



Walkin' on God's Good Side: Laura Nyro Revisited

You know a Laura Nyro song. Even if you don't think you do, you do. *Stoned Soul Picnic*, *Wedding Bell Blues*, *Blowin' Away*, *Save the Country*, and *Sweet Blindness* were all hits for The Fifth Dimension; *And When I Die* for Blood Sweat and Tears; *Eli's Comin'* for Three Dog Night; and *Stoney End* for Babs Streisand (I've met her, I can call her "Babs"). Amazingly, Laura Nyro wrote all those songs before her 19th birthday. In fact, by the end of the sixties, she was the second most covered songwriter in history, after Lennon and McCartney. Her songs have been recorded by such diverse artists as Frank Sinatra, Jane Siberry, George Duke, Mongo Santamaria, Suzanne Vega, Carmen McCrae, Junior Walker, Patti Larkin, and a host of others. So, as I said, even if you think you don't know one of her songs, you probably really do.

Laura Nyro is owed a huge debt of gratitude (whether they realize it or not) by many of today's artists. Without her body of work and her influence, which has virtually seeped its way into music's collective unconscious, performers like Tori Amos, Paula Cole, Fiona Apple and Alanis Morissette wouldn't be half as good as they truly are. Echoes of Laura Nyro pervade all of their "unique" styles (again, whether they realize it or not).

It is dismaying, frankly, that you can't find a Laura Nyro CD for sale in any major store, because, as is often the case with unsung heroes, there is *real* magic in the real thing. Laura Nyro's strong soprano voice - steeped in equal parts of gospel, soul and the blues, her penchant for quirky time changes, her absolutely poetic lyrics, and her pure genius for stringing together infectious and indelibly memorable musical hooks comprise an *oeuvre* for our generation — nay, for the ages.

It is even more dismaying, personally, that I have only come to this realization fairly recently. Laura Nyro's first three records have been part of the Brother Rodney vinyl collection for over a quarter of a century — from the days of yore, when the General, the Iron Baron and I were disk jockeys together in college. It was toward the end of that idyllic time that the radio station received a copy of her 1976 release *Smile*. In my youthful haste, after hearing only two songs, I dismissed the LP as substandard and inconsequential, since it didn't contain anything remotely like any of her earlier pop tunes. My ongoing relationship with Laura came to an end at that point, and I was contented for the next two decades to simply enjoy her earlier works, and mistakenly regard her as a has-been. This opinion, much like most of the opinions I held in my twenties, ultimately turned out to be completely wrong. (She wasn't a has-been, of course. She just felt that celebrity interfered with her art, and was able, due to the success of her early work, to produce new music only when it felt right.) Thankfully, she didn't give a crap what I thought about her, and continued working both on the road and in the studio, all the while

