

Restless Hearts, Elusive Homes  
Rediscovering the songs of Karla Bonoff  
by Timothy White - 1999

A stern old Latin navigator's advises, "If there is no wind, row," and in the nearly thirty-odd years since she began to study, write, sing and record music, Karla Bonoff has strived to heed that ancient exhortation.

Whether learning the Weavers' arrangement for the traditional Scottish ballad "The Water Is Wide" from ex-Weaver Frank Hamilton; watching such artists as Linda Ronstadt, Aaron Neville, Bonnie Raitt, and Wynonna cut beloved renditions of her own compositions, or notching assorted Billboard chart successes of her own, Bonoff has openly tried to dispel personal isolation, nagging self-doubt and professional creative blocks by seeking to craft music of uncommon personal candor and poignant clarity.

Born in Los Angeles, the second daughter of radiologist Dr. Chester Paul Bonoff and the former Shirley Kahane, Karla grew up in West L.A. near UCLA and attended University High - alma mater of Jan and Dean, Randy Newman, Raitt and numerous other popular musicians whose upbringing encompassed the sun-swept inspiration of Southern California.

While in the 10th grade, Karla began playing music with her sister Lisa in a Joni Mitchell-influenced folk duo called the Daughters of Chester P. and later started cutting school to hang around the legendary Troubadour folk club and perform in its Monday "Hoot Night" programs.

Karla was 16 and Lisa was 19 when they secured an audition with Electra-Asylum A&R executive David Anderle through the good graces of go-between John Densmore, the drummer with The Doors. The 11-song demo session oversaw with engineer Bruce Botnick in 1969 didn't lead to a label deal, but it helped draw Karla into the professional orbit of other local singer-songwriters. Lisa Bonoff elected afterwards to become an educator, and now teaches history and religion at Los Angeles Valley College.

Karla became friendly with Troubadour regulars Kenny Edwards, Bob Kimmel and Linda Ronstadt of the Stone Poneys (named for Charley Patton's "The Stone Pony Blues"). When that band broke up circa 1970. Edwards joined Bonoff, Andrew Gold and Wendy Waldman in a seminal but transitory new group called Bryndle, which cut an unissued record for A&M and then disbanded. (In 1995, Bryndle would re-form and release an acclaimed eponymous album)

In the aftermath of Bryndle came a brace of burgeoning careers, however, with Edwards rejoining Ronstadt's band, where she recorded his songs, and where he soon introduced Linda to Bonoff's material. Ronstadt subsequently covered three of Bonoff's songs ("Someone To Lay Beside Me," "Lose Again," "If He's Ever Near") on her 1976 Hasten Down The Wind album, and then helped Karla launch her solo career with a self-titled 1977 album on which Linda guested. Meanwhile, Waldman and Gold had each begun significant solo recording and writing careers.

But all the Bryndle alumni continued to contribute to (and in Edwards' case, also sometimes produce) the recordings for Bonoff's next three solo releases: *Restless Nights* (1979), *Wild Heart of the Young* (1982) and what is arguably her best album, *New World* (1988).

Bonoff's songs have also been used in numerous soundtracks (*Footloose*, *About Last Night... Eight Seconds*, etc.), and Ronstadt and Neville's lovely 1989 duet on Bonoff's "All My Life" from Linda's *Cry Like a Rainstorm, Howl Like the Wind* album won a Best Pop Vocal Grammy®.

Still recording as a solo artist and a member of the reactivated Bryndle, Bonoff is one of the finest singer-songwriters of her generation, with many of her ballads having become classics of American pop songwriting in the second half of the century. Moreover, many fans and critics feel Bonoff's own renditions of her songs are the more penetrating, with the instrumentation more spare and sharply textured, the singing more focused and unadorned, the sum effect more emotionally direct. It's an outlook this unprecedented 16-track compilation ultimately reinforces.



What follows is a February 1999 conversation with Bonoff in which this writer elicited track-by-track commentary from the customarily reticent artist. Indeed, one can read Karla's private overview while listening to this anthology, whose music opens with Bonoff's own falling notes at the piano, the eerie effect not unlike footsteps in the darkness.

Rich with stirrings of the conscience and the spirit, Karla Bonoff's works are a bold expression of humanistic searching and belief during an often faithless era. They are also a uniquely intimate window on the secrets we all somehow share, as we make progress along what she once called "the way of the heart."

"Someone To Lay Down Beside Me" (K. Bonoff, from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "Looking back now on being a 23-year-old person struggling to find my way, I think I was lonely, very isolated in those days, especially in trying to find a way in music and find out what was going to become my adult life. I had the music for the song for a really long time and I knew the music was special and I could never come up with lyrics for it. One night I watched it appear on the paper, and it was the most disconnected-from-my-body experience.

