



Cyndi Lauper: A Memoir

By Cyndi Lauper

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Legendary and iconic singer-songwriter Cyndi Lauper offers a poignant account of the journey that led her to become an international superstar—from her years growing up in Queens, New York, to the making of enduring hits like “Time After Time,” “Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” and “True Colors,” to becoming an actress, a mother, an outspoken activist, and maintaining a music career that has lasted more than thirty years.

After leaving her childhood home at seventeen, Cyndi took on a series of jobs: racetrack hot walker, IHOP waitress, and, as she puts it, “gal Friday the thirteenth,” as she pursued her passion for music. She worked her way up playing small gigs and broke out in 1983 with *She’s So Unusual*, which earned her a Grammy for Best New Artist and made her the first female artist in history to have four top-five singles on a debut album. And while global fame wasn’t always what she expected, she has remained focused on what matters most. Cyndi is a gutsy real-life heroine who has never been afraid to speak her mind and stick up for a cause—whether it’s women’s rights, gay rights, or fighting against HIV/AIDS.

With her trademark warmth and humor, Cyndi fearlessly writes of a life she’s lived only on her own terms.

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Editorial Review

Review

“[*Cyndi Lauper: A Memoir*] doesn’t feel like an autobiography so much as a long, loud, deep interesting chat over coffee.” (Rollingstone)

“Lauper’s story echoes the hopes of a struggling artist portrayed in Patti Smith’s *Just Kids*. A moving story of an American musical original.” (*Kirkus Reviews*)

“[Cyndi Lauper] was mouthy then and she’s mouthy now, and [...] when authority wags its stern finger in her face, she still responds with a finger.” (*The Washington Post*)

About the Author

Cyndi Lauper has won a Grammy, two American Music Awards, an Emmy, three MTV Video Music Awards, and has been nominated for many more. She has sold more than thirty million albums globally and continues to tour around the world. An unwavering advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) equality, Cyndi created the True Colors Tour in 2007 and founded the True Colors Fund in 2008. Visit CyndiLauper.com.

Jancee Dunn has written three books, including the rock memoir *But Enough About Me*. She writes for many publications, including *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

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CHAPTER ONE

I LEFT HOME AT seventeen. I took a paper bag with a toothbrush, a change of underwear, an apple, and a copy of Yoko Ono’s book *Grapefruit*. *Grapefruit* had become my window for viewing life through art. My plan was to take the train to the Long Island Rail Road and then a bus to Valley Stream. I had left dinner in the oven for my brother, Butch, who was five years younger than me. He was the reason I stayed so long. But things were just getting worse for me. This situation with my stepfather was impossible.

At the time, my mother worked as a waitress—five days a week, sometimes six, and it was a fourteen-hour day. My mom knew what was going on, but we got by; we had a system. I’d come home from school, go to my bedroom, and lock the door. She thought we could kind of live around my stepfather until she got on her feet a little more. My sister had left home already. She was living in Valley Stream with her friend Wha. She and I had always been sidestepping situations with my stepfather, but this time it was too creepy for me. I called my sister that day to tell her what had happened earlier in the bathroom.

The bathroom was in the back of the apartment, off a corridor that led to two bedrooms. I shared one of them with my sister most of our lives, and my younger brother’s bedroom was right next to ours. The bathroom was rectangular, with a long, old-fashioned clawfoot tub. It ran the length of the right-hand wall past the toilet, which was by the door. The top of the tub curled over a bit so you could sit on its edge by the little sink on the back wall. As a child I used to watch my dad shave over that sink before he left for work. And I once saw my mom sit on the edge of the tub and sing the most beautiful rendition of Al Jolson’s “Sonny Boy” to my little brother while he sat on her lap. It was one of the most haunting and heart-wrenching moments I’d ever witnessed.

One time my mom showed us how, if you attached a little hose to the faucet in the tub, you could clean yourself while you were on the toilet, like a bidet. This little task was all very civilized and very French. She loved everything French. At the time she would say that it was “chic,” which she pronounced “chick.” But whatever it was called, there was a drawback to this whole water-hose-connected-to-the-faucet-of-the-tub task. Because whatever water you ran in the tub you could hear through the pipes in the kitchen wall. So when I started experimenting with different kinds of water pressure that could be used while performing this task, she could hear the pipes jam in the kitchen. Of course, as a child, I didn’t realize how unsettling something like that would be to my mother, who was washing the dishes. (And anything that had to do with my body would send her running for a thick anatomy book so she could explain about taking care of yourself, and what you should and shouldn’t be doing “down there.”)

