

OPENING ACT

Coming to America, More Specifically North Jersey

Far we've been traveling far
Without a home, but not without a star
Free, only want to be free
We huddle close, hang on to a dream

— "AMERICA," BY NEIL DIAMOND

"Mr. Diamond would like to see you, Mrs. Wild."

The dreamy invitation for my mother to enjoy a personal audience with Neil Diamond—our own King of Kings, our Jewish American Elvis—arrived not from an angel on high, but from a large, formally dressed, middle-aged security man who carried himself with the impressive, monotone self-seriousness of a Secret Service operative. It was the fall of 1988, and in only a matter of moments the night's big Neil Diamond concert was scheduled to start before a sold-out crowd of more than twenty thousand, at the then Brendan Byrne Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey—a grand Garden State gathering place

that would later become the Continental Airlines Arena, and then, perhaps most fashionably of all, the Izod Center.

Scanning the rest of our small concert-going party—my older brother, Jeff, his wife, Susan, and myself—and doing a quick threat assessment, the security man then added, “Will you all follow me . . . *now*,” as he firmly motioned for us to hurry up and come along. The simple fact that this oversized fellow knew exactly in which seats to find the Wild party was enough to convince us that he was a properly authorized representative of all that is good in the universe—namely, Neil Diamond—rather than some nefarious figure curiously bent on leading us out of the Byrne Arena so that we would miss the Man’s impending show. Frankly, when somebody hands you the Garden State—the reformed-Jew equivalent of a backstage pass to the Vatican—your first instinct isn’t to look too terribly hard for any reasons to say no.

So it was with a collective sense of urgency that we did *exactly* as we were told, dutifully abandoning our choice floor seats as we followed this polite and possibly armed man down a hall, past a security checkpoint at which we were ceremoniously presented our priceless “All Access” stickers, then through a maze of backstage pre-show buzz. At long last, we reached the door of an unmarked room outside of which an even more intimidating security man stood guard, bravely placing himself in harm’s way as the last wall of defense between the Man Who Would Be Diamond and our potentially lethal clan of shorter-than-average, mostly pudgy Jews.

Understandably, we were not privy to the next few moments of whispered, coded, and official-sounding conversations. Then finally and thankfully—after a series of very professional-sounding walkie-talkie transmissions and a supersecret pattern of knocks—the door in front of us opened and we were ushered in past what looked very

much like the Gates of Heaven, at least if you happen to be someone who actually liked Neil Diamond's performance in *The Jazz Singer*.

And so while the rest of Diamond's flock faithfully waited in their seats just a few hundred yards and yet a million miles away, we alone were now being welcomed straight into the belly of the beast—the inner sanctum of the Frog King himself, Neil Diamond. For anyone with a lifelong sweet tooth for “Cherry, Cherry” or “Crunchy Granola Suite,” this moment in time truly was as good as it gets.

For as long as I can remember, Neil Diamond had been one of the more consistently appealing presences inside the Wild home at 25 Glenwood Road in Tenafly, New Jersey, an affluent New York City suburb whose population was even more white than Diamond's live audience. To be fair, for five glorious, irony-rich weeks in 1973 when I was twelve and suddenly concerned about the racial imbalance of my hometown, NBC broadcast a drama series about a black private eye called, of all things, *Tenafly*. Legend had it that some Hollywood hotshot was driving down Route 9W in Bergen County, spotted an exit sign in the corner of his eye, and somehow thought that the town's name had some of the urban cool of *Superfly*.

This Hollywood hotshot thought wrong. *Tenafly* wasn't a big hit show, not even in Tenafly.

Neil Diamond, as I can personally attest, was big in Jersey well before Bruce Springsteen became The Boss. In our home in particular, his music was always near the very top of our pops. Coming of age in the early seventies in a sort of Dark Ages after the breakup of the Beatles and before the rise of disco, the music of Neil Diamond took a central place both in our eight-track tape players and in our hearts and minds. Through his indelible and almost absurdly infectious songs, Diamond unknowingly provided the brooding yet beautiful sound track

for the good, the bad, and the ugly of our messy Wild life. Heard most often in the full aural glamour of the sound systems of boxy station wagons that my mother drove, Diamond's passionate and poppy music spoke to us—and to me in particular.

Through good times and even not-so-good times, Diamond offered suburban listeners like us the uplifting and radiant hope of “Sweet Caroline,” for whom “good times never seemed so good.”

Whether or not anyone in our house was actually scoring at any given time, Diamond brought the courtly romance in “Play Me,” the sexy zest for life of “Cracklin’ Rose,” and the exotic, Afro-tinged sensuality of “Soolaimon.” In lieu of any more orthodox religious belief, we even looked to Diamond for the answers to life’s bigger questions. And unlike any of the religious, local or world leaders with whom we had the pleasure of being personally acquainted, Diamond never let us down. Like some charismatic spiritual leader, he provided us solace and inspiration with songs like “Holly Holy” and “Brother Love’s Traveling Salvation Show,” the closest that I ever came to being truly saved, with the possible exception of a subsequent teen tour in Israel. And while I personally never had an imaginary friend growing up, at least I had “Shilo,” Diamond’s great song about imagining a special pal.

In *What About Bob?*, a 1991 film comedy, the title character played by Bill Murray offered his intriguing world view that “there are two types of people in the world: those who like Neil Diamond and those who *don’t*.” In the movie, Bob emphatically did *not* like Diamond. Then again, Bob was an obsessive-compulsive psychiatric patient with major issues and questionable judgment.

We Wilds, on the other hand, were in the far wiser former group of lifelong, red-white-and-Jew Diamondheads. My older brother, Jeff, and younger sister, Wendy, had become Diamondheads almost

by association. For his part, my father, Stanley, also greatly admired the work of Neil Diamond, though truth be told, he was, and always would be, much more of a Frank Sinatra man. There was no *Sopranos*-like crime in that, particularly in Frank's native Garden State where we all lived as opposed to those "Brooklyn Roads" that Diamond had traveled on his way to the top.

Especially after my father moved out of our home sometime in the mid-seventies, the exceedingly male yet deeply sensitive adult voice of our favorite "Solitary Man" became all the more welcome at 25 Glenwood Road, which was apparently not walking distance to that "Glory Road" about which Diamond so poetically sang. Our biggest family sing-along was the almost absurdly catchy and life-affirming "Song Sung Blue," or "Song Sung Jew" as we sometimes sang with a certain unsubtle but sweet Semitic charm.

All these years and one-way memories later, Neil Diamond—the man, the myth, the middle-aged Hebrew hunk—was speaking to us not through blown-out car speakers, but far more directly, person to person—or at least superstar to person. Actually, truth be told, Diamond was speaking first and foremost to my mother.

"Carol, it's an *honor* to meet you," Neil Diamond told her warmly. "Your son David tells me that you've been listening to my music for years. I want you to know I *so* appreciate it."

