

By GORDON POGODA

After writing songs for over twenty years, John Keller broke through with his multi-format #1 hit "Love Is," recorded by Vanessa Williams and Brian McKnight. The song was one of ASCAP's five most performed pop songs of 1993 and the #1 Adult Contemporary songs of the year. His songs combine soulful melodies with incisive lyrics. In the last few years he has written most frequently with Tonio K, with whom he wrote "Don't Look Back," the title cut of Wynonna Judd's new record. His other co-writers include Will Jennings, Wendy Waldman, David Was, Mark Mueller, Bob McDill, Bonnie Hayes, and Gerry Goffin.

His songs have been recorded by Aaron Neville, Rickie Lee Jones, The Four Tops, Sheena Easton, Vixen, and many others. Recently, he and Tonio wrote a Christmas song for Phoebe Snow for a world-music Christmas album.

He had his first hit when he was almost 40. "I had been writing since I was 16. I never thought about hits. You do it truly out of the love of music. I got my first staff writing gig at 26 at United Artists."

SongTalk: Your first cut was for K.C. and the Sunshine Band?

John Keller: Yeah, a song called "Go Now Before There's Trouble" which is a funky song that had the same feel as Bruce Springsteen's "Tenth Avenue Freezeout." Tina Turner cut the song with Richard Perry when she was making her comeback. She ended up not using Perry on that album, and the song got lost in the shuffle.

Tell me about writing with Tonio K.

Tonio is a gifted lyricist with a very unique and inimitable way of writing. What happens between me and Tonio is that I come up with the music first and usually record a track of it. He takes a track away to Idyllwild where he lives half the year and he writes the song in splendid isolation. That's been frustrating for me because I like to have more contact with him when I'm writing, but I'm not going to get in the way of something that works well. We joke about it all the time. It's a long distance relationship but I understand why he needs to be alone and I respect that. I usually do my best work alone as well. Tonio is a pleasure to be with. He's funny and relaxed and we have a good time.

How did the two of you write "Love Is"?

Tonio got the track and wrote the lyric. I had the idea for "Love breaks your heart" and kind of insisted that he take that phrase and write it around that. He didn't want to, initially. He thought it was a cliché. But I insisted upon it because I felt that that really captured what the song was about. In and of itself "Love breaks your heart" is a cliché. But sometimes, clichés can be good in pop music. For instance, what follows "Love breaks your heart." And that's "Love takes no less than everything." That's absolutely brilliant as far as I can tell. I love that line because it's so unexpected, and it's true.

I played the song for [my publisher] Jolene, and it moved her to tears. In the end, the really good songs have to come from a place that's real. To me, it always comes out of some kind of emotion or pain or frustration that I'm feeling.

Does it always come from a sad place, a dark place?

Not always a sad place. But it seems like my best stuff comes from my being in touch with my deepest emotions or my unconscious. And often these emotions come from sadness or anger. And I think that's why I started writing. It allowed me a positive way of expressing who I was. It seems to me the songs that are about some kind of conflict have more interest.

Do you think of "Love Is" as a sad song?

That's a good question, I don't know. When I was writing it, I just knew I was writing something good. It felt like — this all fits so beautifully.

The lyric takes you on a journey through the good and bad sides of love.

Well Tonio has always written about love from his own sarcastic and ironic outlook. He could never write a conventional love song. Underlying all his best work is an emotional honesty. If you look at "Love Is," the title really expresses what that song is about. Love is many things. It's good and wonderful and exciting, but it's also a real drag sometimes.

There's a sweet melancholy to "Love Is," a yearning. But there's also a feeling that it all makes sense. There's a resolution to it as well, or an inevitability to it. But, the duality of love is really what this song is about, and you hit on it.

I just love sad songs, songs that make me feel something. You know the songs that are just dashed off and the ones that are real. Like "The Times They Are A Changin'" by Bob Dylan is real. He believed those words, and so does the listener.

With "Love Is," I was writing a lot of songs at that time that had descending lines. My hands just fell on the keyboard in a certain way. They fell on that initial chord. And I went with that chord progression.

The bass line in "Love Is" descends chromatically by half-steps, which a number of songs do, but when it hits the augmented chord and some of the inversions of the other chords, it sounds fresh.

