







by Joe Hagan

# Dear Charlie

**I**n August of 1974, a teenaged girl, named Tara after the plantation in her mother's favorite movie, wrote a three-page letter to a forty-one-year-old man. Alone in her bedroom in Ludowici, Georgia, she traced careful floral cursive letters with a blue pen on lined notebook paper. An LP spun on her record player. *Hey*, the man said to her, *did you happen to see the most beautiful girl in the world?*

The man looked out from the record cover: silver-white hair flowing to his shoulders, sturdy jaw with sideburns, large-brimmed hat shading his deep-set eyes against a lowering sun. He was pensive, mysterious, vulnerable. He was Charlie Rich—P.O. Box 3510, Hollywood, California, 90028.

Dear Charlie,

The first thing I want to say is: I hope to god this letter gets to you. From the first time I ever heard your record, "The Most Beautiful Girl," I thought it was the prettiest song I ever heard . . . I see your picture in magazines + your a very nice looking man. Your my favorite country + western singer. You have a beautiful voice + I love to hear you sing. I used to cry when I heard "The Most Beautiful Girl" (T.M.B.G) . . . I guess that song just got to me.

Well, to tell you about my self. I'm 15 years old, blonde hair, past the shoulders, green eyes + I weigh about 128 to 130 pounds. I'm about 5'4 feet tall. People tell me I look the age of 19. It's really a compliment to me . . . I start school in a few days, in which I'll be in the 11th grade. I'm fixing to get married to a 21-year-old guy named Donald McGowan. I love him very much + my mother thinks I don't know what love is, but I've tried to tell her I do know what it is . . .

We've had a lot of family problems involving my boyfriend Donald. My mother told me if something didn't work out between us + we couldn't get married, she said not to ever come back to her house again. [My father is not living. He died when I was 14 years old (drinking problems).]

So every night, I cry, and I think of how much I'm hurting my mother. I just wonder if we do break up, I guess I'll be left out in the cold somewhere in the streets, no place to go, no money or whatever. Well, I doubt you want to hear my problems, but I'm the type of person that has to tell someone my problems and have them help me solve them. I'm the type of person who likes older men because I feel as though I was an adult, too.

I've just got a very mixed up life.

Tara's confession to Charlie Rich, a major country star that year, was among forty-two others I discovered in the home of a woman who produced Rich in the 1960s. Unread for nearly forty years, mixed in with yellowing newspaper clips and old drink coasters from a Las Vegas revue, they were the last known remnants of the Charlie Rich Fan Club. Variouly handwritten, typed up, set on stationery and notebook paper, the stash contained the intimate pleas and declarations of fans who sought communion with the star known as "The Silver Fox."

I had stumbled upon the inner life of Tara for the same reason she wrote her letter in 1974. I felt drawn to Charlie Rich. For me, he was part of the landscape of family road trips in the late 1970s, lonely days driving with my parents in a VW van through the muggy Southeast in

summer, across Louisiana and Alabama, up to the Carolinas and Virginia, as my father, a Coast Guard officer, moved me and my sisters from one military station to another. In memory, the sun sets in a Polaroid-orange glow over an Interstate horizon as the opening piano rolls of "Behind Closed Doors" come through the radio. Years later, Charlie Rich's voice seemed to plumb some blue depth in me, a subterranean loneliness. But he was long dead by then and, unlike Tara, I was in thrall to a forgotten singer, left to chase a ghost: Charlie Rich, the tragic soul man whose legacy was largely forgotten after his brief period of fame. He was a major American artist whose life had traced the history of rock & roll, r&b, and soul; the definitive missing link between Elvis Presley and Ray Charles.

The fan letters were messages in a bottle, notes by kindred spirits washed ashore from

many Americas ago: a twelve-year-old girl living in Wisconsin who colored a picture of herself in a field of flowers; a forty-year-old from Massachusetts who liked to "visualize what kind of person you are when I listen to your records"; a teenager from California who bursts off the page: "Do you think that we can write to each other all the time if you have the time! Oh! 'Behind Closed Doors' is on!! Well it's over. Well I bet you have a bunch of letters to read so please write back."

The letters are all from women, some of whom lived along the highway exits of my childhood travels, isolated pockets of America off Interstates 81 and 65, where hazy days passed in slow motion while the TV flickered game shows and the radio "spit out Charlie Rich," as Tom Waits sang in 1975, "Man, he sure can sing that son of a bitch." Fans read about Charlie Rich in *Country Music* magazine or in fly-by-night gossip rags like *TV Radio Mirror*, which was lined, page after page, with ads for "massage wands," miracle diets, and astrology books. "Is it true the amazing secret of TELECULT POWER automatically brings you anything you desire? . . . See for yourself!!!"

In his quietly wounded voice, Rich came across as a soul survivor, a rugged country romantic with a plush blues for a culturally weather-beaten time. In "Behind Closed Doors," he was a sturdy, faithful man whose affections privately smoldered, more powerful for being hidden from view.

My baby makes me proud  
Lord, don't she make me proud  
She never makes a scene  
By hanging all over me in a crowd

But when we turn down the lights, he sang, the rest was "behind closed doors," leaving the listeners to fill in their own fantasies. And they did. A letter from fourteen-year-old Kim Baumgardner of Cincinnati, Ohio, describes an elaborate dream in which Charlie Rich performs on a "floating platform" on a pond near her house. "I wanted to talk to you and it drove me crazy that you were so far away so I went in after you," she wrote. "I got up to the raft and you jumped off and started swimming and I kept saying wait Mr. Rich I wanta talk to ya and you wouldn't listen so I got mad and I said I have 7 albums of you and I worship the ground you walk on." At this, Charlie Rich swam over to her:

We went into the [apartment] and you dried off and put your other clothes on and we sat down at the kitchen room table and you said what do you want to talk about + I said well nothing I needed an excuse to get up close to you and you started laughing and I said what's so funny and you said well for a while I thought you were going to say something nice like I love you or your really tuff looking, cause girls come up to me and say that all the time . . . then you said come over here and sit on my knee. I came over and you came real close and I thought you were going to kiss me and I said please do and you did kiss me and it sure was something.

