

Judy Blue Eyes: Collins' "Sweet" conversation with Stephen Stills for Writers Bloc session

[Steve Hochman](#) | February 5th, 2013



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After a few minutes of introductory chatter between [Judy Collins](#) and [Stephen Stills](#) on stage at the Saban Theater on Monday evening — a [Writers Bloc](#) event with the two former lovers/collaborators and still friends discussing the former's new memoir, *Sweet Judy Blue Eyes: My Life in Music* — Collins suddenly paused and turned to the audience:

“Just to get this out of the way,” she said, and then began to sing, unaccompanied:

Rows and flows of angels hair, and ice cream castles in the air....

Delighted gasps, sighs and rising cheers came from the audience, many members of which hold Collins' version of Joni Mitchell's “Both Sides Now” as one of *the* songs, one of *their* songs, a life landmark that has stayed with them since it was a hit in 1968. And as she finished the brief performance, just the first verse and chorus, even Stills sitting next to her smiled and shook his head in wonder, as the voice we'd just heard was as pure and powerful and moving as when we first heard it 45 years ago.

A few minutes later in what unfolded as a freewheeling conversation, as much two friends catching up with colorful tales and asides as a discussion of a book, Stills reminisced about his first awareness of the singer. He'd moved to New York in the peak of the Greenwich Village folk boom, was “living on pennies” while playing at “basket clubs” where tips were the only pay and staying with a friend in very spartan circumstances. But the friend had a few albums, one of which had a cover photo of a woman with “cornflower eyes,” as he put it, and he found himself entranced both by the image and the voice contained within.

“I spent a whole year, shivering in winter, listening to that voice,” Stills said.

“I now know why we came here tonight,” Collins said back to him. “I never heard that story!”

And, in return, there was a revelation prompted by a question from the audience about Collins’ 1975 song “Houses.” Stills, it turned out, was unaware that it was an affectionate reply to his “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes,” the musical tribute he wrote to her which became the showpiece of the debut Crosby, Stills & Nash album in 1969.

Anecdotes were scattered — in both senses of the word — throughout the evening:

There were tales of Collins’ young adult “pioneer” life in rural Colorado. She glowingly talked about her father Charlie, a blind radio broadcaster who died just days before she and Stills started working on her landmark *Who Knows Where the Time Goes* album, and, she said, the subject of her next book. And there was back and forth about music business foibles, relating both to Collins’ book and Stills’ vast career, which is being documented in an elaborate box set, titled [Carry On](#), with a great number of previously unreleased and rare tracks, due for March release.

A few details remained fuzzy, notably the time and place when Stills first played “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” for her. (He says it happened with CSN gathered in a house he and Collins shared in Sag Harbor. She’s not so sure.)

After more or less sorting that out, Stills looked at his friend and said, “I don’t know how to thank you for that song.”

Collins looked back at him: “Nor I you.”

As the audience Q&A segment at the end wrapped up, One of the questions from the audience to Stills was explain the meaning of the Spanish he chants at the end of Suite: Judy Blue Eyes. He said it had to do with his love of Cuba so I ask my friend from Cuba to translate it for me:

Happy, I’m going to exile in Cuba

The happy, give Chile a hand

Blue sky, I’m going to sit here

Say yes, look I know I can’t dance.

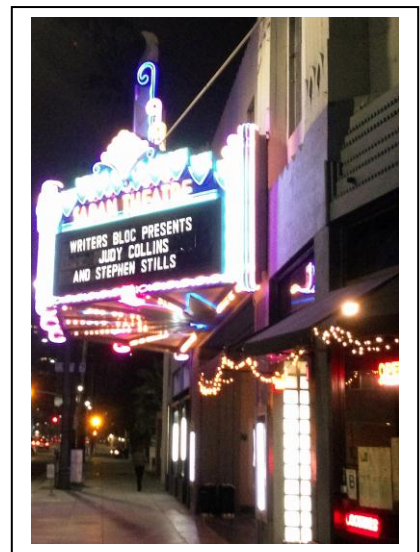
Stills then walked off stage and returned in a moment bearing a guitar. After a little conferring, Stills started playing and together they sang Tom Paxton’s [Last Thing On My Mind](#), a ‘60s folk classic that they did as a duet just three years ago on Collins’ *Paradise* album. They got through one verse and chorus, then neither could remember the second verse, but closing with a perfect refrain for the reminiscing:

