

LAURA NYRO'S *ELI* AND THE THIRTEENTH CONFESSION: TRANSCENDING THE DICHOTOMIES OF THE WOODSTOCK YEARS

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*As Wavy Gravy says, if you can remember the sixties,
you weren't really there (Van Ronk 141)*

Introduction¹

As a member of the so-called Woodstock Generation, I am aware of the potential pitfalls of writing about this period. As Dave Van Ronk points out in his quote from Merry Prankster Wavy Gravy (Hugh Romney), memories of those times tend to be hazy. On the other hand, research on memory has shown that there is a “reminiscence bump,” that is “people tend to remember disproportionately more events from the period between their adolescence and early adulthood” (Foster 64). In any case, it is clear that memory, whether it is individual and collective, reconstructs past experience, and that my own experience of the era has inevitably flavored the content of this article, making it impossible to aspire completely to the traditional ideals of scholarly distance and detachment. Future generations of cultural analysts will no doubt reassess the Woodstock Years through different lenses.

The name “Laura Nyro” may not ring a bell for many readers, as it did not for many of my students, colleagues and friends whom I have informally surveyed. This is understandable since, unlike other singer-songwriter icons of the period (e.g., Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor), Nyro was never really in the mainstream, although her songs have often been covered by a broad spectrum of singers and bands in a remarkable variety of musical styles, sometimes achieving a fair amount of commercial success. My limited sampling can be confirmed by using more objective measures. For example, a Google Fight staged on July 22, 2010 yielded 4,590,000 results for Bob Dylan, 265,000 results for Joni Mitchell and 41,900 for Laura Nyro. Dylan gets nearly 110 times more hits than Nyro and 17 times more than Mitchell.

In virtue of the Wavy Gravy principle, Laura Nyro had faded from my own memory until I read Sheila Weller's *Girls Like Us*, a biography of Carole King, Joni Mitchell, and Carly Simon, which led me to realize what a tremendous influence Nyro had had on other singer-songwriters. According to Weller (189), Carole King was influenced by Nyro's first album, *More than a New Discovery*, released in 1967, and Joni Mitchell considered her as her only female peer. Many other singer-songwriters, including Ricky Lee Jones, Suzanne Vega, Elvis Costello, and Elton John, would subsequently acknowledge their debt to Nyro. In this paper, using her second album, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* as my central exhibit, I will argue that Laura Nyro deserves far more recognition for her lasting innovative songs and performances that rival with the best work of the era. I will also relate her work to more general issues involving the Woodstock Years. But first, who was Laura Nyro?

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1. Laura who? A biographical sketch

Laura Nigro, pronounced “NIGH-gro to avoid a racial tease” (Kort 1), was born on October 18, 1947 in New York City in the Bronx. Her first name came from the famous title theme of the 1944 Otto Preminger film, *Laura*. Her Russian Jewish mother, Gilda, worked as a bookkeeper and her father, Louis, half Russian Jew and half Italian Catholic, was a professional trumpet player who played for weddings, bar mitzvahs and club dates. Laura grew up in a mixed neighborhood “populated with a rainbow coalition” of Puerto Ricans, Irish, Jews and Italians (Kort 5). At home she listened to a wide variety of music, including big band jazz, Broadway musicals, classical music (she recalled hearing soprano Leotyne Price and especially loved Ravel and Debussy), folk music and rock ’n’ roll. She began singing and writing poetry at an early age, and by age six or seven had written her first musical composition, an “Indian song” that included fourths, an open harmonic interval would characterize her own piano voicings as well as a lot of the jazz and rock of the Sixties, from McCoy Tyner to The Beatles.

After the Nigros acquired a Steinway grand piano Laura took lessons briefly, but she was mainly self-taught, and developed her own style by making up chords without any formal training. In this respect we might compare her to Joni Mitchell, who came up with innovative non-conventional guitar tunings and harmonies. She began performing at the summer resorts in the Catskills, singing “Michael Row the Boat Ashore” at age ten. Around 1963 or 1964 she was leading group sing-alongs at a small informal camp in Mountaintale, New York, teaching the other girls African American spirituals and freedom songs for which she arranged the harmonies. In 1964 she experienced her first triumph as a composer, writing original tunes with complex harmonies for a Sing Night at the camp. In addition to folk music, Nyro was also strongly influenced by the urban-based doo-wop of the Fifties. She teamed up with a group of young Puerto Ricans and sang a cappella in a subway station. Their repertoire included girl group material by the Chantels and the Shirelles, who had scored a number one hit in December 1960 with Carole King and Gerry Goffin’s “Will You Love Me Tomorrow,” which Nyro would later record. Laura was also listening to soul, including Motown groups such as Martha and the Vandellas, as well as Curtis Mayfield whose male falsetto influenced her vocal style. Among female singers she admired Joan Baez, but especially jazz vocalists such as Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone. She also listened to modern jazz instrumentalists, especially John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Coltrane’s pianist McCoy Tyner was undoubtedly a major influence on her piano voicings.

