waited. She looked really old to me, though she was probably in her mid-thirties. But what did I know? I had no television; I had no *Playboy*s under my bed, no Internet. I knew which parts fit where, but that was about all. Otherwise I was as nervous — no, scared — as I could possibly be.

The woman was really nice. She sat on the dirty, crumpled sheets, motioned me over to the bed, and helped me out of my clothes. I was so naïve I asked if I should take my socks off. Then she washed me in a little basin of water and put my penis in her mouth. Holy shit! I didn't know someone could do that. I wish I had had a camera then, not to record the act, but to take a picture of my face. I'm sure it revealed exactly what I was thinking: *You can do that? Is that legal? Do Mom and Dad do this?*

I was so nervous that it took me a few minutes to get aroused, but she took it easy with me, and said, "Come on. Relax. Feel good," and everything worked as it was supposed to. It seems funny now, but afterward I remember thinking, You had sex, now you're a man.

When I left we had some beers and celebrated the loss of my virginity and having beaten my brother at something important. He made the trip himself two weeks later be-

cause he couldn't stand the thought of his younger brother having one up on him.

Now that I was a man, there was only one "problem." I liked sex. A lot. But I didn't have enough money — the drachma equivalent of about ten dollars — to keep going back. I'd had to save for a long time just to show up in the first place. That left me in a quandary. No fourteen-year-old girl at my school was having sex. And although I may have looked mature for my age, the older girls, eighteen or nineteen, were not going to have sex with a fourteen-year-old boy. A brothel was my only option, and I couldn't afford it.

So my friends and I sometimes went from bordello to bordello just to check out the girls. There was no rule that you had to get laid. You could browse just like in any store. We'd go in, buy a drink, and pretend we wanted to buy some company. A girl would come out and say hello. I'd examine her closely and shake my head. The next one would come and I'd do the same; and the next one, too. Eventually, I'd say, "Well, we were just thinking about it. Thank you," and leave.

Of course, the madams probably knew we couldn't afford the girls. As long as we bought drinks they made some money, and

they knew that one day we'd grow up and spend a little more.

I think now that maybe it was unfortunate to have started so young with sex because it only added to the frustrations I had begun to experience in other parts of my life.

2

Learning

With the bay virtually outside the town's front door, everyone in Kalamata swam. I was in the water all the time. I loved breaking through the waves, fooling around with my friends, and seeing who could swim the fastest. I also made bets with my friends about who could swim farthest underwater. I could make it out to a boat anchored 50 meters (about 150 feet) offshore and come up on the other side without taking a breath, and always won. The loser had to buy sodas afterward.

Our high school, which began in the eighth grade, had a swim team. Unfortunately, we had no pool and no real coach who could tell us how to train or win. We were just kids fooling around, although I got some pointers from my uncle Yianni, a water polo player and regional swimming champion.

Near the end of each term students from the different area high schools gathered at the beach for races. Our "pool" was the

ocean between two wooden barges that floated on great metal drums, inside the breakwater. The barges were set approximately 50 meters apart — one Olympic pool length, though the distance varied with each small swell that passed — and were connected by ropes, to make lanes.

I entered my first official meet when I was a freshman, and came in first. The prize was a trip to Athens for the national championships. Because we didn't have a coach, a gym teacher from another high school went along as chaperon, with instructions to keep order and bring us back alive. Naturally, we expected to get our asses kicked because the city kids had heated Olympic pools and trainers and took their swimming seriously.

My mother packed my little brown suitcase and, with my brother and maybe twenty other students, I settled in for a twelve-hour train ride to the capital. I'll never forget the journey: It was June, and hot. We had no air-conditioning. The train stank of coal smoke, and soon my short-sleeved shirt and khaki shorts did, too. The hard wooden seats hurt my ass, and we stopped at every little town along the way.

But no matter. This was all an adventure. I stared out the window as we rolled along

through the countryside, thinking, Can I do this? Maybe I can.

"You know," I said to some kids near me, after reading the race qualifying times in the newspaper, "this doesn't seem very fast. I think *I* can go this fast."

I had no idea if that was true. I'd been timed, but when your lane is the rope line between two barges that might be 49 meters apart one second and 52 the next, there was no such thing as accuracy. I just knew I usually came in first.

The chaperon overheard me. I can't recall his exact response, but it was more or less, "Stop the boasting, kid. You're just going on a little vacation. Don't think you can beat anyone up there. You ain't got a chance."

His words upset me, but he was probably right. The guy just wanted to protect us all from having unreasonable expectations and from coming home terribly disappointed. But he didn't know me. At almost fourteen, I was much stronger than most kids my age. I'd been playing beach soccer almost every day since I was six. I lifted weights and boxed. I had tremendous lung capacity.

Maybe I could do it. I'd certainly try.

We arrived in Athens after sunset. An official told us the schedule. The 50-meter freestyle

heats were in two days. No problem. I'd have a chance to rest and maybe see some of the city. I hadn't been in Athens since I was eight years old; compared to Kalamata it was huge, intimidating, and promising. I feel the same way now when I go to New York. Everybody pushing, energetic, going places. Horns blare. The air smells like a city.

Our accommodations were hardly better than our seats on the train: an old army barracks with what seemed like endless rows of cots. Trying to relax and sleep that first night was almost impossible with kids throwing pillows, making noise, roughhousing, going nuts.

The next morning I had a big breakfast, including lots of milk, bread, butter, marmalade, and everything you're not supposed to eat before swimming. But I had a day to kill. Before exploring the city, I went to the pool with the team to watch a few events. When we walked in, someone told our coach that there had been a mistake: The 50-meter freestyle heats had just started and I was in heat number three. Not only did I barely have time to run downstairs and get into my suit, I wouldn't be able to warm up. I'd counted on that because I'd never actually been in a pool or unsalted water.

I was in a heat with seven other swimmers.

The current under-fourteen, 50-meter freestyle Greek champions had already won their earlier races and no one really expected any of the kids in my heat to qualify. But despite the badly timed heavy meal, I felt strong. I looked at the other racers and realized that my shoulders were bigger and I was more fit. I may not have trained under ideal conditions or every day, even in winter, but I knew that the 50-meter freestyle was a power event. It's all about speed. It's straight ahead, one pool length. There's no endurance involved. It all just comes down to how strong you are.

I took three or four good deep breaths, the starting gun fired, and we dove in. My plan was to breathe as little as possible while I was swimming and to use the pain of my lungs about to explode as an incentive to touch the opposite pool wall before everyone else. My muscles would get less oxygen, which is like depriving an engine of fuel; however, it takes about eighteen seconds for a breath to distribute its benefits to the body, and the distance was short enough not to make that a major issue if I could get enough air at the outset.

After I hit the water I never looked up. I didn't know if I was ahead or behind. I just swam straight and fast until I touched the

wall, thrust my head out of the pool, and gulped air. The first thing I noticed was my brother standing to the right of the official timer on my lane. He stared at his watch, then shook it. I looked into the pool and saw everyone else still swimming, a good 5 or 6 meters to go — an enormous distance in this race. My brother ran up to me and said, "I don't know if this is right, but Jesus, this is fast. This is really fast!" And then I heard "A new national record!" on the loudspeaker. I clocked 28.6 seconds, and I was stunned. The second-place swimmer was at least 5 seconds behind me.

I got out of the pool and everybody screamed. My teammates lifted me into the air. The chaperon who had rebuked me the day before was now all hugs and smiles. I didn't bother to say, "I told you." We both instantly accepted what had happened and forgot about the past. That's what I love about athletic events. The results are not a matter of opinion. They are what they are.

Swimming in freshwater is indeed different from swimming in the ocean. The ocean is more buoyant, and the salt water creates much more resistance. Your arms don't move as fast. You can't push or pull as hard, though with every pull you cover more distance. Think of bicycle gears. Ocean

water is like a higher gear. You work harder, and go farther. Freshwater is like a lower gear. You can pedal faster and more easily, but you cover less ground.

After my win — and a celebration — I was surprised by a feeling I'd never had before: self-doubt. I tried to rest that afternoon, before the evening finals, but I couldn't. It wasn't just the dormitory noise. I was nervous. Rather than feeling elated, I was racked with questions: How could *I* have won? Maybe it was a mistake. Or a freak accident! I didn't know if I could do it again, and this time I would be swimming against the champions.

Beyond those doubts lay an even more uncomfortable realization: Before the race I'd been of one mind, focused on winning, no questions asked. Now I had a mind divided. I tried to bury my anxiety by napping, but sleep wouldn't come.

By evening, the media had already begun to make a big deal out of me — bigger than I was. As the dark horse, I was the story of the day. The race even took on social and political overtones. Decentralization movements were afoot to try to get the Greek government to spend money outside Athens for education and a variety of activities. Suddenly I was the poster boy: Look, this kid

came out of nowhere and doesn't even have a coach. Imagine what he could do with training . . .

Moments before the final race, one of the two Greek champions walked by and tried to intimidate me. "I've never lost," he said confidently. "No one can pass me. No one." He was at least a foot taller than me. "This is a real race," he added, as we stepped up on our platforms. I was in lane four. He and the other Greek champion flanked me. I stood there, waiting, shaking, scared. The only good news was that it seemed that some of my competition was just as nervous. Instead of concentrating on the race ahead, they were looking over at me, with expressions that asked, "Who is this guy? Who's teaching him? Why is he here?" I guess I'd have felt that way too if some kid out of nowhere had just that morning beaten my record by a long shot. Suddenly I felt better. My confidence returned.

The official announced the race. We took our marks, got set, and . . . false start. Someone moved before the gun and we all ended up in the water. The starter gun was fired a second time, to let the swimmers know the situation. Warning flags were dropped in the water about 8 to 10 meters out in case someone didn't hear the gun. We

got out of the pool and took our places again, the tension even greater.

Another false start.

A third false start would mean disqualification for anyone who ended up in the water.

The official held up the starting pistol: "On your marks, get set . . ."

I saw the swimmer in lane five move just before the gun went off. I assumed once again that the race would stop, and the swimmer would be disqualified, so I struggled to hold myself back and stand up. But there was no second shot, and no warning flags. The officials didn't want to disqualify a Greek champion, so they let it go — and everyone hit the water but me.

You make that big a mistake and you don't recover, but I didn't stop to think. I just dove in and swam as if my life depended on it. If I breathed at all, I don't remember.

Here's what I do remember: I won — and my time was identical to that morning's. Now I really owned the record.

The media fussed over me. The newspapers and radio kept asking, "Who is this Chryssomallis kid from Kalamata, and how is this possible?" The mayor of Kalamata gave me the "Best Athlete of the Year" award, a handmade silver cup. And the town

hired a team swimming coach who knew all the latest training techniques.

People swim a lot faster today, but I think my win was miraculous. My definition of "miraculous" is that there was no way an untrained kid could reasonably expect to enter his first official event and beat swimmers who had dedicated their young lives to the sport. Yet in both races I looked around and thought, There's no way any of you are going to get ahead of me. The miracle was in my innocence, and I've learned that in innocence there is strength. When you're naïve, you don't question. Years later, this applied to my music when I was learning how to set up the best conditions under which to create it. The more I questioned and the more I doubted, the more I destroyed my songs. A naïve person believes things are possible that others, who think they know better, don't — or can't. I'm not saying that the innocent always triumph, but maybe knowing better isn't always better. Sometimes the knowledge you've been given in school or by an elder — "This is just the way it is" — keeps you from accomplishing because it traps you in a box in your mind and limits your freedom to discover.

Openness has always been the key for me. I won the swimming meet in part because I

believed that anything was possible, or at least because I didn't put together everyone else's "facts" and believe that winning was *impossible*.

