

## On “It’s Only Make Believe”

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The past year, every couple of months it seems, I give over a couple days to an “It’s Only Make Believe” pre-occupation, call it that. “It’s Only Make Believe” was a huge hit record in 1958 by a theretofore unknown with the intriguing name of Conway Twitty. I was a teenager back then and heard it on the pop radio stations I listened to day and night. I didn’t pick up what the song was about exactly, but it went from a low note to a very high one in quasi-operatic fashion, which was catchy to my taste at the time. I’ve since learned from Googling that Conway Twitty’s real name was Harold Jenkins and that he was born in Mississippi and grew up in Arkansas and was 25-years-old at the time of his big hit.

Conway co-wrote “It’s Only Make Believe” with the drummer in his band, Jack Nance. He said he wrote his part in just a few minutes in Hamilton, Ontario where they were performing at the time. As far as I know, Conway hasn’t said what his contribution to the song was—my guess is he came up with the chord changes. Here are the lyrics:

People see us everywhere  
They think you really care  
But myself I can't deceive  
I know it's only make believe

My one and only prayer is that someday you'll care,  
My hopes, my dreams come true, my one and only you.  
No one will ever know how much I love you so  
My only prayer will be someday you'll care for me  
But it's o-only make believe.

My hopes, my dreams come true, my life I'd give for you,  
My heart, a wedding ring, my all, my everything.  
My heart I can't control, you rule my very soul,

My only prayer will be someday you'll care for me  
But it's o-only make believe.

My one and only prayer, is that someday you'll care,  
My hopes, my dreams come true, my one and only you  
No one will ever know how much I love you so  
My prayers, my hopes, my schemes, you are my every dream  
But it's o-only make believe (make believe)

“It’s Only Make Believe” is a four-line intro or whatever it is called, and then three choruses—or verses, I don’t know the terminology--all three with the same melody but different words, though each has the same meaning as the others: I wish you cared for me but you don’t. Here’s Conway singing the song when it first was a hit, his remarkable voice and vocal range shining through. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJefPaBsSug>

During my “It’s Only Make Believe” episodes, whatever to call them, throughout the day I sing the song to myself, including when I wake up in the morning--I find it addictive. I have never been able to get the words right, however, which makes me appreciate how seemingly effortlessly Conway and the singers who have covered his song make the lyrics flow in correct order.

In the ‘50s, around the time when “It’s Only Make Believe” hit big, I was a faithful viewer of Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” television show that came out of Philadelphia. There I’d be, every afternoon after school let out, sitting alone watching teenagers dance to pop records. Now that I think about it, Dick was very good at seeming to be talking right to me sprawled out on my living room couch, and taking me seriously (for sure, no one else did), and getting across the idea that the “artists” who created teen-oriented, popular music, most of it little more than jingles really, had a special importance and were worthy of my time and attention.

Singers and bands would appear on “Bandstand” and lip-sync their records—Dick’s people would play their record over a loud speaker and they’d pretend to be singing. It took me a good

amount of time, sorry to say, to catch on to the fact that they weren't really singing.

After the performers were done with their song, Dick, decked out conservatively in a suit--he represented maturity and legitimacy, the very things I lacked--would interview them with a cheerful banality but at the same time get across that this was indeed serious business that we, which included me lying there on the couch, were engaged in with the popular music. I remember being taken back when, later on, Dick hosted the daytime game show "The \$10,000 Pyramid"—what is super-big-deal Dick Clark doing on a silly and trivial show? It didn't occur to me at the time that "American Bandstand" was no less silly and trivial than "The \$10,000 Pyramid."

Conway Twitty, he too dressed up in suit, lip-synced "It's Only Make Believe" on one of the Dick Clark's music specials he produced from time to time, this one for Beech-Nut gum. Here's the YouTube of it. As I look at it now, Conway must have found the experience embarrassing if not humiliating. There he is, a grown man, married at the time, pretending to be singing a song walking down a theater aisle amid an audience of high school girls clapping in time to the music and looking up at him as he goes by and laughing. But he had to promote the record.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-e2MUH3rBw>

I saw Conway perform once, at the Flaming Club, a bar in my home town of Saint Paul, Minnesota. He was on a small stage elevated two or three feet backed by four musicians in front of a hundred people or so clustered right up close to him, which included me sipping my gin and tonic and feeling out of place being out in the world like that—my place was on the living room couch munching potato chips and glancing through a sport magazine or staring at the TV. This must have been in the early '60s, so Conway would have been around thirty-years-old. I remember little about the occasion other than Conway was on the short side and pudgy and didn't seem too happy to be there.

All this up to now has been a lead-in to recounting my “It’s Only Make Believe” activities, preoccupations, whatever best to call them. Here I am, geriatric old and living alone in retirement, no connections with anybody or anything, no one knows or cares that I’m even in this two-room rented apartment much less what I’m doing while I’m in here. It’s the morning and I’ve eaten breakfast and had my one cup of coffee for the day—more than that and I get jumpy and can’t get to sleep at night—and I’ve scrutinized ESPN.com and skimmed *The New York Times* online. Now what do I do with my day? “I know!” I think to myself. “I’ll check out a YouTube of ‘It’s Only Make Believe.’” Then, for a couple days or so, as a major part of my existence, such as it is, I cycle and re-cycle through “It’s Only Make Believe” YouTubes and sing and hum the song. The latest of these episodes is winding down as I write this.

