A LARGE PRINT BIOGRAPHY

YANNI IN WORDS
Yanni with David Rensin

Yanni in Words is the remarkably forthright, never-before-told story of the critically acclaimed musician's personal odyssey: from his childhood under a Greek military dictatorship to success as his country's national 50-meter swimming champ at fourteen; from his college years at the University of Minnesota, where he earned a degree in psychology, to his wild years playing rock and roll across America before going solo. This is a story of how a single-minded musical vision and indomitable will to be heard became the source of Yanni's biggest frustrations, greatest triumphs, and deepest insights about creativity.

"A miracle, a lesson in pluck that could be taught in business school, preached from pulpits and woven into bedtime stories."
—Washington Post

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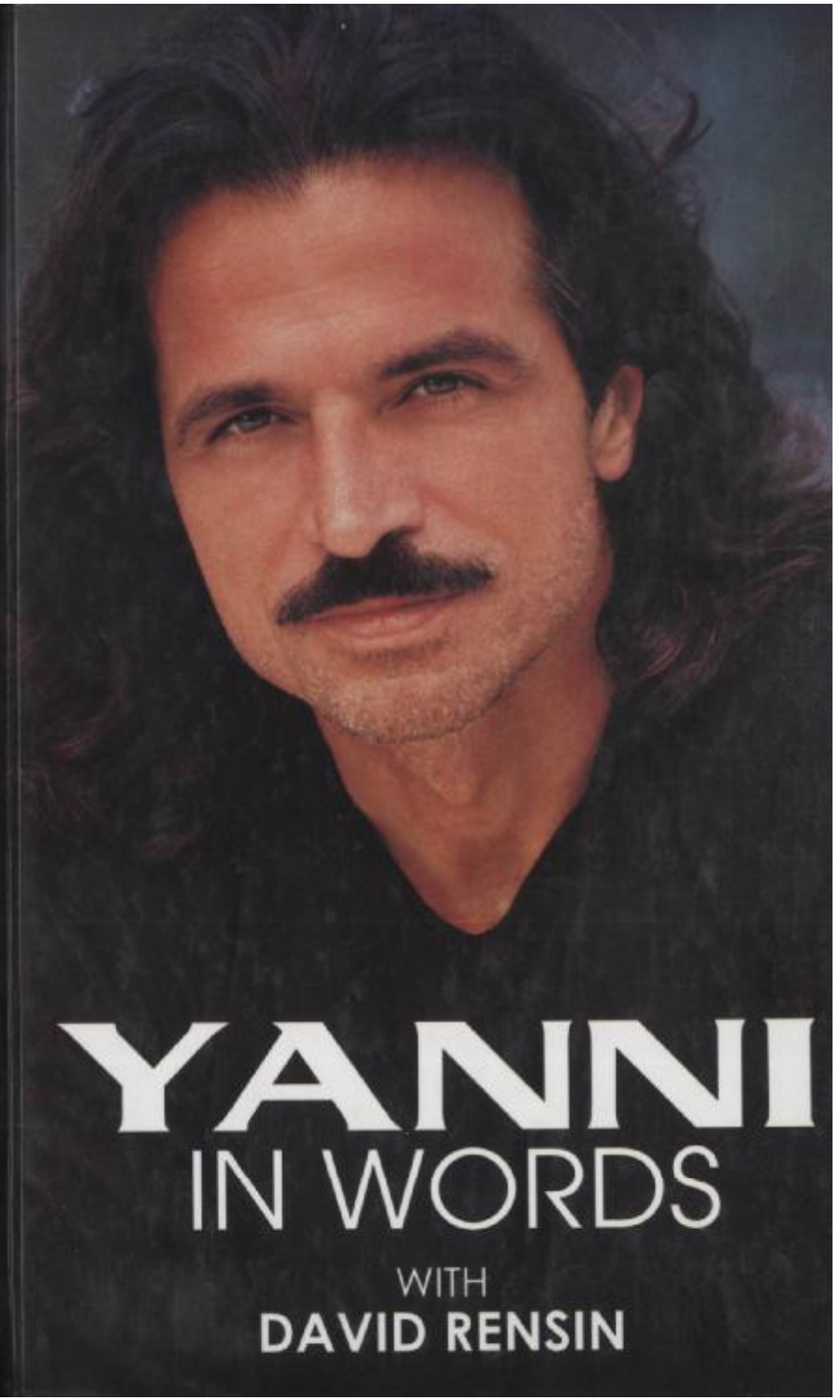

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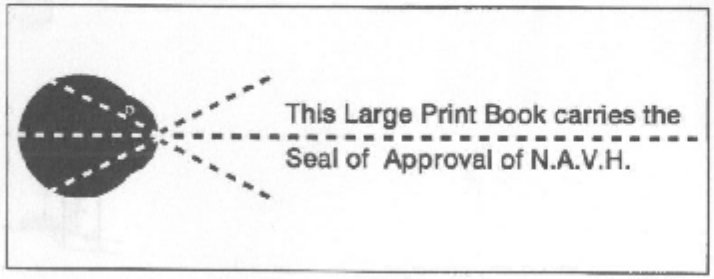

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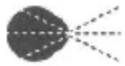

As the Founder/CEO of NAVH, the only national health agency solely devoted to those who, although not totally blind, have an eye disease which could lead to serious visual impairment, I am pleased to recognize Thorndike Press as one of the leading publishers in the large print field.