A few months earlier, I had interviewed Neil Diamond for a long and loving piece in *Rolling Stone* magazine, exactly the sort of supposedly hip magazine that had often dismissed this legendary singer-songwriter and performer, who has long been the people's choice as opposed to a critics' darling. The fact that Neil had generously donated to an antigun charity that publisher Jann Wenner had founded to honor his fallen friend John Lennon probably didn't hurt either.

Despite selling more than a hundred million records—or perhaps *because* of selling more than a hundred million records—Neil Diamond had gotten pretty much everything in this world except the respect as an artist that he rightly deserved. Everyone from Frank Sinatra to Bob Dylan sang his songs, and even the uberhip Miles Davis sang his praises. But for some it was never quite enough. For me, he was something much more worthwhile than hip; he was *good*. Make that *great*. And so, if showing Diamond that core respect right there in black and white meant that I would risk earning the scorn of some of my groovier-than-thou *Rolling Stone* colleagues, well, then so be it. After some soul searching, I ultimately decided that to deny my love for all things Diamond was to deny my very identity.

For his part, perhaps sensing my knowledge and affection for his work, Diamond was less guarded with me than he had been with interviewers in the past. I first asked him about his immortalized performance alongside the likes of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, and Van Morrison at *The Last Waltz*, the 1976 farewell performance by the acclaimed rock group The Band on Thanksgiving Day, which was famously filmed by Martin Scorsese. Diamond was invited to take part in *The Last Waltz* because The Band's Robbie Robertson had produced Diamond's 1976 album, *Beautiful Noise*. He sang a beautiful version of one of his stellar songs from that album, called "Dry Your Eyes." Yet, I pointed out, despite the fact that he was likely far and away the single best-selling recording artist at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco that night, there was still a curious sense of his being somehow apart and different from the other rock icons in the room.

"I don't fit in," Diamond confessed to me. "But you could put me in *any* show and I wouldn't fit in. You could put me in a rock show and I wouldn't fit in. You could put me in a country show and I wouldn't fit in. You could put me onstage with Sinatra and I wouldn't

fit in. . . . I just do *not* fit in. . . . I'm sorry. I apologize to everybody. But I never tried to fit in, because that meant conforming what I could write or what I could do to a certain set of rules. . . . The last group I remember joining was the Boy Scouts, and they threw me out for nonpayment of dues. So I suppose you could say that I've always gone my own way."

I had flown to Los Angeles from New York to meet my hero, expecting him to be some splashy star-spangled figure, like Elvis in Vegas. Yet the man I met turned out to be infinitely more approachable and down-to-earth than that. Unshaven and dressed in jeans and casual shirts, he struck me as a far cooler and more interesting presence than his naysayers would ever bother to imagine.

As Diamond told me years later, from his point of view he was no Elvis, Jewish or otherwise. "When I first came up it was Elvis that was king and I was much more clean cut," he confessed. "He was black leather jackets and motorcycles, and I was just a nice kid who minded his manners and helped his dad out in the store after school every day." Those who knew him in the beginning say Elvis too was actually a nice kid from Tupelo who loved his mama before he rocked the world.

As musical superstars who lived in Malibu went, Diamond was turning out to be a real *haymish* kind of famous guy from Brooklyn. For all he had been through, he was still at heart the New York boy who went to Erasmus High on Flatbush Avenue, where Bernard Malamud, Barbara Stanwyck, Mae West, and Mickey Spillane had gone before him—as had a young girl named Barbra Joan Streisand who sang with him in the school's hundred-member fixed chorus and who would later become a perfect duet partner. For the record, Diamond then graduated from Abraham Lincoln High on Ocean Parkway, which also gave the world Joseph Heller, Mel Brooks, Neil "The Other Neil" Sedaka, Carole King, and even Marv Albert.

Diamond was well aware that not everyone was a Diamondhead, but as he explained in *Rolling Stone*, that did not stop him for a moment from achieving his musical mission of touching me, touching you. “When you have done so many songs over the years, one of them has to have attracted at least somebody, you know? If you haven’t liked one song that I’ve written, then I should probably hang it up. I tried for twenty years to get everybody to like at least one song. And if I haven’t done that by now, I’ll just have to spend the next twenty years trying to do it.”

Having loved the guy’s music forever, I found that I liked the actual man behind the music just as much. This was a lesson that I would learn again and again over the next twenty years: the bigger they were, the better they were to know. I would have the pleasure of spending time with three of the four Beatles, for instance, and found them all to be genuinely Fab. The Backstreet Boys, who would arrogantly keep me outside in the cold for hours waiting to interview them for a cover story—not so much.

During our many hours of conversation over two days at Diamond’s homey office on a tiny Los Angeles side street named Melrose Place, I had apparently mentioned that I was in fact a second-generation Diamond worshipper. Immediately after my article ran in the magazine, Diamond had written a very warm thank-you note on his personal stationery, which bore an engraved illustration of a frog wearing a crown, a charmingly self-deprecating reference to a famous line from “I Am . . . I Said,” perhaps Diamond’s most self-revelatory classic about being “a frog who dreamed of bein’ a king and then became one.” A few weeks later, his trusty publicist, Sherrie Levy, called to say that Neil wanted to invite my family and me to attend his show in New Jersey as his guest. And that, I assumed, would be the end of my relationship with Mr. Neil Diamond.

Now here we stood just minutes before showtime in Diamond's large, welcoming dressing room. Spread all around us were assorted signed items of merchandise: Neil Diamond T-shirts, posters, tour books, and CDs. Neil explained to my mother that it was all for her, a small token of his esteem. "You raised a real *mensch*," he said with a broad smile, "and I want you to know I *really* appreciate it." Having already gotten all the press he was ever likely to get from *Rolling Stone*, Neil Diamond had done everything for my mother short of bringing her flowers.

Predictably, my mother beamed with pure maternal pride and perhaps with some less pure feeling toward Diamond as well. For my part, I was dumbstruck in a somewhat different manner. Though only four years out of college, I had already become a journalist of sorts, ever so slightly jaded about seeing stars up close and personal. Yet this grand gesture of generosity was stunning. After all of the not-so good times we'd been through together as a family, it was moving to see my mother so well treated by our very own family icon. There was, you might say—at least if you were an aging Jewish rock critic like me—a whole lot of *nachas* going on.