I became serious about swimming and trained twice a day, from six to eight in the morning, and from six to eight in the evening. From five to six in the afternoon, I lifted weights. I was in bed by nine thirty. On Sunday I trained just two hours, plus I lifted weights. I even worked out on my birthday because I knew that if I missed practice sessions it would take me days to get back to peak shape. Swimming is a particularly difficult, demanding, and physically brutal event. My pulse rate sometimes reached nearly 180 beats per minute. Watch a swimmer's chest after he's done interval training and you can actually see his heart beating against his skin. If my body could have spoken it would have screamed, "You're killing me!"

I refused to give in. I acknowledged my pain but I would not let it destroy me or change my course. Then I went back for more. Endurance is mind over matter, mind over muscle. I have tremendous respect for athletes; when I watch the Olympics I know the kind of agony these competitors have been through.

For the next few years I won almost every race I entered, from the 50-meter freestyle to the 100-, 200-, and 400-meter distances. I did it in the under-fourteen and over-fourteen age categories. I collected a lot of gold medals and cups — my parents still have them in the house — and continued to do well right through high school. But I didn't do as well as I wanted to. The best swimmers are tall and slim; my muscled, five-foot-nine frame began to show its limitations. I was more built than sleek. I had natural ability, but that wasn't quite enough anymore.

As a junior, I remember walking around Athens one day by myself, in the rain, crying, bummed out at having not lived up to my high hopes in an international swim meet. I'd been very sick the week before and the illness had drained me — but knowing that didn't seem to help. After having been so positive for so long, I doubted my competitive future, and I decided to quit. The coaches and my friends tried to talk me out of it. "You're still a kid. Come on, how could you give this up?"

"You have a great talent!"

"You can go to the Olympics."

Maybe. But at that level of competition there is absolutely no room for doubt. Either you're 1 million percent convinced that this is the only thing you want to do, or you get out. You can't *just kinda* do it. You won't succeed. It's a waste of time. Also, swimming had once been fun; it was hard work but also a social event. Now most of the fun had disappeared and I knew I no longer had the passion to continue.

My mom says I always hated injustice. If I knew I had done something wrong, I accepted the consequences. I put my head down and didn't say a word. But if I did not agree that I'd done anything wrong, she could never punish me because I would object loudly. Once, but only once, I grabbed the dining room table and turned it upside down.

Sometimes my desire for fairness and justice caused problems at school. In the eighth grade I was in gym class playing basketball when the rest of the school was called to an assembly outside. We didn't have to go, so my coach asked me to get him something from the dressing rooms. I took off, past all the kids, and ran into the composition teacher. He didn't like me. "The principal's talking," he snapped. "You're being disrespectful." I tried to tell him I was on an errand for the coach but he wouldn't let me

finish. "I said you're being disrespectful," he barked. "You've *always* been disrespectful. I know your kind." I stood there, speechless. "Go back to your class," he ordered.

"I can't go back," I protested. "The coach . . ."

That's when he grabbed me and started shaking me. "Listen here," he yelled. "You'll do whatever I tell you to do."

The Greek school system was strict and unforgiving, and many of the teachers had the bad habit of getting physical. Sometimes they'd even hit. I didn't like it, so without much thought, I grabbed his arms and pushed them away, forcing him to let me go. For my trouble, I was suspended for a few days.

This teacher's attitude was part of the reason I hated school. I resented being treated like a little kid. I didn't like to be pushed around, hit, or handled in an uptight military manner. It was always "Move this way, turn this way, look up, look down, sit to the left, sit to the right." Even worse, it was also "Think this way, not that way. You're wrong, we're right."

A couple of years later in religion class somebody made a noise or giggled and the teacher got mad. He asked who did it and no one would confess. Then for some reason

the instructor decided I knew and should tell him.

"I have no idea," I said.

"If you don't tell me," he threatened, "I'm going to kick you out of the class."

"I don't know," I repeated.

"Tell me," he insisted.

"Look," I said, "I don't know. And even if I did know, I wouldn't tell you. And you're not going to kick me out of class for nothing."

I shouldn't have let my frustration get the better of me.

He marched to my desk, grabbed my arm, and tried to pull me out of my chair. I weighed a lot more then than I weigh now, and my biceps were twice their current size. (I could do 137 push-ups nonstop.) Unfortunately for the teacher, I sort of lost it and reacted instinctively by backhanding him on the chest. Not the face, the chest. And only once. But I must have hit him harder than I realized because he fell backward on a desk and went down in a heap with some students. It all seemed to happen in slow motion and I remember thinking, Now I've done it. I've just hit a teacher, it's over. I'm never going to finish high school. They'll kick me out forever. My future is screwed.

Even though I saw my whole sorry life

flash before me, I still had the presence of mind to leave the classroom immediately, on my own, and go to the principal's office. He was at his desk. He saw me, smiled, and said, "What's up?" The principal liked me; he thought I was a good kid, which is why I went to him in the first place.

"I just did something really bad," I said. "I'm really sorry, but I just lost it." After I explained, I added that I was just exhausted from getting up at 5 a.m. every day and training so hard for the swim team. Most teachers understood and cut me some slack. More important, I also said, "My father doesn't hit me. I don't get dragged around like that in my family. I don't expect anyone here to grab me, either. It was just instinct. My arm did what it wanted to do."

From the look on the principal's face I could see he was trying to figure out whether or not to believe me, so I said, "I know you can't give me a break, so I'm going home now."

I was totally embarrassed to tell my parents. My father, who never condoned violence, always said, "You gotta be cool." (Of course you don't actually say "cool" in Greek, but that's what he meant.) You don't use your fists, you don't yell, you don't jump up and down. Strength is in your mind and

heart. We went through all that. But I still had a little bit of a cowboy attitude.

My dad believed my story, and so did my mother, which surprised me because most of the time she went the other way and stood up for the teachers whenever I complained. It wasn't that she didn't support me, but my mother wants to do the right thing and the good thing, to be socially and politically correct, to get along. Part of me is that way, too — but only part.

Because word traveled fast around school and I became a hero for decking the teacher, the principal made me stay home for a week. It could have been much worse. In those days, if you didn't have excellent behavior on your high school release papers, the government wouldn't give you a passport to study abroad. My parents' dream was for all their children to go to college in America. I didn't want to mess that up. Luckily the principal protected me. I promised myself to take a deep breath before losing my temper again.

As for the teacher, they let him go a couple of months later.

If only discipline were my biggest complaint about the Greek school system. But it wasn't. I loved my country and admired its culture

and heritage, but I objected to the way children were educated. Those core beliefs about teaching remain with me today.

Once, an instructor stood me up in front of the entire class because my brother and I had to take a few hours off from school for a music recital. He was upset that I had to leave for something "as ridiculous as playing music."

"You just can't do so many things," he said. "If you go to school, do music, take languages, play sports — all at the same time — you'll be no good at any." And this was the wisdom of a man teaching life's truths to impressionable young minds? No wonder I disliked the — you guessed it — composition teacher whose arms I had pushed away when he grabbed me.

In high school we spent an enormous amount of class time translating ancient Greek into modern Greek. We focused on the works of Plato, Socrates, and so on. We had ten lines to translate every other day. That would have been fine had the teacher also made some attempt to help us understand what the texts were about. What had these sage men advocated? Why do we still read them today? What had they disagreed about? Did they get along? We spent 99 percent of our time translating and 1 percent

discussing. To say this made me angry is an understatement. I asked the teacher why the ancients wrote down their philosophy in the first place if not to communicate their ideas and encourage debate. No answer.

Most of my early educational experiences were similar, and to this day I regret the time wasted by school at an age when my mind could have absorbed so much. Of course, I didn't expect my teachers to be Aristotle or Plato or Socrates, but I also didn't expect them to be just disciplinarians who frustrated me and made me hate school. Maybe it wasn't their fault; rather than being structured to encourage individuality and creative thinking, the system was set up simply to test my ability to remember on Wednesday what I was taught on Monday. But there's a difference between a teacher who loves his students and wants to stimulate their minds through exploration, and one who stresses memorization. Maybe learning is best when it isn't a grind but opens your mind instead.

Great teachers usually have wise teachers themselves. Again, think of Socrates, who taught Plato, who taught Aristotle, who was personal tutor to Alexander the Great — who in turn conquered most of the known world in his time. I don't think that's a co-

incidence. The teachers I responded to were those who encouraged thinking outside the box. That's how my dad treated me at home. There I had respect and positive reinforcement to the nth degree. He taught self-reliance, freedom of thought, and that it's okay to be different. "If the whole world wants to go left and you feel like going right, go right," he would say. "You don't have to follow. And you don't have to make a big deal about which way you're going. Just go. It's very easy."

At school, I couldn't go anywhere. I had to fit in, find my place, stay there, not ask too many questions, make no waves, be a slave — a microcosm of what society wants from most people.

It was hard to reconcile my father's approach to life with one that told me to get in line and sell out like everyone else standing there with me. I've always thought that if you can bring good to those around you, be productive and not a drain on society, avoid hurting people or feeding off of them, then you should be allowed to live the way that you want to live. Find a way to contribute: Take out the garbage, build, cook, paint a house. There is always a way.

The older I got, the more I wanted to rebel. Sunday nights were the worst time of

the week for me because Monday I had to go back to school. When my mother reads this page she will be surprised and think, But you were such a good student, what do you mean? Well, remember how I spoke of being trained to take pain? No matter how depressed I got on Sunday nights, I didn't complain.

A few times I discussed these feelings with my father. Even though he also disagreed with the system, he knew I had to go to school and do well simply to achieve my goal of going to America. He tried to help me get along. "Just ignore it," he'd say. "It's fine. They don't understand." He worked to nurture my individuality, but he also knew I had to deal with the situation. "You're right, they're wrong, but you still have to show respect. Don't take it personally. Don't shortchange yourself. Look beyond now; focus on your future."

I confess I contributed to the problem. From as early as I can remember, starting with the piano, I didn't particularly like to be taught. This is my personality, I know. I've always been more teachable when I teach myself. I don't want problems solved for me. I want the fishing rod, not the fish. My whole family's like that. Sometimes when we have a dis-

cussion over dinner I say, "You know, no one in this family listens to anyone."

I've learned the hard way. I've made mistakes, spent hours tinkering, experimenting, obsessing. But I'm glad I made discoveries on my own. To write my music, I must face the unknown. I call it "the black." Most people are frightened by the unknown. I find it exciting because of the abundance of possibilities. I'm comfortable there. The unfamiliar is very familiar to me. I don't have a "you can't do this" voice in my head. Freedom is beautiful.

It's not that I don't value teaching. I do, especially when it comes from instructors who understand that their job is to teach students how to function without them, how to confidently face the unknown without a backup. That takes more than just memorizing a bunch of facts. You need a mind open to possibility, conditioned to love the creative spirit we all have inside ourselves.

Look at Dick Fosbury, the 1968 Olympic high-jump champion. Instead of leaping like everyone else, he went over headfirst and backward. They called it the "Fosbury Flop." At first people laughed, but Fosbury broke the world record. Now everybody jumps headfirst and backward.

When I began to play piano seriously, I looked at the keyboard and my fingers and thought, What would I like my hands to do? Okay, I'd like to be able to press this note and that note. I tried, and if it didn't work I experimented until it did. Did I need a teacher to show me how? Teachers can make it easier as long as they don't imply that there's only one right way to do something and cut off access to original thoughts.

Original thinkers have always fascinated me.

