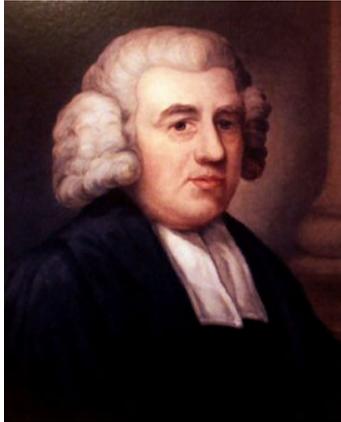


“Amazing Grace”—Judy Collins (1970)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

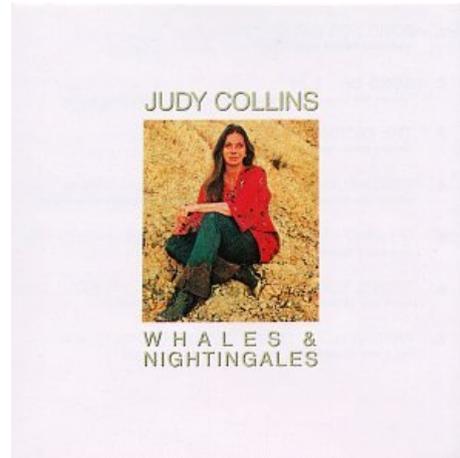
Essay by Cary O’Dell



John Newton



45rpm label



Album cover

All in all, it was the most unlikely of pop hits.

The year was 1971 and the song was, by that time, almost 200 years old. It was also plainly religious in nature. And, furthermore, it was performed acapella and no instrument-free recording had ever broken into the top 15 of the “Billboard” chart ever before.

But, there it was, at the end of 1970 and the beginning of 1971, being played on radio and climbing up the charts. A solemn, beloved hymn conveyed via Judy Collins’s crystalline soprano.

“Amazing Grace” was first published in 1779; it was written by the English poet and Anglican clergyman John Newton. Newton began writing its now famous lyrics in 1773 to illustrate a sermon he was giving on New Year’s Day. Originally, it is believed that the congregation simply recited the words or chanted them as part of the church service.

Later, Newton’s powerful words of divine love and forgiveness would be put to music, a variety of melodies were used until the one we all know today was composed in 1835 (some sources give 1844) by William Walker.

After “Amazing Grace,” words and music, was codified, around 1847, it was first “professionally” recorded in 1922. That recording was performed by the Sacred Harp Choir (who performed the song acapella) and their version was released over the Okeh label. Since then, the song has been recorded more than 7,000 times. Treatments have ranged from operatic ones by the likes of Jessye Norman to plaintive versions by such icons as Elvis Presley. Along the way it has also been recorded by the likes of Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, Willie Nelson, Aretha Franklin, Andrea Bocelli, Leann Rimes, Skeeter Davis, Alan Jackson, Destiny’s Child, Al Green, Whitney Houston, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Mumford & Sons, U2, Ani DiFranco, John Legend, Kenny Rogers, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Anne Murray and even Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler.

Yet, it was only Judy Collins’s that hit the pop charts and which—to many—has become the definitive version.

Collins was already a leading light of the folk music movement and was already at work on her fifth studio album, to be titled “Whales & Nightingales,” when she almost stumbled upon the idea of recording the beloved hymn.

It was early 1970. Collins, along with her then boyfriend, the actor Stacy Keach, had just been part of an encounter group where everyone’s emotions about the then-raging war in Vietnam had come to the fore. Immediately, afterward, to decompress, Collins led her companions in an impromptu rendition of “Amazing Grace,” the only song everyone seemed to know all the words to.

Both the beauty of the song’s message and the beauty of the singers’s voices, inspired Collins and her record producer, Mark Abramson, who was in also attendance, to record the song. Later, Collins, Keach, Abramson, Collin’s brother John and his girlfriend, Abigale, and Abramson’s wife, Janet, as well as their mutual friend Harris Yulin, gathered inside St. Paul’s, a small church on the Columbia University campus, to sing the song one more time and record the results.

It was added to Collins’s work-in-progress LP and was chosen to close out the album.

Once the “Whales” album was completed, “Amazing Grace” was not intended to be a single from it. But, after the album was released (it would later be certified “gold” by selling over 50,000 copies), fan feedback received by the record company evidenced that while many of the album’s tracks were proving popular with buyers, including “A Song for David” and “Farewell to Tarwathie” (the latter being Collins’s “duet” with the recordings of humpback whales), nothing was connecting with listeners more than her artful, heartfelt rendition of “Amazing Grace.”

Soon, radio was reacting to it, too. And, suddenly, the playlists of Top 40 stations around the country included Collin’s “Amazing Grace.”

Why, after 200 years, this particular hymn connected so strongly to so many is open to many theories. Along with the power of the song itself and Collins’s pristine, even angelic vocal, its success, no doubt, had something to do with this particular time in history.

Certainly Collins, her producer and her record company saw it as a needed balm for troubled times, and the public did as well.

The ongoing conflict in Vietnam had cast a dark pall across the nation which only seemed to exacerbate an array of other social issues tied to race and America’s trust (or lack of) in its own government institutions.

At the time, and as it had for many individuals for more than a century, “Amazing Grace” brought comfort to a nation. A service it—and Collins--has continued to supply in times of need.

Even after the Vietnam conflict concluded, the Collins rendition of “Amazing Grace” has been resurrected, on radio, in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing and in the days following the 9/11 attacks. Once again used as a comfort.

Collins herself has even turned to it at times. She performed it—somehow—at the funeral service for his son, Clark, after his death in 1992. And Collins performed it again at the funeral of fellow folk legend Mary Travers, of Peter, Paul & Mary, in 2009.

Despite the great popularity and longevity of her version of “Amazing Grace,” even Collins does not see it as the ultimate or absolute version of the song. “Amazing Grace,” as music and

message, means too many things to too many people to be limited to just one rendition. While, to some, Collins's is *the* version, for others their favorite version is by one of the other artists listed above, or an artist not listed, or the version that they heard in their own churches growing up. Collins, in her 1998 book, "Singing Lessons," notes that the first time she heard "Amazing Grace," it was being sung by her grandmother.

Still, it is Collins's lovely version—timely and timeless—that has so spoken to so many and has earned it a rightful place on the National Registry.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).