

On Marianne Faithfull: Diary of a Lesbian Spinster in Winter

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November 6th

I do two things, religiously, every winter: I listen to Marianne Faithfull and google stories about hermits who die in their homes without being discovered for weeks. Years ago, somewhere in Europe, a recluse decomposed into her floor. Her body wasn't discovered until it began dripping into the downstairs neighbor's apartment. Last year, I considered adopting a small dog with a misshapen body and protruding fangs. The disclaimer on the adoption website read, "He did eat his owner." The owner died at home and the dog ate the corpse instead of starving to death, which seems reasonable enough. He has since been adopted and renamed "Rumplestiltskin."

On November 6th, 2018, I drive to campus for an evening seminar and play Marianne Faithfull's newest album, *Negative Capability*. I have my period and I feel hormonal and weepy. I rarely cry and I am confident about my suppression techniques until "In My Own Particular Way" begins and I promptly burst into tears for the first time in a little over two years, which, coincidentally, also occurred in the same campus parking lot. I blame the parking lot, reapply my mascara, and head into class.

November 17th

As a closeted teenage homosexual, I spent a lot of time alone in my room, avoiding high school boys and their aggressive penises, playing music, drawing, adventuring in a homemade spy belt, and recording music videos and live performances on VHS tape—before the dawn of the internet and when MTV still lived up to its name. I watched Marianne Faithfull sing with Metallica on *Saturday Night Live* in 1997. I thought she was interesting because she was old, and I've always had an affinity for "women of a certain age," but I didn't care for Metallica and failed to investigate their mysterious backup singer.

In my late 20s, having played in bands, and procured a sizable music library out of a nucleus of "best of" albums, I considered myself well-versed in rock history. But, I invented spectacular stories about how I arrived at a particular artist or album, which, for the record, is a gender-induced phenomenon. Growing up female, just outside of Guyville,¹ with no viable source of music knowledge, you tend to discover things in "un-cool" ways. The road to good taste, whatever that is, is a bit longer for girls than it is for, say, a teen-age boy who was, perhaps, encouraged to play drums in a shitty death metal band, or who had the privilege of living with older, cooler siblings.

The truth is, one December in the early 2000s, I picked up Marianne Faithfull's "Greatest Hits" out of a bargain bin at a record store and that's when she hit me. I have disliked almost all of my favorite artists at some point, but there comes a day when my emotional maturation meets their artistic genius and the two coalesce to form a successful relationship. Soon after my foray into the greatest hits, I was the proud owner of her

¹ Great line from "Harvest Spoon," by Free Kitten. 1995. Has nothing to do with Marianne Faithfull, but it is clever.



Marianne Faithfull

"In My Own Particular Way"

Negative Capability

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entire discography. I preferred her *Broken English*,² cigarette-ravaged, post-heroin voice. I still do. A weathered heel on cool snowy-blue gravel, aged and imperfect. A cup of tea that's just a little too hot and burns when it goes down.

November 28th

I started smoking in the sixth grade, after I got my first electric guitar. It was hard to smoke regularly at 12, with a mother who singlehandedly made every school in our district smoke free. In the 90s, I bought packs of Marlboros from a vending machine at Bickford's Restaurant and smoked in the woods with friends. I chain smoked from 18 to 31. I can't say it was Marianne Faithfull's fault, but I can say that she was a very beautiful smoker and I didn't hit puberty until my senior year of high school. Correlation is not causation, but it is something.³

November 29th

In 2007, I admitted myself to a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program. One surprising thing about rehab is that they confiscate books and music that are not "recovery-based." I was prepared for the strip searches and sleepless nights on a cot in a room with other detoxing women; to be handed toiletries and razors that had to be returned after showering; for barred windows and no exercise; but I was not prepared to give up my music. I was admitted to the facility as a vagrant which meant I was awarded a coveted state bed, an extended stay, and visitation privileges. Most of the other women had visitors who smuggled in makeup or drugs, but I insisted on burned compact discs that I would shove down my pants before exiting the visitation room. There were certain things my family wouldn't provide—anything too "depressing," and no Judy Garland because she was also too depressing and an alcoholic. But an acquaintance visited once—I think he was curious about the place. He wrote vacuous short stories about the trials and tribulations of white, college-educated, redheaded young men, and he was a redhead and a Brown University graduate. He brought me a Marianne Faithfull mix and I never saw him again.

December 5th

Romantic love is a social construct, but the rush of oxytocin that comes with the honeymoon period is nice. Despite my ambivalence, I reboot my dating site profile and choose a series of flattering, candid photos that I hope will attract like-minded individuals. I link my Spotify account and choose "Why'd Ya Do it" as my Tinder Anthem.⁴ I do not receive any matches.

December 19th

A French reporter interviewed me about the status of women in music over Skype. We discussed oral history and the always subjective art of curation. She asked who my dream interview would be, and I answered, "Marianne Faithfull." When she asked why, I said, "I love her."