Nyro saw herself more a songwriter than a performer. During this era the pop divas, such as the Supremes or Aretha Franklin, often sang material written by others. On the other hand, a number of talented female songwriters, including Carole King, Ellie Greenwich and Cynthia Weil, were churning out hits at the “Brill Building” (in fact a number of buildings) in Manhattan, which mixed the sophisticated Tin Pan Alley legacy with rock and R & B (Emerson). It was in this context that, by chance, Nyro was discovered by record company executive Artie Mogull, who would become her first manager. Her debut album *More Than a New Discovery*, released in 1967, included “And When I Die,” successfully covered by Peter Paul & Mary, The Fifth Dimension, and Blood, Sweat & Tears. Her second album, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, was released by Columbia Records in 1969 to great critical acclaim, followed by *New York Tendaberry* in 1969, and *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat* in 1970. In 1971 she recorded *Gonna Take a Miracle*, with the vocal group Labelle, which featured covers of soul and pop classics such as “Jimmy Mack” and “Spanish Harlem.” The same year she married a carpenter, David Bianchini, and decided to retire from the music business at age twenty-four. This may help

explain why she never really attained star status, and ultimately faded from collective memory. After her marriage broke up in the mid-seventies she returned to the studio, recording *Smile*, and went on a four-month tour. She recorded her 1978 album *Nested* while pregnant with her only child. Her 1984 album *Mother's Spiritual* testifies to the transforming experience of motherhood. In the early 1980s she began living with painter Maria Desiderio. Laura Nyro died of ovarian cancer, which had killed her mother, in Danbury, Connecticut on April 8, 1997 at the age of forty-nine.

2. Eli and the Thirteenth Confession

Before making *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, Nyro had appeared at the legendary Monterey Pop Festival on June 17, 1967. Although this performance has often been described as a disaster (e.g., Auclair 1296-97), careful viewing of the footage reveals that she was not actually booed and that she was actually appreciated by some of the audience.² However, her music and appearance did seem out of step with the dominant psychedelic style. Performing with a house band after The Byrds and just before the Jefferson Airplane did not help matters. In spite of this setback, the ambitious 24-year old producer David Geffen became her agent and steered her towards Columbia Records, which had signed Miles Davis and Bob Dylan among others. For the arrangements, Geffen hired 29-year old Charlie Calello, who had been working in the industry for ten years as a musician, producer and arranger. While there is no doubt that Calello made a major contribution to the album, Laura Nyro was very much in control of the material and the arrangements build on her unique style, especially the piano voicings and tempo changes.

I will first discuss two well-known songs from this album, “Stoned Soul Picnic” and “Sweet Blindness,” which both have a get-happy gospel groove, before moving on to two darker and more intimate tracks.³

2.1. *Stoned Soul Picnic*

Can you surry,
Can you picnic? whoa...

The vocal arrangement and melismatic “whoas” of “Stoned Soul Picnic” echo the doo-wop of Laura Nyro’s formative years and the girl groups of the early 1960s. All the vocals on *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* were sung by Nyro herself through the relatively new multitracking technology. This track, like the others on the album, displays a complex vocal and instrumental tapestry of sound. To execute his sophisticated arrangement, Charlie Calello had assembled a team of top flight studio musicians, which included jazz saxophonist and flutist Joe Farrell. Over the years Nyro would record with many well-known jazz musicians, including Toots Thielemans, Zoot Sims, Michael and Randy Brecker, and Alice Coltrane as well as leading folk and rock stars, such as John Sebastian and Duane Allman.

Come on, come on an'
Surry down to a stoned soul picnic
Surry down to a stoned soul picnic
There'll be lots of time and wine
Red yellow honey

²Laura Nyro can be seen performing “Poverty Train” at the Monterey festival on You Tube.

³ The lyrics of these four songs are in the appendix. While I would recommend buying the album, these four tracks may be heard on the free and legal streaming service Deezer.

Sassafras and moonshine

Popular song is an art of repetition, and “Stoned Soul Picnic,” like doo-wop, revels in rich recurring sound patterns. The word “surry,” coined by Nyro, is repeated over twelve times before the fadeout at the end of the song. Incidentally, *surry*, which for many listeners may recall “a surrey” (as in “The Surrey with a Fringe on Top” from the 1943 Rodger and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!*), has actually entered the online urban dictionary as a verb, defined as “to move with the expectation of having a good time” and the lyrics of “Stoned Soul Picnic” are cited as an example.⁴ Intoxicated with the sounds of language, Nyro exploits assonance, alliteration and rhyme, all illustrated in the catchy title “Stoned Soul Picnic,” where the singable diphthongs of *stoned* and *soul* contrast with the short lax vowels and crisp percussive voiceless consonants of *picnic* (whose two syllables rhyme). Nyro chooses words with rich and evocative sound patterns, such as the alliterative *sassafras*.

