

Lori Bonati

Song Seeds

A few years ago, I wrote a song, submitted it to a contest, and sang it in front of a live audience. My father planted the seeds of that song. A trumpet player since the age of eight, he inspired me to write songs and to have the confidence to project my voice out into the world.

As a child, my father played his trumpet on street corners. As a soldier during World War II, he led a band that entertained the troops. And as a husband and father, he played in dance bands on the weekends. He practiced diligently, and every night I got to hear him playing standards from the American Songbook. It was the soundtrack of my childhood.

I absorbed those songs like the proverbial sponge. I'm told that I used to sing to strangers in the grocery store when I was about three. "Adorable!" and "So talented!" they'd say, stopping in the aisle to admire my tiny voice. So, when the Ted Mack Amateur Hour came to town, my father put four-year-old me in the front seat of his Ford sedan and took me to an audition.

I sang one song, but even though I was probably cute as a button (all buttons are cute, aren't they?), I wasn't quite up to Ted Mack's amateur standards.

"Don't worry," my father told me on the ride home. "They said you were too young."

I've always remembered those words, and I grew up naively believing that I might have won if only I'd been older. Although I could have felt rejection, my father turned it into hope.

I guess that's why I like contests, and why I keep trying to win them. In fifth grade, I won the school spelling bee, but that might have been a mistake. The girl ahead of me spelled "judgment" with an extra "e" in it, like the British do, but I spelled it the American way. It was probably just an accident of geography that I won that day.

My prize was a dictionary with my name printed in gold on the frontispiece, right under the words, "School Champion." I kept that dictionary for over 30 years. One day it dried up and fell apart. I threw it away, but I still have the frontispiece.

I once won money at a casino while on a trip through New Mexico. I was only there for the buffet, which my friend had recommended. (The chili was delicious.) On my way out, I decided to throw away the two dollars left over in my wallet on a slot machine. I put a dollar in the machine and pulled the lever. Nothing. I pulled the lever again. This time, the machine lit up, and bells started ringing. I'd just won \$165. I spent my winnings that night on a second-rate hotel room in Santa Fe. Easy come, easy go, easy to get addicted to casinos, especially when chili's involved.

I really hit the jackpot when I met my second husband on match.com. He was an improvement over my casino winnings -- but still, I wanted to win an actual contest, one requiring more talent than just pulling a lever, or knowing the difference between judgment and judgement.

When I heard about a humorous songwriting contest sponsored by a local cat shelter, my ears perked up. I could win this one. I knew something about cats, and I like funny lyrics and puns. In fact, I thought writing a funny song about cats would be right up my alley.

I've lived with several cats over the years: Tia, Abner, Sadie, Myshkin, Mitzi, Pepper, Jade, and Dennis. But my absolute favorite was Midnight, a green-eyed black cat with white paws and a white star on his forehead. I'd gotten him when he was a tiny kitten, one of several huddled together in a box my college English professor had brought to class. I knew how to get an A in English. I took one of my professor's kittens.

I pictured Midnight while writing my songwriting contest entry, *My Name is Romeo*. It's a tender, sweet ballad about a homeless cat who "wouldn't be bitter" if he "just had litter." I sent my song in and was so sure of its merits that I wasn't surprised to be one of ten finalists who were asked to perform at the benefit show, where the winners would be announced. I assumed there would be at least nine people in the audience (the other contestants), and that was enough for me. After Ted Mack, I've always wanted a second chance to prove myself musically, and this time I definitely wasn't "too young."

I thought I might at least win a flea collar. As it turned out, *My Name is Romeo* took second place. The prize was a guitar tuner worth about ten dollars (I already owned two), but the real prize was watching people in the audience dancing and laughing while I performed the song.

The songwriting experience made me feel closer to my father, who once wrote a song called *Dear Santa*, a Christmas song about Santa's wish for world peace. It was 1960, and world peace was on everyone's minds, especially us kids who grew up hiding under our desks during air raid drills.

In the summer of 1961, Dad took my brother, my sister, and me on a train trip to New York City. His mission: to get *Dear Santa* published and recorded. We went with him to the publisher's office, which might have been in the famous Brill Building. I don't remember being there, but I can picture the scene: a hopeful young man with three kids in tow, proudly showing his handwritten sheet music to a receptionist, asking for a chance, holding his breath while waiting for the reply, turning away as his song was placed on a pile along with so many others.

Dear Santa was never published or recorded, and my father must have been disappointed. I wish he were still here so I could tell him that our family loves the song and that we've sung it many times over the years. I'd love it if I could tell him that he planted some songwriting seeds

in me. Mostly, though, I just wish I could hold his hand and tell him: “They said you were too young.”

THE END