Take the idea that the universe is made up of small "building blocks," or atoms. The name is derived from the Greek word *atomos,* which means "indestructible particle." The concept is commonly attributed to Democritus, an ancient Greek philosopher who lived from 470 to 380 B.C. Democritus was first to use the word "atom," but he built on the ideas of his teacher, Leucippus. Democritus's student, Epicurus, went further and enquired into the movement of atoms. Some say the original thought behind the atom came even earlier, with Anaxagoras and others, and it's difficult to know exactly, but the point is not who actually came up with what, *but that they came up with anything at all.* How in they heck did they think of this stuff? What made

someone arrive at the picture of an atom in his head? I always wanted the kind of mind that could give birth to a thought that no one else had had.

Today, largely because of the creative process I employ to make my music — which I will describe in more detail later on — I realize I do have that kind of mind. *And so does everyone else on this planet.* It's just a matter of how that mind is nurtured, encouraged, and trained. It begins when we're young, with our parents, and continues in school, where the key is not to teach in a way that breaks the spirit — or ignores it — so that the student never explores or takes a chance. Supporting creativity and eliminating the fear of facing the black is the path that works for me and allows the mental quantum leap. If I were raising children, my primary focus would be to expose them to a wide spectrum of subjects. I wouldn't push; I would find a way to let the new experiences attract and entice the children. That way they would follow of their own accord. And once they did, I'd let them soar.

Unfortunately, my vision of how things work best was not the standard when I went to school. And even now, there are so many students and so few teachers. Classrooms are crowded; all kids don't learn at the same

speed. It's next to impossible to give individual attention and cater to everyone's needs. Some kids are visually oriented, some aurally, some tactilely, and sometimes those who are not equipped to pick up information in the standard fashion, or who are slower, are considered dumb, if not by their peers or the teachers, then by themselves. They become traumatized and think they're not good enough. They drop out, and it's over.

Self-judgment is the destroyer.

It doesn't have to be.

The famous psychiatrist Alfred Adler performed a test many years ago in which he went to different schools and found kids at the bottom of the class, took them away for a year, and taught them while highly emphasizing and reinforcing self-esteem. When he returned them to their schools they went to the top 10 percent of their classes. Adler believed in relationships established on the basis of equality. He supported creativity, improvisation, invention. He understood the uniqueness of each person and adapted his methods to the individual.

We all have special needs. If they're met early, our brains will rise to the occasion.

I have a suspicion that if you check into the lives of some gifted children, you'll find

something in their homes and families or somewhere along the educational line that inspired their brains to hang on to a lot of those billions of neurons that most of us drop along the way. They were probably stimulated in every way possible without worries about what they'd be when they grew up, without love being withdrawn for making mistakes. It may seem like they lack direction because sometimes they go in all directions at once, but it's not so. The engaged mind stays sharp and retains tremendous capacity. Those kids learn how to solve their own problems, gain confidence from doing it, and are not afraid to face the black.

When I was still in high school I met a man named Bill MacDonald. He was the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota. He, other professors, and their students would come to Greece in the summers to excavate archaeological sites near my town and study the culture. They wanted to discover the origin of the Greeks. Eventually MacDonald wrote a book about it.

I got to know Bill because of my father, who got involved with these people through a good deed he had performed a few years earlier for a young American couple named William and Esther Loy. They came into his

bank when they were in Kalamata making maps for the future excavation.

The story is so characteristic of my dad.

The Loys asked a bank official if a check from the University of Minnesota had arrived. The answer was, "It's not here yet." The problem was a post office strike, which went on for forty days, and they desperately needed money.

My dad was assistant manager then. One day he realized he'd seen the Loys come in again and again, always leaving frustrated. He assumed they must be in trouble, so he took them aside and heard their story. They couldn't pay the rent or buy food. To help, my dad did something anyone else would have considered foolish — he gave them money out of his own pocket. He said, "I'm sure your check will come, and when it does, just give the check to me."

What? The Loys freaked. Can you imagine: In a foreign country, some local banker just gives you money without collateral? The Loys could have walked out and never returned. A smart person would never have given them a loan. But my dad is great at reading people. He knew they weren't lying. He has always told me, "Intelligence is a wonderful thing, and you must be intelligent. But intelligence without discern-

ment, judgment, without being a good judge of character and a good judge of a situation, is useless. You will always shoot yourself in the foot. Intelligence is not enough."

Maybe a week later, when the strike ended, the check came and the Loys repaid my father. Then they became friends. My father brought them to the house. My mother cooked and baked. We all went swimming and hiking. The next summer, they visited again.

As the excavations approached, the university needed someone to handle the business end in Greece, to buy land and get permissions from the government's antiquities department. The college turned to my dad. He got land clearances and helicopters, and built them the expedition house. My dad made money from these dealings, but the biggest benefit was that his openness cleared the way for his kids to go to college in the United States at the University of Minnesota.

My father would sometimes take me to the dig, where I met the professors — including Bill MacDonald. Bill was my hero, an inspiration. He was the first adult much more important to me than any teacher or authority figure, except for my father.

Where others treated me as a child, ignoring or deflecting my inquisitiveness because my mind was housed in a kid's body, he considered my questions seriously and engaged me in dialogues.

Bill had humility; my regular teachers were absolutists. Bill was one of the first people to be sympathetic toward my young views about my education. It's a sign of my bond with him that I felt free enough to discuss them in the first place. My opinions weren't fully formed then; I was just a kid with a sense that something was very wrong. But when I complained to him about how we were taught, instead of brushing me off or patronizing me, he said, "You're right; it's wrong." I felt a great sense of relief.

Bill was always ready to talk. Once I asked him, "How do we know that a historical event really happened? How do you know that a certain battle took place with this many Persians and that many Greeks?"

His answer: "That's just it: We don't know. We cross-reference one primary source with another. If more than one account from different cultures in existence at the time say the same thing about the same event we tend to believe it."

Maybe this is no big deal to American students, but no teacher I'd ever known had

been so open. Bill didn't even like the grading system, believing instead that students should either pass or fail. Grades, he said, misrepresented knowledge and intelligence — and often confused them. I wondered then why I couldn't have more teachers like him. He was there at the right time, saying the right things to spark my imagination. He showed me I wasn't crazy, that there *were* different approaches to learning. Before he died a few years ago, I would call him whenever I had a serious question about early civilizations, archaeology, or history, and we would have long talks. At one point, after I had become famous, he said that if I ever found myself in a position to be able to affect society and do something about revamping the educational system, that I should do so.

I went to my last two years of high school in Athens on a swimming scholarship as part of the Greek national team. Although my brother was also in school there, I lived in an apartment by myself. Before I left for the city I asked my father for an allowance, and he agreed. In fact, he gave me a family checkbook.

"What can I take out a week?" I asked

"Whatever you need," he said.

"No, I mean *how much?*" I wanted him to say, "Fifty or a hundred dollars a week." Something specific. But he refused.

"Whatever you need," he repeated. "But of course if you spend too much there won't be any left for the rest of us to live on."

"Why," I asked him many years later, "would you trust a sixteen-year-old with that kind of responsibility?"

"Because I raised you," he said. "I know what I put into you. You understood responsibility."

To this day we joke about that moment, but he was right. Once again he had treated me like an adult, and it had worked.

Around the time I quit swimming I had also, not so coincidentally, fallen in love with psychology. My father had passed on to me his love of exploring why we are the way we are. There is no single answer, of course, but I loved thinking about it so much that my athletics suffered. But that was okay with me, and I made the difficult choice to go in a completely new direction. I read and absorbed every text I could find. I was well into Freud, Adler, and Jung by the time I turned seventeen. That's young, perhaps, but not if you grew up with my father. He always talked to me about the human condition. He was in-

terested in what made people tick and tried to explain it nonjudgmentally.

Years later, in college, I studied dream analysis. I think dreaming is one way our brain educates itself. To process our mishmash of experiences during the day, it runs various scenarios at night, based on the information we've absorbed from the world. This includes situations we're afraid of or think might happen, and outcomes that make us happy, sad, or indifferent. Dreams just connect the dots — without judgment — and through them we get to experience a possible future and react fully. Then if it ever really happens, we'll be more prepared because we've already been there. If anything, dreams are self-protective, educational survival mechanisms.

For example, my sister used to see my father dying in her dreams. She thought it meant something was going to happen. But I think she just loves my dad so much and is so connected to him that she's probably going to be devastated when he dies. Those dreams are her way of preparing for the future by letting her become accustomed to her feelings now, a desensitization that also works when you're awake. When I see people cry, I say, "Please: Cry. Go for it." It hurts you? Good. Please cry. Let's think

about it again tomorrow. The next day it won't hurt as much. Pretty soon you can handle your feelings. Suppressing anything only makes it worse.

All our brains go into overdrive at night. Mine focuses on music. If I work on a song at the end of the day and have unresolved problems, I know when I wake up the next morning I'll have the answers. My brain does that for me because music is the last thing I think about at night — intentionally. No TV or books. I brush my teeth and go to sleep. The next morning I wake up smarter about the song.

Attending college in America isn't cheap, especially for a foreign student. To make it possible for us to go, my father did what many would consider unthinkable: He sold our house, moved into a rental, and used the money to buy plane tickets and help all three children get started in school. That took enormous balls. My father was in his fifties, approaching retirement. His salary would soon stop. But Mom and Dad had discussed it and agreed that nothing was more important than us going to America.

It wasn't only the educational opportunities. From 1967 to 1974, Greece was ruled by a U.S.-backed military junta. The gov-

ernment tried to change history by rewriting the schoolbooks. Boys, me included, had to get a crew cut. They also changed the language in an effort to make it more "proper." The police and army had ultimate and absolute power. There was no freedom of the press. There was no political dissent allowed. We were told not to say anything against any government official because we could be arrested and thrown into jail with the other political prisoners. We also heard stories of people "disappearing."

After the junta was overthrown, Greece was not such a bad place if you could focus on the country's history and its hopes for the future instead of on its day-to-day struggles with bureaucracy and corruption. Today, Greece has worked through a rite of passage, has come a long way, and is looking at a brighter future.

Nonetheless, as my father recently and bluntly told me, had I not come to America there would be no Yanni. He's adamant about that. He believes I've reached whatever levels of creativity I have because I was stimulated by changing cultures, by moving to a land with greater challenges and more of everything. And, of course, because of who I am. Maybe he's right.

My brother went first, to the University of

Minnesota, where he studied chemical engineering. (He earned a Ph.D.) His freshman year he stayed with one of the professors, which helped financially.

A few days before I left, I visited my aunt Xanthe and I told her that I would not come back until I did something right, until I had made something of myself. I understood my parents' sacrifice and I believed in my heart there was no chance I'd allow myself to fail.

The day before my flight to America I walked with my father to the little pier on the bay where I used to swim. I looked out over the water and found the horizon, but hard as I tried I couldn't see the horizon inside my head. I had no idea what the future would hold. "I would give anything to be in this spot ten years from now," I told my dad, "to know what is actually about to happen to me."

Was I scared? Maybe a little, though danger always feels to me more like excitement, like pins and needles. When I throw everything in the air, up for grabs, that's when great things happen for me. I don't live in fear, but if I don't have a *little* fear about what I'm about to do, then I know I'm just repeating myself, not stretching. I look for the little bit of doubt; I need to ask myself the question: Can I do this?

However, at that moment, I had a stomach full of butterflies and I wanted desperately to see through the curtain of time.

My father wanted to make the unknown okay. "What you're about to do is extremely difficult," he said, "so if it doesn't work, come home and don't feel bad about it." Then he opened the door a crack more and said, "Most kids wouldn't succeed at this. You don't really speak the language. It's a change in cultures; you don't know what to expect and you don't know what you'll find. We think it's best that you go and try, but if it doesn't work, no one is going to blame you. You can go to the university here."