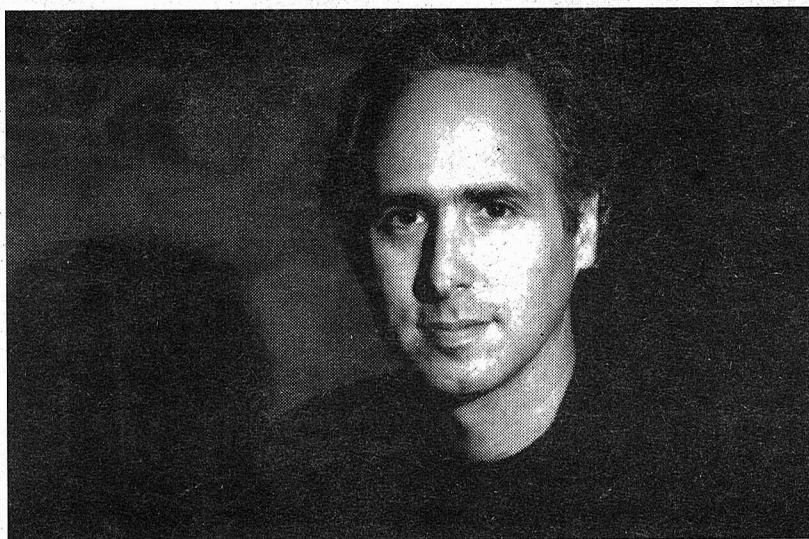
Right. There's nothing new under the sun except the way in which you express it. These chord changes have been written before but because of the way my hands, and this truly was accidental, fell on the keys, it made that descending line sound a little different. That's another key to being a good songwriter. It's being open to your so-called mistakes.

On the demo of "Love Is," the second line of the chorus has two different chords which are not on the record.

Right. That was a big issue. I complained and moaned about this to the amusement of my collaborator and publisher. Everyone kept saying, "Stop complaining. It's a hit. Leave it alone. It doesn't make any difference." Of course, it made all the difference in the world to me. Because that very inclusion of the substitution chord at the beginning of the second line was what made the chorus different. And you don't hear that on the record.

I was told by the producer of the song that Brian McKnight had made that decision, that he wanted it to go back to the first chord of the chorus because they thought it was more commercial or whatever.

I thought the production was first-rate, with the exception of excluding those chords. Maybe they thought that chord was a little left turn in the chorus, but to me, that's what gave the chorus something different. I would never have written it the way it's on record because I would have been bored.



Inside the Songs of John Keller

But the public wasn't bored.

I think the reason the public wasn't bored was because, despite the fact they did that, they could still hear the melody. But, a melody is enriched by the harmonies that underpin it. I hope that one day the song gets cut again and that I'll be able to influence whoever does it to do it the way it was meant to be.

After hearing the song so much on the radio, do the new chords seem more natural now?

No. I just think it sounds boring. The substitution chord in the chorus gave it a little musicality. So, unfortunately, I'll never like the record.

If you were to now play the original version for someone who already knows the song the other way —

Would they notice the difference? No, they don't notice it. But what matters is that I notice. The public didn't have an opportunity to choose what version they were going to get. So they're going to hear that version. That's the song to them. But I know what they're missing. The original way was more interesting. Even though it seems like a subtle difference, it's quite a big difference.

The title isn't in the song, and yet the title for the song makes sense.

That's Tonio refusing to do the obvious. He just doesn't think in an obvious way. We actually debated that title, too. We were wondering, "Is 'Love Is' the right approach?" It's never said in the song. But it does capture what the song is about.

With Tonio, and it's an interesting thing, not only with that title but with his lyrics, sometimes he'll present me a lyric to a song, and initially I won't get it. A day or two will go by and I'll go, "Oh wow, this is really good." Nowadays, I reserve judgment initially when I get one of his lyrics. I think he thought that calling the song "Love Breaks Your Heart" was too obvious. That might turn people off.

Plus, those words aren't in the second chorus which starts "Love breaks the chains." The song is about what love is.

That's true. Since "Love Breaks Your Heart" isn't the title, we could change the opening line of the second chorus. I like using alternate lines in succeeding choruses to break the monotony of songs. We thought about the title for a long time — Is "Love Is" going to confuse people? But I went with Tonio on the title.

Another element that goes against the grain in that song is that the lyric doesn't make reference to the specific couple until the second verse.

That's a technique that works well in this song. It's good to start out generally and then get more specific as the song goes on. I often talk to Tonio about the importance of being specific in a lyric, making the song about people, hopefully ourselves, drawing on real experience in hope that if it's real to us, it will be to those who listen.

How did the song get cut?

Jolene Cherry called Jeff Aldrich at Giant Records who was putting together the *Beverly Hills, 90210* soundtrack album. I thought it was a tacky mass marketing kind of thing. And I wasn't too excited initially. But that's part of the music business.

Do you think the marketing helped the song's success?

Yeah, it did. One of the things that got it off the ground was that it was coming from this successful TV show. But it was also the A&R people's enthusiasm.

So Jolene got it to Aldrich and Irving Azoff. Azoff thought it was a smash. I'd never gotten that kind of reaction on a song from an executive. But, that's really what it takes to make a song a hit.

You get people in positions of power like Irving Azoff and Jeff Aldrich saying that this is a great song. It filters down to promotion and all the other networks that actually get the song out. By word of mouth, a buzz is created about something. Suddenly, everyone's on it. They got Charlie Minor to promote that. I met him one day and he said, "This is going to be a smash." I would hear this from people and think, "How on earth do these guys know this months before it's coming out?"

