



MIMI FARIÑA

ANON

# Bread and Roses

I first heard of her when I was in college. A folkie friend came back from a Boston summer saying that Joan Baez had a younger sister. She was more beautiful than Joan, played guitar better, *and* sang more sweetly. Her name was Mimi.

If true, these were impressive credentials. Joan was gorgeous, an ethereal singer, and a solid guitarist. More beautiful than Joan and a better picker and singer to boot was a combination that was difficult yet pleasing to imagine.

Mimi had married Richard Fariña around then, when she was eighteen. Richard was a novelist, songwriter, and singer who accompanied himself on the dulcimer, a fretted, three-stringed, acoustic instrument. He wrote a novel titled *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*. They were living near Carmel when it was published, and went to Richard's first book signing together on April 30, 1966. When it was over, Richard asked an acquaintance for a ride on his motorcycle. He handed Mimi his wallet before he mounted the bike.

Somewhere along the highway they took a bad turn and went off the road. Richard died at the scene, his head against a stone.

Back at a friend's home, waiting with others for Richard's return, Mimi heard sirens and felt something was wrong. They drove down the highway to a crash site where police met them. An officer told them that the driver of a motorcycle had lived but not his passenger. They couldn't identify the victim because he didn't have a wallet. Mimi was holding the wallet in her hand. It was her twenty-first birthday.

In 1974, Mimi started a nonprofit organization in Mill Valley that she called Bread and Roses.

B&R brings free live music to people in Bay Area institutions. They have over a thousand volunteer performers who bring their art to convalescent homes, hospitals, AIDS facilities, homeless and senior centers, psychiatric, rehabilitation and detention facilities, and shelters for runaway kids and homeless people. With over 500 institutional shows a year, they bring entertainment, as Father Guido Sarducci quipped, "everywhere that Jello is served."

Mimi named her organization after the poem, "Bread and Roses," by James Oppenheim. It is said that he wrote it after witnessing a textile strike in 1912, Lawrence, Massachusetts. The women picketers carried signs that sloganized "We want Bread and Roses too." Mimi set the poem to music in 1976 and recorded it with her sister Joan.

*As we go marching, marching  
In the beauty of the day,  
A million darkened kitchens,  
A thousand mill lofts gray,  
Are touched with all the radiance  
That a sudden sun discloses,*

*For the people hear us singing:  
"Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!"*

*As we go marching, marching,  
We battle too for men,  
For they are women's children,  
And we mother them again.  
Our lives shall not be sweated  
From birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies;  
Give us bread, but give us roses!*

*As we go marching, marching,  
Unnumbered women dead,  
Go crying through our singing  
Their ancient call for bread.  
Small art and love and beauty  
Their drudging spirits knew.  
Yes, it is bread we fight for —  
But we fight for roses, too!*

*As we go marching, marching,  
We bring the greater days.  
The rising of the women means  
The rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler  
Ten that toil where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life's glories:  
Bread and roses! Bread and roses!*

*Our lives shall not be sweated  
From birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies;  
Bread and roses, bread and roses.*

. . .

I walked into the Bread and Roses office in 1979, a few months before they mounted their music festival at Berkeley's Greek Theater. I volunteered to be the house string bassist for whomever might ask for my services. They mulled it over and finally said Sure.

A week later Mimi gave me a call. Peter, Paul & Mary had accepted Bread and Roses' invitation to play the festival that year, and had asked for my house-bass-player services. The trio overnighted me their set list, and the rest is a story you've heard. In the two years I played the festival, I had the honor of accompanying the Chambers Brothers, David Bromberg, Jeff Hanna, Paul Siebel, Jethro Burns, Odetta and Tim Hardin, Steve Goodman, and many others.

Some time after that first festival, I started playing behind Mimi in her backup band, joining Lowell Levinger, AKA "Banana," who played banjo, guitar, and piano. We played venues in Northern California and opened for Gordon Lightfoot on a tour of Alaska and Hawaii. The tour started at a high school in Anchorage. We were slated to fly out to Waikiki that night, right after the gig.

