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**UNDERWHELMED**

## Final Track

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted 6/6/2001

I'd been hearing singer Susannah McCorkle's name for years--occasionally catching a tune of hers on jazz radio, seeing ads for her appearances at the famous Algonquin Hotel in New York. But it wasn't until a few weeks ago that a friend lent me one of her CDs and I spent some time really listening to her. I listened with a respectful but critical ear, zoning in on the character and color of her voice, the clarity and humor with which she expressed herself in song. I thought hard about which aspects of her interpretations I really liked and which aspects struck me as a bit theatrical. The whole time, I was envisioning her as a living, working artist, someone I could learn from, someone who'd be around for a while, adding to an already prolific body of recorded work. I'd become particularly enamored with an Antonio Carlos Jobim song she does, a sneakily stunning tune called "The Waters of March." I listened to that one over and over again, enraptured by McCorkle's lilting, playful, yet rhythmically precise treatment of it, and dreamed about one day adding the song to the small but growing repertoire of stuff I hope to perform, somewhere, someday. On that one tune, my critical ear shut down; I just fell in love with the song and its singer. I realized I was simply going to have to get myself to the Algonquin, soon, if only to hear that one song.

I was already too late. On Sunday, May 20, I opened up the newspaper and found Susannah McCorkle's obituary. A shocking story: Early in the morning of May 19, the 55-year-old had thrown herself out of the window of her 16th-floor apartment in New York. She'd left a suicide note, but the obituary didn't divulge any of its contents. It took a few days for a more complete story to emerge. McCorkle had apparently struggled with depression all her life. Her father had manic-depression (bipolar disorder) and had killed himself decades earlier. Although she'd been medicated for her severe mood swings, she'd never gained complete mastery over them. Her latest downturn was triggered when she learned that her record label, Concord Jazz--which had produced her 17 previous albums--could not afford to issue her new CD, and that the Algonquin Hotel was not going to book her for her usual engagement this fall. She'd recently told a friend, "I can't seem to pull out of this one."

My shock and sadness only deepened when I read that McCorkle had been not just a great singer but also a deeply literary person: a genuine scholar of old, neglected songs who laced her public performances with fascinating anecdotes about tunes she'd rediscovered; a speaker of several European languages who'd often sing her own translations of lyrics; an accomplished writer who had published short stories and magazine articles and had been at work on a book (variously reported to be a memoir or a novel). If I'd known more about her years ago--say, 13 years ago, when I was in New York, working a crappy day job, muddling through mediocre fiction-writing workshops at the 63rd Street YMCA, taking horribly overpriced voice lessons from a grabby old lecher in the theater district, all the while wondering if I should bail and go to law school--what an inspiration Susannah McCorkle might have been.

Her suicide has no doubt spooked her fans, in large part because McCorkle had never revealed her depression. (Clearly, she was not in sync with the Oprah-fied, tell-all times--and she feared that such a revelation would hurt her ability to get bookings.) Terry Gross, the normally unflappable host of National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* and a longtime fan of McCorkle's, betrayed mournful bewilderment as she questioned McCorkle's ex-husband and close friend, Dan Dinicola. Why had Susannah killed herself, and why had she chosen such a horribly self-punishing way to do it? Dinicola did his best to answer the unanswerable, invoking her recent career setbacks, but he also suggested that this apparently joyous, life-affirming artist was beset by depths of self-hatred and rage, stemming back to childhood miseries. But he could not answer the question definitively--despite the fact that he is among the few who've actually read McCorkle's suicide note.




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Of course he can't--who can answer the unanswerable? Suicide remains an utter mystery even to those among us who've suffered depression or had reason to entertain self-destructive thoughts at one time or another. I personally find it difficult to reconcile my admiration, respect, and envy for this "successful" artist's life--a life of following her various passions with vigor and apparent self-confidence, despite the risks and struggles--with her own inability to go on living it. The medically savvy part of me, the part that understands depression to be a physiological problem ultimately no different than cancer or any other disease, knows enough to separate McCorkle the admired artist from McCorkle the psychiatric patient. But a more childlike, fearful, reflexively pessimistic part of me wonders: If a Susannah McCorkle can be who she is and do what she loves in life and bring such joy to others and still not be happy enough, what hope is there for the rest of us?

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- That's All She Wrote** (12/25/2002)  
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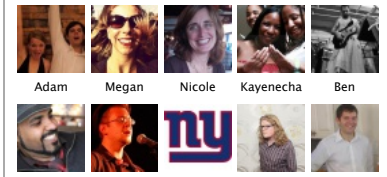
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