Invariably, I first go to a blurry-but-still-discernable YouTube from sometime in the late ‘70s I would imagine. Conway “surprises”—it is so obviously scripted—petite, bottle blond, mid-thirties Canadian singer Carroll Baker while she is recording “It’s Only Make Believe” with studio musicians. I must say, Carroll does quite the job of belting out the song, with her clear, radiant voice and hitting the high notes in the face-contorted fashion of “The Voice” contestants though better—Carroll is really good. Conway joins her for the last chorus (or verse or whatever it is). Every time I watch this YouTube, I’m struck by the flirty delight and obsequiousness she pitches at Conway when he shows up on the scene “unannounced.” The no-holds-barred phoniness of it all has an innocuousness and inanity that makes the time pass pleasantly for me, what can I say.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-3bmPvIYnU>

Baker later recorded “It’s Only Make Believe” and featured it in her concert performances. After the Twitty-Baker duet YouTube, I tend to focus on three YouTubes of Carroll singing the song. I couldn’t find the third YouTube of her singing the song that I’ve watched as part of this activity in the past. It was from a

least a decade after the first two and outdoors at what looked to be a state fair. I learned from the internet that a very prominent backup singer in this YouTube I couldn't find was Carroll's daughter—tall, perhaps 25, an everyday look about her, like she might have a small child at home and clerk part-time in a convenience store.

Every time I watch the Carroll Baker YouTubes, I notice how she gets older and fatter from one to the next, from trim and slight to hefty and boxy-looking, and, so it seems, how she tries to compensate for things going south on her (and east and west) by getting bigger and poofier with her hairdos and plastering on the makeup. Liz Taylor did that toward the end.

Watching Carroll belt out “It’s Only Make Believe” multiple times, I am reminded of how life often comes down to doing the same thing you’ve done many, many times before and trying to be responsible and do your best with it, but really, deep down wanting it to be over so you can go home. I remember that feeling from the acting in theater I did for many years, and, the last few years especially, when I was teaching—how long before this class hour ends?

Here are the two Carroll Baker YouTubes I watched this week. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otnV3d\\_asqA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otnV3d_asqA)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6u\\_cCiG-sM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6u_cCiG-sM)

After the Carroll Baker YouTubes, I go to one of Conway singing “It’s Only Make Believe” on a television show in 1990, I think it was, or maybe it was '91 or '92--anyway not too long before his death. On June 3rd, 1993, he collapsed during a performance and died the next day from an abdominal aneurism. In the 1990 or so YouTube, he looks even pudgier than before and he'd let his hair go frizzy and get gray—young, he had it done up Elvis-like, straightened and piled high in an inky-black pompadour—and of course he looked older, time marches on for us all.

In an interview before the song with the show's host, which is on another YouTube, not this one, Conway is showbiz upbeat

and chatty and gets in a plug for Twitty City, his entertainment complex (“Be sure to come by and visit us”). I understand Twitty City was pretty successful, in stark contrast to the Twitty Burger franchises, which went belly up.

Also, and totally out of context, Conway makes note of the fact that when he was young the Philadelphia Phillies major league team wanted him to play for one of their minor league teams, but he’d signed up for the army and couldn’t take them up on their offer. That bit of self-puffery reminded me of how in my youth, particularly among my class of people, down near the bottom. it was a mark of distinction to be chosen, anointed as it were, to play with a ball for a living. In fact, this same Phillies team was interested in me, and like Conway, honored as I was, I had to turn them down because I had enlisted in the army—I had just turned seventeen. Like Conway too, there was a time when I made my baseball talents and prospects known whenever I had the chance. The truth of the matter was that I wasn’t much good at baseball, and if I’d been able to sign with the Phillies I would have lasted a year in a low minor league before being released.

Like Carroll Baker did, Conway gave “It’s Only Make Believe,” which he’d sung who-knows-how-many times before, his very best effort, straining and bending down and bobbing back up for emphasis, really selling it. How different from the straight-ahead lament in his early YouTubes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr6BBTC2so4>

I usually then go to a YouTube of Glen Campbell’s cover of “It’s Only Make Believe” that was successful for him, performed in South Dakota in the early 2000s I believe. Glen, showing his age some too--I remember him from his TV show back in the ’60s, young guy--is in front of a large orchestra including stringed instruments; this was a major operation. Glen doesn’t push as hard with the song as Baker and Conway did in their YouTubes. Campbell’s virtuoso talent comes through in his performance; it really jumps out how gifted he was.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Utrkirpbk\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Utrkirpbk_o)

As I watch Campbell, all of them on my YouTube runs, I think about how our lives come down to rising up above the surface of the water for a time—not very long, really--and then receding back beneath the surface. Glen's gone, as is Conway and Dick Clark. Carroll's around seventy now and I don't know how much she performs these days. Like them, whatever I have accomplished in my life is in the past, and now I'm barely above the waterline, just my eyes and my ears and my mind and my memories. Soon enough will come the oblivion, and I'll sink completely beneath the surface and drift to the bottom and remain there forever.