The line “Red yellow honey sassafras and moonshine” illustrates the multisensoriality of her lyrics, mixing taste, smell and vision. In fact, at Laura’s request, the art director used perfumed ink to print the lyrics from “Eli’s Coming,” and according to Kort (57) the original lyric sheet retains a pleasant aroma decades later! Such lyrics suggest that Nyro may have had a form of synesthesia, a condition where “people experience more than one sensation in response to a single stimulus,” so that they may “see” sounds as well as hear them or “taste” images (Carter 76).⁵ There is substantial evidence that Nyro, like Joni Mitchell, experienced music as colors, shapes and textures. According to Jimmie Haskell, who orchestrated her *New York Tenderberry* album, Laura preferred talking in colors, so instead of requesting a brass instrument, she would ask for “blue” (Kort 75). She once described the instrumentation on her song “You don’t Love Me When I Cry” as “a warm pale blue with a few whitecaps on it” (Kort 76).

Like many successful songwriters in the English-language tradition, Nyro creates memorable two-beat alliterative phrases, such as “the lord and the lightning” and “trains of trust.” The somewhat oxymoronic line “rain and sun come in akin” uses sound patterns for cohesion, with its five word-final nasal consonants as well as a clever internal rhyme over a two-beat iambic metrical pattern: “come *in akin*.” The semantic contradiction is thus transcended, signaling to the listener that at the stoned soul picnic, (or at the Woodstock festival, one might add), the party goes on come rain or come shine. In a series of lines made up of the construction “There’ll be trains of +<noun phrase>,” Nyro reinforces her synesthetic imagery through grammatical parallelism, another familiar songwriting device (similar to incremental repetition in ballad scholarship):

There'll be trains of blossoms
There'll be trains of music
There'll be trains of trust
Trains of gold and dust⁶

⁴ <http://www.urbandictionary.com>

⁵ Composer Olivier Messiaen, for instance, perceived chords as colors. Baudelaire’s sonnet “Correspondances” (« Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent ») and Rimbaud’s « Les voyelles » evoke synesthesia. In *Born on a Blue Day* autistic savant Daniel Tammet writes movingly of his experience as a synesthete. Recent books by Sacks (165-183) and Lechevalier discuss the relationship between synesthesia and music.

⁶ These lines must have held great symbolic meaning for Nyro because in a 1994 interview with Paul Zollo (229) she said in a comment on her song “Save the Country”: “To me, that’s my philosophy. In my mind I can’t study war because there will be trains of blossoms, there will be trains of music.”

Nyro's intoxication with verbal sounds creates some wonderful although rather elusive images. As a You Tube blogger named *undercoverbrother* has noted, "this song is so lovably weird." Beyond its lovable weirdness, I see "Stoned Soul Picnic" as an upbeat gospel-influenced invitation to celebrate the senses, very much the gospel of the Woodstock Years and a legacy of the non-Puritanical Whitmanesque tradition passed on via the Beat Generation. The word *stoned* in the Sixties referred increasingly to drugs (as in Dylan's "Everybody must get stoned") but still had the older meaning of an alcohol-induced high (as in Ray Charles' "Let's Go Get Stoned"). "Stoned" was not only a metaphor for Nyro since during the recording sessions of the album, Nyro would bring pot to the studio, to the consternation of her producer who felt she was losing valuable studio time. She also tried LSD in the Sixties as a means of exploring her inner visions, but gave it up because of potential genetic damage (Kort 55).

"Stoned Soul Picnic" has been praised by many. Steve Katz of the influential sixties band The Blues Project even said (hyperbolically) it should be the National Anthem, a proposal that sounds far out compared to a more mainstream choice such as Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land." More significantly, songwriter Stephen Sondheim claimed that in "economy, lyricism and melody, it is a masterpiece" (Weller 2008, 188-89).

2.2. *Sweet Blindness*

Oh sweet blindness
A little magic
A little kindness
Oh sweet blindness
All over me

In "Sweet Blindness," Nyro celebrates the pleasures of "Daddy's wine." In a live performance at the Bottom Line in New York City in 1978, available on You Tube, she introduces it as a "drinking song." The title "Sweet Blindness" and the noun phrase "sweet-eyed blindness" illustrate once again the connections between the different senses, reminding one of the expression "to be blind drunk." As in "Stoned Soul Picnic," the performance highlights her quirky tempo changes, which were sometimes resisted by producers who felt they would affect their commercial appeal. Felix Cavaliere of The Rascals, who co-produced Nyro's fourth album, said:

when you have a song you're trying to get played commercially on the radio, you can't all of a sudden stop the rhythm, go have a sandwich, and come back [...] But she would stop and get real slow and dreamy, then pick it up again! However she felt it, that's where it went. Well, goodbye radio (Kort 112).

