

Marianne Faithfull (1946-2025), tough and unflinching: A survivor of the “Swinging Sixties”

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Singer and songwriter Marianne Faithfull died at the end of January in London at the age of 78 following a long struggle against ill health, including breast cancer and the severe consequences of a COVID infection.

Faithfull worked with and was an inspiration to some of the most outstanding musicians of the last half century. Particularly in the second half of her career, she produced work that stood head and shoulders above much of the vacuous music pumped out by the major international music concerns.

Her background has been well charted and only needs to be sketched out here. She was discovered by Andrew Loog Oldham, the manager of the Rolling Stones, when she was just 16. More interested in her looks than her musical talent, Oldham threw the naive former Catholic convent pupil down into the deep end of the burgeoning British pop scene of the mid-1960s.

Her most successful song at the time, written overnight by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, was the lament *As Tears Go By*. At the time (1964), the lyrics of the song did not sit easily on the shoulders of the wide-eyed, beautiful, blonde haired 17-year-old from a privileged background. But Faithfull continued to sing it throughout her career, and its melancholic lyrics, rendered in her increasingly ravaged voice, took on a new and deeper resonance over the decades. *As Tears Go By* was an immediate hit, entering the top 10 of the British pop charts within weeks.

In other songs at that time, Oldham sought to press Faithfull into the mould of the chaste beauty singing twee versions of English folk songs and listless love tunes. In fact, her family roots were much more complex.

Her father, Major Robert Glynn Faithfull, was a British spy in World War II. Her mother, Eva von Sacher-Masoch, an Austrian baroness (and great-niece

of Austrian nobleman, writer and journalist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, from whom the term masochism is derived), danced in the theatre troupe of Berlin-based director Max Reinhardt in the 1930s, including in productions of works by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill.

Marianne Faithfull was already a mother at 19, following the birth of a son with artist-musician John Dunbar. Their relationship and marriage floundered after Faithfull began an affair with Jagger. Having placed Faithfull on a pedestal as the epitome of English purity, the vicious British establishment and venal media quickly took their revenge. A drugs bust by British police in 1967 resulted in a vile defamation campaign against both Faithfull and the Rolling Stones, which had long-lasting psychological consequences for the 20-year-old.

Seeking to escape the role assigned to her, Faithfull took on roles in plays (this writer recalls seeing her playing Ophelia to Nicole Williamson’s *Hamlet* at London’s Roundhouse in 1969) and films, notably with Alain Delon in *Girl on a Motorbike*. In her autobiography, she admits that she was already doing hard drugs, including heroin, during the intermissions of *Hamlet*.

Faithfull’s reluctant acceptance of her new public persona as a fallen angel, anticipating her long struggle against drug addiction, was reflected in the harrowing song *Sister Morphine* (1969), for which she wrote the lyrics, with music by Jagger and Richards. The song, graphically describing the torture of cold turkey drug withdrawal, was banned by the BBC after just two days.

Following a suicide attempt, the withdrawal of custody for her child and her break-up with Jagger, she struggled for years with the consequences of her heroin addiction, including living homeless on the streets of Soho for two years. Still in the grip of her addiction with drugs and alcohol, Faithfull made a musical breakthrough with her

album *Broken English* (1979), composed in collaboration with the guitarist Barry Reynolds.

Her accumulated anger against the establishment and its endless prosecution of wars was explosively expressed in her rendition of the stand-out track, *Broken English*, which she co-wrote, with its lyrics

What are you fighting for?
It's not my security
It's just an old war
Not even a cold war
Don't say it in Russian
Don't say it in German
Say it in broken English
Say it in broken English

Other songs on the album included a cover of John Lennon's *Working Class Hero* and another cover dealing with the oppression of women, which she sang throughout the rest of her career, *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan*, by Shel Silverstein.

Broken English won her a large audience and she subsequently enjoyed the collaboration of outstanding artists. Faithfull's voice had suffered heavily during her years of addiction and heavy smoking, and in studio and concert halls its deep, rasping quality was offset, or rather complemented by contributions from a host of brilliant musicians from the spheres of jazz, blues, country, folk and rock. A very incomplete list of collaborators would include Dr. John, Garth Hudson, Roger Waters, Stevie Nicks, Bill Frisell—and more recently, PJ Harvey, Beck, Nick Cave, violinist Warren Ellis, Damon Albarn, Billy Corgan and Brian Eno.

In 1985, Faithfull announced she had finally won her battle with heroin. Her aim now, she declared in interviews, was “to do my work and be completely honest.” The same year, her rendition of “Ballad of the Soldier's Wife” (Brecht-Weill), with guitarist Chris Spedding, appeared on the album *Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill*, an anthology executive produced by Hal Willner.

Obsessed with Weimar-era cabaret, Faithfull played the role of Pirate Jenny in *The Threepenny Opera* at the Gate Theatre in Dublin in 1991 and recorded a live album of primarily Weill songs in *20th Century Blues* (1996), followed in 1998 by a recording of Brecht-Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins*, with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Faithfull recorded another highly regarded album *Strange Weather* (1987), including cover versions of classic ballads, blues and gospel songs. Backed by

guitarist Frisell and bass player Fernando Saunders, she provides a wistful rendition of the Jerome Kern-Otto Harbach ballad *Yesterdays* made famous in the 1930s by Billie Holiday. Other highlights include the title track *Strange Weather*, by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan, and the Al Dubin-Harry Warren 1933 classic, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*.

Despite health problems, Faithfull continued to tour and turn out new albums, and, in the process, she won a younger audience. Pursuing her desire to record music with darker themes, she released the album *Before the Poison* in 2005. Primarily a collaboration with Harvey and Cave, but including contributions from Damon Albarn and Jon Brion, its bleak tone and Faithfull's repeated evocation of *Weltschmerz* (world-weariness) grates on the listener. Faithfull told the media it partially reflected the realities of the post-9/11 world.

Negative Capability, released in 2018, which was well received, involved collaborations with Rob Ellis, Warren Ellis, Cave and Ed Harcourt. It featured renditions of Bob Dylan's *It's All over Now Baby Blue* and *As Tears Go By*, along with new songs, including the hauntingly beautiful *The Gypsy Faerie Queen* (Faithfull-Cave).

Increasingly deserted by her voice, Faithfull recorded a final haunting album with Cave and Ellis, “She Walks in Beauty” (2021), in which she recites and sings works by the British Romantic poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth and John Keats, all of whom she had studied as a young girl at her convent school.

In Faithfull's performances and recordings she remained blisteringly honest. She continued to demonstrate an artistic integrity that appealed to older generations disenchanted with the broken promises of the 1960s and 70s, as well as to a younger audience not satisfied with the pap churned out by the major contemporary music outlets and looking for songs with deeper meaning and emotional content.



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