

# letter to a folksinger

February 12, 1974

Dear Don McLean —

I want to tell you my reaction to your Hudson River Sloop benefit concert in Poughkeepsie the other night in the hopes that it will lead you to do some hard thinking about your music and to some changes that will allow myself and other women with a feminist consciousness to hear you with openness — the way an artist should be heard.

By the end of your first song about being a cowboy and working life away\* I was entranced by the simplicity, the clarity, the boldness, the gentle strength and power of what I was hearing and seeing. You were answering a yearning in me for that kind of artistry.

Then came the words about “wanting to do to the banker’s daughter what the banker does to us” and the trance disappeared in a flash and all I could feel was a sickening, sinking feeling. Again I had been betrayed as a woman. Somehow you had led me to let down my usual protective defenses against insults by entertainers, especially male entertainers. (The betrayal would have been there even with the defenses up, but it wouldn’t have hurt so much; it would have made me angry. But I was tired of being on guard; I wanted so much just to hear you.) You had joined the ranks of those who want women to pay for what the banker does because they—and you—don’t have the guts to take on the banker himself, the man with the power, even in a song.

From there you moved to “And I Love You So” and some of your other beautiful love songs and I tried to forgive you. But it was like finding out your lover has been messing around with another: you may take him back, but things are never quite the same. Trust is gone...and with good reason.

Even so, I must admit I learned from you (but what would it have been like if the trust could have been there throughout?). “Starry, Starry Night” gave me an insight into art that I have been searching for (somehow the recording never spoke to me like your live presence did). It came to me while hearing “Fool’s Paradise” that people’s nostalgic yearnings haven’t so much to do with better or easier *times*, but with times when we are most in touch with and sure of and less afraid of our feelings.

But then came the encore and the woman-hating, sadistic “Yonker’s Girl” and this time I was stunned — and angry. So were some other women, including two young teenage girls in front of me, who hissed and booed. Did you hear? Of course it didn’t pass notice that the song was a take-off on an old folk song theme and that you sang it tongue-in-cheek, so to speak. But that didn’t take away the impact of a woman being beaten up and tortured and killed by a man...supposedly YOU? There was no humor in it, for women anyway. It was “psychological” terrorism.

I left the concert disturbed, angry, unable to sleep. I felt like somebody had convincingly told me how much he loved me and then slapped me in the face to make sure I didn’t take him too seriously. Is it possible that your clear, strong, bold, beautiful music and presence was just an act, a performance? How much of your anti-womanism is ignorance and how much intention?

I have taken the emotional risk of writing this letter because I know I *want* the artistic power that you have on my side — on the side of women, on the side of the people. I want/need to know: Which side *are* you on, Don McLean?

Most sincerely,  
Carol Hanisch

\*“Bronco Bill’s Lament.” McLean writes most of the music he performs. The songs referred to above can be heard on United Artist LP’s except “Yonker’s Girl.” The song in which the line about the

banker’s daughter appears is entitled “Where Were You Baby” and was written by Josh White. McLean has since included it on an album.