He gave me permission to fail without ever implying that he expected I would. With that, he took the pressure off. Dad is a clever man. He understood the source of my stress. My mom, too. I heard her voice in my head, saying, "If your own mind does not beat you up, a thousand people can't do it, either." In other words, she knew I had self-control and focus and that I would do my best.

I forgot about that moment until years later when I returned to Greece after a long absence. I walked with my father to the bay and stood on the pier in the same spot where we'd

talked so long ago. I remembered our goodbyes and my wish to know the future. That's when the circle finally closed. Suddenly, I felt like an eighteen-year-old again. I had tears in my eyes.

3

Changing

When I came to America I wanted to be free and open to change. I wanted to try new foods, a new culture, and new ideas. I understood that to do so I had to cut the cord to Greece. You have to give up some of the old so that you can make room for the new. You need not to be full of yourself in order to move on. I had no intention of getting stuck in the past, and I couldn't have chosen a better way to do it than to leave the cocoon, get on an airplane, and wind up in Minnesota.

I didn't even call myself Yanni. I was John. John Chryssomallis, the name on my passport and enrollment forms.

I had this "keep moving" attitude even as a kid. My instinct was to taste it all, because the more I stimulated my mind, the better off I was. Now that I'm older, I *know* that I can never sit still. That's the beauty of life. It never stops. We change constantly, both physically and in our perceptions. That's not to say that other instincts don't pull in

the opposite direction. No matter how old you are, at times you will find a place and say, "Hey, this works for me. This is good. Why don't I stay here?" But even if you could, even if nothing bad ever happened, even if it was Heaven, I suspect you'd be bored out of your mind. Eventually you'd want to change — so you might as well not resist when it happens naturally.

I wouldn't mind having a younger body if I could keep my mind the way it is today. Many mornings I wake up and look at myself in the mirror — and it's kind of a bummer. "Hey guy, what happened to you?" I'm not happy about getting hurt more easily and taking longer to heal, but as my mother has said, what's the alternative? These changes are part of what keeps me interested and excited. Life won't let me keep coming at it from the same angle.

I said good-bye to my parents at the Kalamata airport and took a puddle jumper to Athens, where I boarded a TWA flight to New York. I arrived in America on November 8, 1972, a week before my eighteenth birthday. I had to change terminals at JFK for my flight to Minneapolis. The airport bus charged a quarter, but I didn't have any American money, so I just got on and walked

to the back while the driver yelled at me to pay him — I think: I barely spoke English and he talked too fast. Fortunately, a nice woman said, "It's okay," and paid for me. Then, being a Good Samaritan, she gave me a handful of coins and said, "This is a quarter. This is a nickel. This is a dime."

My brother met me at the end of the jetway in Minneapolis. We'd been virtually inseparable all our lives and it was great to see him after a year apart. We hugged, then picked up my bag, which was much larger than the old brown suitcase I'd taken to Athens for the swimming championships. But as soon as we exited the terminal I wanted to turn around, reboard, and fly home. The wind howled and it must have been ten below zero. My skin had never experienced anything remotely as cold. My lungs hurt so bad I could hardly breathe. My ears were on fire and felt like any second they'd crack off my head and fall into the snow. Yorgo had said it would be cold, so I wore a coat, figuring, How cold could it be?

Let's just say it wasn't the right coat for Minnesota in the winter.

I'd also never touched snow before. Ignoring the chill for just a moment, I picked up a handful of the slushy white powder,

squeezed it into a lump, and threw it. Eventually I learned to love the snow, but had I realized then that the ground would still be frozen and covered six months later, I might *actually* have gone home.

Yorgo drove us to Territorial Hall, our dormitory at the university. We'd be roommates on the second floor. I lugged my bag up the stairs and we walked down a long corridor. Suddenly, I smelled something burning; it was pungent, acrid, and everywhere.

"Yorgo," I said. "What's that smell?"

"Marijuana," he said. "Pot."

"*That's* what it smells like?" I had never been exposed to it. "But it's so strong."

He laughed. "Oh, that's because everyone's smoking right now in their rooms."

The whole place? This is going to be great, I thought, and not because I wanted to get high. Compared to Greece, everything was wide open here and the possibilities seemed endless.

The first thing I did was grow a beard and stop cutting my hair. Soon I looked like a cross between Cat Stevens and Che Guevara. Since coming to America, I've shaved my mustache only once, and I didn't like it. There's nothing funnier–looking than a guy who has a mustache one minute

and not the next. It takes him a year to get used to his face again.

Back home, I'd had to take some examinations, wait for grades, and deal with endless emigration red tape before I could leave the country, so I wasn't able to start college in September. That meant I had to kill time until the next quarter began in January, 1973. I didn't mind because I had to work on learning English. After only a year in Minnesota, my brother spoke quite well. I hardly spoke English at all, despite a few years of study at high school. Most kids in Greece had to take English, but mostly we joked our way through class, and I didn't absorb much.

My brother, who is extremely intelligent and has great problem-solving abilities, made my challenge clear. "Look," he said. "From now on you just don't speak Greek anymore. If there's something you don't understand, I'll explain it in Greek. But don't talk to me in Greek." Very clever. He knew the difference between English lessons back home and speaking English in America. Nobody slows down.

I struggled, but I kept up.

I also needed a job. The next day I found one as a part-time dishwasher at the university Campus Club, where my brother

worked and the professors ate. I'd never had a job before. My father had figured we'd work for most of our lives anyway, so he didn't push us as teenagers. I earned $1.29 an hour, five hours a night, to grab plates, with cigarette butts stubbed out in the uneaten food, off the conveyor belt and scrape and scrub them bright and clean. I'd never washed a plate in my life, either; my mom was the best dishwasher in the world. I even hated touching food with my fingers. In Greece, I'd only eat chicken with a fork and knife, even the drumstick; it was too greasy and oily.

Because we lived in the dorm, the cost of meals was covered, though you can imagine how they compared to my mother's cooking, which had spoiled me forever. Once a week we went across the street to the Red Barn, where I stared at the pictures of the hamburgers and French fries and struggled to decide whether I could afford the large fries for fifty-nine cents or had to stick with the small ones for thirty-nine cents. If I could afford an extra cheeseburger it was the highlight of the week — that is, once I got used to American hamburgers. They always came with onion, ketchup, and pickle. I almost threw up after my first fast-food experience.

But I soon got used to it all. The job became like a big party. The kitchen crew played practical jokes on one another, we threw towels around, and once in a while I'd make a big mistake and break a bunch of plates. Not on purpose, of course, but if you know anything about the culture, you have to wonder if dishwashing, of all things, is really the right job for a *Greek*.

When I wasn't working I'd hang out in our little two-beds-and-not-much-else dorm room and study English or read, which amounted to the same thing. Otherwise, I had little to do: We didn't own a television, and I had no car. In some ways it was just like being back home — except that outside it was freezing cold, I didn't know my way around, and I had no friends. One thing remained the same, though: My brother, who'd lost none of his magic touch with women, was usually off with a girlfriend.

After reading for hours straight I had to take a break or go crazy. One "escape" was to start smoking. At first I had only one or two cigarettes a day, and it seemed like no big deal, but that's how you get hooked. It took me years and a lot of pain to quit.

Sometimes I would wander into the communal room. An old television set hung

from the ceiling and everyone watched shows like *Sanford and Son*, with Redd Foxx. I couldn't understand what anyone said and I thought, I'm never going to learn English. I asked my brother, "What language are they speaking?"

"You'll get used to it," he said. "It's slang."

When I saw Johnny Carson for the first time, I thought, What is that? A guy standing in front of a drape, telling jokes. I didn't think it was that funny.

My brother told me Carson *was* funny, but I'd have to know more English and listen more closely. I took his advice, paid attention to Carson's speech patterns, and learned to tune my ears. Fortunately, he spoke clearly, with simple words. Yorgo was right. Johnny was very funny.

Most of the time I preferred to relax by playing a brown, beaten-up, out-of-tune upright piano in the first-floor student lounge. Late at night I'd go downstairs, sit in the near-empty room, and make up melodies on the spot. No particular song. No words. Even then I wasn't a big fan of three-and-a-half-minute formula tunes. Most of them didn't seem that creative, and besides, I couldn't connect with the "I love you, baby" and "Since you left me" lyrics. My idols

were Beethoven, Mozart, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Bach — and the world music I'd heard on my shortwave radio at night.

Playing piano was a way for me to shift focus and pass the time. I wasn't that good, but I still found it easy to surrender to whatever emotion I felt and express it musically. It was a way out of feeling lost and a way into myself. To my surprise, I really took to it. The kid who had never thought of becoming a musician suddenly had a tremendous urge to play for hours. The melodies just poured out. I remember wondering what was going on, but it should have been obvious: Music was simply a part of me.

My mother recently reminded me that until I took up swimming, I had played music all the time. Often, I would gather everyone in the living room, which doubled as our music room. My brother played the piano; a friend of ours, Christos, played the drums; Stathis played the guitar; I played the guitar and the accordion; my mom and my sister sang. I'd tell everybody what to do. "You were conducting us even then," my mom said.

Soon I brought a cheap cassette tape deck with me into the student lounge, to put on the piano and record some ideas. Later, I'd play back my tapes before I went to sleep. It

was purely for pleasure because I enjoyed the mood the music created. Today I understand that music follows a natural emotional flow from its creator. That's the advantage of writing your own song: You write it precisely the way you like it. I enjoy the improvisation. I don't agonize over it.

I'd only been playing in the lounge for a few weeks when I noticed that people began to fill the couches and chairs around me. Particularly women; they'd walk in and stay. Now *that* was music to my ears. I realized, Wow, this works great for me! Lonely coeds, or girls tired of studying, would sit and listen and, when I finished, would come over and say, "That was beautiful."

Oh yeah? Wait 'til you hear this.

To be honest, I didn't have a problem meeting girls. I wasn't as classically handsome as my brother, but in Minnesota we were more on par. So many of the local women were blonde, and they just *loved* dark men. I enjoyed the benefits of being the Greek guy. Girls wanted to cuddle me, take care of me, feed me. My halting English was suddenly adorable, and they wanted to show me the ways of America. "Okay," I said. "Show me. Show me!"

Could life be more pleasant and beau-

tiful? Perhaps not, but it could get more complicated.

On my second day at work I had noticed one of the Campus Club waitresses, and she noticed me. Her name was Janice. She was, atypically, a brunette. We spoke during our break and one thing led to another. We ended up in my room, between the sheets. Remember, it was the seventies and it was very normal to meet someone and have sex — no AIDS, no big deal. Afterward we said an affectionate, "Nice to meet you. See you at work. Bye."

The next day, Janice had the shift off and I noticed another waitress, a blonde. Cute as a button. I thought, Wow. I want to meet her! I did, and we ended up in my room that night. Sweet. Great. No problem. Nice meeting you.

The fourth day, it all blew up in my face when both girls worked the *same shift*. I walked in, punched my time card, saw them, stopped to think about what I'd done, and nearly had a heart attack.

Then I found out they were roommates!

Both were casual about the whole affair. Janice said, "I don't mind sharing," which, frankly, blew my mind. Of course, I didn't mind either, but it didn't really work out. I preferred Janice's friend, and I ended up

going with her for a while.

From then on I made sure the girls I went out with didn't work where I worked.

Making love was one thing; making good friends was another. Those first few months in America I had plenty of the former, none of the latter. As lucky as I was to have female company, I was also lonely. I hadn't been in Minnesota long enough to get close to anyone, but understanding that didn't make me feel any better. I was depressed.