For Kim and other fans, Charlie Rich seemed as vivid and real as if he were in the room, fresh out of the local pond. But Charlie Rich was a cipher. A sullen introvert who pursued fame reluctantly and spent much of his life battling alcoholism, he was both more and less than the man they heard on the radio, channeling not just his own blues, but those of the actual woman behind closed doors with Charlie: the long-suffering partner who was instrumental in harnessing his talent and saving him from himself, his wife Margaret Ann Rich.

Charlie and Margaret Ann were high school sweethearts from rural Arkansas whose lives were turned upside down by the music coming from nearby Memphis in the 1950s. They met when Charlie, riding on a white horse, discovered Margaret Ann and her father cutting down a Christmas tree on his family property. She was ten and Charlie was twelve. They became a startlingly beautiful couple: Charlie, the six-foot-two linebacker with a square jaw and well-oiled pompadour; Margaret Ann, a raven beauty, part Native American, with jet-black hair and brown eyes.

The son of Baptist sharecroppers, Charlie learned blues piano from a black field hand named CJ and seemed to burrow into the keys, his long, delicate fingers percolating with blue notes and mellifluous gospel runs. He was introverted and odd, so painfully shy and insecure about his rural poverty that he had to drink to perform in front of others. Margaret Ann, the daughter of a butcher in nearby Forrest City, was a charming and outgoing singer, Charlie's de facto social front and musical soulmate. They were the only two kids in their school to subscribe to *Downbeat* magazine, and when they married, right out

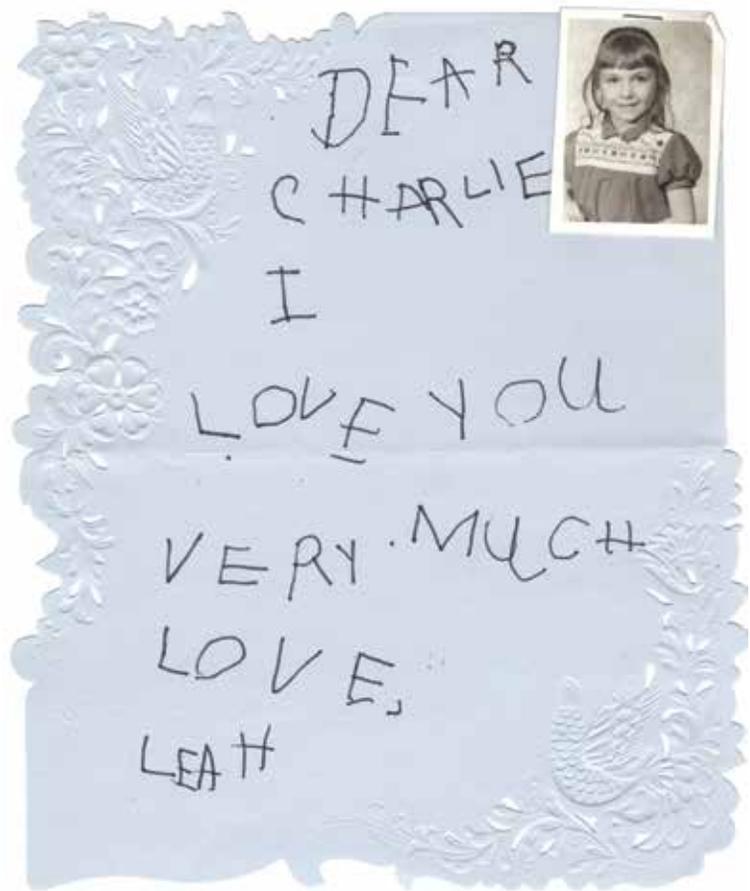
of high school, they spent all their money on LPs, digging Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, Stan Kenton.

Charlie didn't discover singing until he was twenty-two, when he was playing piano with a jazz group called the Velvetones that featured Margaret Ann on vocals. He tried singing a blues one night when the band was out of material. Margaret Ann was amazed—but also a little stung, since as a result she was effectively demoted in the group. She instead became Charlie's musical collaborator and biggest booster.

After some college and a stint in the Air Force, Charlie tried farming for a year, but wasn't interested. He liked to fish and hunt and play piano, and that was it. Ambitious and self-assured, Margaret Ann took charge, taking his demos to Sun Records in 1957 in an attempt to capitalize on the Elvis Presley craze, landing him an audition. "I left our three children at home with a babysitter, crossed the river, and went to Sun," she once told an interviewer. "I brought a tape of Charlie that we had made at home." After listening

to him burn up the piano with jazz riffs, Sun's arranger Bill Justis famously handed Charlie a Jerry Lee Lewis record and said, "Come back when you get that bad."

For Sun, Charlie became house piano man, stablemates with Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee, but only wrote and performed one hit of his own, "Lonely Weekends," in 1960. He struggled to earn a living, playing small clubs every night, drinking and smoking constantly and sometimes not coming home at all. When Charlie left Sun in 1963, Margaret Ann and their kids were left with a man who had a bad drinking problem, no money, and not a spark of ambition. He was thirty-two. What Charlie did have was talent and a wife desperate for him to succeed in the music business. So Margaret Ann turned her entire life, the love and the heartache of it, into raw material for Charlie to sing. The radio hits that made Charlie famous in 1974, that inspired Tara and Kim to pour their hearts out, were produced in Nashville and written by professional songwriters. But the emotional truth behind them was written





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years before that, two hundred miles away, back in Memphis.

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Behind the glass, the record popped out of a circular carousel and fell on the platter, the tone arm of the 1962 Rock-Ola jukebox jerking into place and lowering to the groove. The crackle of vinyl heightened our pulse. Here was the song that drew me to Memphis: “Pass on By,” a slow, humid lament, set to gritty Memphis r&b, with a horn section that melted to drip-feed drums and landed on a bed of chest-deep bass. Charlie Rich’s voice, quivering with gospel blues, had instantly upended my idea of him as a smooth country balladeer from Nashville. The lyrics, written not by Nashville pros but by Margaret Ann Rich, expressed, in a tone of resigned fatalism, the acceptance of love over ambition and success.