Although she would eventually gain the appreciation of her seasoned studio musicians, some were initially thrown by her idiosyncratic rhythmic sense. While this might conventionally be viewed as a weakness, she turned it into a strength and a stylistic trademark. As in classical music, but also in ballad singing, gospel, and free jazz, *rubato* is used for free expression, as a way of escaping the constraints of a regular pulse. In "Sweet Blindness," the tempo is slowed down at strategic locations, for example at the beginning of the second verse "Let's go down by the grapevine..." or at the beginning interlude "I ain't gonna tell you what I've been drinking."

"Sweet Blindness" is not only an ode to the senses, but also to transgression: "please don't tell my mother/I'm a saloon and a moonshine lover." The repeated line "Ain't gonna tell you what I've been drinkin'" sounds like a childhood ditty, linking the song to folk tradition. The use

of the tambourine ties the lyrics to its good-time gospel roots. Unlike Daddy, the singer is preaching the “gin mill spirit”; its magic, wonder and goodness: “ain’t that sweet-eyed blindness good to me.” This is very much part of the Woodstock “we are stardust” ethos before the darkness of Altamont set in.⁷ A prelapsarian song of innocence, “Sweet Blindness” harkens back to mythical American values. The line “Come on baby do a slow float/You’re a good lookin’ riverboat,” with Calello’s brilliant horn arrangement reinforcing the image, evokes the mighty Mississippi, the vector of jazz and blues. Whether it means, it is a piece of pure Americana that sticks in one’s mind.

Like “Stoned Soul Picnic,” which was successfully covered by The 5th Dimension, “Sweet Blindness” has been performed by various artists in a broad range of styles. With its precise choreography, Liza Minnelli’s performance on the Ed Sullivan show emphasizes the Broadway musical comedy approach. Sammy Davis and Tom Jones include it in a medley as part of a comedy routine in the entertainment tradition going back to minstrel shows.⁸ *Caveat emptor*. Many of these covers sound, at least to my ears, far less soulful than Nyro’s own edgier interpretations, and some come pretty close to “sweet blandness.”

2.3. *Poverty Train*

Oh baby, it looks good and dirty
Them shiny lights glow
A million night tramps, tricks and tracks
Will come and go.
You're starvin' today
But who cares anyway?
Baby, it feels like I'm dying
Now.

Paul Zollo (216), the author of the acclaimed *Songwriters on Songwriting*, notes that Laura Nyro, on her first albums

showed an uncanny affinity for songs of great emotional extremes. There are songs of pure ecstatic joy, a sense of boundless happiness that few songwriters, with the exception of Stevie Wonder, have ever been able to express. As songwriters know, writing a truly happy song that’s not trite is tough; it’s easier to write an effective sad one.

If Nyro had only written songs like “Stoned Soul Picnic” and “Sweet Blindness,” as enjoyable and uplifting as they are, her work would lack the emotional depth that characterized her work and to which Zollo refers. The Devil, darkness and death haunted her lyrics right from the start. On the folk-inspired “And When I Die,” written as a teenager, she was already singing about Satan. In “Buy and Sell,” also from her first album, she described the darker side of street life, evoking drug use and prostitution:

Ladies dress calico style
Beware your heart when they smile
And their men walk shamelessly
Aimlessly by
Cinders in the sky

⁷ The darker side of the Woodstock Years is explored by Blanchet.

⁸ These performances are available on You Tube.

“Poverty Train” updates her report on the sordid side of street life. Although Nyro is sometimes associated with confessionalism, this track shows that, like Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, she was also inspired to comment on the world around her. During the Woodstock years the spiritual and hedonistic use of pot and LSD, as pioneered by the Merry Pranksters and proscribed by proselytizer Tim Leary, would give way to harder drugs like cocaine and especially heroin, the bane of jazz musicians of an earlier generation, which increasingly afflicted the stars of the Sixties, such as James Taylor and Keith Richards. Although “Poverty Train” mentions cocaine as a form of escape, Charlie Calello says that Laura told him it was actually about heroin. A former Bronx drug user quoted by Kort (55) claims that the lyrics resonated with their life: “You get on a train...and find there are no stops to get off.”

The arrangement and the performance of “Poverty Train” enhance the powerful lyrics. First we hear the blast of a single note on electric guitar, a bare-bones blues lick on acoustic guitar, and a lone almost sobbing voice calling out “Last call for the poverty train,” followed by a chord on the vibes and a drawn out melismatic “yeah.” Then the drums kick in, playing in 3/4 meter, underlining the vivid even violent synesthetic images of a bleak urban landscape: “You can see the walls roar/See your brains on the floor/Become God/Become cripple/Become funky/And split.” After this build-up, most of the band drops out on the line “Why was I born?,” and jazz flutist Joe Farrell comments on the scene with wispy impressionistic phrases. The syllables “No” and “Whoa” have a dual structural and expressive role, not only separating verses, but above all conveying emotion that transcends the ordinary lexis.