It all hit me at once on New Year's Eve, 1972. My brother was off with a girlfriend. I couldn't call home because it was too expensive. (I used my cheap tape deck to record letters to my parents.) The girls I'd met and sometimes slept with were scattered throughout Minnesota and the Midwest, home for Christmas. I had no money, no car, no anything. I wished I were in Kalamata with friends, a couple of gifts, and my mom's cooking. I'd never been alone for the holidays before and I missed my family. I'd have slept off the emotional turmoil if I could have, but I had a serious case of cabin fever.

Without thinking, I wandered out of the dorm and across the campus toward the Mississippi River and the West Bank

Bridge, which led into town. I wore a green army jacket and blue jeans, and my hair looked pretty much as it does now. I was halfway across the bridge when I figured out how cold it really was — and that I was dressed like an idiot. Not even a scarf or a hat. Mistake of my life. My head almost froze off.

The bridge comes out onto Franklin Avenue; that was Nowhere Land to me because I'd never been in town. The neighborhood was dark, looked unsafe, and seemed as empty as I felt. Then I saw a neon sign, and underneath it a door into a bar. I opened it and walked inside. I just wanted to get warm.

I stepped into a dark foyer. To my right was a window that looked into a small, empty bar, closed for the night. In the shadows I noticed a guy on a stool. He saw me and said, "Shhh," and cocked his head toward another guy in the bar, trying to break into the cash register with a screwdriver. No one could see them because the main room was beyond a swinging door at the far end of the entryway. I was too cold to have enough sense to ask myself, What the hell am I doing here? and walk straight out. Instead, I pushed through the far door into a room full of Native Americans. I sat in the

back, shared a few drinks with the locals, said nothing about what I had witnessed, and got along fine. An hour into 1973, I walked out. The guys trying to jimmy the register were long gone.

This time I crossed the bridge on the inside, under the covered walkway used by normal folks who were not dumb-asses like me. I stopped in the middle and looked out over the frozen river, under a starless January sky, and decided once again that I could take whatever pain would come my way. I knew what I was doing in America: trying to become somebody. The loneliness and disorientation were part of the price I had to pay. I wouldn't have the luxury of being able to wallow in my gloom, anyway. The semester started in a few days and I had to think about what lay ahead, not what had just happened. I picked up the pace and hurried back to Territorial Hall and whatever the future held in store.

The first quarter I took three classes: calculus — in Greek high school we had a lot of math and physics; French — I already spoke quite a lot; and Psychology 101. My psych course had a 400-page textbook. Every fifth word was unfamiliar. I'd never been so frustrated, but as they say, what doesn't kill you

makes you stronger. I studied with the book, a notebook, and a Greek/English dictionary. I'd read a word: "Preface." Pre-face? What the hell is pre-face? I'd write it down, look in the dictionary, then put the Greek word next to it. This happened so often that it probably took three hours to get through the first page. Plus, almost every word or sentence had a few possible translations. But I'm a worker. I'd sit for eight, ten, twelve hours — whatever it took — and at the end of each day, I'd cover up Greek words, look at the English side, and try to recall the Greek. Then I'd do it the opposite way. I also threw the book up against the wall more than a few times, but I had faith the work would get easier.

Reading that textbook is how I finally learned English. The inadvertent beauty of my method is that I ended up going through it about ten times. I not only got a perfect score on my final, I aced all my finals and made the dean's list. That really encouraged me.

Another benefit of getting A's was financial support. Foreign students pay three times as much as local students. I knew my father's money would last maybe a year, but after that I'd be on my own. Great grades meant a full scholarship. All I had to decide was whether I'd rather wash dishes for

money or read books. The answer was a no-brainer.

As an honor student I had also earned the right to take more classes than I needed, without my advisor's signature. Fifteen credits was the general maximum, but some quarters I took twenty-one, or twenty-four. Once, I took twenty-seven credits. My life became single-minded study, but I saved an enormous amount of money and graduated early. I took just about every psychology class offered at the university even though I didn't need them for my degree. I also signed up for computer classes — with state-of-the-art IBM punch card computers — without actually registering, and learned programming for free. But that's what I was there for: to learn.

My first summer in America I went to Northfield, Minnesota, where I had two jobs: coaching some high school swimmers whose families knew that I was a Greek swimming champion, and lifeguarding at the municipal pool.

The next semester a psychology professor decided I was a hard worker with good ideas and he hired me to work with lab rats. Though I was an undergraduate student, I got two rooms in the psychology depart-

ment and they paid me. I wonder if my professor would recognize the John Chryssomallis he knew then as Yanni today?

The rats were black and weighed maybe a pound each. I fed and cared for them and conducted experiments. We know that rat hearing is pretty close to human hearing and we were trying to prove that there's a gain-control mechanism in the human ear that interprets sound.

I trained the rats to perform sound discrimination tasks. I created a box and a Plexiglas tube with a nose press in it, and two slots on either side. Imagine the rat's head going inside the tube — they're very inquisitive and usually stick their noses in anything — and pushing the nose press. Its ears would pop up on either side of the tube and two bursts of white noise would occur. If the two sounds were equal in volume, the rat had to press the left bar to respond correctly. If one sound was louder than the other, the rat had to press the right bar. For the correct answer the rat was rewarded with a bit of sweet milk. The trick was how to get the rat to keep its ears in one spot while the sounds happened. If you could come up with a way to keep the head steady, you could study them.

I designed the box, the nose press, the

whole experiment. And it worked. I could train a rat to learn that task in one afternoon.

Here's the weird thing: A journalist once asked me — jokingly? — if this is when I learned I could psychologically manipulate millions of people with sound. I suppose he wanted to figure out how a guy who plays instrumental music that some critics think is fit only for elevators, coffee shops, and putting callers on hold, managed to sell so many albums and fill so many concert halls. Of course, I don't believe he thought that I actually brainwash people, but it's true that you can intentionally manipulate sound to cause emotional reactions. It's done in the movies all the time. A low frequency tends to be scary, probably because it's reminiscent, at a primal level, of a large animal or an earthquake. In other words, it intones impending death. A hissing sound recalls snakes. I'm sure this is all programmed into our genes.

I also know it's possible to have a tremendously profound experience while listening to music. Music at the right moment is the facilitator, the catalyst to get your body — and, I believe, soul — to vibrate at a certain frequency, to transport you to a different perspective.

When I compose I'm not trying to produce a specific reaction in any listener, but if my listeners connect with what I'm feeling at the time (every artist's sincere hope) — or if it sparks an emotion of their own — that's good enough for me. If my music can change someone's mood for the better even a little bit, that's amazing. What's wrong with taking a bad frame of mind and making it good?

It goes deeper. In 1993 scientists reported on the "Mozart Effect." They claimed that listening to certain of his works had a positive effect on spatial reasoning. Other international research has suggested that some musical compositions can reduce the number of seizures in people with epilepsy. Then, my music was added to the list — particularly "Acroyali/Standing in Motion" — because, according to the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, "it was similar to Mozart's K448 in tempo, structure, melodic and harmonic consonance and predictability."

Whether a person is spiritual or not, we all seek to get away from the stress, anger, and anxiety of everyday life. Some people drink, do drugs, or do worse to escape, and they hurt themselves in the process. Some people listen to music, mine included, and feel

better. As I come to experience life on different levels, I can use music to express what those levels feel like to me. I believe the listener can be transported to this understanding as well, just by listening to the music. Based on the letters I get, and the stories I've been told by fans, apparently I've done this for many people. If, like me, you're interested in how you're doing on the planet, then that kind of feedback is pretty nice to get.

In the summer of 1974, between my sophomore and junior years of college, I went back to Greece for a brief visit. When I returned to Minneapolis for the new school year my brother and I moved out of Territorial Hall and into a one-bedroom apartment in the slums. I like to say that the kitchen floor was self-cleaning because it lay at an angle; anything you dropped rolled into one corner. My brother got the bedroom; I put a mattress on the floor in the pantry and still had space for a small table and chair. The living room was for company. We stayed there for a year, surviving on bologna sandwiches and peanut butter. I thought it was a beautiful life.

Between my studies, music, fun, and new friends, I fell more and more in love with being in America. I cherished both the

freedom and the anonymity. A beautiful thing about changing cultures is the ability to reinvent yourself. In Greece, I was Yanni the swimming champion; in America, I was John the nobody. In Greece I was the weird kid who didn't smoke, had problems with school, and disliked the teachers. In America I was the kid with an insatiable appetite for learning, who wanted good teachers and to expand my mind. And just because I'd started off as a dishwasher didn't mean I had to stay a dishwasher forever. Americans take that malleability for granted; people from some other countries don't. Had I stayed in Greece I would have faced people who resisted my changes and hoped to keep me in a box that made *them* feel comfortable.

I loved Greece, and still do. I just didn't like being told what to do or how to think. America helped me undo the damage of my early schooling and gave me tremendous opportunities for a future I could fashion for myself.

Because I no longer lived on campus, I played piano whenever I could by sneaking into empty practice rooms in the music department until someone kicked me out. But I didn't take the music so seriously that I

changed my plan to become a therapist, return to Greece, and take care of sick people. At least not at first.

However, the more I enjoyed life in the States, the more difficult it became to imagine sitting in an office all day long, saying, "Next patient." I still loved psychology and had no serious alternatives to replace it, but I instinctively knew that therapy was probably not in my future. I'd get my bachelor's degree, but I might not go to graduate school.

When one door closes, another opens, right? In the midst of my indecision some friends said, "You know, you play the piano beautifully. Why don't you join a band? You could make some money this summer."

I'd never considered that; I wasn't a rock 'n' roller and I didn't have much spare time, but still the idea made sense. I checked the newspaper ads and found one from a band looking for a keyboard player. I decided to investigate and a week later walked into an Animal House that looked like it hadn't been vacuumed in six months. A guy named Dugan McNeill took me down to the basement where the band was waiting. We played a little bit and they hired me. I didn't have any equipment, but they happened to have a red Vox Jaguar organ and an Arp Od-

yssey synthesizer. Once I realized how many sounds it could make, that was it. My life changed. All of a sudden I was absorbed. It was like God had spoken.

The band was called Zed. Billy Melton played the guitar. His brother, Dennis, played the drums. Dugan played the bass. Bob Derickson played guitar. Everyone sang but me. They just needed backup keyboards to sweeten the sound a little bit.

We were terrible, but we thought we were great. It doesn't matter how terrible you are as long as you think you're great.

Playing keyboards in a rock 'n' roll band is not difficult. In fact, it was boring unless I did complex material by bands like Emerson, Lake and Palmer or Yes. And yet I loved being in Zed. I felt lighter, the way you do when your life suddenly works and you hadn't even known there was a problem. Rehearsals were the highlight of my day. I practiced constantly and improved both my dexterity and my musical vocabulary. Soon I could immediately copy whatever I'd heard without too much fumbling. I composed.

The lab rats got lonely.

When I graduated, in June 1976, I told the school to just mail me my diploma. Then I

did something that made me sweat a bit: I told my parents I wanted to put off graduate school for a year, devote myself only to music, and see how I liked it.

Everyone thought I was making a big mistake, though they didn't say so to my face. They didn't want to dishearten me, either. My father didn't tell me to go back to school, but said, "You'll tell us if you need money, won't you?" My mother was a bit more forward. "Well, you could still play your music, if you want," she said. "Why don't you finish school and do music on the side?" My brother was getting his Ph.D. in chemical engineering, and my mother wanted me to get my doctorate so I'd have something to fall back on. At first I thought they might be right, but pretty quickly I realized I was much happier playing with the band.

I wanted to fall forward, not backward.