It took a moment to fully grasp the reality that I had just been dubbed a *mensch* in good standing by Neil Diamond himself. As I remember it, my mother was left speechless and found herself in a highly emotional state that the even vaguely Yiddish speaking among us will recognize as a full-body *kvell*. If so, one could hardly blame her since she had suddenly found herself in the presence of true pop royalty. Diamond looked every bit the part. Only moments before he was about to take the stage—and I mean, really take it—Diamond was already made up and dressed to kill onstage in all his now-familiar glitz and glory. Despite being the man who brought the world "Forever in Blue Jeans," Diamond had long had a far less casual way of dressing for his fans. At just under six feet, the man was both taller and

skinnier than he photographed, and a *lot* taller and skinnier than anyone who had ever dipped their toes in the shallow genetic wading pool of the Wilds. For tonight's show, he was wearing black pants and one of those white, shiny-almost-metallic, open-necked stage peasant blouses that he stressed were made not of sequins, as commonly but wrongly theorized, but rather *beads*.

At one point I pulled myself together long enough to thank Diamond for this abundant and unexpected act of generosity. "Thank *you*, buddy," he said blessedly loud enough for the rest of my family to hear. For once, payback was not a bitch, but rather a *mensch*.

Just then a loud knock on Diamond's dressing room door served to remind us where we were and why we were there in the first place. As if he actually had any doubts, Diamond asked us to "try and enjoy the show." Then right before we were hurriedly escorted back to our seats before the lights dimmed and the show began, Diamond made one small request: "Carol," he asked gallantly. "Would you mind terribly taking a photo with me?" A photographer emerged from out of the shadows of the Brendan Byrne hallway, and somehow we all jumped into the shot and a quick photo was snapped, forever documenting a moment of actual shared joy just before we returned to our seats to hear our new buddy Neil's beautiful noise.

For two decades now, that very same photo has stood on my mother's bedside table. And even though the picture caught me in one of my least attractive phases (and that's marking on one hell of a steep curve) I still look upon that image fondly, even if I do appear to be retaining much of the Hudson River as I hide behind a temporary beard and a supersized overcoat.

Good times never seemed so good, and rarely would again.

I'M A BELIEVER

I'm a man of God
Though I never learned to pray
Walked the pathways of the heart
Found him there along the way

—"MAN OF GOD," BY NEIL DIAMOND

ALBERT EINSTEIN, WHO WAS APPARENTLY A PRETTY FAIR FIDDLER, once offered his informed view that "God does not play dice." Still, if He really does exist, I tend to believe that God *does* play guitar, likely quite well. In my mind at least, He plays rhythm parts mostly, but perhaps the occasional flashy lead too. And self-evidently being one of those dreaded "creative sorts," there is reason to believe that He may very well *write* songs too.

The first time I ever enjoyed the semireligious experience of speaking with Neil Diamond at his former office on Melrose Place, I could not help but notice that the man whom I had been closely listening to my entire life displayed a charming, if unorthodox and vaguely pagan, tendency to bestow upon those individuals whom he greatly admired the honorary title of "god." "He's a *god*," Diamond would say repeatedly during our conversation, or only slightly less frequently, "She's a *god*," suggesting that while this uplifting man who put "Brother Love's

Traveling Salvation Show” on the road may not be much of a monotheist, he is definitely not a sexist either.

By upgrading men and women to such heavenly status, Diamond was obviously seeking to fully express his profound respect for all the extraordinary songwriters of the Brill Building era, all of whom had managed to rise to the ranks of the big time years before he ever did. Over the years, Diamond has reflected frequently on that significant turning period in his life, including on one of his greatest albums ever, *Beautiful Noise* (1976), and on a later tribute album called *Up on the Roof: Songs from the Brill Building* (1993). When Neil speaks of that era, he tends to take great pains to stress that he himself was simply a very minor character in one of the greatest pop stories ever told and not one of those gifted musical deities whom he worshipped in his early days as a singer-songwriter in Tin Pan Alley.

The way Diamond tells it, he was merely some struggling low-level *schlep* trying to peddle his second-rate songwriting wares to little or no interest. The reigning gods of song, meanwhile, were the likes of Carole King and Gerry Goffin, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, a younger and at least slightly more innocent Phil Spector, Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, Neil Sedaka and Howie Greenfield, Burt Bacharach and Hal David, and, last but hardly least, Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry, who would eventually produce and collaborate on Diamond’s classic early hits like “Cherry, Cherry” and “Solitary Man.”

So before we get to fully telling His story, please allow me the chance to share my praise right up front. When it comes to Neil Diamond, he is, I say, very much a musical god. To me, he’s long been a very American idol, and not a false one either. This works out quite well because I’m a Believer. Chances are excellent that if you have read even this far, you’re at least a partial Believer too. As for all ye of little

faith and less taste when it comes to all things Diamond, please read on anyway, for you are hereby forgiven. You know not what you've been missing.

Lest we forget, God is no stranger in the songs of Neil Diamond. Taking a quick scan through my own iPod, I soon found the following songs that I have filed under His name:

“Thank the Lord for the Night Time”

“Brother Love’s Traveling Salvation Show”

“Lordy”

“Walk on Water”

“Dear Father”

“The Good Lord Loves You”

“Heaven Can Wait”

“Holly Holy”

“Jerusalem”

“Leave a Little Room for God”

“Man of God”

Diamond has also recorded very nice cover versions of the Jewish prayer of atonement, “Kol Nidre,” and the Beach Boys’ “God Only Knows”—and that’s not even mentioning all the times that Neil freely throws the word “Lordy” into a song, as he does in “Stones,” “Captain Sunshine,” and “Crunchy Granola Suite,” to name just a few. And to be entirely ecumenical about the whole thing, let’s not forget about “You Make It Feel Like Christmas,” one of Neil’s heartwarming eighties compositions, whatever your faith happens to be. Then there is the stocking-stuffing set of traditional Yuletide classics on which Diamond puts his own Semitic spin, on his two popular Christmas albums.

For my *gelt*, *nobody* rocks “Jingle Bell Rock” like Neil.

Truth be told, there is something mysterious, if not holier than thou, about this man with a deep voice. He's not simply solitary, but also at least a little otherworldly. I remember that Elvis Costello, another one of my own musical gods growing up in the innocence of the Garden State, spoke of playing a show at Hollywood High early in his career and being taken aback, and even unnerved, when his famous record-label mate Neil Diamond stopped by on his tour bus. In particular, Costello remembered being struck by the sight of Diamond wearing a hat that read "Arch Angel," the chosen name of his personal recording studio.

"I thought that I was having some sort of religious vision," the British, non-Jewish Elvis told me, still shaking his head at the memory many years later. Somehow I got the sense that Costello, who quite likely may have been enjoying a little "Red, Red Wine" in those days, was not *entirely* sure at the time if Diamond's visitation was from some sort of musical devil or angel. Either way, Neil Diamond had made a powerful, unearthly impression on this new Elvis, as he has made on so many of us.

As for myself, I'm a Believer not just in the *existence* of Neil Diamond—because as far as I know no one yet has been foolish enough to be an outright Diamond denier—I'm a Believer in the enduring excellence of Diamond and the eternal healing power of His music in our lives. Consider this book to be simply one sinner's sincere effort to speak to the faithful and spread his good word about His great music to all those who need it—and can pay full retail.