2.4. Lonely Women

No one hurries home to lonely women
No one hurries home to lonely women
A gal could die without her man
And no one knows it better than lonely women

In “Lonely Women,” Nyro also conveys a broad range of emotions through the use of silence, expressive timing, voice quality and dynamics. The song opens with a stark minor chord on the piano and Joe Farrell’s smoky tenor sax. Then we hear a naked voice stating “No one hurries home to lonely women.” The alliterative collocation “to hurry home” illustrates Nyro’s effective use of everyday formulaic language, another hallmark of good songwriters. At the same time, she subverts the often positive connotations of the idiom: in popular songs lovers plead “baby, hurry home” and one might assume that some actually do. Leaving no room for hope, the opening line cries out a tautology of despair. Women are lonely because no one hurries home to them. But their loneliness only makes them less desirable, creating a vicious self-feeding spiraling cycle of solitude. This line is repeated, suggesting the blues, even though the standard AAB format is not respected. Line 3, “A gal could die without her man,” evokes blues and jazz phraseology. One can almost hear Billie Holiday, a strong influence on Laura, singing “My Man.” The reference to the blues is spelled out explicitly in the following verse:

And no one knows the blues like lonely women do
No one knows the blues like lonely women, yeah
Blues, the blues that make the walls rush in
Walls that tell you where you’ve been

The verb of movement *rush*, semantically echoing *hurry*, makes the listener feel the crushing overwhelming pain of loneliness, as we witness a woman alone with her memories: “Walls that tell you where you’ve been.” Nyro apparently fought off bouts of depression (Kort 55), and listening to her songs one wonders whether she suffered from a form of bipolar disorder. The next verse evokes death, bitter tears, a downpour, and the realization that lonely women may not have offspring.

And let me die early morning
Whoa, whoa, whoa, bitter tears
Whoa, whoa, whoa, bitter tears
Uptight, downpour
Don’t got no children to be grandmother for
Grandmother for
She don’t believe no more,
She don’t believe no one hurries home to call you, baby

Through its intensity and iconic melodic shapes, the music reinforces the meaning of these lines. The phrase “bitter tears” is sung to a falling contour (degrees 4, 3 and 1 of a minor scale) and “downpour” also has a descending contour. The final line states the logical contradiction of despair: “Everybody knows, everybody knows/Everybody knows, but no one knows.” Perhaps this references the Negro spiritual “No one knows the trouble I’ve seen,” but here there is no Savior.

2.5. Eli and the Thirteenth Confession *as an organic whole*

While not a self-consciously crafted concept album like the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* or the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds*, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* is much more than a collection of individual songs. The recurring themes and images create a coherent organic whole. In addition to the synesthetic imagery and the celebration of the senses discussed above, there is a complex network of references to religion and folk beliefs. The first song, “Luckie,” depicts the Devil (a frequent character in Nyro’s songs), but he can’t stay because

Luckie’s taking over
And his clover shows
Devil can’t get out of hand
'Cause Luckie’s taking over
And what Luckie says goes

The second song, “Lu” refers to “Walking on God’s good side.” In the third song, “Sweet Blindness,” we encounter the phrase “Four leaves on a clover.” The next song, “Poverty Train,” suggests that through sweet cocaine you can become God, but “I just saw the Devil and he’s smilin’ at me.” The mysterious title song “Eli’s comin’” sounds a cautionary note: “Eli’s comin’/Whoa you better hide your heart.” An Old Testament character mentioned in the Book of Samuel, Eli is also a variant name for God in Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic. While Eli appears to be a mortal lover and heartbreaker, the song hints at a deeper spiritual dimension.

The last (thirteenth) song, “The Confession,” links religion and physical love. The opening lines refer directly to sex:

Love my lovething
Super ride inside my lovething

Subverting the conventional meaning of “virginity,” the singer confesses:

Oh I hate my winsome lover
Tell him I’ve had others
At my breast
But tell him he has held my heart
And only now am I a virgin
I confess

The line between religious and sexual fervor is of course narrow, as can be heard in the suggestive lyrics of many R & B and soul classics that subverted the language of gospel. Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin and others “crossed over,” trading love for Jesus for secular love. In a similar spirit, the last two lines of the album proclaim:

Love my lovething
Love is surely gospel

Nyro is surely preaching the good word, the gospel that dominated the Woodstock Years, calling for the wall between spiritual and physical love to come tumblin’ down.