Besides, I had already fallen in another way. Zed always rehearsed in Dugan's basement. One day in came this gorgeous girl with blonde hair and big blue eyes. I took one look at her and went *wow*. Her name was Sherry; she was Dugan's cousin. While she hung out, listening to the band, I watched her and she watched me — and we kept smiling at each other.

After the rehearsal I talked to Sherry and she was great. I said, "You want to go out?" She said, "Okay." And that was it. On our first date we went to a coffee shop. She told me about herself. She worked at a factory that made stereo speakers. I told her about myself, and that I'd been thinking of giving up school for music.

We fell head over heels in love.

4

The Rock 'n' Roller

Sherry was my first American girlfriend, and my first love. It was puppy love, two twenty-year-old kids trying to figure out what love is and what it means. And man, was it intense. We soon rented an apartment in south Minneapolis and moved in together. We even got a gray-blue Persian cat and named him Felix.

Through Zed, I developed other close relationships. Dugan's mother, Shirley, took care of us all. She even made stage clothes for me. Shirley was a great cook who would feed half the kids in the neighborhood, if necessary. When a girl she knew had a kid she couldn't take care of, Shirley helped raise the child, and has done it more than once. Her own daughter, Debbie, got sick with a high fever when she was young and ended up epileptic and mentally challenged. Most families would send a child like that to a home, just put her away. Shirley wouldn't hear of it. She was the local Mother Teresa.

Shirley's husband, Mac, had a machine shop where he manufactured mattress springs and coat hangers. After five o'clock he'd come home, drink beer, and enjoy life. Although the McNeills were poor, they gave us gifts at Christmas. I once got a check for a hundred dollars, an enormous amount of money then — at least to me. I also spent time with Sherry's mother, Barbara, a great lady to whom I could talk easily.

Between my family, Dugan's, and Sherry's, I was never alone at Christmas again.

Zed was a "cover band." In 1975 and 1976, in nightclubs and dance bars around town, we played songs by groups that had big hits on the radio and sold millions of albums. We covered the spectrum. But like many similar bands, Zed didn't last long.

I left for Archangel, a progressive group that avoided playing cover tunes. They gave concerts and already had a following. Zed fell apart; keyboard players were difficult to replace. Even today, I find it hard to hire one who's proficient, has equipment, and knows how to run it.

Archangel was also short-lived. My next band, Straight Up, was pure fun. We were the big local attraction, a "show band." We

used smoke bombs and other pyrotechnics onstage, and dressed up. Think KISS. I wore black leather pants, a tight black shirt, long hair.

Rock 'n' roll, man.

My new lifestyle did not make a steady relationship with Sherry easy. When I was on the road other girls would invariably show up, willing to share themselves for the night in very creative ways. If you're young and away from home for two or three weeks at a time, it's hard to resist walking into temptation. Mostly I didn't. Maybe Sherry suspected the cheating, but it never came up. One thing is for sure, whatever happened when I was away I was still in love with Sherry. Madly in love. The problem was that such intense feelings led in only one direction.

Sherry wanted to get married and have kids. She hoped I'd go back to school and get my Ph.D. There was nothing wrong with her wanting that, except that it wasn't what I wanted. I'd promised myself a year to discover if music was the right path for me, and it seemed like it was. I needed the freedom to travel and create and have fun. That's not a good recipe for marriage. We were so young. What did we know about life? I began to wiggle out of the relationship, and

that began a period of arguing, breaking up, making up, and breaking up again. We split and got back together so many times — everyone knows how that goes — until one day we were both so tired of the dance that we said, "No more."

I don't dwell in the past; I don't wallow in old events and emotions. I don't waste time on regret. No use going over and over the details of what already happened. I don't even keep old photos on the wall. I just let go. But even today I can remember the pain of breaking up with Sherry. Horrible. I didn't realize it would hurt that much. I was very naïve. A lot of guys, we have this attitude of, "I don't care; I'm fine. I can be without you," and then we discover later that it's not so easy.

I felt stupid without Sherry and eventually I wanted to get back together again, but she wouldn't let me. She did the right thing because our goals were different and it would never have worked. The year it took me to get over Sherry was one of the worst of my life. Sherry, on the other hand, met a nice guy to whom she is still married.

In the end I learned that it made no difference whose fault it was, who started it, who ended it: You're just going to hurt. The pain drove me so crazy that I started smoking pot

just to get to sleep at night. I figured that instead of getting into alcohol heavily, why not just take a hit off a joint and go to bed. I missed Sherry terribly. I also played sad music all the time and cried; for the first time I understood the love songs I had always ignored on the radio.

And yet, I also tried hard to remember my father's lesson: Take the pain. Grab the bull by the horns. It goes away more quickly. You're done with it and you're finished. That's the objective. The more you soften the blow, the more you try to cushion yourself from feeling any discomfort — some people take pills, or drink, or overeat, or try to change the past — the more you perpetuate the problem. You keep it alive, nurture it, and give it strength. If you try to completely avoid the pain, then you'll create a monster that you'll carry with you for the rest of your life. It will always affect your behavior, always affect *you*. It only works in one direction: It becomes bigger, stronger, and drains you.

My relationship and breakup with Sherry pretty much shaped how I behaved toward women for the next ten years. I got to know quite a few and had long-running friendships that also included sex, but I never got serious. I just wanted to have fun and I was

honest about it. "I'm not looking for a relationship, and I hope you're not. I don't owe you anything and you don't owe me anything. If we do this, it's what it is for tonight. If it continues tomorrow, okay, but if it doesn't, don't come to me and say I've used you." I was straightforward. I adored women, and I always saw them as human beings first. I couldn't bear the thought of the kind of pain you could cause another person over sex and unspoken expectations. I didn't think sex was so important that a brief hour or two of pleasure should cause someone pain for a month or two. The bill was too high. I thought anyone who wanted to be with me should just enjoy me and realize that owning me wasn't part of the package.

Sherry was my last real girlfriend until I met Linda Evans nearly fourteen years later. In between I didn't allow another woman to be so deeply in my life that I would be influenced by her presence or her jealousy of the attention I gave to my career instead of to her. I'm not saying I couldn't find the right woman; I just wasn't looking. I didn't have the time or the interest. I had set up my life in a way that worked and I liked it.

Linda once said to me, "I think you didn't fall in love because of how much you hurt."

She was probably right, though at the time I didn't see it that way. I had studied psychology. I even remember asking myself, "Are you afraid of women now, just because you got hurt once? A lot of people get hurt. So what? Get up and do it again." And so I did. But I wanted things my way: no children, no marriage, we just hang out. Maybe I lived in denial. Maybe I threw myself into my music not because I'd have no responsibilities except to myself, but because I didn't want to experience heartbreak again. But if so, it was unconscious.

In 1978, during one of the periods that Sherry and I were only half together, I quit Straight Up and moved to Pembroke Pines, Florida, between Fort Lauderdale and Miami, to try to develop a solo project with lasers. It didn't work out. Then I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where Bruce Lipton, a professor of cell biology, had invested a lot of money to develop lasers. The plan was to do concerts in which I played the keyboards while the lasers swirled around. Laserium had debuted in Los Angeles in late 1973, but the concept of combining lasers and music was still relatively new. I performed a couple of times in Chicago, and in some Minnesota theaters, but that went nowhere. I also did a

few months of keyboard-only solo gigs — without lasers — in nightclubs around Minneapolis, playing classical pieces and some of my own material. That's when I decided to drop the first "i" in Yianni and become Yanni. That's also when I first decided to get out of rock 'n' roll and get serious about my own music.

When Sherry and I split, I moved out of our apartment and asked my sister, Anda, and her brand-new husband, Tommy Sterling, if I could live with them. Their hospitality was critical to my survival. I had no money and couldn't pay rent. They welcomed me immediately.

Never ones to discriminate among their children, my parents had also sent Anda to America for a higher education. But Anda didn't take to it right away. Even though our parents treated us equally, the times and society were stricter for a young woman growing up then in Greece, and Anda chafed under the restraints. We all hung around together as kids, she'd watched her two brothers be independent, and although she was never a tomboy, Anda wanted to be more like us. Strong, willful, and very much her own person, Anda got to the United States and more or less wandered off into

the sunset for a while to have some fun before returning to school to get her M.B.A. and C.P.A.

Anda and Tommy lived in a 1500-square-foot, two-bedroom, one-bathroom house on Ewing Avenue in Brooklyn Park, a middle-class neighborhood just north of Minneapolis. Not only were we literally on top of one another, but if you jumped up and down on the floor the whole place rattled. I wanted to concentrate on writing and recording, so I built a studio in the unfinished, unventilated, unheated basement. I threw down some carpet on the cement floor and used the weight of the equipment — keyboards, amps, speakers, mixing console, patch bay — to hold it in place. The heat generated by the equipment provided the only warmth.

I'm not really sure you could even call what I had a "studio." I didn't have any money and I didn't know anything about electronics. I built it all from scratch using logic and intuition. I stripped and soldered every wire. I solved problems through trial and error. But I loved it. The learning experience was profound because I was on my own. It was just what I'd always dreamed of in school in Greece. I found my own way.

When I was done I looked at what I had

assembled. Honestly, I wasn't really sure why I had gone through all the trouble except that I really enjoyed listening to what I improvised, and the equipment I'd cobbled together would reproduce it better than my cheap cassette recorder. Then I thought, Okay, now be creative.

By then I'd begun to come up with a sound of my own. I'd roll tape and record myself playing things pretty similar to the stuff I do today. I had already written "Butterfly Dance" and I probably had begun toying with the idea of "Marching Season." The piece was so difficult — I say this in my concerts — that in the beginning I couldn't play it with both hands at the same time. When I recorded it, I played the right hand first and then the left hand, and kept practicing until I could perform with both hands what I heard in my head.

I made many discoveries in that basement. Day in and day out I honed my engineering and producing skills, recording and working with guitars, vocals, drums, bass, keyboards. I learned how to mike instruments and bring sounds to life. And most important, I realized that no matter how small-time the machinery or the studio, creativity does not depend on the equipment but on the ability to focus.

Eventually my sister and Tommy got divorced; Anda moved out while Tommy and I stayed — for seven years. Tommy and I are still good friends and he is my sound guy on tour. I'm lucky he was also a heavy sleeper and so easygoing. He never once complained about the noise, and we never once raised our voices to each other. Sometimes I'd wonder: Where can I find a girl like that?

Every day Tommy would get up early and go to work. I would get up later and go to the basement. I'd made a commitment to stay there all day, no matter what. If I didn't feel like writing or playing, that was fine, but I couldn't go upstairs and watch television or talk on the phone. I had to stare at the keyboards and the concrete walls. Sometimes I'd talk out loud, just to keep myself company. I'd say, "Okay, you stay in this room. You can play music or not, be bored or not, but you are stuck in this basement a minimum of eight hours a day, just like the rest of the world when they go to work."

My mother used to tell me that whenever I did something as a child, I was totally committed to it. If I loved something, it was that and nothing else. I was tough on myself because I feared being a lazy procrastinator and the inevitable result: being mediocre or

second best. I always went the extra mile. I required at least eight hours of effort each day, and I usually went for more. It wasn't unusual for me to lose ten or fifteen pounds while recording.

I wasn't being a martyr. I was simply learning how to reach the levels of focus I needed to create the music. There's a reason why monks go into the mountains and sit for long periods of time. Time is the key. When I wasn't good at finding my creative space, it could take me a week to get there. As I got better, it took five days. Then one day. Then only a few hours. Nowadays, with years of experience behind me, I can get there in twenty minutes.

One day I was so caught up trying to work out a problem that I continued to think about it when I drove to the supermarket, and I nearly got into a terrible accident. It seems I'd keyed into a zone and stopped registering cars as cars. The intensity of that moment scared and thrilled me. The more I tuned out the noise, the more clear my thinking process became. I just had to promise myself never to do that again while driving.