Fame, how you tempt me  
My heart beats faster  
But not as fast as when I hear my lover’s  
name  
Goodbye fame, pass on by

The track was from a relatively rare album, recorded in 1966 and not released in full until the late 1980s. I was startled to learn that it was recorded at Hi Records in Memphis, the black soul label where the legendary albums by Al Green were later cut. I knew almost nothing about the recording except that it was produced by one “N. Rosenberg.”

Peter Guralnick, the great Elvis biographer, had solved the mystery by directing me to a 75-year-old woman named Natalie Rosenberg who was living outside Memphis. And so here I was, a few months later, in Natalie’s ranch-style home, on a shady lane in Germantown, listening to “Pass on By” on her Rock-Ola, a time-piece filled with all the 45s she had produced of local r&b acts and garage bands—including a black girl group called the Passions, who were singing backup for Charlie on that song.

Her den was a Memphis memory room, festooned with posters and photographs of Elvis and Charlie, backstage passes and trophies from her career in local radio, and a framed gold record for Charlie’s 1974 album *A Very Special Love Song*. The fan letters were tucked in with stacks of old magazine profiles of Charlie. No one had asked her about “Pass on By” since it

was cut, she told me, and nobody asked her about Charlie Rich anymore either. So while the jukebox played, Natalie smiled at me with her blue, twinkly eyes, like a long lost friend, both of us marveling at this song that had brought two strangers together.

Natalie became my guide to the lost world of Charlie Rich. But it wasn’t easy for her to relive the past. Her friends Charlie and Margaret Ann were dead, and she had long ago divorced Charlie’s manager, Seymour Rosenberg, who died in 2011. Fifty years ago, Natalie and Seymour were just local music fans, rare white faces who ventured to black juke joints in West Memphis to see Little Anthony and the Imperials or Little Richard. A lawyer and musician, Sy made his name in the music business by helping artists sue Sun Records founder Sam Phillips for unpaid royalties, starting with Charlie Rich in 1963. Together, Sy and Natalie, and Charlie and Margaret Ann, had formed a kind of pact: to make Charlie Rich, the quiet, moody, but intensely talented singer and pianist, into a hit maker.

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What followed was a series of misses. Producers in Nashville struggled to find the right songs and style for Charlie, trying to bridge his elastic talents to the going fads. At Groove Records, an RCA subsidiary, Chet Atkins attempted to turn him into a smooth, over-produced balladeer, sanding down his blues inflections and whitewashing him with choral backup singing. In 1965, Charlie left and signed to Smash Records, where producer Jerry Kennedy set his soulful vibrato and belting blues vocals against a rock & soul dance sound that borrowed liberally from Elvis, Motown, and the burgeoning big beat music on TV shows like *Shindig!* (where he appeared with the Kinks and Bobby Sherman). Charlie and Margaret Ann wrote most of the songs on his two Smash albums, but scored a hit with a Tom Jones song, “Mohair Sam,” a novelty number that later became a historical footnote when Elvis Presley played a bass guitar along to it the day the Beatles came to his Los Angeles estate for a visit (according to one version of events, they joined in on the jam). To the Riches and Rosenbergs it seemed Charlie’s moment had arrived. But the follow-up, “Can’t Go On,” a driving, jazz-inflected soul song, failed to chart. Sy

got crossways with record executives and the label dropped Charlie.

Along the way, Sy co-founded American Studios, the legendary soul music studio, with Chips Moman, the producer who eventually recorded the Box Tops, Dusty Springfield, and Elvis Presley’s 1969 homecoming, “From Elvis in Memphis.” It was at American that Natalie befriended a talented teenage songwriter who hung around the studio, Isaac Hayes. He was American’s first customer, recording a demo called “Laura, We’re on Our Last Go-Round.” To earn money, Hayes babysat Natalie’s young children.

In 1966, when Charlie Rich was at a nadir in his career, Sy moved him to Hi Records, a small-time local studio, and Natalie brought Isaac Hayes in so Charlie could take a shot at one of his songs, “When Something Is Wrong With My Baby.” As Natalie recalls, the backing band was composed of legendary session players from Stax and Hi—the Memphis Horns, Andrew Love and Wayne Jackson, along with Tommy Cogbill on bass and Willie Hall on drums. Hayes sat next to Charlie at the piano and taught him the song before they recorded it in one take. For “Pass on By,” Sy Rosenberg himself blew a meandering trumpet solo in the background.

The Hayes track was never released, and “Pass on By” was issued as a single and went nowhere. Hi opted out of doing a soul album and instead had Charlie cut a torpid album of Hank Williams covers to fulfill his contract. Six months later, Sam & Dave made “When Something Is Wrong With My Baby” into a hit for Stax Records.

It was a bleak time. Charlie and Margaret Ann fought constantly, tortured by the internal conflict of their lives: her desire for Charlie to make it in a business that was destructive to him, though probably the only thing he was qualified to do. By then, Margaret Ann had been forced to take the children, who now numbered four, to central Arkansas to live with her father, who had a steady job. Charlie regularly commuted two hours to Memphis to play in clubs for meager pay. “People looked at him in a very poor light,” recalled Allan Rich, their first son, when I spoke to him. “Some of the older teenagers, when I was nine or ten, would tell me what a loser my dad was. Didn’t have a real job. What do you say? Get me out of here.”

Charlie would sometimes bring Allan to clubs along the river in Memphis, sneaking him in the back door so he could see what his

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father did for a living. At age ten, Allan would marvel at the rowdy crowds as his dad drank up all the night's profits and played long improvisational piano runs that mixed boogie-woogie, classical, and jazz, liberated from the confines of commercial pop. "He'd slip me a brandy Alexander every now and then," he said. "I thought, 'This is alright.'"

Back home, Margaret Ann held the family together, substitute teaching in Allan's school and writing ballads that managed to spin gold from the wreck of Charlie Rich, most purely in "A Field of Yellow Daisies," from the 1965 Smash album, *Many New Sides of Charlie Rich*. Shrouded in a Phil Spector-ish echo and set to a slow, dramatic tambourine beat reminiscent of the Ronettes, Charlie sang Margaret Ann's words with a focused intensity.

