

Chapter 4

Everybody has an artist inside of them. Many sing. Some sculpt. A few act.

Dad painted. His relentless series of barn paintings captures farm life in every conceivable condition. He has painted new barns, old barns, wooden barns, rusty barns, sturdy barns and dilapidated barns. Dad's barns appear in snow, at night, in wheat fields, surrounded by trees, up close, on the horizon, by houses, along dirt roads and eerily abandoned. Except for the occasional hawk making lazy circles in the sky, his barns have no animals nearby. I guess it's Dad's exercise of the artist's prerogative, leaving us to contemplate what the pig's absence means.

My brother sketched. Matt's love of the Marvel Universe resulted in him illustrating his own comics by the time he was in junior high. He would tag along with Dad to art supply stores when we visited Mom's family in Tulsa. Dad would buy more red paint. Matt would pick out the charcoal, colored pencils and sketch pads needed to create his cast of characters.

Mom knitted. Most of our family vacations involved driving throughout the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico while listening to Anne Murray. Mom would start knitting as soon as we would drive out of Shattuck. By the time Dad pulled over to take pictures of a provocative barn, whatever Mom was creating would overflow her side of the front seat, encroaching into the backseat territory that Matt and I fought over.

I was a musician. Until Tri-State. Then I needed another medium to express myself.

I spent each Saturday, from 1984 through 1988, loyally watching *Puttin' on the Hits*. It offered creative people and future drag queens the chance to seize the spotlight while lip syncing in choreographed glory to their favorite songs. Judges awarded points for appearance, song choice and the critically important lip-sync ability.

In the long, difficult days between episodes, I would eat. Sensing that I was somewhat different from my friends at school but not exactly understanding how, I turned to food. Lots of it. I also turned to music and my dreams of being one of the performers that I saw on television.

I hid in my room with cookies and cassettes, practicing my performances for *Puttin' on the Hits*. While Mom and Dad watched the news and Matt played basketball, I would unleash my inner dancer, capturing 1980s pop culture in all of its neon, synthesized, moonwalking, MTV-wanting greatness.

What I saw on *Friday Night Videos* inspired my secret performances for the *Puttin' on the Hits* judges in my mind. I'd put on a pair of Levi's, grab a white undershirt, throw on a headband and put Dad's red handkerchief in my hip pocket. Adopting an almost angry facial expression to snarl around the lyrics, I was "Born in the U.S.A."

Other favorite songs required more extensive preparation. With one of Dad's hats, Matt's football gloves, a little of Mom's mascara and strands from a mop that I colored red, gold and green, I became Boy George in the video for "Karma Chameleon," dancing on an 1870s Mississippi riverboat.

It was around this time that Dad issued one of the only two pop culture prohibitions that he ever laid out as a parent. First, he drew the line at the gay, sexualized innuendo of *Three's Company*. It was off limits to Matt and me in prime time or in reruns. No questions.

Dad's second declaration hit closer to home.

"Mom told me that you have that Culture Club cassette," he said.

"Yes. I like 'Karma Chameleon,'" I said without knowing what he wanted. Maybe, I thought, Dad had seen my interpretive dance, and it had impressed him.

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to give me that tape."

"Why?!"

"That Boy George character isn't a good role model."

True. I thought Boy George wore just a titch too much makeup, and, as my efforts to copy it had established, his hair was ridiculous. But he was still one of my musical heroes.

"Why not!?" I demanded to know.

"His lifestyle . . ." Dad struggled to articulate his objection. "He, well . . . he likes other men."

"As friends?" I asked, thinking that Boy George had better get some Saran Wrap or he might catch that disease I had avoided in San Francisco.

"Not as friends. No more questions. Give me the tape."

I'm sure Dad didn't really want to hurt me and didn't mean to make me cry. But he did. I went upstairs, found the tape that I had nearly worn out, brought it downstairs and gave it to him. I just didn't give Dad the 45 RPM single of "Kharma Chameleon" that I had bought for my record player before Shattuck's music store pulled the song off the shelf.

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In the summers, Matt and I would take turns visiting Mom's mother, Juanita Ingersoll, in Tulsa. Nobody in our family called her Grandma Ingersoll. She was our "Gonge." Matt gave her this

unfortunate moniker as a toddler. He couldn't say "grandma." It came out a mashed sound of hard consonants and vowels that Dad interpreted as "Gonge," which was pronounced "gone-ghee."

