



LIKE GOLD

being refined

Text by Rona Cherry : Photograph by Jeff Fansano

Years ago you bought all her albums, sang soulfully along to “Send In the Clowns,” and fell in love with her bottomless blue eyes. Here, **Judy Collins** shares how she’s turned her life’s biggest tragedy into a healing new career.

At 68, with more than 40 top selling albums, nine books (including a novel), and her own recording label, singer-songwriter Judy Collins has no intention of slowing down. The

American folk legend, who rose to fame in the ‘60s and is best known for her 1968 Grammy-winning rendition of Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now,” still does 50 to 80 performances a year around the country. She’s also writing

another book, and she plans to release a new album this summer. “I have half of my life left,” she laughs. “Exciting things are in front of me.”

It’s taken years for Collins, whose legendary eyes inspired Crosby, Stills

8 Nash's "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" to really feel this way. Although her lovely voice radiates a sweet serenity, her private life has been full of trauma and heartbreak—polio at age 11, a suicide attempt at 14, an alcoholic father, years of drinking and drug abuse (she's been sober for 28 years), a divorce from her college sweetheart, bulimia, bouts of depression, and panic attacks.

Her toughest hurdle came in 1992 with the suicide of her 33-year old son and only child, Clark Taylor. "I was beyond devastation. I wanted to die," she tells me, as we sit in the living room of her four-bedroom New York apartment filled with family photos, glass pieces, and paintings by friends, family, and Collins herself.

But slowly, after years of therapy, meditation, the support of her second husband, Louis, and speaking with others who have lost loved ones, Collins began to find a way out of the darkness that once plagued her. In 2003, she wrote *Sanity and Grace*, a memoir of her experience "as a witness, attempter and survivor of suicide." Her most recent book, *The Seven T's*, guides readers through grieving the loss of a loved one.

Dressed in a black pantsuit, her silver-and-ash hair gathered up to frame her face, Collins talks philosophically about loss in everyone's life, but says what's most important is how we handle it. She speaks enthusiastically about her work as a mental health advocate and the 15 to 20 speeches she gives each year on being a suicide survivor and on suicide prevention. "It's like a whole other career for me," she says. "It's very healing, and it's a way to experience my own recovery with other people talking about their life experiences."

Since her talks and performances keep her almost constantly on the go, Collins says she needs to be extremely self-disciplined. "The voice is the only muscle in the body that does not deteriorate on its own unless it's abused," she says. "If you scream and laugh and drink and smoke and stay

up all night and sing incorrectly, it's going to go. But if you don't, you can sing until you fall over."

To keep herself in top form, Collins takes dozens of vitamins and antioxidants a day, including at least 3,000 to 4,000 milligrams of vitamin C, acidophilus, fish and flaxseed oils, an anti-inflammatory, plus homeopathic remedies. She has acupuncture once a month, as well as a monthly vitamin shot, works with a nutritionist, and for a year after her son's suicide had a massage every day. She gets an annual flu shot, and this year, she also went for a pneumonia shot. "I'm on the road so much that I can't afford

at night disturb her sleep? "I sleep like a baby," she replies.

And then there is her meditation. Although she started meditating in her early 20s, following the gurus of the times, it wasn't until her early 40s that Collins discovered the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), a practice founded by the Indian yogi Yogananda. "I meditate on a pretty regular basis," says the singer. "Meditation provides an emotional stability that I really need." She also does a lot of reading, writing in her journal, contemplation, and prayer.

In 1999, Collins co-founded her own recording label, Wildflower Records,

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not to," she says.

The singer also is an avid exerciser. She started working out in her early 20s, though she says it was mainly to be able to sleep—and drink. "I figured if I was exercising and getting fit, I deserved to drink," she laughs.

Now Collins exercises daily to stay fit (she loves to ski) and to fight off depression, since she doesn't want to take medications. She explains, "As a sober person, I don't medicate myself because I have an illness that's treated by abstinence," referring to drugs and alcohol. She has a treadmill and a stationary bike in her bedroom and spends about an hour each day exercising while watching favorite TV shows such as *CSI*, Public Television, and nature programs. A few days a month, she also does the original Jane Fonda workout.

Even when she's on the road, Collins manages to exercise after a concert or talk. "I run around my hotel room and do my exercise routine, usually before I go to bed," she says. Does exercising

which is run from an office in her apartment. It produces her own records along with several other artists she has signed. A Judy Collins tribute album, whose guests include Dolly Parton, Jimmy Webb, Leonard Cohen and many others, will be released this spring. In addition, Collins is working on new projects, performing for six weeks until March 1 at the Café Carlyle at New York's Carlyle Hotel. Then she's back on the road to speak in Vancouver, Denver, San Jose, and other cities.

Reflecting on her life, Collins makes it clear that she's looking forward to the years ahead. "Instead of the word *aging*, I prefer the word *refining*—like gold being refined," she says. "I intend to keep learning, writing, singing, playing my piano, and reaching out my hand to help others." **e**

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