Have you ever been in a field of yellow  
daisies  
Where the air is warm, pure and sweet  
Just as if the world is at your feet?  
She loved me, she loved me not  
The daisies didn't lie  
They knew better than I she'd go away . . .

As with "Pass on By," the lyrics expressed the yearning pain of thwarted desire. And Charlie interpreted them with unusually powerful feeling, elevating the lines with a soaring soul cry. But as I soon discovered, the thwarted desire was not that of Charlie Rich, but of Margaret Ann.

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**W**hen Natalie's memory of the r&b sessions reached its limits, she sent me to a man who might know more: Boo Mitchell, the son of Willie Mitchell, the legendary producer behind Al Green's hits for Hi Records in the 1970s. (As it happens, Charlie Rich and Al Green had lived on adjacent farms in Arkansas in the 1950s.) At Royal Studios, where Charlie recorded "Pass on By," Boo greeted me with an easy and gracious charm, hair pulled back in a ponytail, showing me around the cavernous, bare-bones facility. Having grown up around the classic soul recordings, Boo had absorbed his father's musical legacy and was lifelong friends with the players behind the famous albums. When he listened briefly to the Charlie Rich recordings, he could identify who was playing on the tracks made almost

fifty years ago. He picked up his iPhone and commanded it to "call Teenie Hodges," the Memphis guitar player and member of the Hi Rhythm Section who played on Al Green's classic recordings, including "Take Me to the River," which he co-wrote.

"I got a history question for you," Boo said. "Did you play on any Charlie Rich stuff here?" Pause. "You did?"

I got excited.

"Oh!" he said, turning to me and covering the receiver. He had solved the mystery of the guitar track: "It's Teenie."

"You know who played piano on that Charlie Rich stuff?" he asked. "Oh, it's Charlie playing! Excuse me. I forgot about that." And then a pause and the knowing laughter of gossip.

"Straight up, really?" he asked, laughing.

Boo told me I needed to call a woman named Bettye Berger, a former Memphis booking agent who still lives in town. "She was dating Charlie, according to Teenie," he said. "I'm sorry, what did you say, Teenie?"

I could hear Teenie describing Bettye—a bombshell.

"Yeah, I heard she was sharp," said Boo, gracefully. "What a world, what a world . . ."

Memphis, I was learning, is a small town.

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**I**n the 1960s, Bettye Berger was a Marilyn Monroe look-alike, blonde and sexy, and attracted to musicians. She had dated Elvis Presley, twice. In 1963, after she divorced her first husband, she met Charlie Rich. At the time, Margaret Ann and Charlie were separated. "He lived a block from where I live now," recalled Bettye, now 81. "He was doing a show at the club called the Nightlighter."

The affair continued on and off throughout the 1960s, with Charlie occasionally staying at Bettye's house after late nights at a gig. "He liked to listen to music, mostly to Ray Charles," she said. "He would play Ray Charles at my house over and over again. When I hear those songs, which I did yesterday, I shiver."

Margaret Ann suspected Charlie's infidelity when he stayed overnight in Memphis and was tortured by rumors of his dalliances. Charlie would always return to her, wracked with guilt over his family. "He was brought up in the church," said Natalie. "That had a lot to do with it. And he loved his children.

The relationship could be fabulous when they wrote their songs. And Margaret Ann knew how to push his buttons."

"It was a complex relationship that took way too many turns, good and bad," she added. "With mine and Seymour's compassion and involvement, they stayed together."

Allan Rich told me that his father was both worshipful of and intimidated by Margaret Ann, emphasizing to him on trips together that she was "the smart one." "He made a big point about that on the road, almost ad nauseum," he recalled. "He wanted his kids to know that their mother was special."

"She could get really kind of nasty with Dad," he said. "Then they'd come together and write a beautiful song. They pushed each other and, creatively, it was magical."

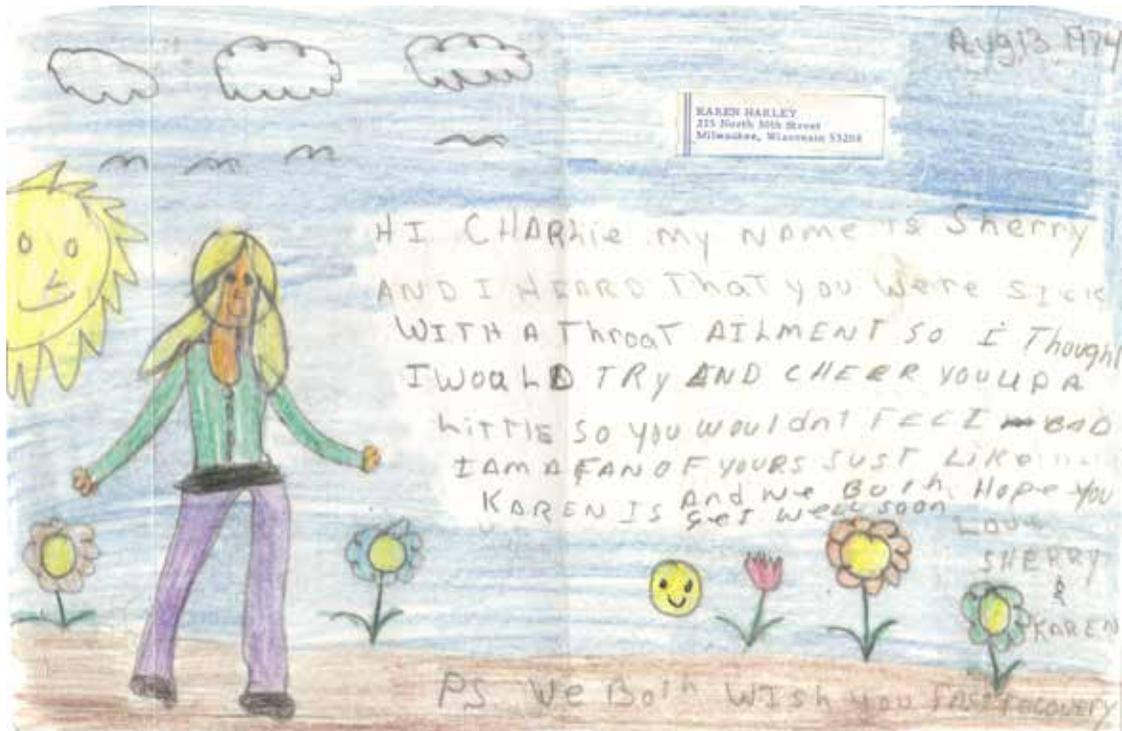
Of the songs Margaret Ann wrote for Smash in the mid-60s, her ballad "The Best Years," credited to "M. A. Rich," seemed to channel her own point of view into Charlie's voice. The burden of singing her words comes out in quivers of hurt:

