

An alternate title for *My Name is Barbra* could have been *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, if that title hadn't already been taken. Her celebrity contacts are scattered throughout like confetti. There is a chapter on Bill and Hillary Clinton and Streisand's relationship with Bill's mother, Virginia. King Charles III, who confessed to having a poster of Streisand on his Cambridge bedroom wall, hosted her at Highgrove and corresponded with her for decades. She includes pictures of herself with everyone from John F. Kennedy to Maya Angelou to Nelson Mandela. Her collaborations span the gamut from the Bee Gees to Marvin Hamlisch to James Newton Howard to Stephen Sondheim. She clearly is a collector of people and has many assistants on her payroll who have been with her for decades. We get glimpses of the administrative machine behind her, especially when she discusses her tour in 1994, but I wish she told us more. How many people does it take to be Barbra Streisand? She'll never tell. One thing Streisand does show us is how to harness fame for good. She uses her name and her voice to support causes she cares about: access to music instruction in schools, environmental protections, gay rights, women's equity. She spoke up for things she cared about before it was culturally comfortable to do so, and for that she deserves great credit.

I wish for a greater roadmap in this monumental work, so the reader might find an example in Streisand's many creative expressions that they can follow. Glimmers are there, but Streisand sees herself as so singular an entity that she is unable or unwilling to generalize for the masses. We can only sit back and admire the brightness of her light.

Recommended for collections supporting theater and film studies.

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The Callas Imprint: A Centennial Biography. By Sophia Lambton. London: Crespuscular, 2023. [xii, 644 p. ISBN 9781739286323 (hardcover); ISBN 9781739286347 (paperback); ISBN 9781739286392 (ebook); price varies.] Illustrations, bibliography, index.

With *The Callas Imprint: A Centennial Biography*, novelist and music critic Sophia Lambton offers a full narrative, not just of the imprint that Maria Callas left on the global culture of her time but of the even more influential palimpsest Callas left on her contemporaries and even on today's evolving culture. *The Callas Imprint* is written in a unique style, beautifully conflating a literary/cultural approach with traditional biography. Lambton allows Callas herself to offer the full panoply of her life in a slow-drip narrative, whereby the reader apprehends the day-to-day existential essence of the immortal diva. Heralded as a *soprano sfogato*, an "unleashed soprano" capable of extraordinary feats, by critic John Ardoin, Callas must truly be recognized not only as that but also as *una forza artistica sfogata*: an unleashed artistic force. She, more than any other female opera singer of the twentieth century, was and remains the embodiment of the operatic goddess, the *diva*.

In the exquisitely written prologue, "Break normality," Lambton quotes Yves Saint Laurent, one of the preeminent fashion designers of the twentieth century and a cultural icon himself, when he said of Callas:

Empress, queen, goddess, sorceress, hard-working magician, in short, divine. . . . You took away everything with you. Deprived of its enchantress, the red and gold pit functions no longer. . . . Those overwhelming gold-fringed curtains, those shadowed ground-floor boxes, those loges, those galleries, those

balconies, those rows of plush seats, those arc lights, those spotlights, those marble stairs, they are YOU! (p. 1)

Indeed, Lambton's prologue could easily stand apart as an enchanting cross-cultural essay that gently places Callas as a poetic inspiration, the creator and primal force of an ever-spinning miraculous web connecting the highest levels of artistic creation. One could also say about Callas, "She is opera . . . and all that goes with it."

Cultural commentator Ted Gioia said, "People hear what they want to hear" (Cynthia Haven, "Changing His Tune: A Jazz Expert Turns to Simpler Songs," *Stanford Magazine* [March/April 2007], <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/changing-his-tune>), and indeed they will. They will also see what they want to see, and in the case of Maria Callas, these emotionally driven apprehensions conflated to create an inscrutable, sphinxlike personage that at once charmed, beguiled, thrilled, enraged, and provided endless fascination to an adoring global audience. And it was Callas alone who created the culture around her. Ardoin quotes Leonard Bernstein as saying, "Callas? She was pure electricity" (John Ardoin, *Callas: The Art and the Life* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974], 65). Forty-seven years after her death, she continues to electrify devoted admirers and detractors: only those not familiar with her art are ambivalent to her.

