

## Chapter 1

# TRACING OUR SONGLINES

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Imagine that you were given a song when you were born. Suppose that as you grew into childhood, your grandparents taught you how to listen for music that connected you to your ancestors. But suppose as well that your future pathways in life were discovered over time as you traced that music and learned to improvise on your song. Human communities have, from the beginning of time, explored identity and destiny in music and song. Such “songlines,” as these may be called, link generation to generation. This image has captivated our imagination as we write about the mystery and power of music in our lives.

In this book we are tracing songlines as well. Music making seems to be in our family DNA, laying down a pathway from generation to generation. Coming alive to music is coming alive to deep memory, as music recreates our sense of the world and who we are in it, right in the midst of the terrors and beauties, the pain and deep pleasures, of human existence. Coming alive to music, we are led on a double journey: into the mystery of God and

into the depths of our humanity. If we listen well, we may even hear the voices of ancestors and of cultures and communities we've never met.

Music can make us come alive, provided that we bring our lives to the music. For each of us, life and music intertwine. Without songs and music making, neither one of us could understand the stories of our particular lives. And without songs and music making, neither of us could understand what words like *spirit* and *spirituality* mean either. For us music and song are intimately related to spirituality, to being alive to what is deepest in and about the human journey.

Early in the process of writing this book, we interviewed one another. Listening to what music has brought each of us and where it has taken us as individual musicians was a revelatory experience for us as daughter and father. We learned things we had not known about one another. We also became aware of questions about the future, because looking back in time also means leaning forward toward what has not yet been. "Well, I don't know where it all began," the Indigo Girls sing in a recent song, "and I don't know where it all will end." Where to begin? Where to end? We'll trace our songlines first with Emily, and then with Don, and then back another generation to Don's own father.

## EMILY'S STORY

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At some level I always knew that a life of music was waiting for me, that it came down to me through all the gen-

erations before me. When I was nine years old, my teacher passed out a flyer advertising various activities at the local YMCA. I remember holding the brightly colored sheet in my hand, looking at the listing for guitar lessons, and feeling a flush of excitement and inevitability—I was going to play guitar. After I got permission from my mom and dad, my cousin Kevin (who was at the time a professional singer-songwriter) took me to pick out a \$24 nylon string guitar. From that day on, I played. There was no other path.

Coming into the gift of music is a rare privilege, one that I have never taken for granted a single day of my life. Music has given and still gives me everything: a working partner in Amy Ray, who to this day still inspires me with her burning gift; experiences with and stories of countless communities we as the Indigo Girls have encountered through our travels and their spirit of perseverance even in challenging and deadly times; and along the way, brilliant mentors like the justly acclaimed Native American activist Winona Laduke and former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, to name just two. I have had the privilege of witnessing and taking part in the great healing power of song, especially communal song as audience and performers become one. I've seen people whose souls seemed homeless find a home and a family in particular songs that called their name. For me music has fleshed out the beautiful and the ugly, one and the same, both equally important.

When Dorothy Bass asked me to write this book with my dad, and I realized it was going to have religious connections and connotations, I felt great fear. I have been

deeply disappointed in the organized church and other organized religions, particularly in the way they treat anyone who is queer and in the brutal legacy of church missions for indigenous peoples, especially Native Americans. I am appalled at the devastation and enormous injustice that have been inflicted in the name of God. How many people all over the world over long centuries have been killed in Christ's name? How many have the church and other organized religions ostracized for one reason or another? How many church people are now suddenly aware of the history of sexual abuse? I will never turn away from this darkness, and I respect the pain of those who have been hurt by religion. And yet . . .

Although I do not identify solely with one faith and am truly a religious "mutt," I grew up going to church and being raised as a person of faith. I have seen how genuine faith was at the heart of the civil rights movement in America and how faith that works for justice can change the course of history. My faith is deeply personal and not something easily articulated. But faith in the Creator and Sustainer of all things is my reason for being. Music and faith are, for me, intimately related, even as I continue to wrestle with questions about organized religion.