Say "Amen," somebody! Then if the spirit moves you, say "*Mazel tov*" too.

I'm a Believer and have been one since at least the age of thirteen, when I was officially scheduled to become a man. At least that's when the Wild family bravely broke ground for the tacky, shallow-minded

bar mitzvah that would be followed by having a rock-and-roll theme at my kids' table. Posters of my musical favorites—the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Eagles, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Cat Stevens, and, the only Jew in the pack, Neil Diamond—all hung high above the kids as they consumed their Tamcrest Country Club salads with French dressing and the roast beef *au jus*. In the pictures that survive of that historic event, the scene looks not unlike the Last Supper, only with a few more Jews. In the 2006 film *Keeping Up with the Steins* starring Jeremy “Let’s Hug It Out, Bitch” Piven, Neil Diamond agrees to actually play a bar mitzvah. We should only have been so lucky.

I’m a Believer that Bill Murray’s title character in *What About Bob?* was totally correct. There really *are* two kinds of people: those who like Neil Diamond and those who don’t. That being said, I am convinced after much soul searching that at least half the people who claim they don’t like Neil Diamond actually, secretly, privately *do*. If you were to, say, hide in the backseat of one of these people’s cars before a long drive—and at the behest of Da Capo’s legal department, I am *not* suggesting you actually try this at home—I believe you would more likely than not hear this purported, theoretical nonfan singing along joyfully to whatever Neil Diamond song might happen to come on the radio, *especially* if it’s “Sweet Caroline” or “Cracklin’ Rose.” Furthermore, I believe that somewhere, carefully hidden away in their imaginary CD or record collection, you would find at least one of the dozens of Neil Diamond’s greatest hits collections. Even more shockingly, in their stacks of DVDs or a dusty VHS collection, in an accessible closet, attic, or basement, you might very well find a covered-up, supersecret copy of *The Jazz Singer* or even, may God help them, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

The other fifty percent of those seriously misguided individuals who claim to be Neil naysayers are probably being one hundred percent

honest when they make the shocking and outrageous claim to “not be fans.” They are, nonetheless, also one hundred percent wrong. While casting no aspersions whatsoever about their moral character, they are probably either utterly pretentious poseurs or totally vicious bastards. I make these charges with all due respect. To each their own, after all.

Yet in my heart of hearts—my “Heartlight,” if you will—I remain a firm Believer that if you hate Neil Diamond, then you may actually hate yourself.

I’m a Believer that Neil Diamond is an altogether merciful and loving musical god who looks kindly upon all those who follow his path. Once I asked Neil to define his average fan, and he immediately noted with a warm smile, “They’re all *well* above average.” In 2001, I questioned him again to discuss his dedicated following for his scandal-challenged but still interesting *Behind the Music* episode for which I served as producer. “They’re people who follow their own guts,” Neil said of his fans. “And it just so happens that over the years enough of them have gathered together to really create a large constituency for my music. And thank God for them.”

Thank God, indeed.

At the same time, Diamond also acknowledged that, like him, his beloved, dedicated following was never considered especially hip either. While discussing his gifted contemporaries from way over in Queens—Simon and Garfunkel—Diamond noted that “their audience was much more intellectual, liberal, you know? Hipper. But then everybody’s audience was hipper than mine . . . What can I say? I was left with the rest of America.”

I’m a Believer that the mostly chaste love between Neil Diamond and his fans is something special: something deep and soulful and

true. This close connection is based partly on shared experience and entirely on shared humanity. In the introduction to his excellent book *Always Magic in the Air: The Bomb and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era*, Ken Emerson quotes from Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, in which one of the characters is said to have "dreamed the usual Brooklyn dreams of flight and transformation and escape."

Those same grand themes—of flight, transformation, and escape, as well as the eternal theme of the search for love—have haunted and graced Diamond's work from the very beginning. Somehow he has managed to transform those profoundly personal issues into one of the most successful acts of group therapy in musical history. Neil Diamond sings songs about isolation in a way that inevitably, and even magically, brings people together. This is the central paradox of the entire seventies singer-songwriter movement for which Diamond helped pave the way. At its core, it's all about alienation as a curiously comforting group activity. And thanks to that almost comically deep and perfectly imperfect voice of his, Diamond has artfully explored those issues always like a man and not just a "Two Bit Manchild." He reached out for decades and connected with millions of us as both a poet and a pop star.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond has thus more than earned a rightful place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, an organization that has repeatedly and wrongly overlooked the cultural contributions of one of the most popular recording and performing artists of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. For years, I've been asked to vote once the nominees are selected, and I never recall having seen Neil's name on the short list. Suffice to say, considering the fact that Miles Davis and Madonna are already in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, I hereby pledge *never* to return to Cleveland until Neil

Diamond is there too. Of course, I wasn't exactly planning a trip to Cleveland anyway, but I hope that the sentiment comes across all the same.

When I first interviewed Neil for *Rolling Stone*, the headline was a memorable question that Diamond himself posed to me at one point in the conversation: "Am I a rock person, or what the hell am I?" Because Neil has enjoyed tremendous success with numerous romantic ballads over the years, there are those who have exiled him from the rock section of record stores. Based on my own informal survey of the situation, even in those relatively few music stores still left in this doomy digital era, Neil Diamond continues to be the victim of a curious kind of record store apartheid, too often cast aside to a distant, secondary store section often dubbed "Vocals," "Pop," "Middle of the Road," or the dreaded "Easy Listening," the rock-and-roll retail equivalent of a premature burial.

Yet make no mistake, as far as I know, there has never been a Neil Diamond show where the man did *not* rock, with the possible exception of that time in November 1985 when Neil went to dinner at the White House during the administration of Ronald Reagan. That night, Nancy Reagan stood before the guests and asked if Diamond would consider singing for the Reagans' honored guests, Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Neil politely agreed and sang two of his big ballads—"September Morn" and "You Don't Bring Me Flowers"—for all the invited dignitaries. So okay, that gig possibly did *not* rock, being both ballad-heavy and in a Republican White House. Then again, let us not forget that immediately after his performance, Princess Diana personally asked Neil to dance. In a royal, respectful and yet still sexy way, that probably *did* rock.

During that first conversation, Diamond quite rightly answered his own question about whether he was in fact a "rock person" and,

significantly, he did so in the affirmative. “Well, the answer is yes, my music is based on rock music,” Neil explained. “But I also have a tremendous love for the romantic music that came before rock, partially because it’s in my tradition. But all of my music is based on rock, you know. If Roy Orbison is rock, if the Everly Brothers are rock, if Elvis Presley is rock, if the Beatles are rock, then yes, I am.”

See, He is . . . He said.