The bathroom was an olive green. The middle of the wall that led to the sink had a heating vent in it. That always came in handy when I came in from the snow because it was butt-high. The bathroom door had four panes of frosted textured glass that looked like it had little pressed snowflakes in it. The glass allowed light through but provided some privacy. There was also a small window over the tub that looked out onto the alley. It was about two feet wide and three feet tall, and it had the same frosted snowflake glass as the door. If you stood in the tub, you could open the window a crack and steal a puff from a cigarette. But I was careful not to let my grandmother, whose kitchen window was right above, or Mrs. Schnur, who lived next door, catch me. From that window, I could also talk to someone sitting on the stoop in the alley. But all of those memories dissipated when the bathroom became a dangerous place.

It was late afternoon. I took a bath, thinking I was alone. There was a little hook latch on the bathroom door but the frosted glass now had a crack in it with a tiny hole. The hole was made by my mother’s platinum wedding band the day my stepfather threw her against the bathroom door. I remember when she first got that ring and showed it to me. I said, “It’s not gold.” And she said proudly, “Platinum is more precious than gold and never wears down.” Well, maybe the ring didn’t wear down, but the ring wore *her* down. And the glass in the door was never repaired. It had been that way for a while. My stepdad wasn’t good at fixing things. He worked and provided. That was the deal, I guess. And for a woman with three kids, that was a lot to ask. Anyway, because of that hole, I was always careful to use the bathroom when other people weren’t around.

Even though I thought no one was home, I locked the door with the hook-and-eye latch anyway and filled the tub. I got in and leaned back. I put my legs up and sank into the water to rinse my hair off. But when I came up for air, I heard a creepy giggle and saw my stepfather’s pear-shaped shadow against the frosted glass. I even saw his crazy eye looking through the hole. It was too much. It was worse than him beating the dog when she cried and making us keep her on a leash tied to the kitchen door. It was worse than him standing behind the furnace at night in his robe with that creepy giggle when I had to go into the basement to hang up the wet laundry. It was worse than him touching himself, right outside our bedroom window.

I knew the apathetic, cold look I needed to wear on my face to survive. But that day I just had to call my sister and tell her what happened. Elen said to get my ass out of there and come to her apartment, *now*. And all of a sudden I felt I could leave with someplace to go. So I cleaned up the kitchen for the last time, and made a round steak and a baked potato for supper and left it in the oven for my little brother. I knew I would be free but I would miss my little brother so much. I was worried about him. He was only eleven. But I didn’t think he’d get hurt like I might have gotten hurt if I stayed. So I left. But I planned to come back for him one day.

My sis and I lived most of our lives dodging pedophiles and the crazy folks. Our big issues were with my stepfather—my mom’s second husband—and, for me, my grandfather. My family always thought that my grandfather was off a little because of a stroke he had while watching a live wrestling match. But who knows

when he actually did go “off”? It was ironic how wrestling would come back into my life and play such an important role in my career.

The day I finally left was at the end of fall. I had been watching the sky for months. There was a water tower that sat on top of the old Singer sewing machine factory, on the corner of our block in Ozone Park, Queens. I would watch the sun turn the little tower from dark sugar brown to golden orange, and then to a silhouette against a dusky sky. I watched birds fly over it when autumn came. I never tired of it. There was something I found profoundly beautiful about that industrial landscape. It had always been one of my escapes. And now I would walk past the old Singer factory and the abandoned Borden factory that stood farther down on Atlantic Avenue for the last time. I made my way to the Jamaica Avenue El and caught the train to the Long Island Rail Road, which would take me to the bus that would get me to my sister’s new apartment, in Valley Stream.

Funny thing is, I had been packing since I was fourteen to get away from that apartment in Ozone Park. My dad, who I saw once in a while, was a shipping clerk at the Bulova watch company. I used to think if I told my dad, he could help. But there was never the right time. My dad had become a bit of an elusive, tragic figure to me—tragic because he never looked happy anymore.

I remembered what he looked like when I was five. He seemed quiet but not as sad. I’d studied him closely as a child. I loved to follow him around. I remember my dad had a xylophone for a short time that he kept in what used to be the front porch but was now an open extension of my mom’s and his bedroom. I remember seeing him play it a few times and being enamored with the sound. And I remember sitting under his xylophone when he wasn’t around, trying to imagine what that sound would be like from inside the instrument. But it wasn’t long before he switched the xylophone for a Hawaiian slide guitar. I would listen to him play that and look at the pictures of a land of palm trees and hula dancers that seemed to sway across the covers of his Hawaiian guitar songbooks.