So they sent it to Clive Davis to see about getting Curtis Stigers to do it. Clive said, "I don't think this is a hit. How about doing some of Curtis' songs?" I guess they figured it was an opportunity for Stigers to make more money.

Fortunately for me, everybody held the line and said, "No, we want 'Love Is.' If Curtis wants to do 'Love Is,' he's welcome to it." But Arista kept sending songs of his. And Giant kept rejecting them. Everyone so believed in "Love Is" that, finally, they gave up on Curtis. They only had two weeks to get someone else. Jolene had the idea of getting it to Vanessa Williams. When Vanessa said yes, then someone decided it should be a duet. Tom Vickers at Mercury suggested Brian McKnight. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise because Vanessa was coming off "Save the Best For Last".

"War of the Sexes" has an adult theme which is underscored by a toy piano sound.

That was the whole idea of the song. I wanted to give it a nursery rhyme quality because what goes on between men and women is really so childish. We may be older but we're no wiser than we were when we were kids. All these male/female problems start in the schoolyard. That's where one's identity is forged. That's why I consciously chose to make it a nursery rhyme kind of ballad.

Then the marching band snare comes in to enhance the war theme.

Yeah, it gives it a martial quality.

"Midnight is the blackest shade of blue" is an interesting concept.

I like "Blackest Shade of Blue." I wrote it with Larry Tagg of Bourgeois Tagg. This song has that kind of Byrds feel that I grew up loving and I don't do that often anymore.

How was "Don't Look Back" written?

I was struggling at this time to write. I didn't feel inspired. When this happens I try to listen to music that excites me, so I put on the tribute album to Arthur Alexander. He wrote some classic songs like "Anna" and "You Better Move On." It stirred me up. "Don't Look Back" came out almost as an homage to Arthur Alexander. This was a song that I knew right away was good. Partly its simplicity, which is so hard to do right, and the way the melody cries in the chorus. It comes from the gut.

I was mad at my wife for something and I just started singing about leaving. I wrote the first three lines of the chorus and Tonio wrote the rest.

After Wynonna heard the song, her arranger Don Potter said, "There's one good line after another." In the bridge it goes, "There's a time for everything including leaving. There's a time the heart admits defeat and starts its grieving." After Wynonna heard those lines, she said, "Amen."

And "I'll Love You Anyway"?

This song was influenced by Van Morrison's "Have I Told You Lately". That song has a lovely feeling to it, and I was consciously trying to write something that evoked that same feeling. Tonio's lyric perfectly captured the mood of the music. Jeff Aldrich heard the demo and loved it, and we got Aaron Neville to record it.

Rickie Lee Jones recorded a wonderful version of your song "Love Junkyard" [on Pop Pop], written with David Was.

It's an interesting song. David had the lyric, and I wrote the music. With David, his lyrics read more like poetry than a conventional song. So it was a special challenge to fit music around it. But I liked writing it because it forced me to think differently. When it was done, it so happened that David was producing Rickie Lee Jones, and her album [Pop Pop] was going to consist of outside material. The song happened to sound a bit like her so it seemed natural for her to do it.

The lyric has all these wonderful junkyard images as metaphors for love — dented bodies, broken souls, heaps and heaps of wedding rings. David's lyric sensibility is skewed, to say the least, which appeals to me. He's very sharp and funny.

Do you remember writing "Merry Christmas Baby"?

Yes. It was written with Tonio K. and recorded by Phoebe Snow. I was trying to write a Nat King Cole type of ballad. I love "The Christmas Song." It's my favorite Christmas song of all time.

I noticed it's in 6/8.

I've been writing a lot of these kind of songs — like "I'll Love You Anyway" — in 6/8. I got into a 6/8 thing. It's hard to shake sometimes. It bothers me actually because all you start writing for a time is 6/8 songs and you go, "You gotta stop waltzing."

How important are chord changes these days?

To me, chord changes are the great magic of music — I miss chord changes. So often you're not hearing that. Then you start thinking, "Am I just getting too old? Am I not being able to discern what's great about another generation or another kind of expression?" It's a real dicey territory because you want to be open-minded. Every generation has their own, individual way of expression which succeeding generations just cannot be accurate about. Great music comes out of every generation.

What advice would you give to outside songwriters, and is there a future for the traditional songwriter?

It's harder and harder ever since the day of the Beatles for traditional songwriters to compete because since that time, bands have often written their own songs. So the competition is much more fierce.

Many of the Tin Pan Alley songwriters have survived and flourished, such as Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, Carole King and Gerry Goffin and many others.

In an interview, Barry Mann recently said, "It's harder than ever for me to get a song cut." There's a continual tug of war between the published writers trying to get in on projects which is very hard to do.

My advice to songwriters is to keep learning, keep studying and don't go into it to become rich because you'll be most often disappointed. Do it because you love what you're doing. The uncertainty of the business is what drives people crazy. But the high you get when you do write something good is like nothing else. ★★