I wrote lots of music and refined older songs that had for years just floated around in my head, untitled. Now they had names:

"Butterfly Dance," "Marching Season." One song, "Farewell," was written when I finally accepted that Sherry and I were through.

The writing came easily; the hard part was wondering if anyone would like the result. This much I did know: Despite my technical shortcomings and the steep learning curve, music was it for me. There was so much pleasure associated with writing that I thought that no one else, no matter what the job, could be as happy as I was working in that basement. Every day I would get a rush from writing something new, solving a problem, finding a different sound. It didn't matter to me that I had almost no money, that I was on my own without a safety net. I knew that I could wind up spending years trying to become a successful musician only to find myself older, going nowhere, and having to start another career. But so what? I'd decided to take the risk, and either I'd succeed or else.

My attitude was that if I wasn't discovered one year, then I'd be discovered the next — and by then I'd be ten times as good as the year before because all I would have done in the interim was polish my music. You do good work for a long-enough time, I believed, and you'd get noticed.

I just had to keep at it. Other people could quit after a week; I didn't care. I could take the pain.

In 1980, I recorded my first album, *Optimystique*. My basement studio wasn't good enough so I worked at Cook House Studios in Minneapolis. Their bread and butter was advertising jingles and commercials, not rock 'n' roll. I knew the head engineer, Jerry Steckling, from the local music scene. He'd been hired by Tom Paske, the studio manager and part owner, to update the facility. Jerry had a lot going on during the day, but the place was usually empty at night. When I told him I had always wanted to do a solo project, he said, "Why don't you come in? I'll put up the money for the studio costs and you can record your material." Later, Tom told me, "I went home at five o'clock anyway, so what did I care? Jerry was on the line for the money and I knew he'd work it off or whatever."

Jerry spent $6,000. The instruments were a grand piano and synthesizers. I used Ernie LaViolet, the drummer from Archangel and Straight Up. The album took most of the summer to record. Tom Paske, who has since become my business manager, confidant, advisor, and one of my closest friends,

says the first time we met I started right in by telling him about problems with the equipment. "Yanni said we needed a new Lexicon because the reverb we had wasn't good enough," says Tom. "The piano wasn't good enough. The mikes weren't any good. I believed him. I didn't know anything about gear, but I knew these guys knew a whole lot more than the guys who were just doing jingles during the day. I wanted to have a good studio."

Skinny and towering at six foot six, Tom looks like a cross between Sam Elliott and the Marlboro Man. Sort of a cowboy with the boots but not the hat, Tom's a very intelligent free spirit who likes to ride his Harley. In conversation, he appears not to be looking at you, but behind those half-open eyes his mind races a million miles an hour and catches everything. It took us a while to become friends, but these days we call each other Stan and Ollie, though there's no rule about who is whom. He also likes to call me when I'm on vacation in Greece and ask if I'm any whiter, fatter, or balder. I get back by saying he'll always be ten years older than me.

Back then we occasionally hung out, or as Tom tells it, we "had a few laughs." Sometimes we went to dinner or met at a late-

night place, drank coffee, and smoked cigarettes. Mostly we talked on the phone a lot — now especially, since we live in different parts of the country. Tom is intellectual, into conceptualizing and problem solving. He's also very calm, and I immediately liked his dry sense of humor and his no-nonsense approach to life. He spoke the truth even though it sometimes sounded cold-hearted.

The first time we had a meal together, at one of those $1.99 breakfast places across the street from the studio, he suddenly asked me, "How much money did you make last year?"

I had made only a few thousand dollars. Maybe he asked because I'd been complaining; I don't remember.

"Whatever it is, it's what you deserved to make," he added.

We weren't close yet and I wasn't sure whether or not to be pissed off at the question and the implication. But something struck a chord and I told him what I'd made because I understood that Tom was really telling me that I had to accept responsibility for myself.

"Look in the mirror," he said. "Don't blame the government or the economy. Don't point at anyone else. It's up to you."

I decided then that I *really* liked Tom. We both subscribe to the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's thesis that human beings always do what they want to do — and then invent reasons to explain their behavior. (Schopenhauer is frequently referred to as a pessimist who inaugurated an emphasis on the will in modern philosophy.) I believe we're responsible for everything that happens to us. For instance, if I'm walking under a building and a brick falls and hits me on the head, it's my fault. I should have sensed that a brick would fall. Get out of the way. Don't pick the airplane that's going to go down.

I know that attitude is insanity for most people, but that's the way I live. It's just what works for me. Even if I'm crazy, this approach prevents me from blaming others for my "mistakes." It also supports my belief in mind over matter, in my ability to take pain, and it may ultimately lead to a healing effect. [Scientific research shows that you can heal yourself, from mending a broken bone faster to fighting off cancer.] But it takes faith. In order for me to have that kind of faith, I must accept responsibility for what happens to me. So I've taught myself how to have a sixth sense, an instinct, and I listen to it. So far it hasn't led me astray.

Maybe I just don't like the idea of fate. I don't want to feel as if I'm walking down the street one day and it's just the luck of the draw that I get cancer. That may be the truth; it *may* be random. It may be due to my genetic makeup, something I have no control over. I just don't like the idea that "There's nothing you can do. What's the sense?"

This is why I am always so positive. Even if we have no control in life, what's the point of believing that? I'd only get depressed. Do I want to be the guy who believes that nothing makes a difference? Why be a pessimist? Why wake up in the morning angry and pissed off and helpless and let anxiety permeate the entire day? I might as well kill myself because the game would already be over.

Taking responsibility gives me a sense of control.

The truth probably lies somewhere between black and white. *I think we have much more to say about what happens to us than most people believe.* And I know there are things I can't do anything about. But too many people I know are unaware of or afraid of their personal power, and they give up before they try. Believing that I can do something empowers me. For me,

there's no logical alternative.

In those days Tom was one of the few people who didn't think I was crazy for trying to have a career as a musician, even though my material was nothing like the popular songs of the day. He understood that I was a strange kid who worked his ass off; that I went into a basement and when I came out I had a bunch of music — good music, though not necessarily his kind of music. One reason I'm still so close to Tom is that he's unwaveringly straightforward and he has faith in me.

As for *Optimystique*, it was an unusual album and nobody had any idea what to do with it. I'd been so focused on making the album that I never thought about the next steps. Jerry sent the tapes out and tried to get a record deal, but the responses were no, no, no, thank you very much, and no. The problem? It was keyboard music. Electronic. We got the hint. We floated a thousand copies on tape and vinyl ourselves and sold them around town. But otherwise the album just lay there, dead in the water.

Chameleon was an up-and-coming local group I'd first heard about when I was in Straight Up. They did kick-ass rock 'n' roll covers with a Def Leppard or Aerosmith feel,

and some original material. Sometimes I'd run into the band at a river festival where twenty groups played. After I left Straight Up, the drummer in Chameleon told me they were looking for a bass player. I said they should check out Dugan McNeill: "He's a maniac onstage," I said. "You might like him." They hired him.

Tom Paske helped Chameleon with financial advice, and when they were ready to make their first album they came to Cook House, where they wanted some help in the studio. They listened to a tape of *Optimystique* and asked me to produce the record. During the project I became closer with Tom Paske, who began to hang around the studio more often after hours, and with Chameleon's drummer, Charlie Adams, who asked me to contribute some keyboard work to the album. (Charlie became my drummer when I went out as a solo performer.)

After we finished recording *Chameleon* I helped the band put on a very successful concert at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, a venue not known for rock 'n' roll. I also performed with them there as a one-time deal. Then Chameleon went on the road and I went back to the basement.

A couple of weeks later, Charlie called

and said, "Yanni, I miss your sound. I got used to you playing with us so now the songs sound empty. Come out on the road with us."

"I was on the road too long," I said. "I don't want to do it again." Besides, in the upper Midwest, "the road" meant freezing temperatures, getting stuck in the snow, staying up all night driving, and sliding off the highway into the cornfields during an ice storm. The road meant staying up late, wearing yourself out, and sleeping in places you'd rather forget. Oh — and a working band had to play nearly all year round to make ends meet.

Charlie wouldn't give up. He called again and again. "Hey, come on; it'll be wild. We're really popular." And they were. Chameleon drew crowds from Minnesota to Wisconsin, from the Dakotas to Illinois, from Nebraska to Iowa. "We're going to do more original material," Charlie said. "I need some help. Come out, buddy, come and help me."

"I've done the band thing," I said. "I want to do my own music."

"Look," he finally said. "Why don't you just try it for a month. Just a month. Think of it as a mini-vacation. There are women everywhere out here. It's a party every night.

If you hate it, fine. But if you like it . . ."

How could that life *not* sound great to a twenty-six-year-old? So I let Charlie seduce me. I went out for a month — and stayed for four years.

Chameleon was Dugan on bass and lead vocals, Mark Anthony on lead vocals and keyboards, Johnny Donaldson on guitars, Charlie Adams on drums and vocals, and me on keyboards. Dugan and I began to co-write much of the music. We played heavy-duty progressive stuff and material of mine, like "The Sphynx." We'd also throw in a couple of popular tunes — maybe a ZZ Top cut — and even the *William Tell Overture* at very high speed, with Charlie Adams going upside down on his two-axis revolving drum set. I even sold a few copies of *Optimystique* at the shows. The Minnesota music scene was thriving then. Prince was beginning to take off. With ballrooms scattered all around the state we could draw anywhere from 500 to 2,000 kids a show.

At first we toured with five guys in a station wagon, followed by a truck that carried all our equipment. But soon, with bigger crowds and Tom Paske advising us, we began grossing more and more each night and bought an RV and a semi. It seemed so

big time, and we never slowed down.

I spent so much time onstage that I finally got used to being in front of an audience without being nervous. I learned once and for all how to be . . . well, sexy onstage: Wear black leather pants, boots, and a tight little T-shirt — a far cry from all-white — have a good body, move your arms and legs a lot, throw your hair, play the keyboards upside down. It's not that I checked myself out in the mirror and went, "Oo, I am sex-y," but if the girls in the audience thought I was, who was I to argue?

I also learned invaluable lessons about light and sound and how to arrange songs for a live performance. I worked on timing, when to talk, when to play, in what order to play the songs, and how to get an audience excited when they seemed bored to tears. I watched the crowd, what made them tick, how they danced, drank, did drugs, brawled, had a good time. I couldn't stand kids getting drunk and punching each other, but it was a fact of life.

One lesson I had already learned in Straight Up was the importance of the drum solo, when to call for one and how long to let it continue. One night there was a power failure during a show. We said, "Ernie: solo." The whole band left the stage while Ernie

wailed. When the power came back on we were all in our van — getting blow jobs. The roadies came running out: "We're on again!" Ernie had been going for fifteen minutes and was about to die! So were we.

True to Charlie's promise, life with Chameleon was wild. Women were always available. It was and still is very easy for a musician on the road to pick up girls. You have access to everything; you're admired and adored. You can be with almost anyone you want.

I liked to choose my companions rather than the other way around. I'd watch from the stage and if I saw somebody I wanted, I'd walk up to her on the break and ask, "What's your name?" Then I'd say, "You look very nice, Mary." If she smiled, I'd say, "Hey, what are you doing after the show? There's a little party back at the hotel. You want to come over?" That was it. The seduction had already taken place while she watched me play. She knew I liked her because I approached her, and most of the time she'd come with me. If I got turned down it didn't make any difference because there were so many other possibilities. But I was never a pest; you could get rid of me easily. All you had to do was look like you

weren't interested and I was gone, gone, gone.