Writing this book has led me to ask once again: What is secular, and what is sacred? Singing in church choirs as a very young girl, I was introduced to the woven harmonies and canons and counterpoints that directly influenced my folk music arrangements later on. The tremendous power and poetry of biblical images have landed comfortably in many an Indigo Girls song. I have felt the intensity of sacred music not only in the hallowed

halls of church but also in the smoky bars of Atlanta, where all the “freaky people” (as musician Michael Franti says) gather night after night to sing together, prop each other up through tragedy and joy, and cry an implicit prayer with all their hearts. One place smells of incense and candles, the other of cigarette smoke and beer. I can’t say one experience is more deeply spiritual than the other.

Saturday night morphs into Sunday morning as I sit down with my father and we talk about how those two days and two ways are not really so separate. We speak of how music can deepen human life beyond measure and bring us closer to the truth of what it means to be human and to the transcendent power of love beyond our understanding. Music, we keep saying, is some kind of mysterious mediator between us and the God we seek.

## DON’S STORY

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My songlines come from the mixture of classical and jazz streams flowing through my father, his sister, our church, and my school. Early on I was exposed to a whole range of church music, and with early keyboard lessons came good sight-reading skills. This meant that I was called upon to play hymns and accompany singers in church and in school and soon had a reputation as the town accompanist. Then came violin and clarinet. High school was filled with musical commitments: choir, orchestra, band, chamber groups, operettas, and by tenth grade, my first jazz trio. Making music, I also learned to listen. I still

remember a regional orchestral rehearsal where a sophomore oboe player from Toledo played what at the time seemed the sweetest most ravishing passage I had ever heard. I can still hear that sound.

I remember playing Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with a community orchestra when I was thirteen. That remains a kind of epiphany. I knew that I had accomplished something after long practice. My father, still at that time struggling with alcoholism, recognized that I was doing well, and he was able to tell me so. Later, as a piano major in college, I performed Bach's partitas on the keyboard, while also playing with a jazz quintet and making some money with various pickup bands. I loved it that Dad heard my senior recital.

It is hard for me to say much about my own early development, musically and spiritually, without saying more about my dad. My father was an alcoholic; and it was music that took him to, through, and finally away from the bottle. He met my mother, Emilie, Austrian by birth, in New York. She was a dancer, and he was a jazzman, living the life of the mid-1920s. She was beautiful and talented, and he was dashing. Fading pictures at the Astor Hotel and other venues show them, twenty-somethings, in the Big Apple, daring and vivacious. He played alto and tenor sax, clarinet, violin, and guitar and sang with a stand-up jazz band of the period. Dad would tell me about finishing gigs in midtown and then driving up to Harlem for what he called the "real sessions." The Harlem Renaissance was in full swing. What music makers were there! Willie "the Lion" Smith, Meade "Lux" Lewis, Albert Ammonds, players from the Apollo The-

atre, and later a young blind piano player from Toledo named Art Tatum. The spirit of that incredible time got into my bloodstream. Alongside my early classical piano training, I would listen to the old 78 rpm vinyl recordings and best of all, learn some of the jazz styles from music books purchased from Ernie Duffield's Music Store.

Later Dad would tell me tales of how the high life was too much. Like the night he fell down a flight of stairs in New York on top of his cherished violin, smashing it beyond repair. High talent, high octane, high life, and then the Great Depression. I was born in small-town Ohio after he had hit the skids and returned to find some kind of employment. In the midst of their struggles, my mother was diagnosed very late with cancer. She died in 1942, when I was not yet five. That's how it was that I went to live with my father's sister, Alice, who provided me with a good home and lots of musical encouragement. She was a soprano and a church choir director. So it was piano lessons from an early age and gradually more and more exposure to choir practice and Sunday mornings at the local Methodist church. She and my uncle held steady while my father struggled on with factory work, teaching music lessons and playing in the local Veterans of Foreign Wars marching band during sober times.

In the midst of the struggle, music came to his rescue. A local Methodist pastor decided that he would like to form a Sunday school orchestra for the church, and he had just the person in mind to direct it. So it was that my father, reluctantly at first, took this on. It was a funny little clutch of players, but it gave him a new venue for music making and a new image among some of the town

folk who only knew him as the musically gifted drunk, not an angry drunk but a sentimental one. At the same time, one or two of his musical buddies and others were able to persuade him to try Alcoholics Anonymous. That's not a story for now, but it is important to say that in my early teenage years I received my father back. To this day I attribute much of his recovery to that odd little Sunday school orchestra, with his lead violin waving to give us the tempo. In his recovered life, he formed a dance band that eventually had quite a reputation around northwest Ohio. That, together with his ability to teach a range of instruments, gave him a rich musical life. It wasn't New York, but he was very good again. So I came to treasure his legacy.

