

GAYLA MILLS

## “A Future Imagined”

I met Rikki in a songwriter’s workshop at Augusta Heritage during bluegrass week. Her short gray hair and crinkled smile topped a seventy-year-old body used to long walks. As a Seattle resident, Rikki wore loose organic cotton and sandals meant for business. Yet this week in Elkins, West Virginia, her roots from this region shone through. She sang with the lonesome sound of those mountains and spoke of cricks and hollers. We were the only women in the class of six. The men spoke of trucks, the technical minutiae of instruments and old songs, and the aftermath of war. They talked of love, too, but not in the way we did.

The least experienced of the group, I was married to someone who’d written dozens of songs that I admired. I’d even given him feedback on his later work to some good effect. Editing and writing are two different animals, though: on my own I’d merely written bits of parody over existing melodies, of the sort that people might do when making coffee or walking their dogs in the woods unobserved.

Since I could write essays and stories, and I could play music, why not learn how to express myself with a song? Since I had no idea how to start, I took a free online songwriting course offered by the pinnacle of musical instruction, the Berklee School in Boston. For one assignment, I worked on the only complete song I’ve attempted, “House with Two Stories.” It told of a couple whose married life played out in two parts. First they built a house with two floors and raised a family there. But in their later chapter of life, she lived on the bottom floor of their house because she could no longer climb the stairs to the second story, where her husband now slept alone.

I was challenged by my self-appointed task: to write concise, poignant lyrics that combined concrete detail, metaphor, and words clear and informative while building to a crescendo of feeling. I wanted these words accompanied by music that was unobtrusive yet well suited to each verse and chorus, not hackneyed, yet with a hook that made it stick.

As someone who’d never written a melody or song before, I might have set the bar too high. I began with the lyrics and got out my rhyming dictionary for help. This was fun, figuring out what a dictionary of this sort could do, seeing the differences with the online version, reviewing the phonics chart from class, and interspersing these activities with spider solitaire and email. Soon I had a verse.

I was trying to follow the model taught me in class: imagine each verse as a box, and make the contents build on the previous boxes. The chorus carries the emotion. You might think such a structure would simply topple over from those big boxes of meaning on top, but the analogy was working for me.

The problem with models, of course, is that the people who create them have done so after already wrestling with the subject for years. These tools are often brilliant distillations from thousands of hours of experience. But they can only produce something as good as the person using them. A simple hoe is an elegant tool for creating a garden, but I haven’t yet succeeded in getting vegetables from mine despite using one.

And so I worked with the models, and the dictionary, and my inchoate ideas, and then I reviewed my work. It was nine p.m., and the assignment was due by eight the next morning. Recorded, uploaded, and accompanied by the lyric sheet. Shit.

I fell back on the tried and true method for overcoming panic and despair: I ate some chocolate, then begged my husband for help. Gene handed me a Kleenex and pulled out his guitar. Soon he was composing a simple melody I could tweak to my liking. He then played guitar backup to my vocals for the recording, and I managed to transfer the file and get everything posted. It was one a.m., with seven hours to go before the deadline. Success!

In the light of day I listened to the uploaded song. It was, as you might guess, unworthy of even a mama’s love. Thank god this was a massive online course and I didn’t have to face a live human in the same room.

But now I was in a room at Augusta with actual people, with five students more experienced than I and a teacher who had his songs recorded by Alison Krauss, a stroke of good fortune that launched his

career as a professor at Berklee. How could I find a way to avoid writing a song and having him critique it? That was my greatest challenge for the week.

Of course I had other aims, too. I wanted to see how real songwriters worked. Where did they start? What details did they focus on? What were the steps involved in the journey?

For every skill has such a journey, and breaking it down into steps makes the craft easier for us mortals to comprehend, appreciate, and learn. I didn't discover how to cook by merely following a few recipes. I've spent years cooking with different combinations, some of which work, some of which don't. I realized that pasta is less chewy if I cook it this way, and that grilling will crisp up green onions beautifully but will just make regular onions weird. I learned how to measure. I learned not to throw liquid away—soaking dried shitake mushrooms makes juice with umami flavor that improves most anything. I learned that capers taste good cooked with scrambled eggs. Just last week I learned that red onions can be added to a watermelon salad if I first soak them in the juice of a fresh lemon for ten minutes.