Founded in 1954 in San Francisco to prepare large print textbooks for partially seeing children, NAVH became the pioneer and standard setting agency in the preparation of large type.

Today, those publishers who meet our standards carry the prestigious "Seal of Approval" indicating high quality large print. We are delighted that Thorndike Press is one of the publishers whose titles meet these standards. We are also pleased to recognize the significant contribution Thorndike Press is making in this important and growing field.

Lorraine H. Marchi, L.H.D.
Founder/CEO
NAVH

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My father once said,
"If the whole world wants to go left and you feel like going right, go right. You don't have to follow. You don't have to make a big deal about which way you're going. Just go. It's very easy."

I believe music represents humanity's soul. Confucius, in his travels throughout China, used to say that he was able to see the mood of each province by listening to its local music. He knew if the people were happy, content, angry, getting ready for war. When I compose I blend a rainbow of styles and ethnicities and witness the souls of many cultures come together obviously and easily. The result is more color, beauty, and strength. A seamless mesh. Unity.

I do it all the time. I feel it, and it's not at all awkward or unusual. In fact, it is completely natural.

When I see how our musical souls come together in art, I ask myself, "Why can't we do the same?"

The answer is that we can. We must. I know the world is in turmoil, but I believe that we are on a one-way street, and that to survive we have no choice but to become a global community. I believe that what I see in the music means that the human race has

the chance to find common ground. You can say I'm a dreamer, as John Lennon once sang; I'm supposed to be a dreamer. I'm supposed to see how the world *can* be. I'm an artist. I am about instinct, not logic or history.

If our souls can come together in music, they can come together anywhere, and as a race we can achieve harmony and peace.

Prelude

When I was thirteen, I took a long walk with my father through the summer-parched foothills above Kalamata, the small port on Greece's Gulf of Messinia where I was born. We did this often, and as we strolled he would talk to me about life, about simplicity, about appreciating nature. He liked to say that the best things in life are available to everyone because they're inside us: truth, imagination, creativity, love, kindness, compassion.

We hiked for a while in silence, then stopped to watch the sun set into the blue-green waters that stretch from the southern end of the Peloponnese peninsula to the Mediterranean.

"What do you think?" my father asked.

"It looks . . . nice," I said.

"Yes, it's beautiful," he agreed. "But does it make you feel *happy?*"

"I . . . I don't know," I said.

My father smiled patiently. "If looking at that makes you feel happy, then you'll be a very happy man, because there are lots of

sunsets to come in your life," he explained. "But if it takes buying a house or a car . . ."

Thirty years later, walking again through those familiar hills, we paused in our usual spot as the light began to fade. This time I watched the sunset through more seasoned eyes and thought about the question my father had asked me so long ago.

I had never spent wildly on material things, but my father's point — as ancient as the Greek philosophers themselves — was still valid: The less you want, the richer you are. The more you need in order to be happy, the more miserable you'll be. I'd heard him say this in one way or another for years but had pushed it to the back of my mind as I chased the dream of having my music heard by more and more people. When the dream came true, I spent too little time enjoying the rewards and too much time reaching for bigger dreams. Now, I'd come home to find my health and the boy from Kalamata I seemed to have lost along the way, and I could no longer shut out the truth of my father's wisdom. I've failed myself, I thought, as the sun slipped into the sea.

Most people would insist I had no reason then not to be thrilled with my life. I was

forty-three, music had been my career for more than twenty years, and my journey from having nothing to everything was an odyssey that made both my family and me proud. After all, I had often asked myself, what are the chances that a poor kid from Kalamata who doesn't read music but taught himself to play piano at eight, who doesn't dance, doesn't sing, doesn't write lyrics, doesn't conform to any particular musical style, and doesn't want to play the show business "game" — what are the chances that this kid will ever succeed, much less become known worldwide? It's laughable. It's against all the odds. But it can happen. And it did.

Along the way I tasted much: I became a Greek national swimming champion at fourteen, moved to America at eighteen to earn a B.A. in Psychology at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and played in an assortment of wild midwestern rock bands. I scored some movies, wrote music for television commercials, even worked as a dishwasher and an employment counselor. But mostly I just wanted to bring the songs I heard in my head to life.

In college I played piano whenever I could. After graduation and in between rock 'n' roll gigs I confined myself for months to a makeshift studio I had built in the base-

ment of my sister's house in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, and recorded my first solo album. It went nowhere. Five years and too much rock 'n' roll later, I made another album and finally got a record deal. I moved to Los Angeles, where I once again became a monk and lived in my home studio — when I wasn't on the road.

As my records began to sell I came to the attention of actress Linda Evans, who called to say how much she loved listening to my albums. We spoke often on the phone, met, and began a miraculous nine-year relationship. Linda was a mentor as well as a lover; being with her gave me insight into myself and into show business, and she gave me the support I needed to grow in my career. Driven by my relentless ambition to be heard despite limited radio and television exposure (neither medium could figure out how to classify my music — I just didn't fit in), I invested everything, including most of my money, into creating new opportunities.

My biggest professional and personal risk was to return to Greece to film and record three concerts with a band and full symphony orchestra at the ancient Acropolis in Athens. The reward was overwhelming: global exposure, millions of new fans, and finally a grudging respect from the media

and music business. With that momentum I planned a world tour and played at the Toji Temple in Kyoto, the Taj Mahal in India, and the Forbidden City in China. The logistics were hell, but I was driven.