Grandma embraced being our Gonge. Mom was the youngest of three children that Gonge had with her first husband Russell Hays. Gonge divorced Russel shortly after Mom's birth, and while she eventually remarried, that relationship didn't last long either. I'm not entirely sure that Gonge was ever the marrying kind. She was staunchly independent with a fiery attitude. When she was pregnant with Mom's older brother, Gonge asked Russell if they could buy a house, but he refused, preferring to raise their kids in the large downtown Tulsa apartment that they rented. Gonge wouldn't take Russell's no for an answer, so she bought a house without him, explaining that he was welcome to move with her and even more welcome to stay in his apartment downtown.

Gonge worked nights as a police dispatcher when Mom was growing up, and because of her schedule, she didn't cook many meals that Mom remembered. Yet something happened when Matt was born. Gonge became a pioneer version of an iron chef, specializing in turning whatever was in her kitchen cupboard into chocolate chip cookies, cobblers, fried chicken, goulash, lasagne (made with imported Italian ingredients like cottage cheese and Velveeta) and anything else that Matt or I requested. Her cooking may not have qualified as Michelin-quality cuisine. It was better. It was grandma chic.

Gonge set the gold standard in grandparenting. We were perfect in her eyes, and we learned her unbending devotion to us early. Before bedtime, Gonge, Matt and I would repeat, "I love my old Gonge, and my old Gonge loves me." It was an oath that Matt repeated for her at the Naval Academy and I vowed while in law school.

For most of my life, Gonge lived in a middle-class neighborhood of Tulsa that was just a few blocks away from Bell's Amusement Park and around the corner from Big Splash Waterpark. Her house to us was Downtown Disney with a cruel catch. Gonge did not drive. Or, at least, she did not drive well. Traffic was too dangerous. She also feared large crowds, where someone might hurt one of her "babies." If we wanted to go to Bell's or Big Splash, we'd have to wait for our parents. As a result, we would spend most of the week at Gonge's house entertaining her friends, watching her "programs" and passing the time until Mom and Dad returned to take us to what were decidedly the greatest theme parks in the universe.

Eventually, Gonge moved to Shattuck and lived with my parents. When she passed away in 2000, many in town didn't realize that she had died. The funeral notices contained her real name. Few in town knew who Juanita Hays Ingersoll was. They knew her as Gonge. A few weeks after her funeral, Mom received calls from friends who offered their condolences and explained that they would've called sooner had they known that Gonge had died.

In 1986, I took a few cassette tapes with me for a trip to Gonge's house. I knew that I could find plenty of time to practice, probably as Alan Spaulding was tricking poor India into an art forgery

scam on *The Guiding Light*. One evening, as we were eating goulash on TV trays and watching the news, a commercial came on that caught my attention.

“Hey, Tulsa, do you have what it takes to put on the hits?” the announcer asked.

“Yes,” I thought. “I’ve been practicing for years.”

“Well, *Puttin’ on the Hits* will be at the Woodland Hills Mall this Saturday for auditions!”

“What!? How? Where?” ran through my mind as I stared intently at the screen.

“Just pick up an application at Safeway, pick out your music and get ready to be a star!” the announcer ended. “You could be selected to fly to California and appear on *Puttin’ on the Hits!*”

My week had a new purpose: my performances would no longer be limited to Gonge's friends. I would soon entertain America.

I begged, pleaded and conjoled Gonge into taking me to Safeway where I could pick up an application. Driving with Gonge was always an adventure. She didn’t learn to drive until Mom was in high school, and she apparently forgot most of her driver’s education class. She had difficulty judging distances in front of her, and she didn’t always look behind her when backing up. Gonge remembered to look both ways before crossing an intersection, but then she would cross the intersection at approximately 80 miles per hour, just to make sure she made it or to test the seat belts when she braked on the other side. Gonge used signals when turning, but she also used signals when not turning. Even though Safeway was just a few blocks from her house, getting there alive seemed to be a sign that God had favored my *Puttin’ on the Hits* audition.

Gonge didn’t really understand what lip syncing was. She had never seen *Puttin’ on the Hits!*. But she knew one thing – I would be excellent on the show. I had her full support.

