

SUSAN COLIN - BIO

I've logged thousands of hours listening to NPR. If Diane Riehm or Terri Gross were to ask the questions here is how it might go:

Give us the quick curriculum vitae.

Born in NYC, raised on Long Island, youngest of three girls. My first memory is of sitting at our piano, and I've always been a singer. I had a wonderful music teacher, Mrs. Canipe, who noticed my interest in music when I was 9 and brought me in to sing with the chorus after school. This was a really big deal because it was for 4th, 5th and 6th graders, and I was only in 3rd grade. Our first program was the complete soundtrack to "The Sound of Music" and I've loved that music ever since. I used to ride my bike every night during the summer back to the elementary school and pretend I was Maria, singing to the empty ball fields and the woods beyond. Long Island is a beautiful place.

I attended Boston University on a partial scholarship for voice performance. I freaked out, couldn't handle the competition and the huge egos. The other kids were so confident and loud and I couldn't find my safe place. The best thing about my two years in Boston was that I got my first studio gig, doing backups for a pop song. I was hooked on recording after that. I changed my major to Sociology and Business, and then transferred to Arizona State University, because my parents had moved to Phoenix by then. I sang here and there but mostly with a local studio, doing jingles and rock operas. Ed Van Fleet was the composer and producer at that studio, and he was a pioneer in New Age music. I learned a great deal from Ed. I would hang out during all kinds of sessions, watching the engineer work the board, deal with the analog tape, see what it took to get just the right sound. I love the recording process.

I started a career in general business, because I was afraid to sing, and I really didn't know what to do with music. So I worked in HR, marketing and other corporate positions, all the while singing in symphonic choirs or local groups. I was married, had my two sons, got divorced, moved here and there, was in an all-girl rock band called Software in Indianapolis, then moved to the Dallas area when I remarried. We've been here now for 16 years.

How did you get involved with Jewish music?

I was raised in a Conservative synagogue, so I only saw men up on the bimah, and only heard male cantors. Like most kids, I was bored by the services, but the music got my attention. I loved the modes, and I would wonder how the cantor knew all those melodies and prayers. When I was an adult and attended services at a Reform synagogue in Indianapolis, I heard a woman cantor for the first time. She's still there, Cantor Janice Roger, a lovely voice and really nice person. I would leave services and mimic what I heard once I got in the car. It didn't occur to me that I could be that person singing on the bimah until I met [Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis](#) when he came to my home synagogue in Texas. He welcomed me to sing and lead services with him, taught me a great deal about the service and pointed me to the repertoire. It felt good and right although I was really nervous the first several months.

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What is like for you now? Do you still get nervous?

I believe in the power of prayer. I don't need to know how it works, I just know that it does work. Judaism builds this into everything we do, and conveniently enough, there's a prayer we recite when we put on our tallit (prayer shawl). That's a moment for me to take a breath, ask God to help me do right by the prayers and by the people in the room, so that's it's a good experience for us all. Once I send that prayer up, I'm OK with whatever happens. My knees shake for a little bit but then my body gets on board. And I prepare thoroughly before every service. I don't ever take for granted that I know all the material. I figure you should prepare and control as much as you can because there will always be some things you can't control. And it's true, either I'll make a mistake and miss a cue or something will go wrong or someone will do something weird so you have to be equipped to deal. And there's always the song, "Hine Ma Tov." It's a folk song most Jews know, and it's a great saver if you run into a problem. One time an ambulance came during a service when someone became ill. Once they left, people were shook up and distracted. I started singing "Hine Ma Tov" while the Rabbi regrouped and everyone joined right in and we got back on track. That's the power of music.

Are you a cantor?

I'm a cantorial soloist. Cantors are invested clergy who go to graduate school, spend a year in Israel, and take on a rigorous training program. For several reasons that wasn't an option for me, though I did look into it. As a cantorial soloist, I'm self-taught and self-directed. I learn as much as I can, and as much repertoire as I can, through a number of different sources, including from mentors and colleagues, so that the synagogues who employ me to sing for them have a good experience.

What does a cantorial soloist do?

I lead the music portion of the services, usually alongside a rabbi or whomever is leading the service. I also do programming, I lead worship bands and choirs, create special services, children's services, women's retreats, any number of things where music is involved.

How did you get into recording Jewish music?

When I first began learning the repertoire for services, I bought whatever I could find. I wasn't impressed with the production quality of most of the recordings, and I felt it was time for some updating of this gorgeous stuff. I grew up listening to Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, James Taylor and classical and Broadway music, so I was used to high production values. I hadn't recorded in a long time and it felt like the right project for me, so I teamed up with [Lee Tombouljian](#), a pianist and arranger, and we recorded some of my favorite songs. **Shabbat Favorites** has a variety of mostly songs that are used at a Friday night service, and **Prayer of the Heart** is more introspective, with some pieces that are used at the High Holidays.

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Your first two CDs, Shabbat Favorites and Prayer of the Heart are very different from your later CDs, Every Day and Be Strong.

The more I sang Jewish music, particularly contemporary music, the more I was drawn to finding new ways of expressing the prayers. [Joe Eglash](#), owner of oysongs.com, kept telling me to write. I didn't think I had anything to say. But I found myself drawn to certain texts and then I started to see the spirituality all around me. An example is the song, "Every day is a new day." That is what I would say to my children, particularly when things were tough, and it was reminiscent of when my mother would say to me, "Tomorrow is another day." I found the passage from Noah in Genesis: *So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will not cease.* Robin Paglia-Dennis provided the contemporary poetry. I wrote that song as a lullaby, although I do tend to sing it more up tempo when I sing it live.

Every Day was a wonderful, exhilarating journey as a composer, arranger and producer. I teamed up with Lee Tombouljian again, and we tried all sorts of new things such as the jazz improv "Rainy day jazz." It was Lee's idea to bring back some lines from "Every day is a new day" into the end of "Sing a new song." I liked having two versions of some of the songs, an instrumental, and a variety of vocal arrangements. Collaborating with Robin on lyrics opened up my writing inspirations as well.

Be Strong was an opportunity for me to stretch my wings as producer. I produced most of the songs, worked with some new musicians and studios, and had more confidence in my visions for what I wanted out of these songs. "Angel" is the biggest departure from my other music and I love it. People either like it or they don't. But it's fun to see peoples' heads start to nod and get in the groove when I sing it live. I also performed on piano for the first time, on "Yih'yu L'Ratzon" which was a big step out for me. Working with Jaymee Haefner, the harpist, to create a solo/choral version of the bedtime prayer, "Hashkiveinu" was a way for me to dip into the waters of my choral past. And jamming with my sons who sang, and my son Jacob Delott who played bass, on "Mah Tov/Sim Shalom" was a last minute inspiration and we had a blast. So this album overall was a way for me to grow and use as many ideas as possible. I didn't have the confidence before to go this far. I'm glad I did.