I could have loved you better

Didn’t mean to be unkind

You know that was the last thing on my mind

Below are the Talking Points/Topics that Stills had in his hand during the discussion on the stage.



SWEET JUDY BLUE EYES – February 4, 2013
TALKING POINTS/TOPICS

- ***Her turbulent childhood:*** Raised in a family of five children, Collins emerged as the one who might follow in the footsteps of her father, a blind singer and radio-show host. His career took him from Seattle to Hollywood to Denver, and he introduced Judy to many artists along the way. But he also struggled with alcoholism; his rages left indelible memories on Judy, who faced debilitating anxiety when she gave her first performances as a classically trained pianist. By the time she had graduated from high school, she had already made one attempt at suicide.

- ***Her road to fame:*** At nineteen, in 1959, Collins was already a wife and mother. She writes tenderly of that idyllic time in the Rockies, where she lived simply and performed in small, local bars. Within two years, she would be immersed in the folk circuit, living with her husband and son on the east coast with regular gigs at Gerde's Folk City in Greenwich Village, the renowned club where countless others—including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Arlo Guthrie—would make a name for themselves. She's been described as an overnight success, but **SWEET JUDY BLUE EYES** captures the singer's years of dedicated performing before "Both Sides Now" became a hit in the late 1960s. She includes the star-studded festivals of Newport (where Dylan dared to go electric in a culture that revered the acoustic guitar) and the heart of the Laurel Canyon recording scene in California. From the creative energy of the studios to the mind-altering parties, Collins's cast of characters includes Leonard Cohen, David Crosby, Dick and Mimi Fariña, and countless others who transformed the voice of American music.

- ***Lovers, and lasting love:*** As her young marriage to Peter Taylor fell apart, Collins entered a world of experimentation and freedom from inhibitions, yet she craved emotional connections as much as physical ones. Throughout this memoir, she describes the intense highs and lows she reached in love, often with musicians and producers—reaching a calamitous, beautiful zenith with Stephen Stills and culminating in a tender romance with Louis Nelson, her husband, who has been in her life for more than thirty years.

- ***Battling depression and alcoholism:*** Many celebrities have written eloquently about their struggles with addiction, but Collins gives us an important new perspective, describing the many years she spent in world-class psychotherapy, in an era before addiction was fully acknowledged, much less studied, and AA carried a costly stigma. Throughout her despairing battles against mental illness and alcoholism, even the best psychiatrists failed to identify her addiction. The fact that she saw a therapist caused her to lose custody of her son, Clark, after an agonizing legal showdown. Collins describes her deliverance after friends checked her into an experimental rehab facility in 1978 and saved her life. It was a bittersweet triumph, however, as Clark also suffered from severe depression and addiction, ultimately taking his life. With a merciful heart and the wisdom of a survivor, Collins describes the path of her son's fragile soul.

- ***A love song to the courageous spirit of the Sixties:*** Recalling "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes," the song Stephen Stills wrote as his tempestuous relationship with Judy was burning out, Collins writes, "The song never fails to transport me to that thrilling and terrifying time we call 'the Sixties,' when so many great songs proclaimed our grand, noble visions. We were dreamers, hell-bent on finding our own personal happiness, determined to elevate all of humanity above the anger and violence of the past." Throughout her book, Collins pays tribute to this spirit, from her efforts to uphold voting rights in segregated Mississippi to her testimony at the trial of the Chicago 7, where she was admonished by the judge for trying to sing "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" from the witness stand.