I drove myself off the edge. My father could see it coming. "Get a life," he said. My closest friends echoed him. "Travel for pleasure. Go to a barbecue. Burn some hot dogs. Drink a beer. Hang out with your friends. Do nothing." They were right, only I didn't know how to do nothing. I could risk $20 million on a tour, fight in the Supreme Court of India to be the first musician to play at that country's most sacred monument, and charm Chinese dignitaries. I could lock myself in a studio for days, not eat, and hardly sleep. But I didn't know how to just go out for dinner and see a movie. I'd dealt with many cultures and experienced some of the most spectacular places on the planet, but I couldn't just relax and have fun.

Linda and I grew apart and broke up just after New Year's Day, 1998. The end was melancholy and unresolved, but we parted amicably and stayed friends while I kept touring, appearing in five different cities a week. I got up at 5 a.m. for television shows and interviews, put on makeup, and posed

for pictures. I worried about selling more albums and more tickets. I tried to take responsibility for the hundreds of people that I dragged across the continents, living in an endless series of hotel rooms.

By summer 1998, I couldn't go on. I was at the height of my career, but I'd lost what I'd once believed was an infinite ocean of optimism. Everything seemed flat, dark, without meaning.

My father taught me that one of the most important abilities in life is to be able to take the pain and persevere, and for years this lesson had served me well. But even my toughness couldn't help with my deeper problem: I had fought the battles, taken the risks, and somehow won — and I didn't know what to do with the rewards.

So I quit. After speeding at 160 miles per hour, nonstop, for more than six years, everything screeched to a halt overnight. After my last concert on July 5, 1998, what I had thought of as my life for so long was gone. I woke up the next day with nowhere to go and nothing to do. But I was neither at peace nor happy. I was wired and tired and frustrated and angry and beaten. I didn't want to talk to anyone, even my closest friends. I was a warrior without a war, a man who not only no longer knew himself but

also had forgotten the person he was when the journey began.

Although I would emerge stronger and more determined than ever, with a greater understanding of myself and a more balanced view of life, at the time all I could do was lie in bed and stare at my hands. I realized without a shred of emotion that I didn't care if I ever touched a piano again.

1

Allowing

People always ask what drew me to music. The truthful answer is that it was a way to get attention in my family. I remember being three years old and listening to my mother sing; I loved it. I also noticed how adoringly my father looked at her when she sang. Even at that tender age I made a mental note of his reaction.

When I was five my uncles and aunts came by for dinner a couple of times a week. Afterward someone would pick up a guitar or play the piano, and there would be dancing and singing. The music was traditional Greek. My mom would harmonize sweetly with my uncle Yianni, and everyone always complimented and encouraged each other. I got goose bumps listening and I wanted to be part of it.

Later, music became a great way to reach girls. On beautiful summer nights my brother, a couple of friends, and I would go to the lighthouse by the breakwater, where all the ships came in, and sit on the benches

and play guitar and sing. Sometimes we'd serenade our sweethearts right under their bedroom windows. One time, a girl's father threw a bucket of water on my head after I woke him up with my lovesick warbling. I wonder if he realizes that he was probably responsible for my writing only instrumental music?

A love of music ran in the family. When my father was a boy he longed to play the violin but there were none available, so he found an old, untuned piano in the church and got permission from the priest to play it when the church wasn't being used. My mother dreamed of being an actress and singer. She had the opportunity to study theater in Athens as a girl, but my grandfather forbade it as inappropriate and her passion was silenced. Those early experiences didn't stop my parents from encouraging my older brother, Yorgo, my younger sister, Anda, and me to play music, and they showed tremendous interest when we did. (They supported almost *anything* we did.) Whether I played the piano or picked at the guitar, my mother paid attention. My dad would come home from work late and still ask to listen to whatever song we'd been working on in the afternoon.

My father earned only $200 a month, and

we had no money to spare, yet he bought a piano for the house. It cost more than a year's salary, so he paid it off monthly. To give you an idea of what a luxury it was, we had no television, we didn't own a car, and my father rode a bicycle to work. He had only two suits and both had holes in the pants. "You're crazy," one of my aunts chided him, "buying a piano when you don't even have proper clothes to wear!"

But my parents were wise. They knew that if we had the piano around while we were still young we'd discover it and some magic might happen. The alternative was waiting years until they could afford the instrument — if they were lucky — only to have us just walk right past it as if it were another piece of furniture.

Mind you, they never forced us into music; they gave us the opportunity and let us make the choice. And there was also a limit. Although my parents held music in high esteem and believed that knowing how to play refined a person and that it could be a friend for life, they encouraged music *only* as a hobby, not as a profession. We could love it but we weren't to depend on it. This wasn't a surprise. Too many Greek musicians ended up poor, playing for a handful of drachmas at the local bar. My parents did

not want that life for their kids. On the other hand, they weren't pushy, saying, "You must have a career, and you must make money, and you must, must, must." Mom and Dad were all for personal power, resilience, and, especially, individuality.

Without much thought I accepted my parents' gentle guidance. I had no clue that I'd become a musician, not even in my wildest dreams, until one day when I would realize that I never really had a choice.

Music was like a time bomb inside of me waiting to explode.

My family's story is also born of explosions, but real ones.

