

LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III SURVIVING TWIN



NOTES ON *SURVIVING TWIN* BY LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III
October 2016

It started in Maine. I was up in Vacationland to do a show, and since there were no hotels near the gig that met my primary on-the-road requirement (windows must open, at least a few inches), I was housed in someone's cabin. The place had a trace of Cracker Barrel Old Country Store ambience. Deer antlers and a pair of old cross country skis were mounted on the walls, and there were black and white photos in carved wooden frames - a Sunday school class from the 1920s and some strapping men with handlebar mustaches in a 19th century logging camp. In the middle of the living room was a swaying, upholstered easy chair and, on the floor next to it, a magazine rack containing copies of old *LIFE* magazines. At some point I sat down and pulled out an issue from 1971 with Tricia Nixon on the cover, knowing it was possible that one of my dad's "The View from Here" columns might be in the front section of the magazine. Sure enough there was, and not just any column but one of his best - for my money the very best - the twelve hundred word essay about having to put our family dog John Henry to sleep. It was called "Another Sort of Love Story." I started to read it and was laughing immediately. By the time I got to the end of the piece I was sobbing, the perpetual Gordian knot in my gut having been relaxed and released for the first time in God knows how long. I had known the writer, as well as the dog, and had loved them both, although expressing that love to the former had always been a pretty tall order for me, practically, an impossibility.

The experience in Maine shook me and I decided to find and read all my dad's columns. When they first were published in the magazine in the 1960s and 70s I mostly ignored them because having a famous father had been kind of a drag. I was the son of the famous *LIFE* magazine writer Loudon Wainwright. Wasn't that great? Wasn't I proud? Those two questions always led to a third, which I invariably asked myself: "How the hell was I going to top that?"

My father's "The View from Here" columns, over 200 of them, appeared when *LIFE* was ubiquitous, on every coffee table in America, way back when there were coffee tables. He wrote a lot about politics and current events, the big stories of his day, but during my rereading process I quickly realized that my favorite columns of his were the personal ones: the one about having to put the dog down, the fire that destroyed our house in 1966, buying himself a Savile Row suit in London, and visiting his mother for the last time in a nursing home. The political stuff didn't really grab me when I read it because it was of its own time and that time had passed. But I did enjoy Dad's forays into criticism. Occasionally, in his column he would write about a movie (loved *Dr. Strangelove*, hated *ET*) and he took a pretty nasty swipe at Linda Ronstadt's 1983 re-recording of old standards, *What's New*. He also relished reporting on the cultural movements of the time, and its cast of iconic clowns, such as baseball's Billy Martin, the hippies, Richard Nixon, or the Maharishi. Dad interviewed Martin Luther King and was part of the press corps traveling with Senator Robert Kennedy when he was gunned down at the Ambassador Hotel in LA. He wrote profiles of the original Project Mercury Astronauts and counted John Glenn and Scott Carpenter among his friends. I remember watching in awe the trim, athletic Carpenter doing back flips off the diving board at the Bedford Golf and Tennis Club pool in the early 1960s.

Initially my father, a former Marine, was a grudging supporter of the Vietnam War, but that changed as the conflict worsened and dragged on. In 1969, he and his close friend and colleague at *LIFE*, Philip Kunhardt, came up with the daring idea of publishing the photos, names and home towns of all the men who had died in a single week in the war. *LIFE* had always been pretty middle of the road, so this was a radical and provocative move, and it prompted angry letters and cancelled subscriptions ("You have succeeded in turning the knives in the backs of grieving parents"), but also high praise ("Your story...was the most eloquent and meaningful statement on the wastefulness and stupidity of war that I have ever read").

Martha Fay, who lived with my father for the last 12 years of his life and is the mother of their daughter and my half sister Anna, lent me a collection of letters Dad wrote to his mother when he was in the Marine Corps from 1942-45. Some were typed, but most were handwritten in pencil or pen, and many were blackened and singed from the aforementioned family fire. These letters were a trove of information for me and an important source and starting point for *Surviving Twin*. Dad was just 17 in 1942, but already his abilities as a writer were apparent. He never saw combat in World War II, but his observations, fears, and complaints about life as a young recruit are cranky, moving, and revealing. In the last of these letters my father cautiously brings up the subject of Martha Taylor, a young fellow recruit from south Georgia he had met and fallen in love with. Soon she would become my mother.

It was during the process of reading the letters and all “The View from Here” columns that I hit upon the notion of a posthumous collaboration between my father and me, something that might be presented as a piece of theatre. I realized not only that my dad was a supremely gifted writer but also that many of my own songs echoed his concerns and preoccupations.