I never thought I'd see the day  
When your love would go astray  
I've lost the best years, the best years  
of my life  
Goodbye to all those years

After failing to break out at Hi Records, Charlie was in need of money and joined Bettye's booking agency, Continental Artists, whose clients included Jerry Lee Lewis, with the understanding that he would work with Ray Brown, Bettye's partner in the business, to avoid antagonizing Margaret Ann. Bettye had got a call from Sam Phillips saying Charlie needed cash and Bettye agreed to loan Charlie \$2,000 against his bookings. He came to her house with Margaret Ann to get the check and Margaret Ann drove to a nearby grocery store to cash it. "I made some coffee," Bettye remembered. "I said, 'Charlie, what do you want in your coffee?'"

He gave her a look that she still remembers. "He said, 'You know what I like in my coffee,'" she recounts, blushing at the memory. "I said, 'God, let's not do it here.'"

Charlie lived in fear of being discovered by Margaret Ann—and inevitably he was. "He took me to this place where he fished," Bettye said. "Middle of the night and it was dark and there was mud and stuff. When we got back to my house, she found us there. She



sent somebody to see who was in my driveway and she found out.”

“I started to cry,” she recalled. “Charlie said, ‘Who are you crying for, me or her or you?’ I said, ‘I’m crying for all of us.’”

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In 1967, Charlie got yet another shot when he was signed to Epic Records. Nashville producer Billy Sherrill, whose name would become synonymous with George Jones and Tammy Wynette in the 1970s, began the process of transforming him into a star, one song at a time. Sherrill was not a country music fan, but a pragmatic producer whose goal was to create modern hits for Nashville. A former sound engineer for Sam Phillips, his personal influences ran to Frank Sinatra and Phil Spector’s “wall of sound.” In Charlie, Sherrill saw a chance to create a crossover act, a “country-politan” production that married sophisticated r&b to what he considered wooden hillbilly music. Ironically, one of his first directions, and a fateful one, was to take Charlie off the piano. “He played too jazzy,” Sherrill said. “He would do stuff to confuse the other players. He was in his own little world.” (Sherrill told me he only let Charlie play piano on one track in the 1970s: his definitive version of “Nice ‘n’ Easy.”)

One of their initial attempts at a hit was the

1969 song “Life Has Its Little Ups & Downs,” in which Sherrill tried passing off a Memphis soul song as a country ballad, with Stax-like guitar licks by Jerry Kennedy, by then a session guitarist, and a slow, rolling piano by Nashville studio legend Pig Robbins, who closely approximated Charlie’s style for his albums. “Life Has Its Little Ups & Downs” was the last major song by Margaret Ann that Charlie recorded before Sherrill began edging her out of the creative process and dominating Charlie’s career. And once again, it was a song about love’s fortitude against failure. It is by far the most soulful, emotionally naked song Charlie Rich ever put to tape, a personal testimony in which Margaret Ann accepts Charlie’s failure, and Charlie honors her patience and love with fidelity.

Margaret Ann had high hopes for the song (that year, she named her publishing company Makamillion), but it was rejected by country radio. Station managers, Sherrill said, “wanted to play Charlie, but a lot of them were afraid to play Charlie. A bunch of them got feedback like ‘Why are you playing this r&b guy on a country station?’”

One night, at a party for Epic records, Margaret Ann met Clive Davis, the president of CBS, Epic’s parent company, who had made the careers of Janis Joplin and Earth, Wind, and Fire. She charmed him, arguing passionately that Charlie Rich should be his next big star.

“She had no qualms about laying it out,” Allan Rich recalled, “why she thought he should make it, why she thought he hadn’t made it.”

After that, he says, things began to happen. In 1973, Charlie hit pay dirt with “Behind Closed Doors,” a song written by Kenny O’Dell that, according to legend, Charlie fished out of the trashcan in Billy Sherrill’s office. It reached number one on the country charts and stayed there for sixteen weeks, and the Nashville elite hailed Charlie as a new superstar, naming him entertainer of the year at the CMA awards. CBS offered Charlie a salary of \$500,000 a year in bookings. “The next thing we knew, it was like this big wave just started pushing the family,” Allan said. “Everything he did was right. The hit just made—it changed the world in a very fast way.”

Sy Rosenberg was quick to exploit the success, setting up an investment unit called Charlie Rich Enterprises, acquiring a private plane with “The Silver Fox” stenciled on the side, and hiring a bodyguard for Charlie. A heavy media and touring schedule began and Sy picked out a house for the Riches in Memphis because Charlie didn’t have time to do it himself. To furnish it, Natalie spent \$25,000 in one day.

They were heady times. Bob Dylan was on the record calling Charlie his favorite singer. And according to Elvis Presley’s close confi-

dante, George Klein, Elvis rode an elevator with Charlie after a Memphis football game in 1974, and told him, “You know, Charlie, I’m glad the rest of the world has found out what I have known for a long, long time—that Charlie Rich is one hell of a talent.”

Perhaps predictably, Charlie’s drinking problem got worse. He would morph into a Mr. Hyde character he himself dubbed “Sanchez.” “That wasn’t me, that was Sanchez,” he would joke about his drunken jags. “Charlie was ‘Behind Closed Doors’; Sanchez was everything else,” said Bill Williams, the publicist at Epic and Charlie’s strongest advocate at the label. “He was as reluctant a star as I’ve ever known. He had a real self-destructive side to him.”