My father, Sotiri, was born in Mani, in 1923. Mani is a region in the southernmost end of the middle peninsula of the Peloponnese. This is one of the most beautiful places in Europe: spectacular ocean views of clean blue water and rocky shores, breathtaking mountains, low humidity, no bugs; in other words, a dream neighborhood. Mani was also the only Greek territory untouched by the Ottoman Turks, who destroyed Byzantium — as Greece was called then — and occupied the country for 400 years, until the early 1800s. The Ottoman Turks wanted Mani because it was

the last outpost of resistance. Its people not only were well-trained tough-asses who'd become skilled over the centuries at thwarting occupation forces, but they also provided refuge to fighters from enslaved regions who fled to Mani and lived to fight another day. They'd hide in the Taygetus Mountains that run along the peninsula's spine to the sea and attack the Turks with hit-and-run guerrilla tactics. While Mani is rugged and gorgeous, with wide coastal plateaus that drop precipitously to the water, the terrain is harsh and dry, and lacks much in the way of natural resources. In the end it just wasn't worth the trouble to try to crush the people of Mani. The Ottoman Turks tried several times, and with each attempt they were defeated; the last battle was like a Greek version of the Native Americans massacring Custer.

The Turks eventually left Mani alone and focused their barbarism on the rest of the country. Big mistake. In 1821, the men of Mani — big, strong, boisterous, spirited, independent, with an in-your-face attitude toward life — attacked the Ottoman occupation forces in nearby Kalamata, and the revolution began. Eight years later, the Ottoman Empire that had outlawed our schools and churches and tried to pretty much eradicate

our culture — it's a miracle we even speak Greek today — was driven north. It was the beginning of the end of Turkish domination.

Everyone says that my father's father, also named Yianni, was a special man, soft-spoken and wise. He was a teacher and a huge influence on my father, who still talks about him in the same reverent tones I reserve for my own dad. Grandpa Yianni was blue-eyed and blond. In fact, our name, Chryssomallis, means "golden hair."

My mother says Grandpa Yianni was one of the sweetest people who ever walked on the earth. He died from colon cancer when I was five, and although I barely knew him, I have a hazy memory of his taking us to a little city garden called Kiparion. He'd peel an orange for the kids and let us play. My mother told me that once he had to punish me for some infraction. "Put out your hand," he'd said. Then he tapped me a couple of times on the open palm with a little stick. I got mad, so he let me hit his hand in return, with my little palm. When my mom asked him why he let me do this, he said, "Let him get the anger out; it's okay. You don't want to break the spirit."

My mother has treated me that way ever since. As a result, when I'm mad, or if I've

been hurt, I let the person know very clearly, very succinctly, sometimes loudly. These days I rarely get angry, but when I do I don't hold on to anger or emotions and come back later. My father also took special care never to discipline his kids in a way that would leave us scarred, or to push us to conform to a society determined to treat us like sheep. He knew better.

Tolerance and consideration of the spirit are the main characteristics of my family. A great example is how we handle religion. My mother is a devout Christian. She can focus intently while praying, and we all think God listens to her when she prays. I've literally watched life change around her. She gets her way.

My father doesn't go to church. He used to just drive my mom there and wait outside for the service to finish. It's a matter of respect, he says. "Because I don't believe what the people inside believe, it would be wrong for me to go in and pretend I do." My father taught us to never try to shake anyone's faith no matter what a person believed in. He always set an example of tolerance, acceptance, and respect.

Around the age of thirteen I began asking questions about religion. I didn't really know if anyone was listening to my prayers,

but I wasn't afraid that a thunderbolt would strike me because I doubted. I couldn't imagine a God who would be so vengeful as to hurt a kid like myself who was stupid enough not to believe in him.

Growing up in a home where no one took shots at one another over differences as fundamental and powerful as religion was a great lesson by example. Today I'm not part of any organized religion. My connection to the Creator is very personal, and I'm suspicious of anyone who tries to save my soul. I believe that when the time is right we all find our Creator.

As a rule I also avoid the establishment. I don't follow schools of thought. I'm open enough to study any religion, to go to temples, churches, and mosques, and to listen to ideas. There's beauty in every path. Buddhists believe that there are as many paths to Enlightenment as you care to take. I'm not Buddhist, but I like that concept.

For all his gentility, my father's childhood was at times surprisingly harsh. He told us of people dying in the streets, bloated from malnutrition. He and my mother were teenagers during World War II and the German occupation; they shared with me the fear they felt when German boots clomped through the

streets. Would the storm troopers stop at their houses? Would they even wake up the next morning?

My dad helped Allied soldiers escape the Germans by ferrying them offshore to waiting sea vessels. Once, using only a flashlight, he flagged down a destroyer off the coast in the middle of the night, not knowing if it was German or English, but obviously hoping for the latter. Incredibly, he got it to stop. He took his little boat to the ship, found it was English, came back, put four English soldiers in his boat, and took them out to the destroyer. On the way, one soldier asked my father if he wanted to come along; they were headed for Egypt. My dad thought about it but realized that if he went, his family would think he'd drowned. He couldn't do that to his parents.

After World War II, there was civil war in Greece. My dad was a sergeant major with the government forces. He doesn't like to talk about this time, and never brings it up, but recently, because I was older and pushed a bit, he did. I heard gruesome stories of living in the mountains, of being shot at, of people cutting throats in the villages, of mutilation.

"The human beasts were out," he said.

My father's brother, Yorgo, was killed during the civil war when he braved enemy gunfire to retrieve a wounded comrade. The man was prone and screaming. Yorgo couldn't stand it anymore, so he carried him in over his shoulder. As he slipped the injured man into the trenches, Yorgo caught a bullet in the head. Yorgo was a true patriot. His death was ironic. He had his army release papers in his pocket. He could have gone home, but he stayed around a few more days because he didn't think it was the right thing to leave with a big battle coming. Thanks to him, the wounded soldier lived a long time.

