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'Swimming to the Other Side'

The Evolution of Pat Humphries' Modern Folk Anthem

- [Listen to Marika Partridge's profile of Pat Humphries.](#)
- [Exclusive to npr.org: Folk legend Pete Seeger praises Humphries' song, and the power of protest.](#)



Pat Humphries
www.pathumphries.com

"This did not just come out of me. This came from a lot of different people and different places, and I just happened to be here at the right time for it to flow through my pen, my tape recorder. It's very emotional for me." Pat Humphries, about the moment she wrote 'Swimming to the Other Side'



Cover for Humphries' first commercial CD release, *Hands*.
[Appleseed Recordings](#)

May 22, 2002 -- *When Marika Partridge was director of All Things Considered, she would listen to hundreds of songs a week, picking the ones heard on the program. Now at home raising three children, Partridge is still listening to music -- and still marveling at how the convergence of melody, rhythm and words can make one song meaningful and lasting. For All Things Considered, Partridge tells the story of one song she found extraordinary: "Swimming to the Other Side" by Pat Humphries. And exclusively for npr.org, Partridge offers the following essay about Humphries -- and, more broadly, about where songs come from and how they travel among us.*

By Marika Partridge

Pat Humphries was born in 1960, the fifth of six girls in a northeast Ohio family. Relatives recall that Pat started singing at about the same time she talked, and she started playing guitar when her parents surprised her on her ninth birthday with a "no-name wooden guitar." She never did take music lessons -- so many kids, simply not enough cash. That was the real world.

It was again the real world that caused her to become politically involved early on. Says Humphries: "We lived 35 miles from Kent State, and my sisters and our friends -- we all went to Kent State University. When the four students got shot in 1970, I was 10 years old -- and it felt like it happened to *me*, to *us*! We all took it personally." The desire to make the world better took hold, and music was an avenue.



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IBSN: APR CD 1045

Tracks from *Hands*:
 ["Swimming to the Other Side"](#) -- 2001 version

 ["Cold Cup of Water"](#)



Cover for Humphries' first CD, *Same Rain*
[Moving Forward Music](#)
 IBSN: MFM 360

Tracks from *Same Rain*:
 ["Swimming to the Other Side"](#) -- 1992 version

 ["Never Turning Back"](#)



Cover for Lui Collins' CD *Leaving Fort Knox*
[Molly Gamblin Music](#)
 IBSN: MGM 1006

From *Leaving Fort Knox*:
 ["Swimming to the Other Side"](#)

By the time she was a teen, Pat had toured and performed nationally and internationally with two youth choruses, and she had discovered that a young singer-songwriter with something substantial to say was welcome in the folk community of Cleveland. Pat performed in clubs and coffee houses there, and honed her skills as a rhythm guitarist in bluegrass, Irish and old-timey bands.

Music ultimately derailed her education; she dropped out of Kent State to work for the National Folk Festival, and kept using her guitar and her voice -- a powerful, warm alto -- to work for justice and peace.

Pat didn't set out to become a songwriter. As she says, "there's an abundance of wonderful material out there and I never felt at a loss." But songs began emerging. Pat's first original song came out of a songwriting workshop led by labor organizer/folksinger Si Kahn in 1984. He asked the participants to quickly compose a song. Without delay, Pat wrote her first song, "Never Turning Back," which folk legend Pete Seeger calls "one of the best songs I've heard in 50 years."

Some songs, Pat says, start as a nagging feeling, something she needs to deal with. But some simply arrive full blown, surprising even Pat. "Swimming to the Other Side" is such a song. Pat says, "This did not just come out of me. This

came from a lot of different people and different places, and I just happened to be here at the right time for it to flow through my pen, my tape recorder. It's very emotional for me."

I heard "Swimming to the Other Side" at a summer music camp, and was captivated. I pursued my obsession with the song, and my search led to a range of conversations. Pete Seeger sings several of Pat's songs, and is a champion of her work as an activist musician. He says "Swimming to the Other Side" has the same kind of significance as Woody Guthrie's anthem "This Land is Your Land" -- because it's passed along, in the same vital way, from one singer to the next, right across the country. When a song or a story takes off on its own like that, says Pete, it can't be stopped.

Someone else who loves and sings "Swimming to the Other Side" is Lui Collins, a singer/songwriter from Massachusetts; she added a new part, borrowed from a hymn she learned as a child. Many who teach the song teach Lui's version, with its potential spectacular harmony.

Here's what Lui writes about "Swimming to the Other Side": "I often

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hear songs that I am quite drawn to, but at some point there'll be some lyric that just doesn't fit, and I'll end up not learning the song. The first time I heard Pat sing this song, it caught my ear immediately. I followed the lyrics all the way through, and the lyrics just kept getting better and better, a perfect expression of something I would want to communicate to an audience. Another aspect of the song that invites immediate connection with it, is that the melody and harmonies are reminiscent of the familiar Pachelbel's Canon in D. Without being identical, it's close enough to pull on those same heart strings!"

Pat Humphries now lives in the Washington, D.C., area, where she struggles to make a living performing music that's often critical of the powers that be. Yet, she says, Washington has all the fundamental elements a protest singer requires in a home base: people involved in progressive politics, and excellent support for acoustic music.

Other Resources

- [Pat Humphries](#) official Web site.
- [Lui Collins](#) official Web site.
- [Watch a video of Humphries performing](#) at a Jan. 28, 2002 Writer's Night showcase at the Millennium Stage of the [Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts](#) in Washington, D.C.

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