

On Laura Jane Jones
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It was three days ago as I write this, the day after Christmas, 2014, in the early afternoon. It was far from the best of times for me. I was alone during the holidays and felt very cut off from the world. I wasn't feeling motivated or hopeful about much of anything. Nothing seemed worth doing that day beyond somehow getting through to bedtime and the oblivion of sleep--that is, if I could get to sleep, I had had insomnia for a week or more.

The legendary British pop singer Joe Cocker had recently died, and that prompted me to check him out on YouTube, what else was I doing. First it was the performance that put him on the map: 1969, the Woodstock music festival in upstate New York, he was twenty-five years old, his cover of the Beatles song "With a Little Help from My Friends."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POaaw_x7gvQ

A bit down the web page from that video was a 2013 performance, 44 years later, of him singing this same song in front of an arena-sized audience in Cologne, Germany. I watched that too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XO-UB3TJ-c>

Cocker's was a dynamic performance in this second video, just last year--or at least for a few days more it was last year, 2015 was coming right up. What most hit me watching it, though, was Joe himself and what that brought up for me. For one thing, he was all but unrecognizable. That diminutive, bald, geriatric pale, gnome-like little man was Joe Cocker? My gosh. I was touched by his attempt to sell that song just like he did in the old days, and, really, being quite successful at it despite bearing in on 70 and being so very sick--the obituaries reported that he had been suffering from lung cancer for a long time. Watching him belt out his first big hit over four decades ago surfaced thoughts and feelings in me related to aging and decline, human fragility, indefatigability, the fact that

we have one shot at life on this earth and we do that thing we do, or those few things, and then it ends, as it did for Cocker not long after that show, and that all of us are us in it together, some of us famous, most all of us not.

I watched the Cologne performance of “With a Little Help from My Friends,” which was long, around 11 minutes, a second time, and this second time I found myself taking notice of the taller of two women backup singers, who was standing perhaps ten feet to Cocker’s left with a microphone of her own. She had a compelling stage presence: vibrant, radiant, very much on top of the occasion. She seemed completely invested in her work, totally there and giving it her all, albeit anonymously, in support of the central performer, the one we came to see, Joe Cocker. I respected that.

She was in her mid-thirties I’d guess, attractive, fit, shapely, on first glance Caucasian but likely biracial, a touch Beyoncé-esque, with hair a cloud of lightened tight curls, which she brushed to the side with her hand, and, on the right side of her nose, a colorless mole, perhaps she covers it with make-up. She had on—barely, it must be said--a skimpy Los Vegas-type body suit, backless, cleavage-revealing, short shorts, and wore high heels. It was an outfit that both accentuated her beauty, which was considerable, and rendered her revealed, displayed, and perhaps feeling a bit vulnerable--when she exited the stage she tugged at the front of the body suit to cover her breast, a self-conscious, and humanizing, gesture. The camera showed her from the back, and from that angle her bare legs, just a touch heavy and undefined, looked rather like those of an attractive mom, getting a little older, who somehow wound up backing Joe Cocker, and that imperfection, that commonness, for me anyway, heightened rather than detracted from her attractiveness and appeal, took the edge off of the glitz in a good way.

I’m hearing impaired and can’t discern the quality of music, so I wasn’t able to tell how talented a singer she is (I had heard Cocker before my hearing loss, so I could imagine his voice). But

it wasn't her art I was taken with, or the sexuality she exuded, which was palpable; rather, it was, how to put it, her being. There was something about her as a woman, as a person, that drew me to her.

I watched the performance of "With a Little Help from My Friends" yet a third time, and this time I focused just on her--the camera showed her fleetingly but regularly. The way the left side of her mouth stayed pretty much closed as she pronounced "friends," a word used over and over in the song, was endearing. Her hands, which she often held in front of her face, were youthful, delicate, expressive, like an artist's drawing. I found her overall appearance and manner feminine, lovely—which contrasted so markedly from my world that day with its absence of both femininity and loveliness.

For all practical purposes, life for me the rest of that afternoon and into the evening three days ago came down to a backup singer for Joe Cocker; the rest of the world went away, including the distress I was in. I was taken with what I sensed to be her humanity, and her grace, and even though she was part of the group on stage, her separateness; I could relate to the separateness. Amid the joyousness that radiated from her in her performance, I thought I was picking up, deep within her, some hurt, perhaps akin to the hurt I was feeling then. I was struck by the presence of such opposite, contradictory qualities in someone: she was both beautiful and ordinary, strong and delicate; show biz inaccessible and down-the-street accessible; immersed in a group enterprise and alone; elated and in pain. Of course, I could have been projecting things onto her that weren't there, but nevertheless that's what I perceived, and frankly, I trust my perceptions.