I will never forget when I began to play now and then with his dance band around 1953. His style was easy; and he usually played the popular songs of the day, many in his own arrangements, somewhat in the manner of Guy Lombardo. As for me, I was always listening to jazz—the late Art Tatum, the early Dave Brubeck, the emerging Gerry Mulligan, Stan Kenton, Miles Davis, and company. Can you imagine the first time I took a piano solo against the melodious dance music and ventured with a set of wild Brubeckian block chords? Dad, who had already heard enough of Stan Kenton to know that was not his kind of music, said to me during the break, “Son, can you keep the progressive stuff down?” That was one side of our musical relationship. The other was accompanying his violin or clarinet students—sometimes he would play an entire piece for them himself, with me at the keyboard—and my own wonderful Sunday afternoon lessons with him. A high

point was the Bach Double Violin Concerto—especially the slow movement—what an afternoon it was when I could finally play through the whole movement without stopping! Those collaborations are, for me now, long after his death, deep life-giving images. Whenever I hear some of the music we did together, it all comes back. That’s what music does—it encodes life, most especially shared life. You don’t have to be a performer to know this, but if you have ever done music together with someone, you know this with special intensity.

When my father shared his passion for both jazz and classical music with me, he opened up a world for me and also opened up his life—a life of pain, tumult, and joy—leaving me finally with a deep sense of connection. I have a scratchy old 78 rpm vinyl, recorded in 1929, of his tune, “Better Keep Away from Me,” and also his sketchbooks of his arrangements of standards from the 1920s through the early 1950s. Recently, as I sorted through some closet shelves, a folder of music paper fell out. There, in his own notation, were several arrangements of Christmas carols, first sketched for that little church band years ago. When I sit down to play from these books or listen to that old record, Emily’s grandpa is very present. I am very grateful. He lives in the music. And the music sounds in this air, here and now. Music draws me into this mystery.

So it was music that took our forebear to many places. For him music making opened up several worlds, including one that he shared with Emily and her three sisters and with me. Our visits to him in Port Charlotte, Florida, where he retired, always included making music

together. He also directed a Methodist church choir and the community chorus during these years. I will never forget him, at age seventy-six, responding to my question about how the choirs were doing. He blurted out, “It would be OK except for these damn stubborn old people!” So much for gentle opinions. But his choirs did well. Despite his short fuse and quick retorts, he gave the singers his passion and his feel for the music.

By the way, he lived long enough to know that Emily had promising talent on the guitar and in singing. He tried to get her interested in his kind of music (just as he had done with me thirty years before), telling her to listen to the Quintet from the Hot Club of France. But at age fifteen, Emily would be moving in a different direction. Just as my first piano breaks with his band headed out at another angle, so Emily’s early song writing traced a different line.

One day we had been speaking of Emily’s grandfather when she commented:

I remember when I was first impressed with your music, Dad. When I came into that little church in New Haven and first heard and saw you playing the organ. I thought: *How can he play with both hands and his feet too?* The music just rolled over me; it was Bach of course—one of his great fugues. Later I was amazed to learn that you collaborated in writing a musical takeoff of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a production called *Elsinore*. I was old enough to know it was pretty daring, . . . and I can still sing the opening theme, “There’s going to be a wedding at Elsinore. They’ll have to change the bedding . . . at Elsinore!” But now I

realize that you, like my grandfather, are equally at home in jazz and classical music.

I remember Emily too, of course. I remember going with her to her guitar lessons on Saturday mornings in Atlanta. She was learning to play some of the classical literature, Fernando Sor, but also the Beatles' "Blackbird" and others. But then one morning I heard her play a song about pollution and people not caring, and I knew she had the gift to cross over.

