

**This interview with
MARLO THOMAS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 19, 2021**



Library of Congress: I know you’ve probably told this story a million times, but for the sake of the Library of Congress, how did you first conceive of this project? What inspired you?

Marlo Thomas: When my sister Terre’s first child, Dionne, was around five years old, I was reading to her from the storybooks she had in her bedroom. And I was shocked by how outdated they were. They all told the same old stories, starring the same old prince, promising the same old happy ending. None of the books had any new ideas encouraging Dionne to dream her own dreams.

“I can’t believe you’re giving her the same stuff we grew up with,” I said to Terre. “It took half of our lives to get over those stories?”

“That’s all I’ve been able to find,” Terre told me.

I was convinced my sister simply hadn’t looked hard enough. But when I got to the bookstore, I was even more stunned. Not only had nothing changed, but in some cases things were worse. One particularly unsettling book was called “I’m Glad I’m a Boy! I’m Glad I’m a Girl!” The pictures were cute, but the captions were appalling.

“Boys are pilots, girls are stewardesses.”

“Boys are doctors, girls are nurses.”

“Boys invent things, girls use what boys invent.”

I almost had a heart attack in the children’s book section.

I was baffled. After all the marches, the consciousness-raising, the literature, this is what we were offering kids? My mind was racing. *How hard could it be to create an album for Dionne that got her thinking about all the things she could be in her life--a record that would awaken her imagination instead of putting her mind to sleep?*

And that’s how the “Free to Be” seed got planted. I knew the record couldn’t be preachy. It would have to be entertaining and a little jazzy. This was not the “Littlest Angel” generation--these kids had rock concerts blaring from their TVs, and that’s what we’d be competing with. And I knew that it would have to make kids laugh. That’s the only way they’d get it--and *remember* it. As the old saying goes, “What is learned with laughter is learned well.”

Once I started mapping the record out in my brain, I couldn’t wait to get started.

LOC: You were, at this time, a veteran film and stage and, of course, TV, why then did you go to the field of recorded sound with this project rather than to, say, embark on a TV special (which it ultimately became of course)?

MT: When Terre and I were little girls, one of our favorite things to do was sit on the floor with our portable pink phonograph, and play story records. That was a big part of the children’s entertainment industry in those days. Loretta Young reading “The Littlest Angel.” Bing Crosby’s “The Happy Prince.” “Bozo the Clown,” “Cinderella,” “Snow White.” Terre and I would lie on our backs and look up at the ceiling and see all the pictures in our heads. It was a great thing to do on a rainy day in Los Angeles.

So that’s where my mind went when I first began thinking about creating “Free to Be...You and Me.” As you note, we eventually brought it to television, and it was a big hit there; but making it a record first appealed to me in a more personal way. I also believe that listening to a record encourages children to exercise their brains in a way that TV doesn’t. It asks them to decide for themselves what the characters look like, and to picture the scenery behind them. I wanted “Free to Be” to do that--to inspire children to embrace their imaginations, and run off with them.

LOC: Was there a learning curve for you embarking on this sort of project in an industry that you were not known in?

MT: Not really. Entertainment is entertainment, and because I was already a producer in addition to being an actress, I knew how to get things up and running. If there was any learning curve I experienced, it was in finding the right material for the album. Going in, I knew I wanted to enlist experts to help me find the perfect stories and poems and songs--whether it was

seasoned book editors who could point me to the best writers, or childhood development specialists to help me understand how to present new ideas to kids. At one point, we even did a focus group with preschoolers. And let me tell you, if you want to hear unvarnished honesty about whether a story is good or bad, ask a four year-old. They'll tell you!

LOC: How did you go about gathering the (ultimately very impressive) array of talents that eventually appeared on and contributed to the album?

MT: Experience had taught me that if you want to build a team, start small; and if your idea is any good, that team will grow organically, as word spreads about what you're up to. Everyone wants to help kids and be involved with something fun. And we were doing both.

My co-producer, Carole Hart, and I began to develop the album by sitting around with a few select writers and talking about our own childhoods, and what we would have liked to have been told that we hadn't been told when we were kids. We went to showbiz talent, not kids' writers, to brainstorm this material--people like Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Sheldon Harnick, Herb Gardner and Shel Silverstein. The more we talked, the more we dug deep into our inner-child.