Each of these lessons is small, and they can't be taught as a whole. For what does it mean to say that shitake mushroom juice is prized? It means that I like the flavor and the way it tastes in the food I like, not that you do. Saying "I have learned to cook" really means "I can create new tastes that express my preferences and do so with skill and confidence based on lots of failures." There may be people with natural talent who never get close to a recipe, but you can be sure they've still clocked their time in the kitchen.

I know that songwriting is something like that. I don't yet know how to measure out the notes, but I know there are ways others use them to break up time. I don't yet know how to bend my words into imperfect rhymes, but I know how imperfect rhymes create a different feel from perfect ones.

But I also know that the songwriters I admire most began young. Songs just seem to come to them. I'd seen Gene at work writing different ways: he often writes a verse or chorus while running, dashes out the words on returning home, and sometimes finishes the song years later. But how did that first verse come into his head? I've never thought up four lines while working out.

On the second day of class, Mark called for volunteers to sing out different melodies for a lyric line. I looked away so he'd pick someone else. I'd never done what he was asking, and I dreaded failing in front of him. But after someone else sang a melody by making the line go down rather than up, I could hear a few notes in my head. I started singing it, and the rest of a new line came out, who knows how. It turns out that I went minor and switched to three quarter time, though I didn't know it then. There it was, my first melody, and sung in tune too. It was a glorious five seconds. I could create original work!

But soon came the second wave of emotion, when I got knocked over by shame. How was it possible that I was in a songwriting class and had never written a melody before? How could this one be my first? Everyone else had written whole songs, some had even performed them. If anyone knew the truth, they'd think me an imposter. I couldn't admit my secret.

The next day, we were listening to one student's song and to Mark's gentle critique. We had to identify the student's chord progression, and Rikki couldn't get it. She teared up in frustration. Trying to be helpful, I said that I'd been using ear training CDs and found them useful. Snapping at me, she replied "but I've already worked a lot on ear training!" After class she came over to apologize, and I did the same. "I have a secret," she said. "I graduated from Berklee."

So that's why she was so upset! After getting a music degree from the premier school in the country, she still struggled with identifying chords by ear and was taking a beginner's songwriting class. The reality was that the song we'd been asked to analyze was a challenge. But that didn't matter to Rikki, who was miserable because of her expectations. She thought she should know how to hear those progressions. She was a music graduate! But it was an act of courage for her to share her secret and her shame with me.

This is my fifth time going to music camp. Most of the students are middle aged or older. They're at the peak of their careers, or they've retired and left those demands behind. Most have raised children. Instead of relaxing, though, they've chosen to spend their vacation as students, knowing that it would require effort and even courage—for every musical accomplishment would be accompanied by moments

of embarrassment or even despair. I've seen these former CEOs, firemen, teachers, and accountants almost in tears because everyone else seems to know a 1, 4, 5 progression, or a harmony tenor line, or a bass run. Everyone else seems to know how to jam with strangers or play new songs on the fly or play by ear.

These folks are learning steps to incorporate music into their lives, to become better musicians, and it's an intensely personal journey that no one experiences the same way. They are learning from people who play music many hours a day and have done so for decades, who've cooked a lot of dishes and burnt quite a few already. They are learning from the best guitar or mandolin players in the country. The best singers. The best songwriters. It's a privilege to work with these pros, to eat at the same table, to share a drink, to watch them perform. But it's also deeply humbling, and we all feel vulnerable. This isn't like hanging out on the beach and drinking Belgian whites to relax. It can be pleasurable, even joyous at times, but relaxing not so much.

The first day of class, Rikki introduced herself as a nurse who had retired after 45 years. "Now I'll be spending the rest of my days as a songwriter," she said. And today, the last day of class, it was her turn to play a song for the group. She took her guitar out of its case. I could feel the weight of her anxiety as she walked to the center of the room and sat down.

Then she began her song, "The Arms of the Giant Sycamore." As her voice transported us to another place, I hung my head to hide the tears streaming down my face.

I have a recording of her playing that day, because on a whim I'd hit the button with my phone. I didn't know that listening to her would be like the moment, one brilliant blue day, when I happened to glimpse a hawk soaring above the river, heading with purpose upstream.

I got so much more from her than a crude recording of her song. She gave me a future imagined.