So, we're on stage in Anchorage. It's colder than, well ... than Alaska, and Mimi, Banana and I have done our first two tunes. Mimi is into her between-tune patter, and she says,

"Tonight, after playing here for you, we're getting on a plane and flying to Hawaii for our next show." Here she thumbs her nose at the crowd and goes, "Nyah, nyaha, nyah, nyah."

And inside I'm thinking, Holy Toledo, what a risk! These are Alaskans. They love Alaska; they love the cold. This could backfire on her. We could get booed off the stage.

But no, the room bursts into laughter and then applause.

. . .

Mimi had pulled off a delightful coup. I appreciate spontaneity in a leader on stage. It can be risky, but when it works you put the entire room on your side. Mimi had the crowd in her hands the rest of the evening.

We played together for a while longer, and co-wrote a song in 1980, "Feeling Left Behind." But after a time, Mimi gave up performing to focus her energies on Bread and Roses.

We both lived in Mill Valley, so we ran into each other occasionally and chatted. When I had my first storytelling gig at Sweetwater, Mimi showed up before the show and gave me a long-stem rose and a note of best wishes. I was deeply touched by her kindness and thoughtfulness.

In November of 1999, Mimi was diagnosed with lung cancer. The news was a shock to all who knew her. She started chemo and radiation treatments that of course led to hair loss. I went to the show that Bread and Roses mounted at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House on March 20, 2000, celebrating their 25th anniversary. It was a magnificent evening culminating in Pete Seeger singing for the packed house. Mimi was a delightful, entertaining MC, and included some kidding about her losing hair. I sent her a letter a few days later:

Dear Mimi -

I just wanted to say congratulations on a wonderful show Monday evening. It was a great concert with some of my favorite entertainers, including your sister, Jackson Browne, Kris Kristofferson, Boz Scaggs, Robin Williams, and Pete. You were an excellent mistress of ceremonies, and you looked gorgeous. It was Boz who said "25 more years," but I believe Bread and Roses will go on for as long as there are prisons and old folks' homes that need entertainment: that is, forever.

I was in Oklahoma City recently, playing their storytelling festival. I mentioned Bread and Roses in the tale I told about playing with Peter, Paul & Mary. After the show, someone in the audience approached me and said that they had started a similar nonprofit in OKC, based on B&R. Of course you know that your organization has inspired and spawned many others. But there it was, looking me right in the face. So, congratulations on Bread and Roses. Congratulations on all its offshoots. But most of all, congratulations and thank you for all the happiness you have brought to everyone in every institution that you have served.

I was more than blown away to hear of your health problems. When we ran into each other recently, you looked great, with hair and all. I think I even mentioned how wonderful you looked.

I could not believe my ears. This must have come up suddenly.

But the big C is no longer the life-defying illness it once was. I believe that the people who beat it are people with purpose, with stamina, and who have a strong support group. Mimi, you have all of these in spades. Please know that you will beat this, that you will live on, healthfully, and that you are by far too high-energy not to survive this battle. Keep your faith, and those of us who know you will keep it with you. May you be blessed with a full recovery.

Best wishes,

*Bill Amateek*

A few months later she sent me a note. It was the first correspondence I had received from her, and I hung onto it. I have since learned that her notes are treasured by the stars and cons alike who have received them.

She wrote:

Bill,

Thank you so much for the healing card you sent me. I opened it with joy, with a song in my heart. To be surrounded by friends like you with feelings of love is indeed a blessing. It affects me deeply.

With love to you and for you,

Mimi

P.S. You wrote such a lovely letter. It was more than a card and I appreciate it so. I'm fighting the good fight – be well and take care.

It was the last I heard from her. Mimi passed on July 18, 2001. There was a memorial service for her at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral on August 7. It was a fitting remembrance of and tribute to her life, and a turning point for me.

*[ continued in the book ... ]*