

Peer Review

Harry Harris celebrates the legacy of enigmatic performer and “songwriter’s songwriter” Laura Nyro.



Laura Nyro was a songwriter’s songwriter, a prodigiously talented teenager from Connecticut, but inextricably linked to New York City. Between 1967 and 1971, she released five records of soul-meets-gospel-meets-show tunes-meets-rock ‘n’ roll, influencing everyone from Elton John to Carole King to Joni Mitchell.

I’m not sure I got Nyro as a kid, when her music would float through the walls of my bedroom from a record player elsewhere in our house in Wales. There’d be the odd flash of something. The climax of “Tom Cat Goodby”—where the shuffling pop of the first half segues into the terse, tense repetitive line: *I’m going to the country, gonna kill my lover man*, for instance. Her compositions and musical decisions felt like challenges, obstacles to overcome, and as someone mostly used to chugging four-four rock ‘n’ roll at that point, they often went over my head.

As a songwriter, I’ve been trying to unlearn a lot of those early, subconscious influences on what I do when I pick up a guitar, listening to music beyond my usual

sphere. Laura Nyro tunes always lingered in my memory, and I found that in revisiting her music as an adult, more of the abstractness began to crystallize: the opulence of the songs, the physicality of hearing her move around the piano keys and sing from deep in her chest. Nyro spoke about seeing music in terms of colors, shapes, textures, sensory things. Listening to her sing is like watching an artist throw colors onto a canvas, each movement informing the next.

There are a lot of descriptions of Nyro as being shy, or not tough enough for the hard-bitten world of the music industry. People cite that as the reason why her songs are best known in the hands of others. To me, it doesn’t wash. She sounds like a star—like every breath and note and tempo change is a choice from someone who is deeply in love with her art. Watch her singing “Poverty Train” at Monterey in 1967. The camera is close, her eyes are darting around the room and her jet-black hair is indistinguishable from the darkness of the stage. Then there’s her voice: colors, shapes, textures.

NEW YORK TENDABERRY by Harry Harris

“New York Tendaberry” is a vignette of a song. The title track of Laura Nyro’s 1969 record, it places you in a very specific version of New York. As she sings: *You look like a city, but you feel like religion to me*. Like much of the record, it’s all about the relationship between Nyro’s voice and her piano. Elsewhere she’ll add woodwinds, drums, strings—creating a very precise and defined musical palette. Here, the two of them are alone, the song coming alive in the spaces where a piano chord lingers, like the city is taking a breath.

Left Photograph: David Gahr / Getty Images, Right Photograph: Gustav Almstedt, Styling: Andrea Frieholt

A fluff-free history of the pillow.

KATIE CALAUTTI

Object Matters

The next time you rest your weary head atop your memory foam, down, polyester or wool-stuffed pillow, try to avoid recalling the object’s not-so-humble origins; you’ll likely conjure nightmares. The main purpose of pillows, at first, was not for comfort. Back in early Mesopotamian civilization, the half-moon-shaped headrests were made of carved stone, and their main job was to keep insects out of the mouth, ears and nose of a person sleeping on the floor.

The Romans and Greeks brought comfort into the equation, perfecting the pillow’s ability to support the head, neck and spine by stuffing cloth with feathers or straw. Initially, the bolsters were seen as a sign of wealth, though the general populace adopted them over time, especially as an accessory brought to a place of worship to cushion knees while praying. But solid pillows prevailed elsewhere for longer. In ancient China, for example—where it was believed that soft pillows pulled energy from the body—lavishly painted ceramic versions were de rigueur through the 14th century; materi-

als like jade, bamboo and bronze were common as well. The industrial revolution brought with it sleeping platforms, and softer pillows became mass-produced and more affordable. With the cotton boom in 19th-century America, the stuffing became more mold- and vermin-resistant; suddenly, pillows were no longer a luxury, they were a necessity. The Victorians, predictably, delighted in—and popularized—the concept of decorative pillows, and by the mid-1900s, the invention of polyester filling introduced stuffing that maintained its shape.

Now, one can purchase a pillow to suit just about any need—they’re no longer solely touted for optimal sleep, but for emotional and physical health. Body-shaped pillows mimic a partner, cooling gel inserts keep sleepers chill in hot conditions, maternity pillows support the contours of mamas-to-be and travel pillows prop us up while flying. Smart pillows can even mimic sunshine or play music to help us rise. The downside of the pillow’s newfound comfort is, of course, that each morning’s parting is a sweet sorrow.