"At the time, Kenny (Edwards) was playing bass with Linda (Ronstadt), and Andrew (Gold) was playing guitar. I got to the point where I felt I had some good songs and I played 'Someone To Lay Down Beside Me' for her, in fact, a year before she recorded it. But Linda didn't respond to it at first. What happened next was that at some time out on the road, Kenny played her 'Lose Again' on the guitar and she really got it, learned it on the road, and started doing it on stage on the *Prisoner in Disguise* tour. Then she came back off the road and asked me for more. So she decided to do 'Someone To Lay Down Beside Me,' which Wendy Waldman and I sang backup on [the single hitting #42 on the Hot 100], and she decided to do 'If He's Ever Near' and it started to domino like that."

"To this day I play the song on the road and I never get tired of singing it; it just has his life of its own. It's in some ways the most important song of my repertoire and has this magical quality to it."

"If He's Ever Near" (K. Bonoff from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "I was having a conversation with a girlfriend of mine who was trying to figure out should she be with the guy. And she was wondering, if and when she saw the right guy, how would she know? So were were having this discussion about how you decide. I was inspired by that conversation, but it still seemed to be pretty contemporary [laughter], and I still seem to apply that one."

"I Can't Hold On" (K. Bonoff, from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "I was having a hard time at the moment in my relationship, and at that age I was not able to communicate very well in relationships. So I think I would put all that stuff into songs. But it's upbeat [laughter] anyway. I did come at songwriting from writing music first - which comes a lot easier for me, while lyrics are something I struggle with. In those days too, I would try to write up-tempo things because my natural tendency was to write ballads, and still is."

"Lose Again" (K. Bonoff, from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "Like 'Someone To Lay Down Beside Me,' I wrote that song while I was living in a tiny \$200-a-month house in the San Fernando Valley and we had turned the garage into a music room. The water used to come down into the garage when it rained, so the piano sat in this wet place. When I think of some of the songs that I wrote in this very, very uncomfortable situation, that contributed to it."

"Also in the house were Kenny Edwards and two other people: a drummer that Kenny had been in a band with and his girlfriend. It was a good time, I think, for me, but I had to fight against a lot. My parent's were not happy I didn't go to college, but I was very driven to prove I was doing the right thing, and a lot of the stuff I wrote then came out of that hunger."

"'Lose Again' was written on that same funky piano. And I remember that I was trying to imitate John David Souther [chuckle]. It was before Linda had recorded any of mine, and she had done a bunch of his things. I was thinking, 'I could write something she could do,' and I was consciously trying to be in his shoes."

"Home" (K. Bonoff, from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "That came out of a cross-country trip, the first time I'd really ever gone in a car like that. I remember seeing snow for the first time and driving through Utah. I was just inspired by being on the road and missing my little nest, more than anything, at the end of it. I think the best songs come from me from a place where I don't intellectualize them. Bonnie [Raitt] liked it too, and did it [on her *Sweet Forgiveness* album, 1977]."

"Wild Heart of the Young" (K. Bonoff, from *Wild Heart of the Young*, 1982) - "That was written in the early '80s, and was my looking back on a relationship that I didn't appreciate until I was 10 years away from it, realizing that first love was something you could never go back to. I had no perspective when I was there, but now knew it would have that specializes to it."

"Tell Me Why" (K. Bonoff, from *New World*, 1988) - "I really like Wynonna's version of this. She and [producer] Tony Brown had me come and play and sing on it. He called me and said, 'We can't get the guitars to sound quite right.' I said 'it's an opening tuning.' He said 'Oh, that's what it is,' so they came out to LA and I put my guitar part on it and Wendy and Kenny sang the harmonies.

"Wynonna's a good singer, and really does get into the song - which I particularly know from listening closely to her lead vocals in my headphones when I did my harmonies. I have a lot of respect for her, she recorded some beautiful stuff."

"Goodbye My Friend" (K. Bonoff, from *New World*, 1988) - "I have never publicly said what this was about because I thought people would laugh, but I had a cat for 16 years who was the most amazing, wonderful cat, and had nine lives. One time, a dog bit through its lung and it survived, another time it had bad kidneys and pulled through. That cat stayed inside because there were coyotes where I lived in Hollywood, but my girlfriend accidentally left the door open and he got out. We never found him again - the coyotes apparently got him - and it was devastating."

"Back then, my mother was still alive - she died in 1991 - so I hadn't truly experienced death before, except for the loss of my grandparents when I was too young to really feel that. So I only wrote that song to help myself, and wasn't planning for it to be anything anyone would ever hear. I was just trying desperately to do something therapeutic, and I was sobbing so hard, I could barely sing. It's amazing, because it's probably one of the best songs I've ever written."