Kort (61) points out that on this album Laura Nyro displayed female sexuality “in a way rarely heard in pop music.” Unlike blues, R& B and rock vocalists like Janis Joplin, who tended to be unabashed about sexual content, her sexual attitude was “more akin to a classic jazz singer: languous, provocative, and knowing.” The song “Emmie” has often been interpreted as being about a female lover, one of the few popular songs of this period evoking lesbianism. Nyro herself said it was about the eternal feminine and not about a specific woman. In a remake from the late 1980’s she “offered a litany of Emilys,” which included mother, daughter, sister, lover (Kort 60). The imagery of the song clearly evokes physical desire:

And I swear you were born
A weaver’s lover
Born for the loom’s desire
Move me
Oh sway me
Emily you ornament the earth for me

Finally, we have seen how Nyro deals with the pain or the absence of love in “Lonely Woman.” In this vein, “Woman’s Blues” also summons up some remarkably original and poignant imagery: “Whoa God it’s hard on the chamber’s walls of heartache.”

3. Laura Nyro and the Woodstock Years

I ain’t lookin’ to block you up
Shock or knock or lock you up

Analyze you, categorize you
Finalize you or advertise you...⁹

Laura Nyro's work often appears puzzling and paradoxical because it defies conventional categorization and the way the Woodstock Years have been depicted, especially by the media. Viewed superficially from the outside, her life and her work may seem somewhat incoherent, although there is little doubt that there was a guiding inner vision. Nyro bridged many gaps, and, as I have tried to show, her work transcends many of the real or perceived dichotomies drawn up in a highly polarized era: rock/pop, folk/jazz, high-brow/popular, traditional/experimental, black/white, straight/gay, God/the Devil, confessionalism/entertainment. As we have seen, her musical influences were extremely diverse, embracing folk, jazz, classical, gospel, doo-wop, Broadway musicals and other genres. Her recordings and performances as well as their reception both reflect and shed light on the sometimes conflicting musical and cultural values of the Woodstock Years. Like Carole King, she was a piano-playing songstress profoundly influenced by the African-American tradition (gospel, doowop, Motown) as well as the structurally constrained commercial craft of the Brill Building songwriting teams, at a time when the "Dionysian" cultural heroes highlighted by the media, usually men, were wielding electric guitars and embarking on lengthy free-form improvisation.

First of all, although it is a handy label, the very expression "The Woodstock Years" suggests a slant on the period. The music played at Woodstock was dominated by male guitar heroes: Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the national anthem is part of everyone's reminiscence bump. On the other hand, one of the best songs about that experience was written by a woman, Joni Mitchell, who wasn't even there, thus providing an ironic twist to the Wavy Gravy principle. Furthermore, the somewhat distorted focus on Woodstock may lead us to forget that the music of this era was incredibly diverse, embracing commercial styles that everyone, hip or square, was listening to: Motown, Top Ten pop (Charlie Calello had arranged "Rag Doll" by the Four Seasons), country music (e.g., Merle Haggard's tongue in cheek anti-protest protest song "Okie from Muskogee," which many took seriously at the time, and loved or hated accordingly), even Ol' Blue Eyes himself ("Strangers in the Night"). In fact, according to Tom Dicillo's 2009 documentary about the Doors, *When You're Strange*, Sinatra became at one point Jim Morrison's favorite singer (gasp!). How does Laura Nyro fit into this complex cultural dynamic? Her sophisticated urban style was often closer to jazz than to the rough-hewn folk traditions represented by Woody Guthrie or Muddy Waters, which inspired so many of the Woodstock bands. Some of her material had real commercial appeal, at least when covered by bands like The 5th Dimension and Blood Sweat & Tears, and in this respect she resembles the female songwriters of the Brill Building. On the other hand, her more "confessional" material and her singing style were probably too far out for mainstream consumption, which may partially explain why, despite the critical acclaim and admiration of her peers, she never had a hit record of her own.

It is revealing to look at how material culture, in this case musical instruments and technology, contributed to the sonic and visual imagery of the Woodstock Years. Nyro may also have been marginalized in part because, like Carole King and others in the Brill Building crowd, she played the piano, an instrument often played by women in jazz (e.g., Mary Lou Williams, Shirley Horn) and popular music, as opposed to drums for instance. The guitar, which had been

⁹ Bob Dylan, "All I Really Want To Do."