But the one instrument that was more portable and the one he always seemed to have handy was the harmonica. He would always pull it out of his pocket and play something when times were dull and quiet, or if somebody said, “Hey, Freddy, play us a tune?” He would cup his hands over his mouth and start tapping his foot. Some of my favorite notes were those long and lonesome bended ones in between melodies that sounded to me like a cowboy by the campfire. And I liked to sit around a good make-believe campfire with him while he played, just like the ones photographed in my mother’s *Life* magazines that sat on our TV set.

I loved pictures, especially ones I could imagine myself in. And lucky for me, my dad also loved taking them. He would take pictures of my sister and me with a special camera when we were small. It was a rectangle and had a little hood that came up and created a dark space, so you could see the frame of the picture he was about to take. All I had to do was step into it. But I used to cry if he snapped a picture of me when I wasn’t ready. (Ya know, I don’t cry if that’s done to me now, but I do bitterly complain because I still hate a bad angle.) But at that time, to me, my dad had magic.

I watched my dad leave for work every day. I watched him walk off until he was so tiny I couldn’t find him anymore on the horizon. I practiced recognizing him as he walked back out of the horizon toward me from blocks away, too. I must have been four and a half. I would pace in front of the two-family mother/daughter house we lived in, with shingles that looked almost like the color of Good & Plenty candy. I’d check to see if he was walking down from the Jamaica Avenue El train, which was around eight blocks away. I could always spot him. He was tall and thin with dark black hair. I could see him walking toward me even if in the distance he appeared only two inches tall.

He always wore a dark gray overcoat and a collared shirt with a narrow tie—but not so narrow that you couldn't see it when he crossed the corner of our street. And by the time he got there I'd already be running as fast as I could so that I could slam myself into the bottom of his overcoat and tell him how glad I was that he was home. Because when he came back, he brought an intriguing world with him—whether he brought his musical instruments or books on Chinese archaeology, or, like one late Saturday afternoon, he came into the house carrying a big yellow wood TV set that opened an even bigger world to me.

But it had been a long time since I sat on his lap as a child and begged him not to go. He and my mother had fought a lot back then. He said it was best. By the time I was ten, he'd either call from work and stay on the line until the dime ran out or put another nickel in, and I'd get tricked into thinking there was enough time to talk about something that might take more than five minutes. But when that nickel ran down, he would get off the phone. And that's when his being elusive became so prominent. He would meet us on the designated day of the weekend, at either an ice cream parlor or a candy shop by the train because he'd come in from the city. He took a room at the Washington Hotel in midtown Manhattan. I got to visit from time to time, but as I got older, he came to us more. We'd spend two or three hours together before he'd get back on the train and go to the city again. And like his phone calls, which were usually from work, the setting was never anyplace where we could talk about anything that was really serious.

I remember once trying to tell him something that happened while we were sitting together at the candy store counter. In those days, you could get food like french fries and a burger or an ice cream sundae or a root beer float, and sit on a stool at the counter. You used to be able to get different flavors of soda too, not just Coke or Pepsi. This is a piece of New York that has for the most part faded away.

I remember once toward the end of one of these visits with my dad, when we were sitting in that candy store next to the bakery on Liberty Avenue by the A train 104th Street stop, the guy at the counter slowly stopped wiping the ice cream cup he had just washed and widened his eyes as I got a few sentences into what was happening at home. And somehow it didn't seem to be a good time to bring it up, with this guy at the counter listening as closely as he was to what I wished could be more of a private conversation with my dad. So I just gave up.

And from time to time, I couldn't help but laugh when I'd get off of one of my dad's brief phone calls and hear my stepfather say, "Who was that on the phone—our father who art in New York?" And I'd say under my breath, "*Dominus Nabisco*." That was a joke my sister and I had with each other from when we were kids. We would reenact Sunday Mass. My sister was the priest and I was the faithful parishioner. She would hold up a white Necco candy wafer (of course, had they been shelling out those at church, I think a lot more kids would have gone to communion, even if confession was a little rough). Then she would piously say, "*Dominus vobiscum*," and I would answer, "*Dominus Nabisco to all*." And even though my stepdad wasn't in on that joke, I said it to him anyway, because it made me laugh. My stepdad was funny. But that's what made him so tricky, because I thought he was psychotic too.