Herb said, "I'd like to have heard that it wasn't a sissy thing for a boy to cry," so the gifted songwriter Carol Hall wrote the memorable song "It's All Right to Cry." I said, "I'd like to read one story about a princess who didn't get married to the prince at the end. And who wasn't blonde!" So Betty Miles updated the ancient myth, "Atalanta," which was about a king who holds a cross-country foot race, offering his daughter's hand in marriage to the young man who wins. But in Betty's version, the princess (now a brunette!) joins in the race, so that if she wins, she can decide for herself whether she will marry at all. (I always loved the last line: "Perhaps someday they will be married, and perhaps they will not. But one thing's for certain. They will live happily ever after.")

And on and on we went, realizing that as we were developing the material--we were rewriting our *own* childhoods. We were all on a mission, obsessed with changing the world, one five-year-old at a time. And when it came time to record the album, we recruited a terrific group of performers, like Harry Belafonte, Alan Alda, football player Rosie Grier (who, playing against type, sang "It's All Right to Cry"), Carol Channing, and a sweet 14 year-old Michael Jackson.

LOC: Somewhat unbelievably, the album got some backlash when it first came out. Were you surprised by that reaction?

MT: Change is never easy, especially for those who are fearful of it. So, yes, there were some who thought "Free to Be" was uncomfortably progressive. But I had learned about this whole dynamic years earlier when I produced and starred in "That Girl." The suits at the networks were more than a little wary of this character I had created--an independent working woman, living on her own and not wanting to get married. But when the show premiered, the critical response--and the ratings--told us that this girl who seemed so revolutionary to the network execs was not a revolutionary figure at all. She was a *fait accompli*. There were millions of "That Girls" in homes across America. We were not our mother's daughters. We were a whole different breed.

The response to “Free to Be”--the record, and then the book--was almost universally positive. But we did have a little backlash with the TV special--especially after we screened it for the top brass at ABC Television. When the lights came up afterward, I could immediately tell by the looks on their faces that some of them were terrified of the program’s messages. They begged us to take out “William Wants A Doll,” a wonderful song written by Mary Rodgers and Sheldon Harnick. Telling little boys that “It’s All Right to Cry” was bad enough, they said, but telling them that it’s okay to cuddle a doll? That was dangerous. (“It’s going to turn every boy in America into a sissy,” one executive told me.)

And then there was the scene in the song “Parents are People,” in which Harry Belafonte and I played various mommies and daddies happily enjoying their lives in all different professions. In one sequence, Harry and I pushed our baby carriages through the park, side by side, and one of the execs worriedly commented, “It looks like you and Harry are married! That doesn’t belong in a children’s special. And they’ll never play it in the south.” But we didn’t back down and, to its credit, ABC aired our complete, unedited version of “Free to Be...You and Me” in prime time. And guess what?--the sky did not fall down. John Leonard of “The New York Times” raved “Free To Be! Hooray!” in his headline, then promised to watch the show with his entire family the following evening. But not everyone agreed with Leonard. The TV critic from “The Boston Globe” wrote, “Keep your children away from the set tonight.” The world wasn’t changing as fast as we had hoped.

LOC: Why do you think “Free to Be...” hit such a chord with the public at that time and why do you think it is still so well-known and popular today?

MT: Truthfully, I think it was because it was needed. Remember, this was 1972 and society was still reeling from the turbulence of the Sixties, and the pitched battles for civil rights, gender equality, and sexual freedom. At this point in our cultural history, nothing was too sacred for a good, healthy re-examination, and everything was up for grabs. So in that context, creating a kids’ record that would dare to be the first of its kind--a non-sexist, non-racist entertainment for children--not only made perfect sense but was arguably long overdue.

The record went gold, the book went to number one on the “New York Times” bestseller list, and the TV special won an Emmy and a Peabody. All of us who were part of its creation were floored by its impact and humbled by its acclaim. I still shake my head about it sometimes. My little present for Dionne had gone straight to the hearts of moms and dads and aunties and uncles and, most of all, educators, who made it part of the school curricula in 35 states, and embraced it as a way to teach kids a new way of thinking about their possibilities and those of the people around them.

It’s very gratifying that it has remained in the hearts of adults who first heard it as kids years ago. I routinely get approached in airports and restaurants and ladies rooms by someone who will say, “I am counting the days until my daughter is old enough to begin listening to ‘Free to Be...’” or “When I was little, my mom used to put on ‘Free to Be’ and we’d dance to all the songs,” or “I still have my original pink copy of the book--every time I move, it goes with me.” And I’m most touched by the innumerable gay men who tell me, “William’s Doll” and “It’s All Right to Cry” were the first inklings that I was going to be okay. That makes me cry every time.

That's the reason "Free to Be...You and Me" is still popular today?--its messages are both timeless and ageless. According to statistics, four babies are born somewhere on this planet every second of the day, every day of the week, every week of the year. And the way I see it, every one of them deserves to be "Free to Be."