

THE GREATEST TRAVEL SONG

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LOUISVILLE, KY.--The greatest travel song ever written took a new direction when I visited with songwriter Chilton Price in her home east of downtown Louisville.

Price is 88, but she had never heard Bob Dylan sing her ballad "You Belong to Me." Her song was a 1952 hit for Jo Stafford, and the Duprees doo-wop group turned it into a top 10 pop hit in 1962. The rare acoustic Dylan version appears on the 1994 soundtrack of "Natural Born Killers," a memorable road movie in its own right.

I was listening to the soundtrack as I drove across the Kennedy Bridge over the Ohio River into Louisville. I brought the tape with me when I arrived at Price's ranch-style house. Price played it on the boom box next to her Baldwin grand piano. Here's how it went down, starting with Dylan's gentle guitar introduction (reminiscent of his recent "Make You Feel My Love"):

"I like it," Price said. "I didn't expect to."

Then, in a nasal tone as drawn out as Kentucky Derby Day, Dylan sang;

"See the pyramids along the Nile / Watch the sunrise from a tropic isle

Just remember, darling all the while / You belong to me. . . "

"My Lord!" Price said. "This is a treat. I'm glad I met you. It's all right."

Dylan continued, ". . . I'll be so alooone without you . . ."

Price groaned and said, "Well, he double-timed that."

Dylan continued, ". . . Fly the ocean in a silver plane / See the jungle when it's wet with rain

Just remember 'til you're home again / You belong to me."

Price smiled. She was in another place.

Price wrote "You Belong to Me" in 1950. She was music librarian at WAVE Radio in Louisville. Wisconsin-born bandleader Pee Wee King (Frank Kuczynski) was doing a show at WAVE. Price had written the King hit "Slowpoke," and she gave him "You Belong to Me." King sent the song to Columbia Records representative Mitch Miller, who first gave it to Joni James before it landed with Jo Stafford.

"You Belong to Me" is so damn romantic, but Price said she was merely searching for rhyme schemes. She admitted, "I should have never put 'See the pyramids along the Nile,' because they're not along the Nile. I didn't find that out until much later. I've never been to Egypt. I was looking for things that painted a picture.

"I later had lunch in New York with Mitch Miller. He said the secret to success in songwriting was to paint a picture that stirs the imagination. I told him that's what I had done. Mitch did a lot for me. He got my song 'Never Look Back' in the Doris Day movie "Love Me or Leave Me" in 1955)." The 1953 Tony Curtis-Joanne Dru film, "Forbidden," also featured "You Belong to Me." Most recently, the song reappeared in "Shrek." Patsy Cline, Patti Page and Dean Martin also recorded "You Belong to Me."

Price said her song was originally titled "Hurry Home to Me," but she had to change it when another "Hurry Home to Me" was released. Price said the song's title came first and the evocative melody followed. "I wrote the whole doggone thing," she said. "Pee Wee published it. He asked if he could put his name on it. King's partner Redd Stewart put his name on it, too. I've got a third of it. But everyone knows it was mine."

Price was born and reared with three sisters on a farm in Louisville. She was named in honor of her father's best friend. "He walked the floor with my dad the night I was born," she said. "His name was Matt Chilton. Thank God they didn't name me Matt."

Price's father, Chesley Hunter Searcy, was a lawyer; her mother, Lillian, was a piano player. Chesley was a musician who played by ear. When Price was 5 he taught her two piano chords, and she was on her way to her tropic isle. During the 1940s Price played violin in the Louisville Orchestra. She is still writing songs today. Earlier this year she penned "The Firefighter's Song," an anthem that honors American firefighters.

There is also an exhibit on Price in the new 16,000-square foot Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum, which is housed in a renovated 64-year-old stable in Renfro Valley, Ky. Price gave the museum her "You Belong to Me" sheet music and an original Doris Day recording of Price's "Kiss Me Again, Stranger." Mitch Miller autographed the record to Price, writing, "I call this a great song, you should be proud of it."

Price was married for 65 years. She has a daughter, two grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

"I've been carried around on peach fuzz," she said.

Her husband Robert L. Price, died two years ago. He was a Louisville businessman whose company installed floors and ceilings in most of the city's office buildings.

They enjoyed traveling together. Price's favorite vacation was a 1960s trip to the peaceful greenery of the Cotswolds in England.

Price met her husband on the road. "He was a cub reporter on the Louisville paper," Price said. "I had an accident. A motorcycle cop was turning right

at the same time I was turning left. I knocked him off his bike. He wasn't hurt or anything. Bob reported on the accident. The cop told Bob, 'If you know that girl, get me a date with her.' Bob called, and I said I'd go but only if he went along."

A few weeks later Bob called on his own behalf.

"The next thing you know, I'm dating him," she said while playing old songs on her piano.

"He had to go to Cleveland and was gone for six months. When he came back, we were married."

Price stopped playing the piano. She looked out a living room window at the distant autumn sunset and said, "There were lots of letters."