In September of 2013, *Surviving Twin* premiered at PlayMakers Repertory Theatre in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, directed by the company’s artistic director Joe Haj. Dad had attended UNC after his stint in the Marine Corps, so it was a gas for me to be on the Chapel Hill campus performing his work almost 70 years later. In 2014, after some rethinking and reshuffling, *ST* was produced at the Westside Theatre in New York City. The producer and director of that run was an old friend and writing partner of my father’s, Peter Askin. The most recent incarnation of *Surviving Twin* was presented in New York at SubCulture, in June of 2015. My director and invaluable collaborator for that outing was Daniel Stern. Dick Connette was an associate producer, and he has also been my backer and co-producer in the making of this CD.

I’ve been performing *Surviving Twin* for several years now, either in its entirety or by including selected parts of it in my regular gigs. Combining and connecting my father’s work with my own has been artistically satisfying, and emotionally powerful. On a good night my long gone old man and I engage in a game of creative catch in front of a paying audience. The two of us are getting along better than we ever have.



LW2 & LW3

1. SURVIVING TWIN (LW3)

Last week I attended a family affair
And a few remarked upon my recent growth of
facial hair
"You look just like your father did with that
beard" someone said
I answered back "I am him" even though my
old man's dead

2. LIFE WITH - AND WITHOUT - FATHER (LW3)

3. HALF FIST (LW3)

In the wedding portrait posing with his
young bride
His right hand hidden by her bouquet his
left hanging at his side
Closed in a kind of half fist unsure what
he'd done
Facing his short future like he could hit
someone

4. DISGUIISING THE MAN (LW2)

5. BETWEEN (LW3)

Between the forest and the ocean lies a
lonley strand
The ocean is your mother the forest
fatherland
You are stranded on that empty beach not
knowing where to go
Out to sea or else inland your whole life you
don't know

6. THE SUM OF RECOLLECTION JUST KEEPS
GROWING (LW2)

7. ALL IN A FAMILY (LW3)

We gather for the holiday
And pray for a quick safe getaway
No one's so close nothing's so real
And the smallest thing is the biggest deal

8. LETTERS 1942 - 1945 (LW2)

Mom - Martha is down at Camp Lejune getting discharged and won't be home until Saturday. I miss her like hell and don't know what to do with myself when she's not here. I never thought I could be this lonely. She's a sweetheart and I love her.

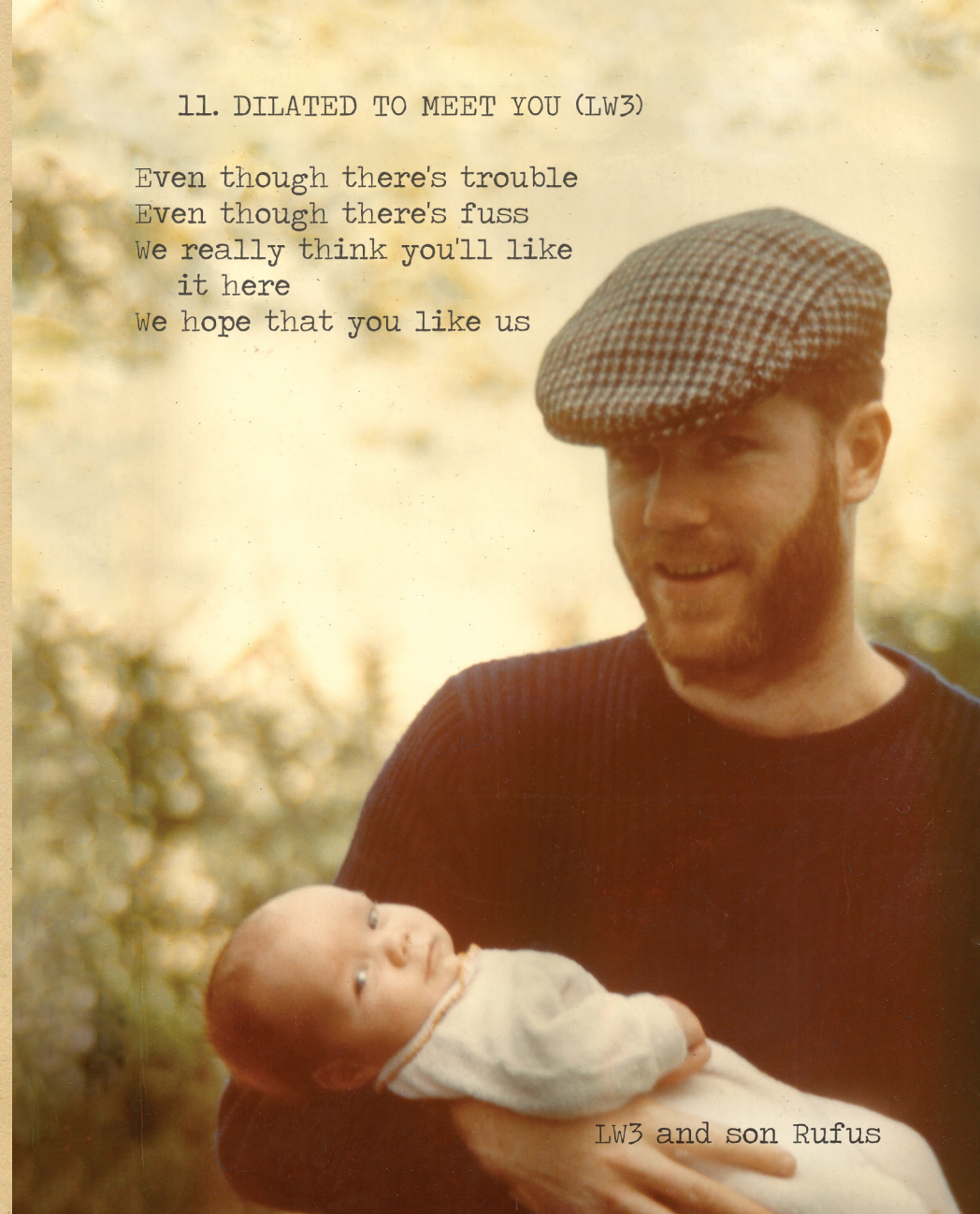
9. WHITE WINOS (LW3)

