

“Moon River”—Andy Williams (1962)

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Essay by Monica Mancini (guest post)*



Henry Mancini with Audrey Hepburn

“Moon River, wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style... someday.”

That Johnny Mercer lyric has taken on so many different meanings throughout my life and career. Before I ever saw “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” my first recollection of hearing “Moon River” was on the radio and being sung by Andy Williams. It was played constantly and being an avid listener of KHJ and KRLA rock and roll radio stations, I found it fascinating that this song of my parents’ generation was included in rotation with Dion, Bobby Vee and Ike & Tina Turner.

This is the moment when my father got way more interesting in my eyes... he was part of the rock generation.

It wasn’t until I saw the film that I could put the song in some other context. I realized that it wasn’t just a huge random hit on the radio, but that the song was threaded throughout the entire film, giving the images texture and grace...and written specifically for Audrey Hepburn, not for Andy Williams, to sing on the radio.

Amazingly, the song almost didn’t make it into the film. At a screening of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” at Paramount studios for the cast and studio heads, it was the studio chief, Martin Rackin, who said, “Love the film, [but] it’s too long. That f--king song’s gotta go.” Audrey shot out of her seat and said, “Over my dead body!” That was that.

After hundreds of cover recordings of “Moon River,” sung by the greatest artists from multiple generations, dad always preferred Audrey’s performance to any other. He said, “No one has ever understood it so completely.”

“Old dream maker, you heartbreaker,” it’s knowing that it will only be a dream, and choosing to dream it anyway.

Dad never heard my recording of “Moon River,” which was on my first CD recorded in 1998, four years after his passing. My understanding of the lyric then, and my performances of it now,

are miles apart. I started to dig deeper into the song, staying true to the perfect melody and find a way to interpret the deceptively simple and poetic lyrics, that fit my life. I still can't sing "my huckleberry friend" without it getting stuck in my heart. As long as I sing this song, it will remain a constant challenge to bring as much of my dad... his humanity, humility and humor... through his music.

Several years ago, I was performing a concert celebrating my dad's music in Palm Desert with their local symphony. Because Andy Williams and his brothers lived in the desert, they came to see my show. It was still early in my solo career, and I was a bit nervous having Andy and his wife in the audience.

After the show, we all embraced backstage, had a glass of champagne, chatted about the weather, and my husband overheard Andy's wife Debby say to him, "Why is she singing your songs?" Not meaning that she didn't like my singing, but that I had the nerve to sing her husband's songs. I didn't react at the time, other than being flabbergasted at the comment, but later I thought, "Wait a minute, your husband wouldn't have a song to sing without a songwriter!"

The beauty of art is to create and share it, put it out to the universe so all can appreciate and have it reflect back on their life, hopefully finding personal meaning. I thank songwriters every day for giving me a career, a way to express my vocal talent however I choose to personalize their work.

There's a reason why "Moon River" was named the fourth most memorable song in Hollywood history by the American Film Institute. I can't tell you how many people who come to my concerts, can't wait to tell me how "Moon River" has become a piece of their history; whether hearing it on a first date, getting married to it, teaching their children to play it on the piano, or even playing it at a loved one's funeral. This is what music does...hits the heartstrings, resonates in our souls, becomes a part of our DNA.

One last memory: my twin sister Felice and my brother Chris and I were watching the 1962 Academy Awards in our den in Northridge, California, being babysat by my dad's grumpy old Italian father. We watched dad receive two Oscars in one night right before our eyes. One for the score of "Breakfast at Tiffany's," the other for "Moon River." We could barely hear his acceptance speeches as we squealed and jumped around the room. When it all calmed down and I realized what had just happened, my first thought was, "Wow, maybe now I can meet the Beatles!"

Monica Mancini is an acclaimed singer with four albums to her credit. She also happens to be the daughter of Henry Mancini.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.