Anxious about an appearance on the Burt Reynolds Late Show in 1973, Charlie took tranquilizers and drank liquor before going on and was barely able to mumble answers to questions by guest Dinah Shore. Margaret Ann and Natalie gave him an ultimatum and he entered rehab, beginning a period of relative sobriety. After he spent several weeks with Dr. David Knott, who would also try, and fail, to save Elvis Presley from his addiction to painkillers, he returned refreshed and straight for the first time in years. “Charlie stayed sober for two and a half years,” Natalie told me. “During which time he made probably \$10 million.”

“When we talk about the women behind the men,” she said, “that was exactly what happened. It’s like handling nitroglycerin. The women behind the scenes never get the credit. The things that we did that really saved his life.”

For a while, Charlie was clearheaded and healthy. And he seemed to enjoy the fame, especially at the end of concerts, when the crowd roared with approval. “When he stood up, you could see a smile on his face,” recalls Natalie. “It’s like being at the top of the mountain and you forget how you got there. All the trials.”

Williams, his publicist, was charged with motivating him and keeping him off the booze. But the music business seemed to make Charlie miserable. For a magazine profile in 1974, he returned to his old farm in Arkansas to visit CJ, the black field hand who taught him to play piano, joined by Williams, Epic executive Dan Beck, a reporter named Carol Offen, and a female photographer, Raeanne Rubenstein. Offen recalls that Charlie was tortured by his heavy schedule, showing her on his calendar where he’d penciled in “Make love to Margaret Ann.”

The only way to cope with touring, he told

her, “is with pills and booze and that kind of crap—and I don’t want to live the rest of my life like that, and why should I?”

Visiting CJ at his dilapidated shack in rural Arkansas, Charlie seemed as happy as anybody had seen him, with a “beatific smile on his face.” CJ, in a blue porkpie hat and suspenders, started fingering the blues on his out-of-tune piano, singing a B. B. King song. “That’s it! That’s where you put the hex on me, right there!” Charlie yelled out. “Now, you talk about some *soul!*”

He told Offen it was the first time he’d relaxed in four years.

What began as a tightly controlled PR junket soon turned into a beer-soaked misadventure, going from a local house party in the afternoon to a pizza parlor at midnight, where Charlie, getting increasingly smashed, asked that they play the somber “Feel Like Going Home,” the B side to “Behind Closed Doors,” on the jukebox over and over again. By “home,” he didn’t mean back in suburban Memphis with Margaret Ann, but on his old property in Colt, Arkansas. There, Charlie brooded in a muddy field at 3 A.M. while the rest of the group—

which now included the Lebanese pizza parlor owner, Najeeb—were attacked by swarms of mosquitos. While the others ran back to the van for cover, Charlie and Najeeb built a campfire and enjoyed the stars until dawn. As the sun came up, Charlie yawped, “God, how I love this fuckin’ place!”

When they returned at dawn to the driveway of Charlie’s house, twenty-four hours later, Charlie covered in mud, Bill Williams told the writer and photographer to hide in the bushes to protect them from Margaret Ann’s wrath.

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The next year, Sy rolled out a major show for Charlie at the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas, produced by Natalie, who hired a stage instructor to teach Charlie how to come out from behind the piano and walk around with a microphone. He never looked quite right doing it, pacing back and forth in sequined outfits. But the shows were successful, attended by celebrities like Charo and Ernest Borgnine and Doris Day. Margaret

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Ann reveled in the glamour, arriving to the premiere in a sweeping purple dress with a feather boa and a large, sequined hat. "She looked gorgeous," recalled Natalie.

But it didn't last. When Charlie was asked to announce the next Country Music Entertainer of the Year in 1975, he arrived on the stage slurring his words and mumbling jokes, clearly drunk or high on pills. The TV cameras caught the look of panic on the faces of Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn, who were both nominees. As Charlie announced the winner, John Denver, he pulled out a cigarette lighter and set the envelope on fire.

Charlie was blackballed by Nashville for the televised embarrassment and his career began to fade soon after. Sy Rosenberg told the press that Charlie's behavior resulted from an illness related to "a badly infected insect bite on the foot." Margaret Ann briefly filed for divorce on grounds of "cruel and inhuman treatment." "They'd argue and fight and they'd make up," Williams recalled. "It was a routine that repeated itself over and over again."

Sy had set Charlie up financially by invest-

ing in the Wendy's hamburger chain. Money would never be a problem again. But Sy, also swallowed up by the success, left Natalie for a younger woman in 1976. Infuriated by the infidelity, Margaret Ann cut off ties with him, ending the fifteen-year partnership of Charlie and Margaret Ann, Sy and Natalie.

In Peter Guralnick's classic profile that year, "Silver Fox at Bay," Charlie sits silently smoking Salems while Margaret Ann frets about the "tragedy" of losing her creative partnership with her husband. Billy Sherrill had pushed her out of the production process, bringing in his own writers and co-writing some of the songs himself. Margaret Ann calls Charlie's alcohol addiction "a familiar hell" she'd grown used to. "We rarely ever have a good time together," she tells Guralnick. "Rarely."

"His broad melancholy face," he writes of Charlie, "always has a slightly hurt look about it."

Bill Williams was crestfallen as Charlie's records became increasingly waterlogged with strings and maudlin ballads. Williams had pushed for a duet album with Ray Charles, to