"Isn't It Always Love" (K. Bonoff, from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "I wrote that about 1973, and at the time Bryndle was working with Chuck Plotkin as a producer. He kept telling us we weren't writing hit songs and needed to learn how to write a hit chorus. I was determined to prove to him that I could do that and sat down and wrote that chorus to show him that I could. But even when I was doing something as an exercise, something would come out of my heart at the same time."

"Restless Nights" (K. Bonoff, from *Restless Nights*, 1979) - "That was about being in one relationship and being in love with someone else, and coming to terms with where I was gonna go and what I was gonna do to resolve it. A difficult time: finding magic with a new person but having allegiance to a long relationship. I was 27 or 28; so it was painful."

"Baby Don't Go" (K. Bonoff, from *Restless Nights*, 1979) - "I went to see the Buddy Holly Story with Gary Busey, and I was so inspired by those wonderful three-chord songs of Holly's that I came home and thought I'd try to write a song like them. There was pressure in those days to have singles and part of "Baby Don't Go" [which reached #69 on the Top 100] was about was trying to come up with one."

"Daddy's Little Girl" (K. Bonoff, from *Bryndle*, 1995) - "I wrote that song in the '90s and never recorded it, so we put it on the Bryndle album. I had a dream that my dad died, and it was shortly after my mom died, so I was still dealing with that and wondering how I might ever face the loss of my father."

"I was also having trouble writing and going to a song coach who was having me write every day in a journal to feel freer about writing. I wrote down the dream in detail and my coach said, 'I'm going to give you an assignment. I know you don't want to do this but I want you to take the "daddy's little girl" phrase from your journal and write a song.' That sounded like homework, and I was begrudging, but the song came out. It showed that I could reach down deeper, and it was a good lesson for me. There's a resistance to having to dig down into painful things, even though it's satisfying."

"All My Life" (K. Bonoff, from *New World*, 1989) - "I went to see a screening of a movie with Virginia Madison in it called *Fire with Fire* [1986], and they were looking for someone to write a song for the slow-dance scene. Because it wasn't personal and I didn't have to take that kind of responsibility for it, I wrote it in about 20 minutes and it came out great."

"They didn't use in in the movie, but I used it on my own record, and it showed I didn't have to wrench myself to write something good. Linda [Ronstadt] was looking for duets [with Aaron Neville for *Cry Like a Rainstorm, Howl Like the Wind*] and that's how she ended up [at #11 on the Top 100] with that.

"Falling Star" (K. Bonoff, from *Karla Bonoff*, 1977) - "That goes back to that \$200-a-month house we had when I was still with Kenny, who then was on the road. I hadn't written anything in a couple of months, and I was frustrated, so I said, 'Damn it, I'm going to write a song before I go to sleep!' I was in bed with the covers up around my guitar, and it just came out."

"Personally" (P. Kelly, from *Wild Heart of the Young*, 1982) - "Glenn Frey [of the Eagles] was a great collector of obscure R&B stuff other people would never hear, and he played me the original [recorded for Columbia in 1978] by Jackie Moore. It was such a cool song, and I thought, that's a hit!"

"I was working on my third record at the time, and Glenn said he wanted to send the song to Bonnie Raitt. But his cassette machine broke and he never quite got it to her. So there was the irony of having my own first big hit [#19 in the Hot 100] being something I didn't write! I'm sure there're people out there who only know me from this song, but I really enjoyed singing and recording it."

"The Water Is Wide" (traditional, arranged by F. Hamilton, P. Seeger & K. Bonoff, from *Restless Nights*, 1982) - "People come up to me to this day and say this song really moves them. I learned it when I was 13 and took guitar lessons from Frank Hamilton, who was in the Weavers with Pete Seeger [and Ronnie Gilbert, Fred Hellerman, Lee Hayes, Erik Darling and Bernie Krauss]. He was part of that whole early '50-'60s folk scene.

"Frank taught guitar in an office on Hollywood and Vine, and he was a real inspiration to me. It was the arrangement he and Pete Seeger played in The Weavers, so that's their actual guitar parts and that's why they get an arrangement credit along with me. So it comes out of my very early folk music training. And then when James Taylor agreed to sing and play on it, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven; he's my hero. I saw him play at the Troubadour on a Monday night in 1968 when I was 16, right before his Apple album came out, and I felt this is the guy."

"Sitting in a studio with James was a great moment, and I also thought it was a great way to end this record, because the song and all those experiences have so much history for me."

