

My Judy Garland Life

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Extract

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I had, from my beginning, to adore heroes
& I elected that they witness to,
show forth, transfigure: life-suffering & pure heart
& hardly definable but central weakness

for which they were enthroned & forgiven by me.

John Berryman, 'The Heroes'

How It All Began

I've been half or more in love with Judy Garland all my life. Since my earliest beginnings, when I was so sensitive that my heart went out to everything – strangers, ants, even that sad cluster of abandoned items in the supermarket next to the cashier's till – Judy Garland has inspired and enriched my inner world.

Her presence, through her films and her recordings, her concert footage and her television shows, has consoled and invigorated, educated and disturbed. The imperative intimacy I feel with Judy Garland is similar to that which I feel for my mother or my children. It is a sort of profound kinship, a peculiar personal connection, an emergency of friendship and sympathy that has the same passion to it as a crisis. This sense of attachment to Judy Garland allows me to sidestep others' ignoble concerns about the way she lived, the way she worked and her reputation in the world at large; it makes me feel I have a reasonable claim to call myself her friend.

And, although Judy Garland died five months after I was born, this has always seemed to me a two-sided affair that has suited us both. I've felt Judy Garland's acute need of me and this prolonged fantasy – you might call it – of intimacy has been both sustaining and exhilarating. It has been a central part of my development as a

person, as real as meat, as tears. I know for certain that something at the heart of Judy Garland connects directly to something at the heart of me. I feel implicated in her myriad struggles and triumphant in the face of her success. There are flashes of understanding between us, almost supernatural shocks of intense recognition, which assail me when I hear her sing or speak, or watch her dance.

As a young child it seemed that all anyone ever said to me was: 'You must learn to toughen up. You mustn't take everything to heart so. You really ought to try to control your feelings more or you just won't have a happy life.' This then, I learned, was the job of



Me aged six

childhood, the work of adolescence. If you could only gain mastery of your emotional world, why, you would be set up for ever! But how to do it? Nobody said. Was I to arrange myself so that I had no feelings at all? Was I to turn everything I felt into a secret? Or was it more a question of keeping very still and quiet for a few years until my mental capabilities could match the intensity of my heart, which had simply outgrown its casings?

Into this fragile environment, one day, came the voice of Judy Garland. At the cinema for the first time with my mother, I listened, transfixed, to Dorothy singing 'Over the Rainbow'.



Dorothy and Toto relaxing between takes

I had never heard anything like it in my life. It was immediately clear to me that Garland's singing bypassed all the indignity of strong feelings that I was grappling with, and instead she capitalised on her struggles. She absolutely led with them, presenting them as the best things life contains. Since early childhood I have always entertained a lot of dark thoughts – I put out a welcome mat for them; I feed them and clothe them – but Judy Garland seemed miraculously to transform the harsher truths of life into something wonderful, where all feelings, however dark, are good and true because they're *yours*. There was an instant – and I felt it even then – *historic* meeting between us, a kind of tessellation of spirit accompanied by thick bolts of not just fellow feeling but of fellow being. I wanted to slip right then inside the screen.

From here, our life took off together in delightful ways. I had an LP of *The Wizard of Oz* – not just the songs, but the entire soundtrack – and I put it on whenever I was in my room. I mouthed the words alongside: 'That dog's a menace to the community. I'm taking him to the sheriff and make sure he's destroyed.' It was my wallpaper for several years. 'Put him in the basket, Henry,' I would murmur wryly in the face of any sort of defeat. I listened to Judy Garland's music continually, lying on my bedcover with the yellow moons and the pink stars. We cared about so many of the same things, chiefly the importance of making other people happy, a huge concern of mine, which no one else I knew seemed to speak of at all. I still believe one of the best ways to help the environment is to be 50 per cent kinder to all family, friends and strangers and then sit back and watch the world improve.

And although I did not begin to understand Judy Garland's sorrows, I saw that she had them and that they weighed heavily on her four foot eleven frame, and that she was a bigger person for them. Like thousands of others before me I felt that just by listening to her I could help. This made me immensely hopeful. The idea that

uneasiness could be channelled into something beautiful, something triumphant that could somehow link us and transform us was a revelation. Even as a child I could see that Judy's courage was contagious; it was almost pneumatic. Everything she did seemed like a staggering act of human generosity, designed especially to appeal to me. She must have been the most conscientious unreliable person who ever lived.

I was a conscientious and reliable and helpful girl, chubby and intense, keen to stay a child for as long as possible – for ever, if I could manage it – because I knew the grown up world inhabited by my parents, by my much older siblings, was far more dangerous than I could bear. To emulate Judy's dance routines I started taking tap, ballet and modern classes, three days a week, in a local church hall presided over by a Miss Audrey. I loved it. It was a cruel joke that I might ever have a dancer's body but I was praised and encouraged endlessly, not for my talent but because of my sheer hard work and my excellent memory which, when you are a very young dancer, can take you quite far. I worked hard also at staying cheerful, with discipline and willpower, practising my dancing for hours at a time to a record called *The Young Judy Garland*, using the mantelpiece in my bedroom as a barre. I loved and learned a song called 'Friendship', in which Judy and Johnny Mercer make hysterical, competitive pledges of allegiance to each other, such as, 'If you ever lose your teeth when you're out to dine, borrow mine', and 'If you ever lose your mind, I'll be kind.' I loved the idea that there might one day be someone I'd do anything for.

I passed through a difficult year. My parents had parted before I was born and I missed my father so much it was a physical pain. Yet as my love for Judy Garland began to grow and deepen something hopeful stirred in me, and things to do with life and the outside world and the people in it gradually started to seem a little more possible, even slightly inviting. Practising my tap routines to Garland's

records, reciting the mesmerising chains of steps, the endless hop-shuffle-hop-brush-hop-pick-ups (repeat) I could see that it might be desirable to grow up one day and it would be awful sometimes, more painful than my darkest dreams, but it might also be, now and then, a bit lovely. My strength of feeling that I'd learned to view as an affliction, Judy seemed to think might be the making of me. She ennobled and forgave. It was the first time she had intervened. And so we began.

What does it say about this extraordinary performer that I've felt linked to her so powerfully all my life? What does it say about me? Whatever strange alchemy has been at work between us, the facts are these: I wasn't there at the moments of her greatest triumphs and her cruellest despair. But she has been at mine.