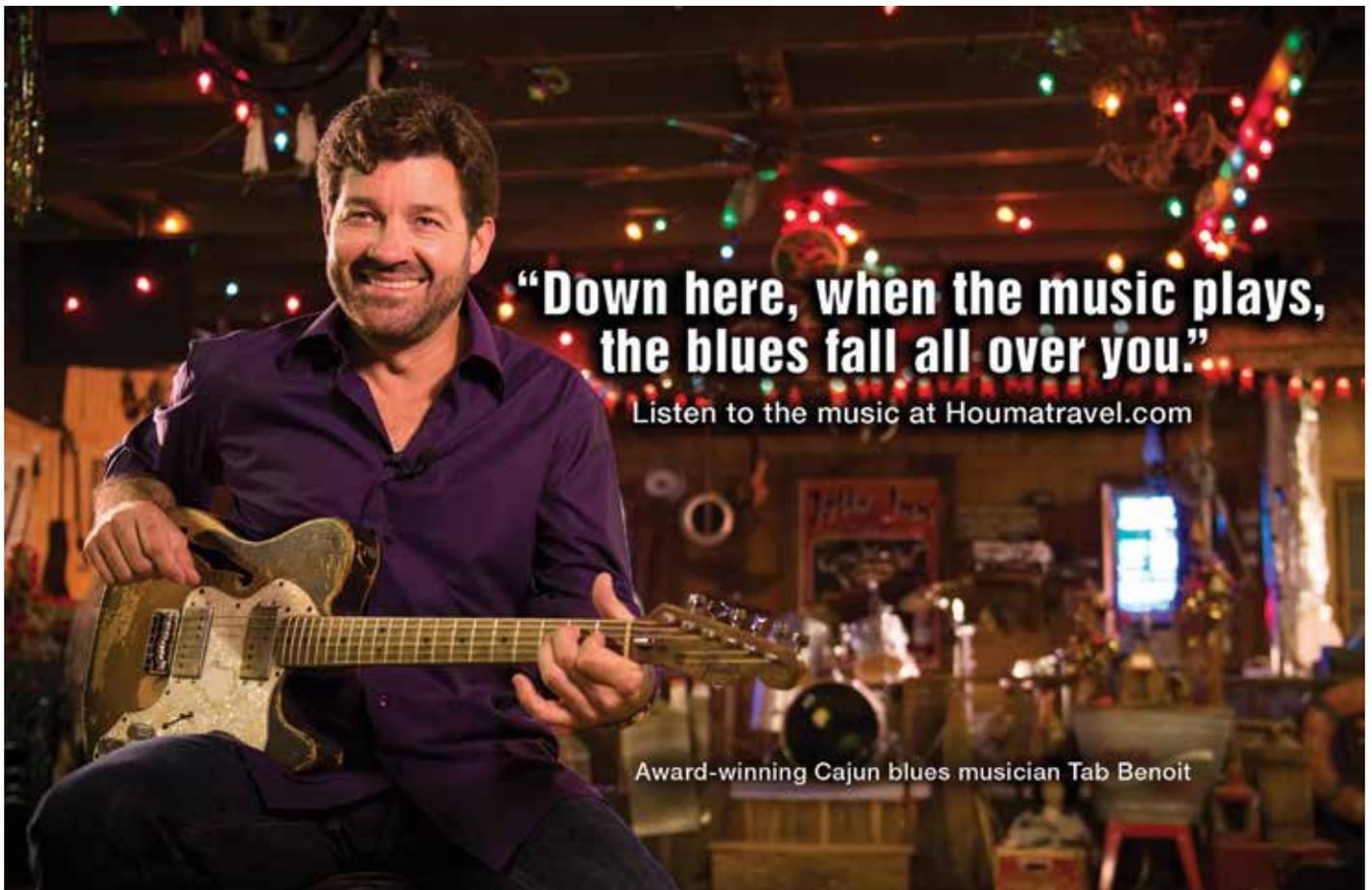
be titled "RC with CR," but the label rejected the idea. "They shot that down and I thought, 'You people are nuts,'" said Williams. "That's who he really was."

"I call him my biggest success and my biggest failure," he told me. "The fact that he never played piano on a session again was unforgivable. That was just stupid. And he let 'em do it."

For his part, Billy Sherrill points to Sy's decision to take Charlie to Las Vegas as the beginning of Charlie's artistic decline. "You can just ride a horse so far and then it goes lame on you," he said. "They shoved him over to Vegas, to the big room, and he's prancing around with dancers. He hated it; I hated it; we just soured on the whole thing."

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Charlie retreated from music in the early 1980s, appearing only occasionally, a few times with Tom Waits as an opener. In a home studio in Germantown, he liked to woodshed every Tuesday with a pickup jazz combo, living off the proceeds



from his old hits and the sale of his share in Wendy's. In 1992, Peter Guralnick produced what would be Charlie Rich's final testament, *Pictures and Paintings*, a jazz and blues album, which closed with a new rendition of "Feel Like Going Home" featuring a black gospel choir.

Bettye Berger recalls seeing him one last time in the early 1990s, at a pharmacy in Memphis. "I would share my prescriptions with you, but I'm not supposed to," she joked. "He was smiling, with those pretty little blue eyes."

In 1995, Charlie died of a pulmonary embolism in a Louisiana motel while traveling to see his son Allan, a singer and pianist like his father, perform with the Tex-Mex country star Freddie Fender. Margaret Ann was sleeping next to him. "It was like her heart was cut out," Allan said. "I had no idea what a hole it would leave in the family's life. I'll be honest, everything kind of went to hell after that."

Of the four Rich children, three have died since Charlie's passing, all from complications from drug abuse. Only Allan, a talented musician who calls himself Charlie Rich Jr., is still alive, himself a recovering alcoholic. In 2010,

Margaret Ann died in Germantown, not far from Natalie's house. "I was at the funeral," Natalie says. "We were getting ready to go to the graves and they had 'Field of Yellow Daisies' playing. It just broke me up."

To raise money, some members of the extended Rich family held an auction of Charlie Rich's belongings in 2012, including furniture that Natalie had bought for them years ago. When I called the auction manager, he said Charlie's relatives had tossed a brown briefcase in the trash, which he retrieved. He gave it to Allan, who at that time was at odds with some of the family. Inside, there were a few stray pot seeds and notebooks with lyric ideas scrawled inside. After a long search, he said, Margaret Ann's missing two-carat wedding ring also turned up—at the bottom of an old liquor store box.

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Last spring, I began searching for Tara Rebecca Warren. I sifted through databases and alumni groups and

obituaries and Facebook pages. Charlie Rich was dead, but the fans of 1974—maybe they were still alive.

At first, nothing turned up. I figured Tara had changed her name or possibly passed away, so I began looking for Donald McGowan, the controversial boyfriend she had mentioned in the letter to Charlie Rich. There was one by that name in Ludowici, Georgia: Donald McGowan Jr. When I called him, I found myself talking to Tara's oldest son.

Tara had indeed married Donald and consequently produced three children. At first, Donald Jr. assumed I was calling about his younger brother, who was at that moment the object of media fascination: Dustin McGowan, the star pitcher for the Toronto Blue Jays, who had just signed a \$7 million contract.