When Yorgo died my dad freaked. He had to pick up the body. Afterward he burned every article of my uncle's clothing, as well as anything else that reminded him of his brother. Only one picture of Yorgo remains. That tragedy changed my father's life. Ever since, he has hated war and has done everything he could to keep us from becoming indoctrinated and seduced by a violent way of thinking.

But the most incredible part of my father's story is his attitude. As he says, "You know, it's really amazing that we ended up being the people we are despite these experiences." To this day he is soft-spoken and

gentle. No matter what happened, he just wouldn't be bitter.

My mother's name, Felitsa, is short for Triandafelitsa, which means "rose." She comes from Kalamata. The town, known worldwide for its succulent black olives, is just north and over the mountains from Mani, and about forty miles from Sparta. As a kid, I could also go to the ancient Olympic stadium and run and play. There, I could touch the old monuments and temples and feel my heritage.

As in Mani, Kalamata's air and water are wonderfully clean. The climate is similar to Southern California's — as low as forty degrees, usually sixty to eighty-five — but we often get a cooling breeze off the bay, and we're protected by the mountains behind us from the northern winds during the winter. We *do* have a winter in the sense that there's snow on the mountains, but it has only fallen in town once in the last seventy-five years.

Unlike Southern California, Kalamata is still underdeveloped; the population is maybe sixty thousand, and it doubles in the summer. Ten years from now, I don't know if that will still be true. I don't think I want to know, either.

My parents met in Kalamata. They had seen each other from a distance and asked mutual friends to introduce them. To get to know each other in those days they'd take a walk, with family members and friends — not quite official chaperons — trailing behind them. I have a wonderful picture of them strolling together when they were young and in love.

I can understand why Sotiri and Felitsa were attracted to each other. My mom is warm, beautiful, affectionate, full of life, and always has a smile on her face. She has a sweet voice. She's a great cook and is completely devoted to my father and the kids. She never treated one child differently than another. She just loves to give. When I was a teenager, we'd come home with our friends and she'd fix us all dinner, giving each of us what we wanted. Later, when the group dragged back in after midnight, we'd find her sleeping on the couch. My mom wasn't worried or checking up; she just didn't want to miss us, or the chance to cook a late dinner of eggs, sliced tomatoes, and fried potatoes. She's a nightbird (which also happens to be her nickname for me) who loves to hang out and socialize at any hour. If we stay up until six in the morning, she'll be right there with the best of us. Mom is joyful

and can make friends with anybody. She loves to sing and dance and party. She loves to laugh. She loves life.

Once I complained to her about growing old, and she said, "It's only by living that you grow old." I understood immediately. Growing old is better than the alternative. Can you imagine how hard it was for me to find a girlfriend when I had a mother like that?

My father is an introvert, which is why he takes long walks alone. He has no patience for a busy mouth, particularly if it just likes the sound of its own voice. My father doesn't offer unsolicited advice, or say, "This is how I feel about life. This is what I think." He'll never be in your face. He'll never start talking to you and trap you there, and he assumes you won't do the same thing to him. If he doesn't like the conversation, he'll just get up and wander off — even from the dinner table, after the meal. No insult to you. One of Linda Evans's girlfriends affectionately called him "The Shadow." However, my father can easily stick around, tell off-color jokes, and get a good laugh out of just about any situation. He just doesn't like to waste your time or his.

My father worked at the National Bank of Greece in Kalamata most of his life. He

began at the bottom and eventually became the manager. He taught himself five languages — English, Italian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese — in addition to Greek. As a result, he handled the bank's overseas correspondence, and because he was so sharp they wanted to send him to run branches in Chicago or New York or London. But that meant he would have had to leave his family. He wouldn't.

Sotiri is also much more than a banker. On his own he studied philosophy, psychology, and medicine. When I took psychology at the University of Minnesota in the mid-seventies, he would often say, "Well, of course you know this a lot better than I since you're studying psychology now . . . ," then he'd tell me something brilliant. I would ask, "How do you know about that?" He'd respond, "Well, a few years ago I read an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and . . ." He always surprises me.

I believe my passionate desire to succeed and the single-mindedness needed to do what it takes to achieve my goals comes from both my parents. My mother is tolerant but made of steel. She is sweet and will sometimes say what she thinks you'd like to hear — then do what she wants to anyway.

My dad does not play that game at all. For instance, in Greece it is much more important to celebrate your "name day" than your birthday. On his name day my father skips out of the house and takes a long walk because he doesn't want to have to answer the phone calls wishing him *Hronia Polla,* or Happy Name Day.

As with most kids, I'm a combination of my parents. Like my mother, I enjoy staying up late. When I was two and three years old I wouldn't sleep unless she sang for me — hence the "Nightbird" nickname. Sometimes she was so tired she'd start to pass out, only to hear me wail from the crib. "You tortured me a lot," she told me.

From my mother I also inherited my ability to walk onstage. I've always been something of an exhibitionist. Our home was right next door to an outdoor movie theater. It wasn't a drive-in; there were chairs instead of cars, and one big speaker. If you sat at the top of the staircase outside our house you could see the movie. When I was five my uncles taught me a very popular song, and one night, during a break in the film, the theater played the tune. I heard it and sang along — loudly. My mom says that everyone at the theater turned around and looked at me — and that I liked it.

Yet like my father I'm also a recluse and a monk, the deep thinker who can't be social for long periods; then I can be as boisterous and obnoxious as the next guy.