The obvious question after watching the YouTube performance, was who is she? The magic of the Internet, a few clicks of some keys and there was her name—Laura Jane Jones. I'd never heard of her, but she has a rather large presence on the Web, including some pictures, an interview with her, a review of an album she made, her web site and Facebook page, a music

video, and blogs she has written, all of which, if you are interested, you can easily access, Google her name. I spent the next four hours, I'd say, going through this material.

One of the first things I came across was a review of her work by Joe Cocker himself. He wrote that night after night, performance after performance, Laura Jane gave her very best effort. Yes, I saw that. The interview of her was lengthy, 37 minutes, low tech, and conducted by a woman, early thirties, chatty, eager, who runs, or works for, some kind of singing school, I didn't quite follow it. Laura Jane mentioned she had grown up in Michigan and was now living in Los Angeles forging a career in the music business. I had trouble hearing, but I think she said she'd been in L.A. for thirteen years, or was it ten, or eight, I'm not sure. She is in a highly competitive line of work and gets jobs wherever she can find them. She mentioned going to Las Vegas to work a weekend in a lounge act "to pay the rent."

In the interview, she came across as genuine, unaffected, respectful of people, sincere, straight-ahead, not ironic, cynical, or jaded, and as hopeful about her future. The interviewer had the propensity to break from the interview and turn toward the camera and impart words of wisdom to the aspiring singers she assumed were watching the interview, and Laura Jane was patient and understanding as she did that. It was clear in the interview that Laura Jane believes in the work she has chosen to do and that she's moving forward in her career the very best she can while remaining true to her principles and values.

In her blog, Laura Jane shares some tough experiences she has gone through in her life. She was abandoned by her birth mother, and then, when as an adult she contacted her mother, rejected again. She had a boyfriend who regularly called her stupid. The interviews and her writing show her to be bright and aware, but perhaps her early-in-life experiences led her to unintentionally seek out romantic interests that would disconfirm her. But even though she has had some rough times, she has a positive outlook and is committed to make something of her life: to be successful in her

work and good for other people.

And she has done that. While she hasn't achieved fame or, so it appears, financial riches, she's accomplished quite a lot as a singer. She has supported a number of well-known performers, traveling the world in the process, including the pop star Enrique Iglesias, which included singing a duet with him as part of his act (there's a video of it online), although this may have been a few years ago. She's done at least one solo engagement in the Los Angeles area along with other aspiring female singers, where, as did the others, she sold her albums—I think she has made two, though again I could be wrong about that--to the people in attendance. Her music video online is called "Dear Rita" (Rita being her birth mother's name). She has done a small-scale solo performance in New York City. She's been asked to teach singing, which is a compliment to her. Indeed, she has compiled a good resume, and she has done it on her own, moving to L.A. and making it happen, no big invitation, no welcoming party, some early struggles. I picked up from the interview and her writings, and I could sense it from seeing her perform, that Laura Jane is kind and supportive and generous to the people in her life. She mentioned passing up jobs and giving them to singers she considers better suited to them than she.

What I read and saw on my laptop that afternoon and early evening brought to my mind that I too went through some tough times in my early years, and indeed they have affected on my adult life, including contributing to the circumstance I was in on this very bad day I was experiencing; but with all of that, like Laura Jane, I believe in what I do in my life, I stand behind it, and I do my very best with it, and yes, I am good to other people, I am. That was very uplifting for me to affirm this about myself on that rough day. The thought came through powerfully that if I pick myself up and get on with life the best I can, I too might help someone out, and that that prospect is worth getting myself out of the deep hole I was in.

Laura Jane Jones, someone whom I have never met in person,

whom it is certain I will never meet, because of who she is, what she is, how she conducts her life, inspired and, in a very real way, freed a stranger, me, by serving to remind him of who he is, and so important, what he might do other than give up, give in. These last three days, I've gotten at it, and I'm feeling up, and I was really immobilized and down. I am convinced I owe that to Laura Jane Jones. Thank you Laura Jane, wherever you are at this moment.