As I see it, the truth is that Neil rocks whenever he wants to. “I’m like the Will Rogers of pop,” Diamond once told the *Los Angeles Times*. “There isn’t a musical form I’ve heard that I haven’t liked.”

When I interviewed him for *Behind the Music*, Paul Shaffer, who had long led the band at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony as well as on David Letterman’s shows, made it clear that in his highly educated view, the pending matter of Neil Diamond being part of rock and roll was to be considered settled law. “How can you deny that Neil Diamond is a seminal rock artist and writer?” he asked. “You *can’t* deny it.”

Should that expert testimony not be good enough for you, take it from the very man who starred in *School of Rock*, Jack Black, with whom Neil would appear in the 2001 Diamond-centric film comedy, *Saving Silverman*. When I spoke with the actor and coleader of the most rocking band in the land, Tenacious D, for that same *Behind the Music* show, he freely said the following of Diamond: “He’s a showman. He’s from the *showman* school of rock and roll.”

That very telling comment by Jack Black may reveal part of Neil Diamond’s mysterious crime in the opinion of some of his more doubting critics. Year after year, the man has been caught in the act of going well out of his way to actually *entertain* the people who show up to see him. Remarkably, in our age of irony and celebrated idiocy, this sort of ongoing commitment to pleasing audiences may be, for some,

Neil Diamond's original sin, showmanship being somehow less hip than self-indulgent angst or navel-gazing.

I'm a Believer that the appeal of Neil is, nonetheless, universal. As far as I know, I have not traveled to other planets. Yet once during the early days of the First Gulf War, following a trip to London and Amsterdam with a great band called Prefab Sprout, I did find myself on vacation in a open-air market in Agadir, Morocco, looking around to see what English-speaking artists had recordings available there for purchase. I had always dreamed of trying to haggle in an Arab nation, plus the market was next to a particularly tasty couscous joint.

There among the bootlegs, in assorted languages that I could not read, I remember seeing only three albums that I recognized: Michael Jackson's *Bad*, Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy*, and Neil Diamond's *The Jazz Singer*. Sure, they were all bootleg copies, and it appeared highly unlikely that any royalties would be forthcoming. Still, seeing a guy from Brooklyn striking a dramatic pose on the cover of such a defiantly American album was a welcome if slightly bizarre sight in that Moroccan bazaar.

See, I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond didn't just go on *American Idol* this year—he *is* an American idol, year after year. That's because I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond didn't just write a great and beautiful song called "America." I believe that Neil Diamond is part of a great and beautiful song called America and, trust me, this downright patriotic sentiment is coming from a normally wiseass Democrat.

I'm a Believer that the very fact that Neil Diamond attended New York University on a fencing scholarship says so much about him and his unique version of the American Dream. In my entire family history, the only known fencing Jew was a relative who was said to fence stolen goods during the Great Depression. Like the old Yiddish proverb puts it, the Jew who can gracefully fence is a Jew who can record

two popular Christmas albums without ever tacking on even one Chanukah chestnut.

Okay, so maybe that's a *new* Yiddish proverb.

Either way, I've written this book not to get something out of my system, so much as to take a long and largely loving look at how and why Neil Diamond's music became part of my system, and I presume, part of yours as well.

As much as I'm a Believer—and proud to shout that out loudly in these pages—I hereby confess that I too have entertained a few stray shards of Diamond doubts over the years. As gods go, Neil Diamond is not one of your most omniscient overlords. And as much as I am moved by the way that he sings the song “Walk on Water,” I understand full well that the man himself walks on earth, generally one foot in front of the other much like the rest of us. This harsh reality dawned on me during our first interview, when we got into our first and only real disagreement regarding a matter of no small significance to me, namely, the precise number of songs he had written that the Monkees ever recorded.

We, of course, agreed on all the obvious tracks: “I'm a Believer,” the classic #1 hit for the Monkees that Diamond originally wrote with country superstar Eddy Arnold in mind rather than the Monkees, “Look Out (Here Comes Tomorrow),” and “Little Bit Me, Little Bit You,” which eventually hit #2 for the Pre-Fab Four. It's easy to forget that once upon a poppier time, having these compositions of his recorded by the arguably more primitive Monkees played a significant part in Diamond's evolution as a widely recognized singer-songwriter.

The flashpoint for our first fight came over a fourth Diamond composition called “Love to Love,” recorded by the Monkees in the same

era though unreleased until much later. This long-lost gem sounds like a variation of “I’m a Believer” with Davy Jones on lead vocals backed by a band that sounds more like the Byrds than the Monkees. For his part, Diamond claimed to have absolutely no memory whatsoever of this recording. Brothers and sisters, I ask you, what sort of musical god is it that could deny his very own creation? With a heavy heart—and inevitably at least a few other heavy body parts as well—I am here to confess to you that at least until I sent him a recorded copy of this long-lost Monkees rarity, Diamond did *exactly* that. To his credit, he then apologized profusely for his very human mistake. This was the exact moment of truth when I realized that perhaps I had come to know some aspects of Diamond’s life better than he did, although in Diamond’s defense, he had no doubt been busy actually *living* that life.

Imagine, then, my terrible shame when in researching this book I discovered yet another pop rock Rosetta Stone that I had left unturned. It turns out that on January 27, 1967, the Monkees recorded, yet never released, a fifth Diamond song called “Black & Blue (from Kickin’ Myself).” The fact that this crucial bit of Neil-centric information had escaped my attention powerfully suggests that I am *not* a god, which surprised my wife not even for a moment.

Let the record reflect that Neil Diamond has never claimed to be perfect. And even to my loving ears and eyes, there have been a few songs and maybe more than a couple of outfits that clearly suggest a certain appealingly human fallibility. He has, however, achieved omnipresence through his songs. Like the song says, everybody knows one.

There are songs with which I have my own long-term love-hate relationship, such as the *E.T.*-inspired “Heartlight.” I understand how people could find the song, inspired as it was by seeing *E.T.*, to

be a little heavy-handed and emotionally manipulative. On the other hand, none of that means that I have not wept openly listening to the song from time to time. Furthermore, as someone with mostly mixed feelings about the look and sound of the eighties in general, Neil's eighties hit "Headed to the Future"—his most recent pop hit to date—sounds to these ears to be the single most dated thing he ever recorded.

Beyond those two tunes, there is at least one song that decades after its initial release still scares me, namely, "The Pot Smoker's Song" from Diamond's memorably titled 1968 album *Velvet Gloves and Spit*. This musical example of genuine reefer madness is an early antidrug song that curiously blended upbeat pop with audio vérité monologues from real-life addicts at the Phoenix House in New York. For obvious reasons, this was not a song that helped Diamond's standing in the hip community, insomuch as there *is* a hip community. When we spoke of this rare lapse in musical judgment for *Rolling Stone*, Diamond told me, "Part of me is rebellious. And part of me will do something like that just to say, 'Hey, fuck you.' That's all it is. Fortunately, that side of me doesn't come out too often."