popular in the folk and rock 'n' roll traditions (e.g. Woody Guthrie and Chuck Berry), became emblematic of the period, especially the electric guitar and its assorted effects (e.g., the wah wah pedal), with former folkies like Jerry Garcia plugging in. Although I haven't calculated the ratio of guitars to pianos at Woodstock, it must be very high. The piano, often viewed as a symbol of middle or upper class respectability, was also a key instrument in the jazz, blues, gospel and early rock 'n' roll traditions, but in the 1960s counterculture it was increasingly sidelined in the youth culture. After all, it's a lot easier to carry around a blues harp or a cheap guitar when you're on the road. Furthermore, in spite of the antics of a Jerry Lee Lewis, the piano's immobility is also restricting on stage, blocking visual access for part of the audience and reducing interaction between musicians. Nevertheless, the piano, which lends itself to harmonic sophistication and embellishment, continued to play a role in the making of the popular music that was heard on the Top Ten, and in particular in African American soul growing out of gospel (e.g., Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin). Much of the American popular music of the 20th century, especially the so-called Great American Songbook (Gershwin, Kern, Porter *et al.*) was composed on the piano, and this legacy has never been entirely forgotten. What is striking about Laura Nyro's work is the original way she uses the piano, with her open voicings, mentioned above, in which she leaves out notes, especially third. Like other musicians of the time (Joni Mitchell, The Beatles, The Beach Boys), she doesn't abandon harmony, but she finds refreshing new colors drawn from her wide-open ears.

Nyro's relationship to the women's movement is also, at least on the surface, somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, early songs like "Wedding Bell Blues" and lines like "A gal could die without her man," inspired by the blues, jazz and pop traditions, hardly sound feminist; on the other hand, Nyro showed great artistic independence in the male-dominated music industry. In the recording studio she did it *her* way, provoking initial frustration followed by widespread admiration from producers and musicians. As mentioned above, the quality of her work and her independent attitude would subsequently influence other women songwriters like Rickie Lee Jones¹⁰ and Suzanne Vega. She was also independent in her private life. After her marriage broke up, she became a single mother, and then lived until her death with painter Maria Desiderio. As we have seen, her song "Emmie" was widely interpreted as being about a female lover, and in 1989 she performed solo at the Michigan's Womyn's (sic) Music Festival, an annual event that only allowed women, featuring lesbian-oriented performers. Nyro's life and music lead us to look closer at the relationship between men and women during the Woodstock Years.¹¹

As we have seen, Nyro's songs have a rich spiritual dimension, which I trace primarily to gospel, because they embrace both the rejoicing spirit of "Stoned Soul Picnic" as well as the darker questions of death and evil. She seems to have been haunted by the devil, and perhaps, like Robert Johnson she had a hellhound on her trail. Symbolically, the 1960s are often cast in terms of good and evil, embodied by Woodstock and Altamont: Nyro's work dramatizes the "we are stardust" vs. "sympathy for the devil" vision. Her later songs, especially on the 1984 album *Mother's Spiritual*, often reflect a more optimistic pantheistic philosophy in tune with her nurturing role as a mother and her regard for Mother Earth. This is reflected in "To a Child":

¹⁰ In 2003 Jones wrote a moving introduction to *Laura Nyro: Lyrics & Reminiscences*, in which she acknowledges Nyro's profound influence on her own work.

¹¹ Reflecting on the status of male artists like Picasso and Dylan, Rotolo (182) notes that men "were born into a society that gave them permission to do as they pleased. Women, on the other hand, were sidelined [...] Females were guests, not participants." Laura Nyro, like Joni Mitchell and a few others, refused to stand on the outside looking in.

Kiss the sun hello
Child in the park
Make your life a lovin' thing
And I'm so tired
And you're so wired
And I'm a poet
Without a poem
And you are my child.

4. Coda: Laura Nyro's Lasting Legacy

And when I die
And when I'm gone
There'll be one child born
And a world to carry on.

Paul Zollo (216) points out that if Laura Nyro had only written “And When I Die” it is “such an inspirational classic that she would still deserve an entire chapter in the annals of songwriting.” He adds:

But there's so much more: since her remarkable debut in 1966, she crafted a lyrical language entirely her own in songs, a kind of streetwise shorthand of the heart, wed to melodies of deep and joyous soul. Her songs, as recorded by herself and the bevy of artists who had hits with them, resounded with the authenticity of new American spirituals, sounding simultaneously modern and traditional. (Zollo 216)

Of course, Nyro has also had her share of detractors and her later work was no doubt uneven. Some found her singing mannered or disliked the perceived shrillness of some of her high notes, which I think she used to great artistic effect. Her lyrics may have been obscure at times, but no more than those of Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, not to mention many authors of modernist poetry or prose.¹² Whatever her shortcomings, an occupational hazard for any innovative risk-taking writer or composer, these are outweighed by the many artistic assets that have been underlined in this paper. Sung by others but sadly undersung as a creative artist in her own right, Laura Nyro has left behind a neglected but lasting legacy. Her richly textured work, illustrated here by her early masterpiece *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, stands out several decades later as a major contribution to the American songbook. Although she died before she got old, she has provided rewarding listening for my generation, and her music will hopefully be carried on to the next.

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¹² Dave Van Ronk (208), a major figure in the folk revival, takes Dylan to task for increasing unintelligibility and sloppiness, inherited from “a long tradition of poets writing things that sounded wonderful but made not sense [...] because if you are a good enough poet, you can make bullshit sound so beautiful that people don't notice that it's bullshit.”