Now that I'm older the quieter part dominates.

I was born on November 14, 1954, the middle child. In English my name means John, in honor of St. John the Baptist. My name day, when all the Yiannis celebrate, is January 7.

In Greek tradition, the firstborn child takes the father's father's name. But my older brother was named Yorgo, to honor our uncle, leaving Grandpa Yianni's name to me. (In proper Greek, if you were to talk *about* me, you'd refer to me as Yiannis; all male Greek names have the "s" at the end. Speaking *to* me, you'd call me Yanni. What few people know is that until I first went out as a solo artist I spelled my name "Yianni." Dropping the first "i" wasn't even my idea. Someone suggested, "Maybe if the 'i' is missing, you could still pronounce it 'Yanni,' and it would have fewer letters and look better.")

In Greek there are many words to describe the different kinds of love. My parents raised their kids with *agape* — meaning

"unconditional love." Simply put, no matter how we acted, if we did something "wrong," our parents never withdrew their love or threatened to. That's crucial.

Whenever I got into trouble, instead of raising his voice or his hand, my father got very quiet. He would take me into another room to talk calmly. The worse my transgression, the calmer he got. There was no punishment. I don't remember him ever saying, "Because you did this, from now on you're not going to . . ." or, "You stay in your room." My father's approach was much more difficult to deal with than anger. Sometimes I hated those serious talks, but he and my mother insisted on treating us with respect and kindness, and we all learned to hold ourselves to that standard. I loved them both so deeply that I couldn't bear to hurt or disappoint them.

The embarrassing childhood misadventure that I most regret certainly merited my father's anger. I was maybe thirteen, too energetic to sit still, and looking for trouble. One night three friends and I were outside a movie theater when we saw a couple of motorcycles. They looked pretty tempting so we decided it would be fun to ride them for a mile or two. We weren't thieves; we didn't want to keep them or de-

stroy them. We just wanted some kicks.

After daring one another to actually do it, we finally agreed that two of us would take one, and two of us the other. I didn't drive, but held on behind. My friend and I rode "our" bike for a couple of miles, winding through the back streets until we got close to my house. We stopped a quarter mile away, left the bike, and walked to our homes.

I didn't know if my other two buddies had made it back safely, but I found out soon enough. Two hours later my doorbell rang. Fearing the worst, I tiptoed into the front room and peeked through the curtains while I tried to keep from hyperventilating. Maybe it was my friends. No such luck. Outside I saw flashing lights and the police. My knees buckled; my palms got wet. But I had to let them in. The police took me to the station. My friends on the other bike had hit a pothole, spilled, and injured themselves. They made it home and explained their bumps and bruises by saying that they'd been hit by a car that had driven off. One boy's father called the police, who knew a couple of motorcycles were missing. They inspected the kids' wounds — mostly scratches, not something you'd get from being struck by a car — and confronted

them. During their confession someone mentioned my name.

My parents were out and when they got home, they learned from my siblings that I was at the police station. My father came to pick me up. I could hardly face him. When we got to the house he led me into the bedroom and very quietly said, "After all I've put into you, it really hurts me to see my son bring himself to such a low level. It's painful and it makes me wonder if the way I've been raising you is the right way. I don't know what else to tell you. You know right from wrong. I can't believe you did this."

For a few days he walked around the house, visibly hurt. After that I never dared to do something so stupid again. My father didn't have to rant or yell or threaten or withhold. He didn't have to punish me because I punished myself. It was embarrassing, even agonizing, for me to see the man I respected the most look so miserable.

I got a lesson in compassion, too, because the motorcycle owners gave us a break and did not press charges. We were from a small town; everyone knew everyone. The owners felt sorry for us and didn't want to ruin our lives over a stupid prank.

To tell you the truth, I've never heard my parents lash out at or openly bad-mouth

anyone. Sure, they get upset sometimes, but they release that stuff quickly. Two minutes, and then it's gone. My mom lives with love. She will find any excuse to explain why someone acts strangely, or badly, and she always allows for their redemption. Same with my dad. He doesn't dwell on the negative. He is optimistic and trusts the future. Whenever I had problems, or struggled with a situation, he'd say, "You're smart enough and strong enough to take care of it, so fix it. You will survive and move on, and it won't happen again because you'll learn from experience. Keep your eyes open. See what happens. Analyze. Be truthful with yourself."

Linda Evans once told me that this parental love — she called it "allowing" — goes to the core of my being, that I have a trust in life that carries me everywhere. If that's true — and I think it is — then I am one of the lucky ones. My trust is not stupidity or foolishness; I see the same stinkers and slimeballs everyone else sees. The music business certainly has its share. I have been nicked, but I haven't been cut badly. People have lied to me, stolen from me, taken advantage of me, but I've never gone back to get even — even if I've wanted to. I just got smarter and learned to see it

coming. I thanked them for the lesson and moved on.

My parents invested a lot of time in their kids. My dad would say, "I didn't ask you if I could bring you into the world, therefore you owe me nothing and I owe you everything." One of his most important gifts to the family was an appreciation of nature and of doing things outdoors. In the winter he would come home tired from the bank, but instead of taking the traditional afternoon nap we would walk, maybe three miles a day. He'd introduce us to the flowers and the trees and tell us a story about an animal; we'd discuss the weather, the clouds. What are thunderstorms, where do they come from, how do they work? If there was any way to feed us outside instead of on a table indoors, my parents would do that. Sometimes they would rent a rowboat, take us out on the bay, and eat there.