I never really told anyone about my home life. I had friends with parents who seemed worse off than mine, so I didn't think I had it so bad. It just seemed like life made some of the grown-ups go crazy. There were times, though, when I wished my dad had never left. I thought for some reason that an unmarried woman with two girls and a young boy was easy prey. So when my mom came home from work one day and said she was in love, we all were happy for her and thought it would be better. But unfortunately, she married a pedophile who beat her and bullied her. He'd threaten to beat her parents and rape her daughters while she was at work. And then he told her he would use the power of his family to crush her and her little family in court should she try to report his threats. There were times when my grandparents or perhaps Mrs. Schnur would have enough of the ruckus and call the police. But when the police came, they would say it was just

domestic violence and leave. I wished I could go to my dad, but I never felt he was able to stick up for himself, let alone us. I thought maybe life beat him down too. Survival seemed to be all anyone around me could handle. I survived by sleeping as much as I could in my bedroom with the door locked so that my stepfather could not follow through with his threats. Home life in that apartment was hard, and even though my mom told me to be a fighter and get through, it seemed a monumental task.

And for a time apathy set in, along with sinus headaches. I went to a doctor for them. I didn't think they might have been stress related. I thought they were just caused by allergies. The doctor gave me a prescription for phenobarbital. When I took the pills—wow, I felt good. But then for some reason the doctor thought I was scamming him and became angry at me, and said he would never refill the prescription.

There were some joyous, precious moments too, with my mom. My mom loved music and art and drama. I guess her love spilled over to me. She adored and craved the culture that life in that neighborhood denied her. She used to sing around the house, and sometimes she would paint by numbers. When she found a paint-by-numbers painting that she loved, she would set up the canvas very excitedly, like we were about to experience some culture just by having it up on the little easel it came with. Her favorite artists were the Impressionists: she loved Renoir, Monet, and the Postimpressionists Gauguin and van Gogh.

She also used to play Debussy, Tchaikovsky, and Satchmo on our new Philips stereo. And she loved Leonard Bernstein. So when she played us *Peter and the Wolf*, it was Bernstein's version. One day I remember we lay on her bed to listen to Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun." It was so beautiful, I started to cry. I asked her if that's what music does sometimes, and she said yes.

I learned how to play guitar from a book by Mel Bay. God bless Mel. I'd play, sing, and write songs all the time. When I was nine, I got some Barbie dolls and two albums for Christmas. One was a Supremes album called *Meet the Supremes*, and the other was *Meet the Beatles*. I was glad to meet both of them. The Supremes sounded like they were my age, like they were my friends, and I would sing with them constantly. Their songs were memorable and easy to sing along to. And I guess that was the first call-and-response I ever sang. The Beatles, however, were intriguing in a different way because I had a crush on them. And because the media introduced them to us individually, and we were encouraged to pick our favorite Beatle, I picked Paul. My sister and I would dress up like the Beatles for our family, and perform with mops.

My sister, Elen, always wanted to be Paul, so I was John. Whatever my sister was doing, I wanted to be with her. My mom told me that I was born to be her friend, and I took that literally. Besides, I didn't mind being John, because he was married to someone named Cynthia. And that was really my name, not just Cindy. And I had a dream once that I was brushing my teeth with John Lennon and spitting in the same sink. (Later, I told that to Sean Lennon, but I think it scared him.)

By singing with my sister like that, and listening to John's voice, I learned harmony and the structure of songs. By the time I was eleven, I began writing with my sister. When Elen graduated from junior high school, she got an electric Fender guitar and amp, and I got her acoustic guitar when I was graduating from sixth grade. Our first song was called "Sitting by the Wayside." I guess if I heard my kid write that now I'd be worried, but we were living in the protest era.

Before that, I was always singing along to Barbra Streisand from my mother's record collection. I also performed for myself a lot with my mother's Broadway albums: *My Fair Lady*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific*. I was Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin. I was also Richard Harris in *Camelot*. At times when I sang I would act like my relatives, because they were always very dramatic. (They were Sicilian, after all.) But mostly I liked the way it felt to change my voice, and when I sang, I could imagine the leading man right in

front of me. My interior life and my play life were so real to me that I could make up anything. I guess the saddest thing about being introduced to the Supremes and the Beatles, though, was that all of a sudden there was a difference between my mother's music collection and mine.

In high school I listened to Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Sly and the Family Stone, the Chambers Brothers, the Four Tops, and Cream. Motown was king, and, of course, Beatles, Beatles, Beatles. When I got older, they came out with *The White Album*, and I put each of their pictures on the walls of my room. That's where I'd daydream, write poems, paint, write songs, or play other people's songs on my guitar. Sometimes I'd hear my mom call out to me to clean my room and I'd try to ignore her. Once I must have pushed her right over the edge because she finally came in and said, "I want you, and all your friends (pointing to the pictures on the walls), to clean this room up *right now*." It was not easy for her.

