just go, "You know what? I'm just going to write whatever I want, and I'm just going to make the record." I think I've spent so much time trying to fit a round peg into a square hole that I just sort of worked my way out of wanting to write anymore. And I got a bad taste in my mouth about not being able to just be myself.

So now I am excited about just doing it...and in a way, I don't care if anybody buys it or hears it, because I know I can print them up myself and sell them over our web page. I can put it out myself and probably make a better living than I did when I had a record contract. I made three albums for Sony, and I think I finally got a royalty check about two years ago. It took so long to recoup the money that was spent. I mean, the cost of the record was so expensive, and the tour support, and the kind of deal you make as a new artist - you get so little per record that it took like 15 years to pay all that money back to the label. If I hadn't been a songwriter, I would've starved. If you're just an artist and you're trying to make money, I don't know how people survive. I would have long ago been working at Der Wienerschnitzel (laughs). So the prospect now of being able to do your own record - even if you sell five or ten thousand copies - if you own that record, then you can do okay. So I'm excited about what's ahead.

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