When my brother, sister, and I were very young my father decided he wanted to teach us how to withstand the cold. He didn't just send us outside without jackets on a winter day and tell us to be brave. As always, he was more creative. He took us to the beach in January.

We all watched as he walked into the water and began splashing around, saying,

"Wow. This is fantastic. Great." Even in southern Greece, the ocean is cold enough at that time of year to make your head hurt. We didn't know that, of course. Dad just seemed to be having the time of his life, which made us want to come in too, just as he had anticipated.

"I don't know," he said, when we asked for permission to join him. "It's very cold, but I suppose you can try if you want to." We didn't think twice and plunged right in; we were highly competitive and probably dared one another. Boy, was it cold. But we got used to it quickly and soon we were having too much fun to get out.

The real lesson here is one that my father taught us over and over in every way possible: The most important battle is the one to conquer yourself. You've got to overcome pain and discomfort and control your urges. Learn how to rein in your desires. This wasn't about sexuality or morality; his advice was purely practical.

He told us not to overeat, to learn about vitamins and exercise. Your body hurts because you're working out? That's okay. It's a good thing. Trust me; you'll be very happy later in life because you won't have the same health problems as your friends.

My father led compassionately and by ex-

ample. He was very clever. He never said, "You *must* do what I do, otherwise you're nothing." He let us find our own ways, and as I get older, I benefit from his lessons each and every day.

My childhood was idyllic. With the beach right outside our door you could say that I grew up in a big sandbox. I walked to school and never worried about encountering guns or knives. I didn't have to lock my bike so no one would steal it. I could stay out past midnight without fear of being abducted or molested or robbed or killed. I never felt threatened or worried, and that was a great thing.

Though our family life was simple, I wasn't aware that we were poor. Maybe we didn't have many possessions, but we never went hungry, were cold, or lacked love. Yes, my soccer ball was homemade — a tin can wrapped in cloth and tied up with string — but I could kick it in an open field, by a gorgeous ocean, with my friends.

My parents wanted us to appreciate our good fortune. Kalamata had an orphanage, and some of the locals thought the kids there were worthless. Not my mother. Some weekends she would invite one or two of them to come eat with us. And sometimes

she would send me to eat at the orphanage. I still remember the long tables and the bad food.

The piano in the house was not my first instrument. Perhaps you can imagine me hefting an accordion, but I never could. I played it only long enough to get an idea of how music was constructed, then I quit taking lessons. One reason for my haste was that when my brother played the piano all the girls looked at him. When I played the accordion, everybody left the room. I got the message.

My brother was a virtuoso, a big talent who'd mastered Mozart, Chopin, and Liszt. My parents offered me piano lessons, too, but I refused. For some reason I wouldn't let myself be taught. Instead I picked at the piano keys and found my own way by copying from memory what my brother played. Other times, when I heard a movie soundtrack wafting up from the theater next door — say, some Ennio Moricone, from a spaghetti western — I would try to play it on the piano even though I didn't know what key it was in. I also spent a lot of time listening to music on a battered old shortwave radio in my room.

Whatever I tried to play, if I didn't like the

way the original melody went, I had no problem going in a completely different direction to suit my taste. I let my emotions take me. When something inside pushed to get out, I just let it come.

But I couldn't do everything by memory. I realized I had to be able to write down what I heard. I couldn't write music and had no tape recorder, so I developed my own shorthand notation — a combination of numbers, a few symbols, and Greek words — as a memory post. I began by taking a piece of paper to the movies, where I'd sit in the dark scribbling the chord progressions in my private code. Soon I could chart them as well as the key, the time signature, the main melody, and more. Today it has developed into a very quick and accurate system.

Within a year or two I realized that I could also instantly recognize notes just by hearing them. This ability is called "absolute" or "perfect" pitch. I don't believe I was born with perfect pitch, but by the time I was eight or nine I had it because I'd worked so hard for it.

Some might regard what I have as a gift. I take issue with the idea of "gifts," not because I have any problem with exceptional talent, but because the concept of a gift means that some people have it while others

do not — and it's just their tough luck. This implies that my accomplishments have little to do with spending sixteen hours a day in a room, for twenty years, working obsessively, and that my "talent" is a result of God looking down at his children and saying, "Hey, let this independent, dark-haired kid from Kalamata have the ability to write music."

I say no. Absolutely not. That's so untrue. And it's so misleading, especially to young people.

I'm not talking about eye or hair color, being tall or short, or having a certain bone structure. That's all part of your genetic inheritance. I mean gift in the sense of it being a winning lottery ticket, something given to you that you have very little to do with — and no matter how hard those who don't have the gift work at it, they won't get it. Again, no. All you need is passion. If you have a passion for something, you'll create the talent. Just love it. And then bust your ass. You'll become great at it. Passion is the fuel.

I will agree, however, that we are born with potential, some of which is realized, some of which, for whatever reasons and life circumstances, will never be discovered. If Mozart's father had not been a music

teacher, and if Mozart had been born in the middle of nowhere with no musical instruments at his disposal, I don't think Mozart would be Mozart.

Music quickly touched my soul and consumed me. Suddenly anything related to music got my attention. From copying what I heard on the radio and in the movies to developing my system of notation, I put in a lot of work.

At first I struggled with musical notes; eventually they just spoke to me. I think of notes as words, like Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Ti-Do. For example, a song might go: Do-Me-So-Fa-Me-So-Fa-Me-So-Do. At the piano, I don't only hear the pitches, but my mind knows the words and my fingers just do it.