I also liked to spend some time with my nana upstairs in her apartment. The air was a little lighter there, especially when Grandpa wasn't home. She'd tell me dramatic stories about her life in Sicily, while making very unusual sandwiches made of cottage cheese and peanut butter that she spread on toasted "light caloric" bread. She said that even though the sandwich might seem like an odd choice, it was very healthy and didn't taste bad either. Her stories seemed a little like Aesop's fables told in a thick Italian accent.

She once told me about a young man who would stand and wait in front of her window when she was a young girl just to catch a glimpse of her. As she told the story, she would act it out for me. She was very captivating, and as I looked through that window with her as she gazed down at her young suitor, I could understand why the guy felt that way about her. She described the length of her hair and swung gently around to show me how far it went down her back. I could almost see it move with her and feel how soft it was. Nana's hair was now short and cut to just under her ears, with a natural wave and gray highlights.

She told me how her father would not allow this courtship because the young man wore glasses; her father said, "What if when he gets older he loses his sight? What will you do then?" The smitten young man knew my grandmother liked to sew. So he gave her a little sewing kit, and therein lay the lesson: "Never give anything sharp or with a point on it to someone you love, because it will go straight to their heart," she would always say. And like Aesop's fables, my grandmother's stories had twists and turns in them, but with strange sad endings instead of happily ever after. I always felt bad that she didn't get to be happy in her young life. Her stories used to fill me with so many emotions. I would say things to her like, "Boy, Nana, if I was there with ya, I wouldn't let them hurt you. I'd give them such a hard time, they'd be sorry." But she would say, "You did what you were told in that time." And I'd come to realize that no matter how much I felt I was traveling back in time with her when she told these stories, I could never undo the wrong done to her because of a ridiculous mentality that kept women back.

As a kid, I heard a lot of sad stories about women. My mom loved art and music so much, but she wasn't allowed to accept a scholarship to a high school for voice, because my grandparents said, "Only whores go to school in Manhattan." This was another ridiculous belief that wore on me. In the end, my mom never graduated. She became sickly with gynecological issues and wound up dropping out of a local high school in Queens. She then went to work to help support her family. I knew she wanted it to be different for me.

There was another story I heard as a kid that started with, "You see Aunt Gracie? She was so beautiful when she was young, she could have been a model!" I always thought that when you heard a beginning like that, the story would be something upbeat. But no. This was another sad one that went like this: Aunt Gracie had a friend who took pictures of her and made a portfolio so that she could go to the modeling agencies. But my grandparents found the pictures and tore them up. I guess they were horrified to see their youngest daughter posing in a shorts set and smiling so pretty for the camera. I think they also tore up part of her spirit, because

she never went back to the photographer to get other copies.

She still had a killer smile and a great joy in her, but it was coupled with big lows. Sometimes you just never knew what you did to set her off. And she didn't feel well a lot in her life. We thought, as it was said in the vernacular of my old neighborhood, that the sickness "was set in by unhappiness." But I do have her to thank for my cousins who I grew up with, Susie and Vinny. What a gift they are.

Around thirty-five years after I heard that story about Aunt Gracie as a kid, life brought those pictures to me. I was remaking "Disco Inferno" with Soul Solution. It was 1999. I was talking with Bobby, half of the Soul Solution team, and he told me his uncle took pictures of my aunt when she was young. He gave them to me and as I looked at them, I thought, "Ya know what? My mom was right. My aunt was very beautiful. She really could have modeled." And for the time, she was tall enough. She was five foot seven. She looked glamorous, like a young Polly Bergen. Aunt Gracie wore an artichoke hairdo in the picture, which was the rage in the fifties. (Natalie Wood wore the same style in *Rebel Without a Cause*.) There was also a glint of mischief in her eyes, mixed with a little bit of hope. The underlying sadness that was in her face later in life was missing from those pictures. It must have crept in bit by bit as she accepted what my grandparents thought was safe for her life. "I could have been, I should have been, I would have been, if not for . . ." is a constant refrain that has always haunted me, whether in my mother's voice or in the many forgotten voices from around the old neighborhood.

So when you ask me if I knew that "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" would be a hit, and I say I didn't want to do the song at first because I didn't think it was especially good for women, maybe you understand better why. But then my producer Rick Chertoff said to me, "Think of what this song could *mean*." And then I saw my grandmother's, my aunt's, and my mother's faces in my head. And I thought that maybe I could do something and say something so loud that every girl would hear—every girl, every color. And I said to myself, "Hell yeah, I'll make an anthem! Maybe it'll be something that will bring us all together and wake us up." It would be a movement right under all the oppressors' noses, and no one would know about it until there was nothing they could do to stop it. I was going to make it work come hell or high water. I'd make it work for every poor sucker whose dreams and joys were dashed out.

Users Review

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