Suddenly, I saw Tara's life as a series of dominoes falling from the moment she wrote the letter. She had eventually divorced Donald and remarried, becoming a city clerk in Ludowici for sixteen years. She retired and moved to Florida with her new husband. Tara was shocked at hearing about the discovery of her

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letter. Not only because it had been thirty-nine years since she wrote it, but because she had woken up in the middle of the night only the week before I called, thinking of the letter.

"I don't know, it just popped in my head, I thought about that letter," she told me in her thick Georgia drawl. "I didn't even remember what all I wrote in the letter. I mean, my God, I was young and—stupid is the word for it, for marrying the idiot that I married. Believe me, he was an idiot. Took me nineteen years and seven months to get rid of him, but I got rid of him."

The past was suddenly present. It was a painful memory. She hated writing letters and marveled that she ever wrote to anyone, let alone Charlie Rich. But she was lonely and confused at the time, her father having died from alcoholism. "I don't think I really told anybody," she said of the letter. "Nobody knew about it. I guess I had to have somebody to talk to."

I looked for others. Darlene. Rosalind. Marsha. Dorothy. Some were dead, but most were alive. There was Mary, from Colorado, who met Charlie backstage in 1974. "Dear 'Charlie-

Baby,' remember me, the dumb blonde at the Pueblo State Fair?" Now a retired secretary and grandmother, she e-mailed me old snapshots she took of Charlie in a denim jacket with a flared collar. With his sullen eyes, he was either sexy or startled. "He was really backward and shy," she says. "He didn't talk much."

The fans saw the person they wanted to see in Charlie. Claudia Obermiller, a farmer, heard Charlie on Country 96 FM in Grand Island, Nebraska. "I remember hearing 'Behind Closed Doors' for the first time on the radio, and thinking, 'Wow, I like this song,' and I started reading up on him and found out he was a farmer and thought, 'Yay!'"

"I remember clearly what I wore to see him in Des Moines," she said. "A red tank top, jeans, and tennis shoes. I wrote the letter at home on my kitchen table, a few months after I saw him, in the daytime, before the men came in for dinner."

Charlie Rich's voice touched places where women often lacked economic mobility. I was haunted by the carefully typed letter from Rosalind from Ohio, the mother of a

three-year-old named Jo Lynn who danced around the living room when Charlie came on TV. "She was a loving mother and sister," read Rosalind's perfunctory obituary in 2008, "and she enjoyed making confetti and watching television and especially her favorite show, *M.A.S.H.*"

When I called around Zanesville, Ohio, looking for Jo Lynn, who was now my age, I discovered there had been a family feud that isolated Rosalind and her daughter from her siblings. A wife of Rosalind's brother, unhappy with my call, told me: "We have no contact with that part of the family whatsoever."

Suddenly, I was down a rabbit hole of rust belt decline. Rosalind's relatives answered the phone with the lethargy of the unemployed at home on a weekday afternoon. According to one, Jo Lynn was pawned off on an aunt who remarried and disappeared from the area. I couldn't find the aunt.

Then there was Dorothy, who liked to "visualize" Charlie Rich when she listened to him. Her name and address were exactly the same as on the letter of 1974. And at first, she admitted to being a Charlie Rich fan, but then: "No, no," she said, "never wrote a fan letter in my life." I started reading the opening lines of the letter, hoping to refresh her memory. She cut me off. "No," she said, curtly. "I never wrote one. I think I would know if I wrote one. I could tell by the words you began with. I would not write those kinds of words, okay?"

I asked if anyone knew she was a Charlie Rich fan. Perhaps it was a prank? "I wouldn't have discussed that with anybody," she said. "There wouldn't be anybody in my circle that I would say that to." The letter had been meant only for Charlie Rich, not for me. The expression of affection, written when she was forty, was so deep and private, no one could know about it even forty years later.

But then there was Kim from Cincinnati. Kim of the dream, in which Charlie performed on a raft near her house. "This is really wild," she said when I called. I'd found her through her high school alumni group. "His music meant so much to me," she confessed. "Because I was going through a really crappy time in my life. It was very unstable. There was something so comforting in his voice."

Kim grew up without a father. An older brother helped raise her, but he died two years before she wrote the letter. "I didn't have

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much male influence,” she said. “There was something in that that was comforting to me. And as a kid, you daydream. That you’re best friends with Charlie Rich and things like that. There was just something about him.”

In high school, she had sixty-three pictures of Charlie Rich on her walls. With her best friend Joey, she went to see him at Cincinnati Gardens in 1974 and while they were visiting the concession stand, Charlie Rich himself emerged from a door with his entourage, including his backup singers. They tried meeting him, but Charlie ignored them, whisked away by handlers. “I got my feelings hurt,” she said.

Kim and I kept in touch, shared some details of our lives. She was happily married now, two grown kids, living in Virginia Beach, where she worked as a housekeeper for a popular mega-church. She lost touch with Joey, but later learned that he died of AIDS. In June 1983, she had an epiphany while working at a taco joint in Kentucky and went from smoking weed every day to becoming a Christian. Later, she rejected organized religion and explored alternative spirituality, working for a time at the Edgar Casey Foundation. “My hunger to find out about different religions and the paranormal and supernatural became insatiable,” she said.

I was fascinated with her powers of imagination and the intensity of her obsessions. She told me of being visited by spirits over the years, some demonic, like the time she heard “alluring” music in her bedroom and saw a ghostly hand emerge from the side of her waterbed. “That shook me up,” she said.

“If I could do the very thing I would want to do the most,” Kim told me, “I would be a medium.” And that’s when it all made sense. What had connected us, across the expanse of years and miles, was a kind of possession. Charlie Rich was the medium, the quiver of his voice the gossamer bond between Margaret Ann’s heartache, his own, and the heartaches of his listeners, including me. The year Tara and Kim wrote him, Charlie Rich told an interviewer, “What it comes down to is, I feel something sad deeper than I feel something happy.” Behind closed doors, the burden and the exorcism of his life was tuned to theirs the moment they tuned in to him—in song, you could get no closer to the beautiful disaster that was and always will be Charlie Rich. 🍷



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