Ironically, I don't listen to much instrumental music at home because the "words" force me to pay attention; music is like an audiobook telling me a story. The story affects me emotionally and I respond in kind. I don't need to hear lyrics that say, "I just woke up, you're not here because you left me yesterday. I haven't slept all night. I miss you." I know from the music that the composer is in pain, or happy, or romantically involved. If you listen to Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Chopin, or Tchaikovsky,

you know everything they're "talking" about. Their souls, their existence, can be studied without reading a single word about them; just listen to their body of work. With a painter, look at her paintings; you'll know her soul. These artists put everything that they're about into their art. That's what I do. Everything I'm about is in my music.

Though I loved music I was not at the piano every chance I had. Mostly I was outside doing something athletic. Early on I developed a passion for soccer and played it in the sand, quickly developing my lungs, heart, and endurance. I also boxed. I had good balance, heavy shoulders, solid thighs. I put the gloves on and a couple of friends who were heavily into the sport trained me. We whacked each other around just for fun. A single punch can feel like a giant headache, but when you're in the middle of a fight you don't really feel it that much. If you take a fist in the face, you notice it most when you smell your own blood.

The training came in handy. I'm not especially proud of this story, but when I was sixteen I fought with a player on Kalamata's local pro soccer team. I caught him pushing around a friend of mine. I was already five foot eight and very strong. I hated that kind

of injustice and couldn't help myself.

It happened at the soccer field, where the team practiced and our high school class took gym. I saw my friend being slapped around. I asked the guy to stop. He didn't, and swung at me instead. I ducked, hit him twice, and he went down. That was the end of it. He wasn't a boxer. I was.

The fight gave me a reputation. I was already known as an occasional hothead, and this confirmed it. Just beat up somebody really big and nobody ever fools with you. It's not what I wanted, but it came in handy. Although my brother, Yorgo, is very athletic and today runs marathons, I also saved him from beatings a couple of times. He was a "pretty boy" and all the girls went after him, and vice versa. This resulted in a few stolen girlfriends. The jilted boyfriends would band together and wait for Yorgo after class. My friend Armenis — not a great fighter, but strong as a bull — stood with my brother and me. You didn't want to mess with both of us at the same time. (I ran into Armenis recently and even after all the years we reminisced about our battles.)

Now, who would ever imagine me, the gentle musician in white, as a fighter?

My brother was into war and toy soldiers. I

loved electronics. I built a rudimentary arc light, like the kind used to illuminate projectors in old movie theaters, by using the carbon from a couple of D-cell batteries.

The fun part is putting something metal through the arc; it's so hot that even metal will instantly melt and drip. Some got on the table in my bedroom and burned a hole in the Formica top. It's not easy to do that to Formica; it's even more difficult to explain it to your mom.

I also loved to blow up stuff. I used gunpowder, which I could just buy at the store, and fuses. I would make little bombs out of playing cards and fishing line. I don't want to describe how to do it, but it sure made a lot of noise when it exploded. I'm lucky I still have my fingers. Of course, nobody knew what my friends and I were up to until my mom found the boxes of gunpowder I'd hidden in the basement. "You could have blown up the whole house!" she said.

I shared a bedroom with my brother. It had a cool terrazzo floor, covered with a shaggy white carpet — a *flocatta* — between the beds. My father put a world map on the wall on my side, a clever trick to make me aware of the planet. Even better would have been a poster of Farrah Fawcett; but no. At the foot of the bed stood the little table I'd

burned, otherwise used for studying.

Most of all I loved my Phillips shortwave radio, which was made of dark brown plastic, with a light cream cloth-covered speaker. I remember lying awake nights, after lights out, with the radio next to my ear, twisting the dial through the crackle and hum, searching for channels, overjoyed at discovering the world: I could pick up stations from Algeria, Egypt, Italy, Germany, the Middle East, and Greece. I'd listen to whatever I could, from rock 'n' roll to jazz to Middle Eastern songs. The experience opened my mind to different music and time signatures. I realized that one culture could find beauty in places another culture didn't understand, but that given a chance, that beauty could be shared through melody. I began to appreciate those differences — and similarities — and my affinity for both grew as I spent more time exploring the world beyond myself.

I was also ready to explore a world much closer at hand.

The idea of sex itself was not a mystery to me. My father was very liberal. He had no problem with mild "bad language." Mom was a little more uptight, but although she giggled and turned red in the face, she didn't reprimand my dad for talking that

way. In Europe, sexuality is much more accepted than in America, which, frankly, was a big shock to me when I came to the United States, because in my experience Americans — at least on holiday abroad — had always seemed so uninhibited.

My first kiss was from a girl I liked in school, but that's as far as it went. I had my first full sexual experience in a local bordello, right next door to my school, of all places. I was thirteen and a half. It was perfectly legal by the way — if you were over eighteen — but no one looked too closely.

Why did I do it? Well, some reasons are obvious, but an unspoken one was that my brother, a year older, already looked like a male model. I never thought I was ugly, but the girls never went for me the way they went for him. Still, none had gone *all the way* with him, so it was very important for me to go there before he did.

An older friend took me in on a Saturday afternoon. The waiting room was tiny, dingy, and dimly lit, and reeked of cigarette smoke and alcohol. I waited for twenty or twenty-five minutes, and then the *Chacha* — the madam — came out of a door on the left, her office, and led me through a door on the right.

A bleached blonde with big breasts