And yet, in this fastidiously researched biography, Lambton allows Callas to tell her own story, and the diva, often enshrouded in the fog of hagiography, emerges simply as a nice girl from New York City who had a tortured childhood and youth and just wanted to be loved and to sing a little bit. That's it. The epic whirlpools of Greek tragedy that often accompanied Callas were usually the stuff of

misunderstanding and the usual "show biz" guff. The cardinal theme of Callas's life was not her divaness, but, ironically, her absolute normality. Lambton tells us, "A good girl in real life who had contempt for anarchy, she broke into rebellion in art's sphere" (p. 4). "Behind an overwhelming horde of stories that exploit her name it is precisely her normality that most incites suspicion" (p. 4). "Her aura emanated tenderness" and "kindness was one of her foremost constituents" (p. 5). The image of Callas emanated haute couture, yet she "'loved westerns' and adored tangos, Sinatra records, cha-chas; 'nice soft music, sometimes even rumbas and things like that'" (p. 6). "'I'm perfectly normal—possibly,' she once insisted to an interviewer" (p. 6). The philosopher Isaiah Berlin revealed that "integrity and honesty were her two highest principles. Callas was genuine. But she was also well-read in the art of self-adjustment: crafting a persona comely for the social context" (p. 8). Perhaps it was this innate sincerity of spirit that charmed the collective unconscious of her devoted following. Those most fervently devoted to Callas have a unique apprehension of her art, and in an arts world often full of meretricious display and polarity, her voice spoke for those who often felt they were not listened to or were disregarded. In the womb, our first engagement with the world is the sound of our mother's voice. Some people spend a lifetime in pursuit of a comforting voice: for many, that voice was and is Maria Callas.

The Callas Imprint should certainly be in the collection of any serious library; the question is, in which section? This cross-cultural work could quite easily find its place in a general music library, filed in biography or cultural studies. There are over thirty books about Callas, ranging from attempts at serious biography to naughty tattletales. Until now, most would probably consider

Ardoin's *Callas: The Art and the Life*, published with Gerald Fitzgerald's *The Great Years*, as the standard biography. Despite the advantage (or perhaps disadvantage) of a friendship with Callas, Ardoin's coverage is not immune from personal reflection. Lambton's presentation of the life of Maria Callas does benefit from something of a forensic treatment. The documents speak for themselves, and while it's obviously not possible—even unconsciously—to exclude all personal opinion, Lambton never really gets in the way.

The time and effort Lambton devoted to *The Callas Imprint* is beyond impressive—it is staggering. Active work was done for twelve years, and there are 3,395 sources, covering eighty years and twenty-one countries. It is a felicitous conflation of a passion project with serious industry. The exhaustive research allows the widest possible panoply of how Callas was viewed and understood, not just by intimates, but by the world at large. This book is quite similar to Marcello Conati's wonderful *Encounters with Verdi* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), which offers fifty eyewitness accounts of encounters with Giuseppe Verdi by his contemporaries. What is fascinating is that no one encounters the *same* Verdi: he's tall, he's short, he's gruff, he's friendly. *The Callas Imprint* offers the same range of encounters, from public to private, but with the addition of documentation from recorded interviews and personal correspondence. At 644 pages, it does call for a devoted reader, but the writing is always engaging, and the reader should enjoy getting to know Maria.

It must also be said that, unlike many other works devoted to Callas, this biography does not have a hidden agenda, nor is it driven by any personal animus. Readers can form their own judgments from the massive amounts of archival materials.

Callas means something different to each person, and each new biography tells us less about Callas and more about the author: how does the individual perceive her in the arts world and the world at large? Callas is still the high priestess to a devoted following, and Lambton offers the votaries an opportunity to look behind the veil and encounter a sympathetic human being trying to be worthy of their projections.