As Gonge watched her programs and gossiped with friends, I transformed her bedroom into my auditorium. My temporary stage might have been a bit cramped, but it had just enough size for me, my cassette player and my vision for transcending pop music.

I listened to each of the songs that I had brought with me on the trip. I rejected anything by Michael Jackson. While “Thriller” offered an opportunity for makeup, it had a been-there-done-that aura in the lip sync world. Plus, my increasing size and poor coordination made the idea of moonwalking unappealing.

I turned away from anything by Cyndi Lauper. There would be no “Time After Time,” and “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” was out of the question. I could have nailed it, but I was having a hard enough time adjusting at school without dyeing my hair a violent orange and prancing across

stage. All I really wanted was some fun, but I didn't need to give Dad more reasons to question what I was doing in my spare time. I'd save that conversation for a couple of decades.

Then it came to me. The song that I would perform – no, *needed* to perform – appealed to young and old alike. It had a great, upbeat melody. It had references to a simpler time. Women and men fawned over the artist. I couldn't remember anyone performing the song yet on *Puttin' on the Hits*. God had ordained me to lip sync my way with it to high points for song choice.

I listened to the song repeatedly, trying to write out the lyrics. The artist seemed to mumble some words, and I needed to be confident in what was being sung if I wanted high points for lip-synch ability. I'd get frustrated listening to the song repeat and would run to Gonge in the living room. I'd play for her the passage of the song that was tripping me up, and we would agree on what the words were.

While I worked on learning the lyrics, I thought about my costume for the performance. Appearance counted for a third of my score. The video featured the singers and dancers primarily wearing white. I had white jeans, a white shirt with red horizontal stripes and red suspenders that I knew formed a solid foundation for my outfit. I wanted to mimic the video but not copy it entirely, lest I lose points for originality.

I thought about whether Gonge might have anything to enhance my outfit. I looked in her closet for any old men's clothing that she might have kept from her brother, who died during World War II, or from when Mom and Dad briefly lived with her. I thought a hat might be just the accessory to complete my look. Everything that Gonge had for men was either too militaristic or formal for my audition.

She did have some jewelry – large white beads – that could match my jeans and add a bit of shimmer when I shook on stage. I decided ultimately that the beads would clash with the suspenders. And I needed the suspenders more. My pants falling off wasn't a concern. I planned to take the suspenders off my shoulders during the climax of the song, wowing judges and audience members alike.

I knew that my lyric work was solid. My outfit was fun (if not something out of a failed barbershop quartet). It was the choreography that was my weakness. I didn't have weeks to plan – just days, and with my size and lack of coordination, I didn't want to plan anything challenging. A winning facial expression would have to compensate for my dancing deficiency. I could add to the complexity of my performance once the local judges had picked me for the real show.

I thought that it would be best to start my performance with my back to the audience. The song had a brief introduction that would allow me to do a couple of choreographed moves before turning around. Getting those first couple of moves out of the way would also boost my confidence. The fear of performing after Tri-State stuck with me.

After the first few beats of the song, I would turn around, shooting my fingers like rhythm guns to the music and beginning the hard work of lip syncing the lyrics that Gonge and I had written out. I would position myself in the center of the stage, dancing along an imaginary V toward each side of the audience and then back to center.

Mom and Dad returned to Tulsa on the Friday before my audition. Woodland Hills Mall was located across town. Gonge did not have the confidence to drive to it. (And I did not have the courage to let her try.) When my parents arrived, I explained the fortuitous nature of the trip – a summer retreat to Tulsa had offered me a chance at stardom. After telling them how hard I had worked and with Gonge chiming in about how good I was, they decided to let me try out.

We got up the next morning and made it to the mall when it opened. I followed the large yellow signs to the registration area. I turned in my application to workers wearing shirts with the *Puttin' on the Hits* logo and told them my song selection. They gave me participant number 1,279 and told me that I would perform at the food court around 1 p.m.

"The food court?" I thought to myself. This was no Carnegie Hall; it wasn't even Carnegie Deli. My path to fame had to begin somewhere, so it might as well start on a makeshift stage between Sbarro and Taco Bell.

I sat with Mom as we watched the performances begin. Tulsans were more talented than I had imagined. Then about thirty minutes before I was to take the stage, two men stepped onstage in white outfits – to my music.

"This can't be happening," I thought to myself. "How dare they!"

