

## 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.