² *Broken English* is Marianne Faithfull's 7th studio album, released in November, 1979. It is considered her "comeback."

³ Marianne Faithfull started smoking again but will quit when she goes in for shoulder surgery, according to an interview with Jude Rogers for *The Guardian*. I still do not smoke and it's not Marianne Faithfull's fault that I was an impressionable and insecure teen who didn't hit puberty until my senior year of high school.

⁴ "Why'd Ya Do It" is the 8th track on *Broken English*, about infidelity: "Why'd ya do it, she screamed, after all we've said/ Every time I see your dick I see her cunt in my bed." Not a great choice for a dating site anthem.

As a functioning and, arguably, productive member of society (how productive is a Ph.D. in a capitalist economy?), I maintain the gift of having once been a total disaster. It is a gift to have lived a million lives, and I am predisposed to obsessions with artists who possess similarly disastrous, yet multifaceted pasts, and who have lived long enough to offer perspective. Not necessarily a happy ending, but the comfort of similarity.

December 23rd

There is something about being a 37-year-old, perpetually single lesbian that makes me feel like I missed an important lesson during my formative years; the years of indoctrination into the heterosexual American ideal. In elementary school, we were asked to illustrate our futures using white paper and colored markers. I drew myself, a successful marine biologist, in a red Saab convertible parked outside of my condo, gazing adoringly at pet whales and dolphins in their large, well-maintained pools. I realized the error of my ways when the rest of the girls in class presented caricatures of weddings, husbands and bald infants. Twenty-seven years after that failed class assignment, I have managed to avoid any semblance of a normal romantic relationship. I procured a beard in high school, Brian Doolin, after a mean girl called me a lesbian in art class; from 18 to 20 I suffered massive crushes on my best friends, which is an unfortunate but totally normal predicament to be in at that age; in my 30s I dated a younger woman who had a boyfriend but liked my attention on and off for a couple of years until she got bored and later engaged; and one cross-country romance with a turtleneck-wearing art curator from Los Angeles who moved in with someone else while we were dating and I didn't even notice.

On bad days, I feel like a failure. Like everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, at some point participates in the Wedding Industrial Complex. They cohabitate, marry, and trade in personal aesthetics for stark, mid-century modern chic, potted plants, and sparsely decorated white walls. For small, tasteful barn weddings, Ikea trips, dinner parties, and compromise. On good days, I feel like a relationship renegade. I relish my solitude. I am passionate about my work. I can hang as much art on my walls as I please and bathe behind the comfort of an uncouth Jeff Goldblum shower curtain. I leave the door open when I go to the bathroom so I can talk to my dog. I am not a failure, I am an enigma.

I travel often for work—I interview musicians—usually in Los Angeles because that's where many of them live. Marianne Faithfull lives in Paris. Of course she does. I remember the first time I flew home to Massachusetts after visiting the turtleneck-wearing, curator girlfriend. My phone rang as soon as my plane landed, and it was her. "Just wanted to make sure you made it back." I thought, *this is why people partner up*. I listened to "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" on the drive home, but I didn't recognize it as a premonition at the time.⁵

December 26th

I don't know why ageism is a thing that exists in pop culture, because women over age the age of fifty are inherently more interesting artists and performers. I would rather listen to Marianne Faithfull at 71, a woman who shares her bed with an assortment of books (and if that's not a mutually beneficial relationship worth striving for, I don't know what is), than be subjected to another trendy 20-something-year-old cog in the revolving door of streaming music garbage. I would rather be alone forever than lose myself in a relationship. I wonder if that's why Marianne sleeps with books. I would rather be a book on Marianne Faithfull's bed than be in love.

⁵ I first heard this version of the song on the "Greatest Hits" bargain bin album.

December 27th

I listen to Marianne Faithfull in the winter, obsessively, because it's purging music in a purging season. The cold, diminished daylight, the holidays, that voice—the combination begs for catharsis. Winter is the Saturn Return of the seasons and you can either absolve your shit or continue on your merry, unevolving way.

I have a tendency to disregard what I call "pedestrian emotions"—love, loneliness, longing, regret—as weakness in order to maintain the illusion of someone confident, unwavering, and self-reliant. Because I am incapable of expressing true vulnerability—or more specifically, to vocalize my desire for "someone to love, who could love me back...in our own particular way"⁶—Marianne Faithfull is my conduit. And because she refuses to discuss her songs in any detail, she does us all the great favor of allowing for translation. I translate them in my private spinster universe, which, for the most part is a 2009 Toyota Matrix, in the dead of winter. Or sometimes in my living room with my old dog watching, and in those moments, that is "love, more or less."⁷

⁶ "In My Own Particular Way," the 4th track on *Negative Capability*, is beautifully sad, vulnerable, and relatable. It's about love, loss and aging. The most curmudgeonly of curmudgeons would cry in a parking lot over this one.
⁷ "Love More or Less," from *Give My Love to London*, released September 2014.