

Name

**A Southern Voice**

***by Andy Landis***

“I think anybody who has lost their momma thinks about her all the time,” says Maggi Vaughn, Tennessee’s longest-running poet laureate. “I know I do. I find myself asking Momma questions about this and that nearly every day since she passed away.” Margaret Britton Vaughn, known as Maggi, speaks with a slow southern drawl as she pushes herself back in her chair, cherishing a private thought about her mom. “She passed away in a nursing home. I’ll never forget it.”

Maggi tells her story with a rich, resonate voice. “The nurse told me to leave since I was real sick with pneumonia. Lord, she was worried about me, I guess. She promised to call me right away if Momma took a turn for the worse, sure Momma would make it through the night.” Maggi’s usually animated face grows still and soft as she remembers arriving home after a 30-minute drive only to get the call to come back to the hospital. Her mother was taking her last breaths. Maggi didn’t make it in time to see her mother leave this world and she has never really forgiven herself for it.

“If I had just stayed those few extra hours,” she opines, “I would have been with her when she died.” Maggi stops herself. There’s no use lamenting any longer. She’d done her best. Her mother loved her and wouldn’t want Maggi to feel guilty about anything. She changes the subject from her mother’s death to her mother’s life.

Maggi was only nine months old when her father, a fireman, was killed on the way to a fire. Her mother was pregnant at the time with their second child. In the blink of an eye, Maggi’s mother went from being a happy wife and expectant mother of a toddler to a widow with no benefits. Momma, as Maggi still calls her today, had to support a growing family but had no work experience. Mary Rebecca Vaughn got a job as the other women in the family pulled together and raised the kids as best they could. Maggi has ever since had a high regard for strong Southern women, working people, and single moms.

As a native of Tennessee, and having lived for many years even farther south in Mississippi, Maggi was shaped by such strong Southern women. “Everyone knows that, in the South, at a certain age all women become neurotic,” she says with a chuckle. “So there I was, raised by all these neurotic mommas. That’s why I’m so neurotic today. As neurotic as a person can get.” She throws back her head as she laughs, her horned rimmed black glasses slipping down her nose.

Maggi was a young woman when she became a professional songwriter in the late 1960s, when most of the world was divided over the war in Viet Nam. One night, as Maggi was working in a clothing store that shared space in a grocery store, numerous poems came to her about mothers, the South and life after death—all inspired by the songs Maggi learned in church. She loved those old southern gospel songs about heaven and sin and forgiveness. She loved the stories found in them, the simple messages of faith and the hope that we lived on in a better place—in a heaven where a God who loves us resides.

All night long during her shift at work, Maggi scribbled out recitations, inspired lyrics, on the backs of brown paper sacks at the cash register counter.

“Lord, people were walking out with all kinds of merchandise and I couldn’t have cared less,” Vaughn recounts with a laugh. The next day she was fired, but didn’t mind. “I knew I had something that was worth more than the job.”

Maggi was right.

A Nashville music publishing company, Surefire Music, offered Maggi a job as a songwriter. Soon, she found herself friends with Loretta Lynn and Minnie Pearl. The songs she had written were cut by singers like Earnest Tubb and Conway Twitty. Week after week, she heard them on the radio. And, best of all, she was getting paid! “It was a dream come true,” she smiles, remembering.

“Momma never thought being a songwriter was like having a real job. She always wanted my dreams to come true but being a songwriter was so far fetched in those days, it seemed impossible. But there I was, doing it.”

Doing it, she was, and in a day when women songwriters were few and far between. Women in the 1960s and 1970s almost always had to be songwriters who also sang and recorded their own songs to get a publishing deal. Maggi was one of very few women employed as a songwriter only.

“Lord Honey, I can’t carry a tune in a bucket,” she confesses with a gregarious cackle. Maggi is nothing if not self-effacing. It is one of her many gifts. “If I don’t make fun of myself, somebody else will,” she says. “Lord knows, you can count on that.”