Mother liked her white wine when she was alive
And she was desperate to live but her limit was five
Carefully I'd kiss her and send her off to bed
We always stuck with white win we stayed away from red

10. FATHER'S DAY (LW2)

11. DILATED TO MEET YOU (LW3)

Even though there's trouble
Even though there's fuss
We really think you'll like
it here
We hope that you like us



LW3 and son Rufus

12. A FATHER AND SON (LW3)

Hate is strong word I want to backtrack
The bigger the from the bigger the back

13. ANOTHER SORT OF LOVE STORY (LW2)

14. MAN & DOG (LW3)

When a man has a fight with a woman
A man needs to go for a walk
Walkin' with a dog is easy
He listens he don't talk

15. MAD ABOUT MAPS (LW2)

16. FOUR MIRRORS (LW3)

I've slumped in your chair tossed and turned
in your bed
Lurked in your lair I have lived in your
head
Where others were closer no one is nearer
As I glimpse you in me in the hallway mirror

17. CHASING AWAY THE GHOSTS OF
CHRISTMASES PAST (LW2)

18. IN C (LW3)

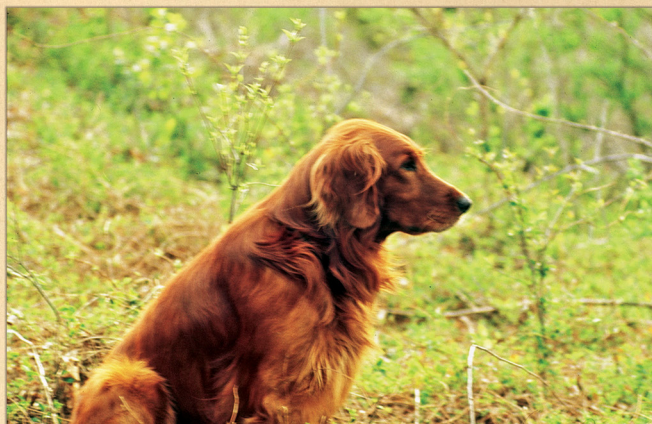
But the great unknown it got inside
And what had been whole it did divide
In the end the father had to leave
When he did the mother had to grieve



LW3 and Martha (mom)



LW1 & LW2



John Henry



LW3 and Harry



Martha (wife LW2)

Eleanor (wife LW1)

LW2



Mr. Perry & LW2



LW1



LW2 and LW3



LW1 and Eleanor Wedding Portrait

The Principal Ghost: Thoughts on Loudon Wainwright III's *Surviving Twin*

By Mark Perry, Resident Dramaturg/Playmakers Repertory Company

A solo piece many years in the making, *Surviving Twin* is what singer-songwriter Loudon Wainwright calls a “posthumous collaboration” with his writer father. Part concert, part dramatic reading, part family slide-show, it is a hybrid theatrical form consisting mainly of songs written by Loudon III, magazine columns written by his late father, Loudon Jr., with photographs and films that span four generations of the Wainwright clan. Despite a troubled past in this father-son relationship, Loudon III has carefully chosen, arranged and rehearsed these pieces, taking the best of his own and linking them with samples of his father’s best self, then bringing them to a polish. And yet, as the evening unfolds one begins to wonder whether this is a tribute or an exorcism.