Critic, scholar, and conductor Will Crutchfield—an expert opera historian, especially regarding singers and the repertoire that Callas sang and promoted—wrote in an excellent article for the *New Yorker* years ago:

What's extraordinary is that the pupil [Callas] was an American, who grew up in Washington Heights—who was not born to this tradition but learned it by immersion and application. Callas offers us the best proof yet that opera can rekindle itself in the talent of extraordinary individuals, even as the culture and artists that created it recede into the past. The best part of her influence still helps to carry it into the future. The worst part sometimes threatens to wreck it. ("How Maria Callas Lost Her Voice," *New Yorker*, 5 November 1995, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1995/11/13/maria-callas-the-story-of-a-voice>)

Crutchfield also writes in this article—astonishingly—"Only one good decade, really. Callas's entire stage career (excluding the Greek years) comprised just five hundred and thirty-nine performances." And yet to write the present review and give the reader a balanced and fair perspective, the tightest possible focus must be held so as not to lose *all* focus in attempting to describe the complex image of Callas—real and imagined—over a public career of just ten years.

Sophia Lambton's *The Callas Imprint* allows votaries—and apostates—the opportunity to experience the creation of the “mystic apostle” (to borrow from Constantine Cavafy's poem “Singer”) who was Maria Callas.

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To Anyone Who Ever Asks: The Life, Music, and Mystery of Connie Converse. By Howard Fishman. New York: Dutton, Penguin Random House, 2023. [ix, 564 p. ISBN 9780593187364 (hardcover), \$32; ISBN 9780593187388 (ebook), price varies.] Illustrations, bibliography, index.

Musician and journalist Howard Fishman came across the music of songwriter Connie Converse over ten years ago and has been researching her life and work ever since. *To Anyone Who Ever Asks: The Life, Music, and Mystery of Connie Converse* is the most comprehensive book on Converse to be released thus far. Fishman utilizes interviews and archival research in order to shed light on the intimate details of Converse's life, to analyze her music, and to further explore the unsolved mystery of her disappearance in the 1970s. Yet Fishman's writing is not restricted to biographical details about Converse, nor does he emphasize music analyses of her works. This account of Converse's life is deeply intertwined with Fishman's own thoughts and questions about life as a working musician.

To Anyone Who Ever Asks is a lengthy book, including 456 pages of prose alone. Fishman also includes several high-quality photographs of Converse and of her friends and family members. The book is structured in six parts. It begins with “Prelude: A Star Has Burnt My Eye,” titled after one of her lyrics. The prelude and part 1 make up a large

portion of the book and are dedicated to biographical details of Converse's life preceding the period when she began recording her original music. Fishman also includes a great deal about his personal experiences with her music in these first two sections as well as the state of her archive when he began his study of her life. He worked closely with Phil Converse, the songwriter's younger brother, and writes about the filing cabinet that contained all of Connie Converse's personal effects. Fishman describes the filing cabinet as “an art installation, an immaculate archaeological find. . . . a self-contained universe, the not-unproud distillation of one person's life of ideas, accomplishments, and unbridled creativity, all carefully curated and preserved” (p. 47). Herein lies one of the most fascinating things about Converse's life and Fishman's interpretation of it: She left a completely intact and organized archive of her work before disappearing, even leaving details about “where and what everything was, which materials were included in which folder and in which drawer” (p. 49). In parts 2 and 3, Fishman focuses especially on music analyses of Converse's music for guitar and piano, respectively. In part 4, he focuses entirely on Converse's life after she stopped composing, and the book ends with unanswered questions about the circumstances of her disappearance, as well as Fishman's final reflections on the information that is available about Converse.

Fishman's writing about Converse is far from an orthodox biographical treatment. Early in *To Anyone Who Ever Asks*, it becomes clear that Fishman is deeply invested in her life and works. He found himself becoming emotionally connected to the music, which he details throughout the narrative, writing in chapter 3: “Converse's music was completely new to me. Why was it having this effect? Why did her songs,