Maggi knew she wanted to be a writer in the second grade, when she got in trouble at school for writing love notes to little boys. In the third grade, she wrote her first song, took it to her mother and said, “Mama, I want to be a songwriter and a poet.” Mama took one look at the piece, titled “Here I Sit Alone at the Bar,” and said, “Are you sure you don’t want to be a nurse?” Maggi laughs out loud as she remembers her mother’s words.

Recently, the lyrics Maggi wrote on those brown paper sacks were found after having been lost during a move decades ago. They’d been recorded back in 1969 and 1972 on the old reel-to-reel method of recording. Maggi was sorting through boxes when she found them, yellowed and covered with dust. She called me, her friend, Andy Landis. Because I believed the recitations should be rescued and preserved for the sake of women’s history and all things Southern, my little company, Shiny Penny Productions, and the Tennessee Arts Commission collected Maggi’s recitations on a two-CD set available for anyone who longs to remember mothers, family, and the days gone by. The project is aptly titled, Southern Voice.

As the Poet Laureate of Tennessee, Maggi travels to schools, colleges and town halls across the country. Driving south to Florida, west to New Mexico and as far north as New York, she speaks of Southern culture, music and mommas.

“Once, after several of us had read poems about all sorts of things, I sat next to a real high-brow poet who’d written about the dark shadows of despair,” Maggi says with a hint of goodnatured sarcasm. “We were signing our books after having been up on stage for our presentation. Well, honey, he and I look out into a crowd of people and the whole line was waiting to buy my books and talk to me. So I leaned over to that academic poet and said, ‘Honey, maybe if you’d write some poems about your momma, you could sell some books!'"

These days Maggi spends time writing about what she has always written about and thinking about what is still true for her today. “It’s in the ear,” Maggi says. “It’s all in how you hear things. Music taught me that. Country music taught me how to write. And when I hear them laughing and crying, Lord, I know I’ve done my job.”

Although I agree with her, I think there is more to it than that. It’s also in the heart. And Maggi has more than her fair share of that. Hers is a big, robust, heart full of friends, music, laughter and tears. Hers is a heart that is alive, a heart that is overflowing with memories of and stories about her momma.

**Mama Got Her New Mansion Today**  
*It seems like only yesterday, I could hear Mama say  
We’re going to have our own home soon, one with a fireplace in every room.  
And Mama tried to save for better days, but it’s hard when there’s kids to raise.  
Somehow every nickel she saved we spent, while we did good to pay the rent.  
But as always, God provided a way, for Mama got her new mansion today.  
No, we never did get to buy that home, it took all our money just to get a loan.  
You see Dad passed away years ago, and she had to be a father also.  
And when she did save a little, why, it would never fail, one of us would step on a rusty nail.  
Mama used to laugh and say with cheer, she’d put the doctor’s duty through school last year.  
But as always, God provided the way, Mama got her new mansion today.  
I know there’s a fireplace in every room, and she finally got her garden where a rose would bloom.  
And the company she keeps are loved ones she once knew, and I’m sure the Master drops in on her, too.  
Yes, as always, God provided the way, for Mama got her mansion today.*

**The Lord Had A Little Help**  
*Now I sure thank the Lord for letting me breathe today,  
For letting me walk about and for teaching me how to pray.   
But you know the Lord was helped a little by others.   
Yes, the Lord had a little help and we know them as mothers.  
Now I want to thank the Lord for the food I’m about to eat,   
For the clothes I’m wearing and for the shoes on my feet.   
But you know the Lord was helped a little by others.   
Yes, the Lord had a little help and we know them as mothers.  
Now I want to thank the Lord for teaching me to work,   
For easing the pain whenever I was hurt.   
But you know the Lord was helped a little by others.  
Yes, the Lord had a little help and we know them as mothers.  
Now I want to thank the Lord for my Christian home,   
For taking away my doubts and fears to never walk alone.   
But you know the Lord was helped a little by others.   
Yes, the Lord had a little help and we know them as mothers.*