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Appendix: The lyrics of four songs from *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*

Line division and layout are based mainly on *Laura Nyro: Lyrics & Reminiscences* (New York: Cherry Lane Music, 2004). Some changes have been made in reference to the recording and occasionally to highlight the structure of the lyrics. I have also indicated some of the “doo wop” syllables.

Stoned Soul Picnic (Laura Nyro)

Can you surry,	Surry down to a stoned soul picnic
Can you picnic? whoa...	There'll be lots of time and wine
Can you surry,	Red yellow honey
Can you picnic?	Sassafras and moonshine
	Red yellow honey
Come on, come on an'	Sassafras and moonshine
Surry down to a stoned soul picnic	

Stoned soul oh... Stoned soul oh

Come on, come on an'

Surry down to a stoned soul picnic

Surry down to a stoned soul picnic

Rain and sun come in akin

And from the sky come the lord and the lightning

And from the sky come the lord and the lightning

Stoned soul oh stoned soul

Surry on soul

Surry surry surry surry

There'll be trains of blossoms

There'll be trains of music

There'll be trains of trust

Trains of gold and dust

Come along and surry on

Sweet trains of thought

Surry on down

Can you surry?

Surry down to a stoned soul picnic

Surry down to a stoned soul picnic

There'll be lots of time and wine

Red yellow honey sassafras and moonshine

Red yellow honey sassafras and moonshine

moonshine

Stoned soul...yeah

Surry on soul

Surry surry surry surry

Surry surry surry surry

Surry surry surry surry... (fade)

Sweet Blindness (Laura Nyro)

(Bah, bah...)

Let's go down by the grapevine
Drink my daddy's wine
Get happy
Down by the grapevine
Drink my daddy's wine
Get happy
Happy!

Oh sweet blindness
A little magic
A little kindness
Oh sweet blindness
All over me
Four leaves on a clover
I'm just a bit of a shade hungover
Come on baby do a slow float
You're a good lookin' riverboat
And ain't that sweet-eyed blindness
Good to me

(Don't ask me cause I)
Ain't gonna tell you what I've been drinkin'
Ain't gonna tell you what I've been drinkin'
Ain't gonna tell you what I've been drinkin'
Wine
Of wonder
Wonder
(By the way)

Sweet blindness
A little magic
A little kindness
Oh sweet blindness

Let's go down by the grapevine
Drink my daddy's wine
Good mornin'
Down by the grapevine
Drink my daddy's wine
Good mornin'
Mornin'!

Oh sweet blindness
A little magic
A little kindness
Oh sweet blindness
All over me
Please don't tell my mother
I'm a saloon and a moonshine lover
Come on baby do a slow float
You're a good lookin' riverboat
And ain't that sweet-eyed blindness good to
me

(bah bah...)

All over me
Don't let daddy hear it
He don't believe in the gin mill spirit
Don't let daddy hear it
He don't believe in the gin mill spirit

Come on baby do a slow float
You're a good lookin' riverboat
And ain't that sweet-eyed blindness
Good to me
Good to me
Now ain't that sweet eyed blindness
Good to me

Poverty Train (Laura Nyro)

Last call for the poverty train
Last call for the poverty train
Yeah.

It looks good and dirty
On shiny light strip
And if you don't get beat
You got yourself a trip.
You can see the walls roar
See your brains on the floor
Become God, become cripple
Become funky and split
Why was I born?

No, no, no, no, whoa, whoa, no, no...

Oh baby, I just saw the devil
And he's smiling at me
I heard my bones cry
"Devil, why is it got to be?"
Devil played with my brother
Devil drove my mother

Lonely Women (Laura Nyro)

No one hurries home to lonely women
No one hurries home to lonely women
A gal could die without her man
And no one knows it better than lonely
women

And no one knows the blues like lonely
women do
No one knows the blues like lonely women,
yeah
Blues, the blues that make the walls rush in
Walls that tell you where you've been
And you've been to the hollow
Lonely women, yeah.

Now the tears in the gutter
Are flooding the sea
Why was I born?

Whoa, whoa, no, no, no, no...

Oh baby, it looks good and dirty
Them shiny lights glow
A million night tramps, tricks and tracks
Will come and go.
You're starvin' today
But who cares anyway?
Baby, it feels like I'm dying
Now.

I swear there's something better than
Getting off on sweet cocaine
It feels so good
It feels so good
Getting off the poverty train
Morning...

And let me die early morning
Whoa, whoa, whoa, bitter tears
Whoa, whoa, whoa, bitter tears
Uptight, downpour
Don't got no children to be grandmother for
Grandmother for
She don't believe no more,
She don't believe no one hurries home to
call you, baby

Everybody knows, everybody knows
Everybody knows but no one knows