Diamond went on to say that in retrospect he had probably misnamed the song, since most of the people he had met at the Phoenix House were heroin addicts, not potheads: "So to the hip community, you know, it was more evidence that Neil Diamond was not one of their kind of guys. It was genuine; it was heartfelt. But it also confirmed a lot of people's feelings that I wasn't hip."

Personally, I consider Neil Diamond to be one of the hippest individuals I have ever met, and I *still* don't like "The Pot Smoker's Song" even one toke, even though I've never personally inhaled . . . at least not that I can clearly remember.

Here's another true confession: for all my many years of admira-

tion, to the very day I write these words, I have never even dared to actually watch the film version of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Though I've come to quite like much of Diamond's ambitious music from the movie, I always figured you had to be *really* high to watch such a bird-brained movie. For this book, I will seek to finally rectify that personal lapse of mine. Wish me luck.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond's long life in music is proof positive that frequently it is the masses who all too often understand things long before the critics catch on. As Neil once told me matter-of-factly, "I had to make a decision early in my career: Am I to please the critics? Or am I to please the audience? And I thought it was more democratic to try and please the audience."

Democracy has rarely sounded so good.

Let me share with you here two dirty little secrets about rock critics. The first is that until what President Bush so wisely called "the Internets" came along and made our media world a far more open place, critics were too rarely held accountable for what they wrote, outside of the stray outraged Letter to the Editor. In my own case, I can only think of two exceptions where my egomaniacal ramblings were really called into question.

The first came when I made the entirely foolhardy decision to publicly pan the Grateful Dead's *Shakedown Street* album in my first weeks as a student-journalist at Loomis Chaffee, a small Connecticut prep school where even one of the teachers played in a Dead cover band. Ultimately, I was fortunate enough to survive this dopey public act of aggressively anti-tie dye treachery, but only after a long weekend of placing myself on a critic relocation program for my own safety. The second time was when I heard, albeit indirectly, that *Miami Vice* sensation Don Johnson wanted to kick my fat ass for describing him in a review of his 1986 album *Heartbeat* as the Bobby Goldsboro of

his generation. Apparently, this sockless superstar didn't realize that I meant this as a compliment. The other dirty little secret of critics is that, much like the human beings whom they only partially resemble, these otherwise contrary creatures actually want to be wanted, and need to be needed. As a result, these critical sorts are particularly tough on major pop phenomena that they play absolutely no part in creating. As with any group given to the danger of groupthink, critics tend to discount pop phenomena that were anointed not by their mighty pens but by the far mightier power of paying customers. Critics also tend to find ways to overlook the obvious. I think back to what Neil's costar in *The Jazz Singer* said when she was asked to analyze Diamond's appeal for *Behind the Music*. "I mean, he writes really great music," Lucie Arnaz replied matter-of-factly. "He's also really cute. Women faint. He's got great hair."

Putting the matter of hair aside, I don't think it helped matters much that a largely New York-based media world—which, let's face facts, really does include no shortage of Jews—sometimes viewed Diamond as someone who early on in his career flew the coop from those "Brooklyn Roads" to sunny El Lay, that city of questionable angels. In this reductive view, Neil Diamond was sometimes wrongly portrayed as a sort of well-tanned sell-out—another flighty West Coast transplant like Tony Robbins' character in *Annie Hall*—by folks who were far more likely to relate to Woody Allen's *nebbishy* Alvy Singer. For too long, until his recent critical rediscovery in the light of his work with Rick Rubin on his last two albums, this most famous fencing Jew found himself in a sort of contest that one rarely wins—the kind waged with the media.

In the wake of my respectful *Rolling Stone* piece on Neil Diamond, I would have the pleasure of meeting and interviewing a number of other misunderstood and undervalued pop superstars, some who even

sought me out as being at least open-minded or possibly a total push-over in the working pop culture press. Over the years that followed, I would get to hang often with Julio . . . Iglesias. I would bond beautifully with Barry . . . Manilow. I'd even wing around the world for a time with Paul and the lovely Linda . . . yes, McCartney.

In each case, I would discover that simply giving a fair hearing is often the perfect gift for the superstar who has absolutely *everything* except the sort of critical appreciation that rarely seems to arrive in print. Having this sort of experience taught me a critical lesson about human nature. Give someone creative the world and, more often than not, they will search that world for the one thing they *cannot* have and cannot get enough of. Often that's fair recognition for their best work.

I'll never forget one long day and night spent working on a cover story about Billy Joel, another notable American singer-songwriter and performer who continues to please millions, decades after some rock scribes wrote him off. Early in one of our days together, while Joel and his band were rehearsing at a Long Island police armory for an arena tour, the Piano Man insisted to me that he didn't "give a damn" about what the critics said to him. Later that very same night, after a few beers and more sambucas than I could count, the very same Innocent Man sat in the bar of my Holiday Inn on the Island quoting chapter and verse of ancient bad reviews, word for word, from memory. The fact that Joel's songs were timeless had somehow not lessened the hurt of otherwise forgotten words from old newspapers that had long ago yellowed and blown away with the wind.

In Neil Diamond's song "Done Too Soon," which sounds like it may have heavily influenced Billy Joel's later smash "We Didn't Start the Fire," he lists a series of famous historical figures, starting off with Jesus Christ and Fanny Brice. I believe it was Brice and not Jesus who

once said, “Your audience gives you everything you need. They tell you.” Diamond seems to have learned this lesson, taking his cues from his followers and not a smaller group of detractors.

As a recovering rock critic today, I'm a Believer that at heart Neil Diamond is first and foremost a songwriter. Neil himself would agree—at least he did going back to a 1976 interview with Noel Coppage in *Family Weekly*. “Songwriting is what I do,” Diamond said then. “Performing is the easiest part of what I do, and songwriting is the hardest. Songs are so all encompassing; they're the joys and sorrows and pacing of life. Songwriting is the only real discipline I've had in my whole life—that's why I hate it so much; I don't *like* imposing that kind of discipline on myself, but it has to be. Songs are life in 80 words or less.”

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond is ultimately *sui generis*, truly one of a kind. “There is nobody else who *sounds* like him,” Ellie Greenwich said of her former protégé. “There is nobody else that *writes* like him.”

Despite that, the Neil Diamond whom I have come to know offstage is more given to self-deprecation than any sort of bravado. In early times, there were interviews that suggested this was a man of great confidence, with even a dash of cockiness. One remark that some made much of came during a 1971 interview with a then-cool, now-defunct rock magazine called *Crawdaddy*. “I don't think I'll be a phenomenon until I'm dead,” Diamond was quoted as saying, “because then someone will turn around and say, ‘Jesus Christ, look at what that man wrote.’ I figure it'll take about twenty years of writing, because I'm going to spread so much good music around this world, you're not going to believe it.”