If the former, it is not the ordinary sort that airbrushes away faults and glosses over rifts. The opening song all but demonstrates an early oedipal urge in Loudon to undo his old man. Then to hear the number of songs he has written about his own Laius, one might venture the latter. The title of the show suggests a person who has lost half of his whole and struggles to continue despite. This is not often the way we frame father-son relationships. The very name Loudon Wainwright III presumes an insistence on the part of not just one, but two generations of forbears that he should carry perpetually something of them with him.

This notion of an exorcism is borne out by the first written piece chosen by Loudon from among the hundreds his father had penned over the decades as an editor and columnist for *LIFE* magazine. It is called “Life with - and without - Father,” and in it Loudon Jr. speaks of a kind of haunting by his then-late father, Loudon Sr. The first Loudon was his “principal ghost,” his “lifelong *éminence grise*” - that is, the man behind the man, a decision maker who operates behind the scenes.

The fraught relationships of sons and their fathers make up a considerable proportion of the world’s dramatic literature and, particularly, American dramatic literature, but the story of the Wainwright family is not told through traditional dramatic means. Here the form is largely lyrical. Songs spin out stories differently than plays, as do short non-fiction prose. The full picture must be gleaned in fragments of stories and song lyrics. There are dramatic elements, of course, including acting. Loudon delivers the excerpts of his father’s writings as monologue and not just as readings, therefore taking on himself something of the character of his father.

We see contrast in the controlled focus of the father’s prose and in the son’s iconoclastic impulse in songwriting, the tearing and kicking of language, lines of lyrics spilling over into restful measures. Loudon’s style of performance is animated, grueling even. The songs are in his body, the stories come alive on his face. Conflicts, whether specific to the song or intrinsic in the man, play across his features. In his lyrics, pure poetry erupts alongside more mundane matters. In his guitar playing, there is dynamic range and time-earned concision.

We meet a cast of colorful characters along the way including Loudon Jr’s alcoholic, authoritarian, but tender hearted father, the cuttingly-mannered tailor Mr. Perry, and the beloved retriever-setter John Henry. During the show, layers of complexity in relationship are added, not so much by narrative development, but by the poetic means of repetition of images and accretion of concepts. A “half-fist” stands for a patrilineal legacy of latent aggression. A custom-tailored suit starts out as possible midlife-crisis ego-gratification, but turns surprisingly into a disguise for a perceived character flaw. A dog’s ceaseless search for an owner’s affection blends into an athlete son’s scanning the stands for a father’s approval. A fog lifting in a coastal New England town holds within it the prospect of a benevolent afterlife.

Both our Loudons conceal even as they reveal. You will not be getting the shocking secrets or fully explored motivations we are accustomed to seeing in gritty realism. Details of divorce and family quarreling are passed over. People in the public eye often choose which parts of themselves to share and which to shield, and who can blame them? It is a zombie fetish of modern life to dig so deeply into the psychological viscera of celebrity. In the end, we see how father and son similarly train the mirror of their reflection on the process of seeking in everyday experiences vantage points on universal questions and pursuits.

Committing himself to memorizing these substantial passages of his father's words and striving to embody them not as a reader of another's thoughts, but in a first-person monologist way—that is, in the way we know the theatre works at blending two identities into one—this feels like the greatest of tributes to his father. He is working not to clarify established territory or reinforce the individuation he no doubt sought in younger years, but to blur distinctions, to merge individualities and to create a space where he might, night after night, step into his father's shoes—or suit, as the case may be—and bring his father back to life, to use his own breath to resuscitate the man who gave him his. In those moments of embodiment, he gives voice to words that resonate throughout the Wainwright line over time, breaking down the separation, calling out the man from behind the scenes and to the fore, perhaps not to exorcise an individual but to acknowledge and celebrate a relationship.

Our performer begins the evening by claiming that the two Loudons, while they fought and disagreed on just about everything, are much the same person. The intermingling of songs and written pieces starts as a kind of out-of-time dialogue between the two, but seems to become more a monologue as the show progresses, with it meaning less and less who the particular author is. At a certain point in the evening, given the four generations of Wainwrights being discussed, you may begin to get confused who exactly is speaking and to whom. Which father is this and which son? Perhaps this confusion is not a bad thing.

Produced by Loudon Wainwright III and Dick Connette
Loudon Wainwright III - vocals, banjo, guitar, piano, ukulele
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