## SEEKING AND SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL

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In all these ways and more, we have received our songlines—musical legacies that are deeply spiritual—and also claimed the freedom to improvise within those legacies. Some people inherit musical talent and training directly from parents or relatives—it seems to be in the genes. Many great musicians come from musical families. But others are inspired by strangers, just by listening to a singer or to a well-played violin, trumpet, or piano. Most people, some of whom can't carry a tune in a bucket, do not inherit a gift for playing music. But in church or in school or simply with a group of friends, the sound of people singing creates a yearning to sing along. This is the beginning of coming alive to the richer and more interesting world that emerges when we know and love music.

Our songlines have helped each of us to cross over into the music of another generation. This is something that seems difficult for many people today. But we who do so find ourselves opening our ears and our senses to what is new. This does not mean that we must like the other's music, but it does mean that we should try to attend to the music and to the person, always seeking to discover whatever is excellent and profoundly human enough to touch another's heart. Doing so, we open our vulnerabilities and our hearts to people "other" than ourselves, asking, What music touches down in them? And has some of this music journeyed across time, gathering experience from another generation than our own?

One of our deepest hopes in writing this book is to encourage readers to practice this kind of appreciative crossing over into music that is not immediately their own, not only across generations but also across other lines of culture, ethnicity, race, and class. We hope that our stories will encourage you to listen for whatever is excellent or profoundly human in another's music.

Similarly, we hope that our reflections here will encourage readers to treat others' spirituality with respect and openness, and we believe that sharing our experiences and thoughts about music across the lines that often divide people can help this to happen. Because everything in life can be touched in music, we think music could be conceived as a primary soul practice. It is in the very nature of music to awaken our souls to matters beyond the ordinary. Whether we are listening alone or together, performing from a score or improvising, sharing our responses, or just pondering what we have heard, the

practices of music engage us at a very deep level. Such powerful engagement is not always used for good, to be sure: music can be used for propaganda, nationalism, sexism, and cruelty. Yet it can also bring us to the animating center of life. This is why many call music the language of the soul made audible.

Emily speaks of how the communion song “Let Us Break Bread Together” always gets to her at some deep level.

The images in that song tear me apart: “When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, O Lord, have mercy on me.” I think of how this world and all of us need mercy. We are fallible creatures. “Have mercy on me” is a cry of the heart and soul. And when I sing this with a gathered community of vulnerable people who really wish to share the bread and wine of life’s table and hope to live a life of truth and grace, the music goes right to my soul.

And the song concludes by inviting lifelong praise because of the mercy and release.

Don recalls sitting beside his grandmother in church as a child.

The old Methodist church pews were hard wood, and the worship service seemed long and boring. But when the hymns were sung, I would stand beside her, hearing her quavering voice, and try to sing with the rest, “Holy, holy, holy . . . early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.” That hymn is imprinted in my body and soul. I did not

realize at the time that I was actually addressing the God of all creation in the very words of the seraphim, those strange angelic beings described in Isaiah's vision of the heavenly court of God (Isaiah 6). Nor did I realize then that I would someday come to understand that holiness and awe before God had everything to do with how life might be lived. I suspect now that my work as a musician and as a theologian owes more to that familiar hymn than I can quite comprehend.

Through the singing practices of our religious communities, each of us has received spiritual gifts. When a religious community sings of its great need for mercy or shares hymns expressing thanksgiving and awe, something is given to each soul, something that is then released into the world's life stream. But of course, this does not happen only in church. Emily points to the remarkable song "*Gracias a la Vida*," by the Chilean singer Violeta Parra. As we listened to this song together, we realized that both the music and the words spoke what we often long to say in response to the gift of life.

<i>Gracias a la vida que me ha dado tanto.</i>	Thanks to life, which has given me so much.
<i>Me dió dos luceros que cuando los abro</i>	It gave me two morning stars, which, when I open them,
<i>perfecto distingo lo negro del blanco</i>	I clearly distinguish black from white
<i>y en el alto cielo su fondo estrellado</i>	and high in the sky its starry depths
<i>y en las multitudes el hombre que yo amo.</i>	and from the crowds the man I love.