Thirty-five years after he shared those words, what strikes me is not

so much a certain notable nerviness or hint of arrogance, but rather an almost stunning foresight: a single-minded vision that one man has already made true against considerable odds. Think of how many kids with a guitar dared to dream of having that kind of impact. Then think of how many actually made it all come true.

And when it comes to Neil Diamond, the measure of the artist, if not the measure of the man, is all right there in his songs. Until his book comes along, the songs together represent quite a telling autobiography. As Diamond once told me, “I think if people listen to my songs they know my story and they know who I am.” And to quote a song written by a fallen Brill Building god named Phil Spector, to know him is to love him.

I proudly profess to love much of Diamond’s catalog, and at minimum, he has written at least two of my top-ten favorite songs of all time. The first is “Play Me,” an endlessly romantic song that Bono and his brethren in U2 saw fit to perform part of on tour a few years back. This is not simply one of Diamond’s loveliest songs, it is also exceedingly revealing in the way it suggests just how closely connected Diamond is with his music. The song’s simple yet stunning chorus is proof that at his best Diamond is a genuine romantic poet:

You are the sun
I am the moon
You are the words
I am the tune
Play me

When I asked him about the song, he said that originally he couldn’t decide what would be the proper time signature for “Play Me.” He recalled how Richard Bennett, who played guitar on the ses-

sion and worked with Diamond for many years, tried a guitar figure in three-quarter time and suddenly it was crystal clear that was how “Play Me” should be heard. “So it ended up a waltz, and I guess that’s what the song was meant to be,” Neil explained.

My other all-time Neil Diamond favorite is another song that’s absolutely everything it’s meant to be: the slightly lesser known but entirely exquisite “And the Grass Won’t Pay No Mind.” Released as the flip side of Neil’s African-tinged single “Soolaimon,” this song was also recorded by Mark Lindsay of Paul Revere and the Raiders fame, and in a royally soulful rendition by Elvis Presley, who was briefly Neil’s neighbor in Holmby Hills in the seventies.

Impressively, in just the past few years, Neil has written a number of brand new songs that for me rank right up with those past classics. For my tastes, there’s “Oh Mary,” the stunning opening track on his 2005 album, *12 Songs*, a song that seemed to announce a whole new golden era in Diamond’s music. Then there’s the wonderfully titled “Pretty Amazing Grace” on his latest album, 2008’s *Home Before Dawn*. To be fair, it might take a decade or so for me to figure out exactly where these songs stand in Neil’s pop pantheon, alongside more time-tested Diamond gems like “Solitary Man,” “Shilo,” “Brooklyn Roads,” “Glory Road,” “Sweet Caroline,” “Cracklin’ Rose,” “If You Know What I Mean,” “Can Anybody Hear Me?” and “I Haven’t Played This Song in Years,” among so many others.

I’m a Believer that much like both the Old Testament and New Testament—two of my all-time top-ten Testaments, if you were wondering—Neil Diamond’s songs are open to interpretation and yet meaningful even when we can’t fully understand their depths. In my tackier moods, I’m a Believer that another one of Neil Diamond’s outstanding songs, “Longfellow Serenade,” may in fact be one of the world’s most elegant and tuneful dick jokes ever told. Even if my low-

brow hunch here is wrong, and this throbbing number *isn't* about some less poetic, more flesh-and-blood sort of longfellow, “Let me make it warm for you” and “Come on baby, ride” both sure sound like lusty come-ons.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond is one of the only songwriters in the world who could make international headlines by revealing the inspiration for a song that he wrote some four decades earlier. That's precisely what Diamond did when he finally let it be known in the winter of 2007 that “Sweet Caroline” was inspired by seeing a cute picture of young Caroline Kennedy in a magazine. “It was a picture of a little girl dressed to the nines in her riding gear, next to her pony,” Diamond told the Associated Press. “It was such an innocent, wonderful picture, I immediately felt there was a song in there.” This is possibly one reason that Diamond keeps finding great songs out in the ether: because then as now, he's always out there searching for them.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond deserves credit for bringing African sounds and instruments to a mainstream audience with his ambitious and accomplished 1970 album, *Tap Root Manuscript*. It featured his “African Trilogy,” which included the left-field top-forty hit “Soulaimon” and brought some Third World soul to the rest of the world, more than a decade and a half before Paul Simon's masterful *Graceland*.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond's best songs are forever, and that the man himself is looking pretty damn good for sixty-seven too. Further, Diamond stands today as a shining example of daring to stick around as opposed to rock's preferred approach of self-destructing and dying young. At the ages of sixty-four and sixty-seven, when some contemporaries are packing it in creatively, Neil Diamond has now released two of the best albums of his entire life, *12 Songs* and *Home*

Before Dawn. Sure, I loved Kurt Cobain as much as the next grungy guy, but frankly I'd far rather live long and prosper like Neil Diamond, who's managed to make millions of people of all ages happy long after he stopped smelling anything like Teen Spirit.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond is still the best of all possible Neil Diamonds. Specifically, he's even better than any of the many Diamond tribute acts on the market, such as Super Diamond with Surreal Neil; Fantastic Diamond; Jay White, who's America's Diamond Live; Cherry Cherry; Double Diamond; The Diamond Geezer; The Diamond Collection; Diamond Nights; Black Diamond; Nearly Neil and the Solitary Band; The Ultimate Diamond with Jack Berrios; Hot August Night; Rob Garrett, King of Diamonds; Marc Dobson's "So Good" Tribute; Tom Sadge; or even Diamond Is Forever with David Sherry.

On December 16, 2000—my birthday, for the love of God—my wife, Fran, and I were kindly invited to sit with Neil and his lovely Australian girlfriend, Rachel "Rae" Farley, at the House of Blues in West Hollywood, where he would witness the splendid spectacle of Super Diamond for the first time. Toward the end of Super Diamond's highly entertaining set, Neil leaned over to let me know that in a matter of mere minutes he would actually be taking the stage to sing with his own tribute act. Tragically, my otherwise goodhearted wife insisted that we had to leave the show before that since we had promised our babysitter we would be home by 11:00 p.m. And so, to her eternal shame and my eternal outrage, we actually left what would have been a religious experience as well as the single best birthday present this aging Jew could even imagine. With prayer and time, our marriage ultimately survived this almost certain recipe for "Love on the Rocks."

I'm a Believer that in any fair Neil-to-Neil test, Neil must be con-

sidered the single greatest Neil of all time, easily taking the title from the likes of former schoolmate and pop star Neil Sedaka, British Labour leader Neil Kinnock, Pet Shop Boy Neil Tennent, authors Neil Postman and Neil Gaiman, Neil Peart of the progressive Canadian band Rush, and another true living legend who came to us from the Great White North, Neil Young. For the record, I find Neil Young to be as endlessly cool and raggedly glorious as the next aging, scruffy rock critic, but when push comes to shove among comparative Neils, I'm just going to have to buy American. Last but not least, when you think about it, even Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, really only had that *one* big hit, while the more earthbound Diamond has already had close to forty.

