

**This interview with
JUDY COLLINS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 12, 2017.**



Judy Collins

Library of Congress: Do you happen to remember the first time you heard “Amazing Grace”?

Judy Collins: I was taught the song by my Grandma on mother’s side. It was one of those songs that she would sing around the house in Seattle when I would visit them. So I was four or five years old. Of course, I knew nothing about the history of the song at that time.

LOC: When was the first time you sang it?

JC: The first time I sang it was at an encounter group that I took part in in 1969. I was there with my producer, Jac Holzman, and my boyfriend and some close friends. And, of course, encounter groups can get kind of wild sometimes. So, finally, Jac said to me, “Sing something.” You know, everyone is tearing each other apart. So I had to find something that everyone knew and I came up with “Amazing Grace” since I thought everyone had sung that on Sunday in church. And I sang it and everyone calmed down.

The next day, Jac said to me, “We have to record that!”

And then it came as a shock to everyone that this song, an a cappella song, by me and a bunch of my friends, became so popular. Just *shocked!*

LOC: If what I read is accurate, your recording of “Amazing Grace” was not done in a studio but in a church. Is that correct?

JC: Yes, it was recorded at St. Paul’s Chapel at the University of Columbia. A beautiful chapel. We went up there and listened to the acoustics and thought, “This would do perfectly.”

So I ended up recording several songs for the “Whales and Nightingales” album there—“Amazing Grace,” “Farewell to Tarwathie” (the song that I did with the whales) and “Simple Gifts.” It worked so well; it was just delicious.

LOC: You did all three all in *one day*?

JC: Yes. We had two ringers—real singers—in the choir to make sure it all worked.

LOC: One of the great powers of the recording is the fact that it was done a cappella, an unusual choice. How did that decision come about?

JC: I wanted to do it a cappella but we tried the other way. Jac wanted it with accompaniment. We worked up a little band and did it that way. But when we were done, I said, “This is never going to work. This has to be a cappella.”

LOC: Why did you feel so strongly that the song had to be done a cappella?

JC: Well... it’s hard to say.... I grew up singing in church choirs and I knew if you took the organ out, you can really hear the voices. The voices create the harmony that you need.

It was just an instinct that I had and it was, I think, the right instinct.

LOC: How did “Amazing Grace” come to be released as a single? It certainly didn’t seem to have the hallmarks of “top 40” at that time.

JC: The record company came to us and said, “Listen, this is a really beautiful song and everyone is reacting to it.” The album was out and selling and people were writing in and talking the most about “Amazing Grace.” So it was a smart decision to release it as a single.

LOC: Why do you think that this song—and your treatment of it—connected so strongly with people at the time?

JC: We needed a break--from the war in Vietnam, from the protests, from the death count. The idiots that were running the war! You know, Lt. General H.R. McMaster wrote a book about it—“Dereliction of Duty”--about his officers and how badly it was all handled. It was an important book. He had the guts to tell it like it was--about the mismanagement and how we had all been lied to and deceived. It confirmed what people had felt, the general consensus....

In fact, for that album, I wanted to get into more spiritual pursuits. The song “Nightingale,” on the album, was about rebirth. I did “Simple Gifts,” a great church song. I wanted to take things to a different level. All the songs on “Whales and Nightingales” were done to appeal to the spirit.

LOC: “Amazing Grace” is now a staple of your concerts, and rightly so. Do you sing it differently now than you did in the early 1970s?

JC: No. No, not at all.

LOC: I’m sure you’ve heard many stories about the impact that the song has had on people. Does any particular story stick in your mind?

JC: One of the striking stories was one about my publisher in England--the company was called Harmony, I think. He was working with a group of Scottish bag pipers and they were recording “Amazing Grace,” and when they were done with it, and he listened to it, he said, “Fellows, that’s Judy Collins’s arrangement.”

And they agreed; they unabashedly admitted that it was. So, we had the copyright to it and I got a nice pair of checks from that! So, in that case, “Amazing Grace” was spiritual *and* material!...

Later, a gentleman named Steve Turner wrote a book about the history of “Amazing Grace” and he asked me to write the foreword to it, which I did. He sent me the book—this was about ten years after my recording of the song—and I found out that my version had helped pull the song out of the shadows. It had helped make the song known again. It had been really disappearing, from the hymnals.

From his book, then, I learned the whole story of John Newton and the song, about Newton’s extraordinary life and his renouncing of his early life as a slave traitor. I learned about the meaning of the lyric itself: how it carried with it both spiritual value and the idea of spiritual transformation.

I think that is why the song is so powerful: it taps into the DNA of millions, of so many people’s struggles.