As they sashayed across the stage, I struggled to find the flaws in their performance. They didn't snap their fingers exactly in time. That hip shake lacked precision. His eyes could have looked more longingly at the audience. And those lyrics! Many of their mouth movements didn't match the words that Gonge and I had deciphered from my cassette.

I finally came to one conclusion – they had performed flawlessly. The audience seemed to agree. They received far too much applause from the people sitting near Orange Julius. I was certain that someone had spiked their smoothies.

I panicked. It was as if someone had snatched my music from me just before my solo at Tri-State. I asked Mom if we could leave, but my request puzzled her.

"Why do you want to go?" Mom asked. "You've worked so hard."

"Did you see what they just did?! They just performed my song!" I exclaimed in terror.

"Calm down, Sugarfoot," Mom replied. "Just because they performed it doesn't mean that you can't do it too."

Matt came out of the bookstore across from the food court. He had grown tired of watching the auditions and had left us earlier to inspect the bookstore's comic collection.

"We're leaving?" he asked as he overheard my conversation with Mom.

"I don't want to go onstage," I said. "Somebody just did my song."

"Oh. Were they good?" he asked. Matt had seen *Puttin' on the Hits*. He knew what true lip-sync talent looked like.

"Yes," I confessed. "Better than me."

"I'm going back to the bookstore. Get me if we're leaving," Matt said.

"Participant 1,279. Participant 1,279. Please check in backstage. You're next," the announcer said.

"Honey, what are you going to do? Do you want to leave?" Mom asked.

"No," I said, depressed at the thought that *Puttin' on the Hits* had just slipped away from me. I knew, though, that great artists should thrive on competition and learn from failure. Dad had scrapped more than one of his barn paintings. "I want to do it."

I left Mom sitting at a table with discarded Arby's wrappers and walked behind the stage. A crew member took my number, and she told me the music would start as soon as I gave her a thumbs up. She then motioned me to take my place, and I walked to center stage, turned around, signaled for the music to start and quickly dropped my hands by my side.

"Jitterbug."

My arms moved up like the arms of a clock to the four and eight positions.

"Jitterbug."

I moved my arms until they were straight out at my sides at three and nine.

"Jitterbug."

I raised my arms up until ten and two.

"Jitterbug."

I flashed my arms quickly above my head, brought them across my body as I spun around, and lowered them by my sides to point my fingers like rhythm guns to the beat.

"You put the boom boom into my heart," George Michael sang as I made a giant heart with my arms, bringing it back to my chest to show how fervently it thumped.

"You send my soul sky high when your lovin' starts . . ."

I released my arms from my chest and quickly thrust them skyward to trace a soul escaping (along with my dignity) from Earth.

"Jitterbug into my brain. Goes a bang, bang, bang, til my feet do the same."

My hands came quickly down from the sky so that I could point at my feet. I quickly started out toward the audience, making pining eye contact with people scarfing down tacos and snapping my fingers.

"But something's bugging you. Something ain't right."

I contorted my face with a concerned but happy look as I moved back along the imaginary V to the center stage.

"My best friend told me what you did last night. Left me sleepin' in my bed."

I shook my finger at the audience in a mock-shaming motion.

"I was dreaming, but I should have been with you instead."

I made a big smile, pointed at the audience and moved back to center stage to hit my mark.

"Wake me up before you go go, don't leave me hanging on like a yo-yo."

I became a human yo-yo, awkwardly crouching down to the floor and springing back up with jazz hands unfurled.

I kept moving toward the audience and back to center stage using my imaginary V. Many fingers were snapped, a few more jumps made, and several spins were attempted.

"Wake Me Up (Before You Go-Go)" finished, forever being carved into my soul. I exited the stage quickly to bewildered applause, hoping to get out of the mall and into the car quickly. I didn't want to stop by the toy store or get an Icee. I just wanted to get back to Gonge's house where I could escape from embarrassment into anonymity again.

Matt came racing around the side of the food court toward me. It turns out he didn't go back to the bookstore, but he had been sitting with the rowdies near Orange Julius.

"That was awesome!" Matt said as he put his arm around me.

I never learned how the judges scored me on appearance, song choice and lip-sync ability. They did not call me back to California. Not surprisingly, *Puttin' on the Hits* was canceled shortly after my audition. The judges clearly couldn't spot true talent, even when it was sashaying right in front of them.