I'm a Believer that for all the lite substitutes, *nobody* sings Diamond like Diamond. This reminds me of one of Neil's better light comedy moments in *The Jazz Singer*, when Lucie Arnaz's character tells Diamond's singer-songwriter character, "Nobody should sing your songs but you, Jess." No doubt drawing on his own days of struggle, Diamond answers, "So far, nobody has."

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond may not in fact be the greatest actor in the world, but in *The Jazz Singer*, I remain convinced that he was better and more subtle than one of the greatest actors of all time, Sir Laurence Olivier. So by the theory of relativity, perhaps Neil Diamond *is* the greatest actor in the world, after all.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond deserves more Grammys than he has, and quite possibly a Noble Peace Prize for playing a cantor's son in *The Jazz Singer* and yet recording two Christmas albums.

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond should be honored, damn it, not mocked, for dressing for success. I'm certain that Neil puts on those beaded shirts and sings his heart out not just for himself but for *us*. He understands full well that the faithful don't just want to see him—they

need to see him in all his glory. In his free time, he's as much a scruffy man as a solitary man. Yet this slightly self-conscious kid from Brooklyn transforms himself because he knows that his fans look to him not just as a songwriter but as an indomitable showman as well. In 1996, Neil explained to Rachel Cook of London's the *Observer* that he really does become someone else entirely when he takes the stage. "I do everything but step in a phone booth to change," Diamond told her. "You put the costume on and it's part of becoming the other person. I have to have the uniform, or I can't fly." Performing, he said, "makes me feel less shy. Sometimes, I find such joy in it that it takes me to another place . . . not permanently, but for the two hours that I'm on stage, it takes me out of myself."

I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond is a truly tough act to follow, though after an early show with the Who at which Pete Townshend smashed his guitar, Diamond said, "*They* can follow me." For the record, Neil Diamond is also apparently a tough act to go on before as well. If you don't believe me, listen to the brilliant Albert Brooks (who was actually born Albert Einstein) discussing the difficulty of opening for an act as popular as Neil Diamond for a few years ("Memoirs of an Opening Act, Part 1" on his 1973 album *Comedy Plus One*). Beyond the occasional fan interrupting his comedy to cry out for "Kentucky Woman," Brooks seemed mostly taken with Diamond's growing popularity. "I started with him when he was doing small colleges and my god, I watched the man price himself right out of the business," he joked. "No, it was getting strange there towards the end. He would perform and the owner of the building would come and give him the deed to the building."

I'm a Believer that the relationship between Neil Diamond and his fans is a close and intimate one, at least as close and intimate as relationships get when largely confined to arenas, stadiums, and the

occasional open-air amphitheater. It's good for Neil too, at least based on what songwriting god Ellie Greenwich says Neil once told her: "When you walk out on the stage, it is the *ultimate* orgasm."

I'm a Believer that the "Songs of Life" (to name a song from *The Jazz Singer*) Neil Diamond has given us for the last forty years accurately reflect the man. The impression one gets of Neil Diamond through his compositions is, in my limited but long-term experience, altogether both flattering and accurate. And so it is only because Neil Diamond has earned such a humanistic, good-natured persona over the years that comic genius Will Ferrell could do his memorable parody of Neil as a profoundly creepy, murderous, addicted, and racist sociopath. Ferrell's Diamond is oddly given to absentmindedly revealing his dark side in tortured stage patter, like explaining on a very special, imaginary episode of VH1's *Storytellers* that "America" was "fueled creatively by my massive hatred of immigrants," that "Forever in Blue Jeans" was written "after I killed a drifter to get an erection," and that "Cracklin' Rosie" was inspired by a passion for "hardcore barely legal porn." In this case of comedy, it's funny because it's *not* true. Also, I'm a Believer that Neil Diamond undeniably has a fully functioning sense of humor, as evidenced by the fact that in May of 2002 he actually agreed to appear alongside Ferrell on the comedian's last show as an *SNL* player.

I'm a Believer that consistency can be a virtue, and by almost any standard Neil Diamond possesses it. Consider the fact that Neil Diamond has had most of the same band members for more than thirty years. In a business with precious little loyalty, Diamond has been fiercely dedicated to his band, and they to him. Okay, sure, Diamond has been married and divorced twice, but let he who is without marital sin (especially in his generation) cast the first stone. Furthermore, Diamond has always been gallant, being the first to explain that he is not easy to live with and that those around him have had to pay a price for

his lifelong dedication to his music.

In 1996, after twenty-five years together, Neil paid a reported \$150 million in his divorce to his second wife, Marcia Murphey. Rather than complain, Diamond was quoted at the time as saying of his ex-wife, “She’s been through thick and thin with me and deserves half of my fortune.” As I well know as the child of divorce, any marital split can be a profoundly painful experience for all involved. On the other hand, when you can write a check for \$150 million—and that check clears—perhaps the message is that in addition to perhaps doing something wrong, you’ve also paradoxically been doing something *right*.

I’m a Believer because, both as a parent and a son, I have come to fully appreciate that, as a rule, the music of Neil Diamond does not scare older people or small children, or anyone in between. Whenever we sit together to talk about life for a few hours while our wives are out shopping, my father-in-law, Art Turk (who grew up just down those Brooklyn roads from the Diamond dry goods store), and I always put on some Neil Diamond music in the background. For us, and for many others of multiple generations, the music of Neil Diamond represents the very best and most solid kind of common ground.

Finally, I’m a Believer because of a very personal revelation that was offered unto me on the very day our firstborn son, Andrew, came into our lives (by coincidence in a hospital room about a minute from Neil Diamond’s current office). As long as I live, I will never forget holding my son Andrew for the first time and realizing on some primal level that if I was going to communicate with this fetching young fellow, I would probably be better off singing to him than talking. First, I tried a little of Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind.” He cried immediately, possibly because I do a fairly accurate Dylan imitation. Next up I tried the Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine,” which I sang with

what I felt was a certain charming, Ringo-like gusto, if I do say so myself. Nonetheless, the review from my new son was similarly instant and equally negative.

Breaking into a parental sweat for the first but hardly the last time, I then dug deep into my own more pleasant childhood memories and decided it was time to break out something fail-safe. Lo and behold, the very second that I started crooning my most calming if ever so slightly off-key rendition of “Song Sung Blue,” my little boy started cooing like—*exactly* like—a baby before dozing back to sleep.

Thank God for Neil Diamond. And to paraphrase a great song from the great man himself, thank the Lord for the nap time.