After this expression of gratitude for vision, the song speaks next of the gift of hearing, of the night crickets and canaries, of barking dogs and dark clouds and the tender voice of the beloved. “Gracias a la Vida” echoes again and again throughout the song. Gratitude for “el sonido y el abecedario” (the sound and the alphabet) with words to think and speak, for “mother,” “friend,” “brother,” and the “light that brightens the path of the soul of my loved one.” And finally:

*Gracias a la vida que  
me ha dado tanto.  
Me ha dado la risa y me ha  
dado el llanto,  
asi yo distingo dicha de  
quebranto  
los dos materials que forman  
mi canto  
y el canto de ustedes que es  
el mismo canto  
y el canto de todos que es  
mi propio canto.*

Thanks to life, which has  
given me so much.  
It has given me laughter  
and has given me tears  
so that I distinguish  
between joy and loss,  
the two components of  
my song  
and your song, which are  
one and the same,  
and everyone’s song,  
which is my own song.

This exquisite love song does not mention God. But listening to it, Don was filled with the sense that the gratitude expressed here is very close to the thanksgiving expressed in the authentic prayers of people of faith. Then Emily mentioned that Violeta Parra had taken her own life. And we both pondered the mystery: Out of what complex turmoil did this luminous lyric of thanks come? When words and music touch those chords in us, we must take notice. The point is not to categorize music as secular or sacred; the point is to notice that we are in the

presence of a human soul and to listen with care and respect from the depths of our own souls.

In his spiritual autobiography, *Dancing Madly Backwards*, Paul Marechal tells of a dark night when a verse of a psalm he had sung in compline (an evening prayer service) “began to move around inside me, like the Spanish *canto hondo*—deep song. I found myself cooperating with this music, leaning into it, knowing that when its last note vanished into the silence, another leaf would be living on the tree I call ‘myself.’” *Canto hondo*, deep song, is what can shape authentic spirituality. The language of the soul becomes audible in such song. We should always be on the search for it, within a worshiping community or wherever it appears.

## WALKING THE SONGLINES OF FAITH

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For both of us, certain music from the Christian tradition has shaped our art. It is another songline. However, it is one that always leads to paradox. The more one learns to express awe and thanks and to cry out for mercy to God, the more one is plunged into the depths of what it is to be human. At the same time, the more one sounds the depths of human experience, the more one finds the mystery of God unfolding. This paradox is not just a religious cliché but rather something both of us keep discovering right in the midst of our making, listening, hearing, sharing, and struggling to make sense of music, our own and that of others.

Don recalls the great orchestra and choral conductor Robert Shaw saying again and again that great art and good music required two things: awareness of human suffering and a sense of mystery. As many who have worked with him know, Shaw was not a pious man. In many ways he was always in reaction against the clichés of religious piety; this preacher's kid had experienced more than enough of church. Nevertheless, his performances of works such as Brahms's *German Requiem* or Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* ("Song of the Earth") could be absolutely transcendent experiences in the concert hall, evoking so much more than most church musicians could hope for. In each year's annual Christmas concerts with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Don was always stunned when Shaw would suddenly whirl around on the podium and proclaim with fiery intensity the Magnificat, the prophetic song of Jesus' mother upon learning that she would bear a child (Luke 1:46–53). This was especially powerful when it followed Wendell Whalem's arrangement of "*Bethlehememu*," an African burst of praise to God for becoming human in Jesus the Christ, sung to polyrhythmic drumbeats by the renowned African American men's singing group, the Morehouse College Glee Club.

Because music is so close to human emotion and feeling, and because faith is a matter of both the head and the heart, it leads us again and again into the realm of spirituality. As Emily observes, "Anyone who struggles with love and suffering and searches for the mystery ends up singing—or at least listening to music." This is because music engages these things like nothing else does,

evoking questions even when we find it hard to find answers. Yet sometimes music does lead to assurance. Don has heard many church people confess that it is easier for them to believe certain things when they sing them instead of just saying them, much less try to explain them. These mysteries are the essence of religious belief and life.

Music helps us enter our humanity more fully, by embracing the most mysterious things about us and about our lives in time and space. For the two of us, as we hope for you who read the pages to follow, the task is to open all of our lives to the mystery and depth of being alive, to lay aside our initial prejudices and our well-formed responses and to listen, really listen. Doing this, we begin to understand why religious faith requires music. It is a matter of connecting and reconnecting to the most elemental senses of life—to beauty, sorrow, joy, hope, and gratitude.