After the show, if the party wasn't in my room it was in another guy's. (Usually there was a party in *every* room.) There were more girls than any of us could possibly be with, sometimes five times as many as there were guys. That went on just about every night, and I say the more, the merrier. I was very promiscuous. And very creative. We had a lot of fun. Remember, we knew nothing about AIDS, and it was a very permissive time. Women could have one-night stands and it was no problem at all. In fact, most of the women I met liked one-night stands. As soon as I set out the conditions they'd say, "Yeah, great. Me, too. Don't worry about it."

I wouldn't lie to a woman, or promise more than I intended to deliver. She knew we were going to have fun that night only, and that was it. I was very clear, so I never felt guilty.

It was rock 'n' roll.

Sometimes, after a girl would show up at the hotel I'd discover that she seemed a little lost and wasn't sure she wanted to be there. In that case I would only talk to her, not touch her. I figured the least I could do was show her some warmth and try to encourage

her in her life. I'd tell her what I liked about her and make it easy for her to talk to me.

Nor would I get anyone drunk or high so I could get her in the sack; I wanted to know that I could do it on my own. The alternative seemed degrading to both partners. Besides, the more you *don't* push, the more you get what you want — at least in my experience. I knew that if I treated someone correctly, the next time I saw her she'd be more than happy to be with me again because she trusted me.

The reason girls want to be with guys in a band is probably the same reason why rock 'n' rollers want to be with groupies: Sleeping with someone new, someone you think is hot-looking onstage, or sexy in tight jeans and a halter top, is a challenge. For me it also had to do with burning off energy after a show, fighting loneliness, and handling the boredom of relentlessly traveling from town to town.

In each town I had a girlfriend or two. Not *real* girlfriends, just girls I knew. Or someone I'd just met. I didn't mind having sex with a woman I'd known less than an hour. I was young, they looked good. Nothing else to do. Let's have some fun. There was no judgment, and I never felt guilty. You're just driving down the highway

and you're lonely; you meet someone who eases the boredom a little bit for the night. And the next day you get up and do it again.

However, I discovered something important about myself during this period: I had a great time, but it was just something I did; *it wasn't who I am*. Take my father: He was a banker; that's what he did, but that hardly describes the man. I am actually very particular when it comes to women with whom I want a continuing relationship. Meeting and being with someone is about so much more than a nice body. A mind goes with it all. The women I met on the road were real people, not inflatable dolls. But to be perfectly honest most of the time these encounters were a disappointment. More often than not it was pretty dull. And maybe they felt the same way about me. Just because somebody looks good at the nightclub doesn't mean she'll look good in a motel room with her clothes off. And equally as true, maybe when I pulled off my tight T-shirt and leather pants I wasn't any prize, either.

I did make some good friends. There was Kelly, who I adored. I met Allison when I was with Straight Up; she was sixteen and a knockout. She wanted to get me in the sack. At sixteen! I kept going, "Uh, get away from

me, you're too young." I ended up talking with her, and over the years, we became close. Well, little Allison grew into a stunningly gorgeous brunette with pow! pow! everything. Fun, easygoing, great soul. When she was old enough we finally went to bed. Then she wanted to have a steadier relationship and I didn't, but in between boyfriends she'd always call me. That "relationship" lasted years. I've had a few women like that in my life.

I also had other means of escape. I smoked cigarettes, drank a bit, tried drugs. Cocaine was the craze for a long time, but until I got into Chameleon I had avoided it. The first time I tried coke it may not have been very good, because I snorted a line and nothing happened. I couldn't figure out what it was supposed to do.

I soon found out. In rock 'n' roll there was cocaine available every night. Everywhere. All the time. As much as you wanted. People who had it and had money liked to hang out with bands, so they always brought coke with them. Local dealers just showed up. Rock 'n' roll was a magnet for that kind of stuff. I snorted it for maybe a year until one of our "friends" said, "Hey, try this." This? "Freebasing." I thought, Hey, what's the big

deal with smoking it? What's the difference? Well, there's a *huge difference*. You might as well be shooting up. It's an amazing feeling. Up like a rocket. And then down like a rocket, too. A horrible feeling.

I freebased for a little while but quickly realized I had gotten in too deep. Nobody had told me my heart could stop or that I could die, but I could tell I had a serious problem from the way I felt. One night, while everybody partied in the living room, I went into the bedroom and tried to sleep, but couldn't. I took a Quaalude and still couldn't sleep. I was too high on coke and, at the same time, lost in the emotional and physical depression of coming down. I remember thinking: If I had feet in the back of me I'd kick my ass all the way to Greece. This was not why I came to America. This was not what I wanted out of life. This was not why my father and mother sold their home, so I could sit around and do coke.

That was it. I walked out to the living room, into the middle of the party, and said, "Okay guys, I have an announcement to make: This is the last time I'm going to ever do this."

They all laughed uncontrollably. "Yeah, yeah. Sure. Come here, do another line."

I didn't.

The next evening, there was coke in the nightclub dressing room. It pulled at me. I could hear it saying, "Oh, you'll feel great." I began to get that temporary rush of euphoria from anticipating the high. Then, just as quickly, I shut down. I played it smart. I made sure I had a very clear, strong memory of what it felt like coming down.

I never did coke again — and the only reason I've told this story is to show that it's possible to get over this crap. That's the most important part of the story to me.

I recently quit smoking the same way. What did I take? Nothing but the pain. No gum or patches. Cold turkey. Grab your own shirttail. Just cut it out. It's the best and quickest way to be free. I have a habit of quitting habits overnight with just one decision, and it's worked for me.

Except for the cocaine, I never let myself go too far. I participated not because I was forced to by peer pressure but because, frankly, I like to play with fire and experience all I can. To avoid things because we're told by someone else not to go there doesn't seem like living, in my opinion. The key is to pick the right fire to play with. You can't play with them all. I got close enough to wave my hand through, and to feel the heat, to get singed

but not burned. Fortunately I didn't need to stand in those fires to feel alive, and I'd seen enough to keep me at a safe distance. The guitar player in one of my bands — not Chameleon — would drink a six-pack of beer, drop acid, smoke pot, and get onstage. He'd play really well, though I don't know how the guy put one foot in front of the other. He'd sweat like a pig, and every once in a while he'd fall down. Yet the kids would go crazy. The higher he looked, the more they loved him. Eventually the drugs affected his performance and his life, and he almost died. I tried talking him out of it, but that's a decision we all must make alone.

I've never been high or drunk onstage. Not even half a glass of wine — except one time, when I was with Chameleon. I got my green card and four years later applied for naturalization. I studied for the test, and while riding between gigs in the RV, I'd ask the guys in Chameleon questions from the book. Nobody knew anything. "Aren't you guys Americans? Didn't you go to school? What did they teach you in high school?"

One morning I passed the test, was sworn in, and became a citizen. That night, during a break in our show, we all celebrated. Tom Paske said, "Hey, come on, have a shot of tequila."

"I can't now," I said. "After we finish."

"No, come on. Have a shot. You're only going to become an American citizen once."

One shot led to another, and I got more bombed than I wanted to. I walked onstage really drunk, drunk like I needed to lie down kind of drunk. As I sat at the keyboards to play the opening song of the second set, I heard the national anthem. I immediately jumped up — and got woozy again. Unbeknownst to me, the band had prepared a surprise. A guy dressed like Uncle Sam walked onstage and announced to the packed nightclub: "Yanni has now become an American citizen." Everyone cheered. Uncle Sam gave me a big phony certificate. On the flip side it said, "Now that Yanni has become an American citizen, he is eligible for every paternity suit. . . ." It was a big to-do. I was really bombed and could hardly play. I don't remember much, but Paske said it was hilarious.

Those years were incredibly fun and just as dangerous. There was promiscuity, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse. If you had a very strong upbringing and a very focused mind about what you really wanted to do, you could survive. Dugan didn't do any drugs; he's clean to this day. Charlie and I were lightweights. We never wanted to get com-

pletely unconscious, but we saw guys who needed to be, and we don't know if they're still alive. I mean the people who get up in the morning and have a glass of straight vodka just to start the day. They have a lot of pain inside. I never had that pain. I was lucky. I liked life.

I was Ulysses, wanting to hear the Sirens' song without crashing into the rocks. He told his mates to tie him to the mast and then plug their ears so they wouldn't hear the song and wouldn't listen to whatever crazy things he said.

Many men crashed on those rocks. I tied myself securely to the mast.

5

Out of the Basement

Chameleon eventually stopped doing cover songs and played only original music, most of which I wrote with Dugan. I was also the band's producer and engineer. Because it was free, my basement became the place to develop material, and when the time came to do our second album, we went to Cook House Studios.

I also kept having ideas for another record of my own. Whenever I got a week or two off after a month of gigs, I'd come home and lock myself in the basement. I'd already "written" the music in our RV during the hours I spent staring at the white lines on the highway. After a while I'd just close my eyes and compose. I used my shorthand notation to keep notes and got quite good at it.

I took my creative moments where I could find them. I didn't yet understand how to tap into the source at will. Like most artistic people, I was lost in this area. I only knew that once in a while stuff happened, and when it did, it all seemed so effortless. Other

times, when I wanted to create, I just ended up banging my head against the wall without knowing what kind of wall it was or how to get to the other side.

I'd never played with an orchestra, but I always heard one in my head. There was no limit to the sound. I wanted to create a world blend of different instruments, of acoustics and electronics, not just a rock band with a backup violin. Nor did I want to come in from left field with some cold and meaningless electronic *whoop-whoop-whoop.* I like to begin acoustically so the listener can feel the heart and soul of the music — and the musician. Then I add the electronics to create a tableau. Beethoven would have used synthesizers if he'd had them. To mix artistic metaphors, what painter wouldn't want more colors, better brushes, better everything. In Beethoven's time, making a new sound meant making a new instrument. It took a couple hundred years just to perfect the piano. Nowadays, you just move a few virtual knobs and you get millions of sounds. When I started out I had to defend using synthesizers because they weren't considered "real" instruments. These days people don't realize that most popular music is in many ways electronic.

I don't need lyrics. Classical composers

communicated across cultures and centuries beautifully without words. That's proof that it can be done. I prefer not to use words when I'm trying to move you emotionally, so you don't have to use logic to understand what you were just told. Also, my music gives you the ability to make up your own story as it plays; your mind is free to wander and create. You can use the music as a soundtrack to your emotions.

Much of what I did then, in the basement, sounded like the music I compose today. When I played it for friends like Dugan and Charlie and Tom and Tommy, they liked it, but they still said, "Electronic music? No lyrics? Will it sell?"

I wanted to find out.

Like all bands, Chameleon dreamed of landing a national record deal. Unlike many bands, we actually had a shot. We were probably one of the few unsigned groups of that time and place that played only original music. We drew so many people that we could write our own rules. If we weren't the number-one Midwestern band, then we were among the biggest. In Minneapolis, when we released our first album, we outsold *Tattoo You* by the Rolling Stones and got written up for that in the newspapers.

Almost four years after I joined, we retired our lead singer and hired Peter Diggins. He was an unknown from nowhere and we found him after lots of auditions. Great voice. Great-looking kid. A little bit of a wild child, and we had to baby-sit him some, but then again in those days everybody was a little crazy. I spent almost a year working with Peter in my basement studio, writing music for him, teaching him how to handle a microphone, slaving over the console, and recording him. The objective was to make a demo, send it to record companies, and get signed. With Peter on board, the band and I believed we could finally move up.

In truth, we had to. As popular as Chameleon was, we had begun to stagnate. We'd stayed alive in the Midwest for years, but we knew that if we couldn't make the transition to the national scene we'd fall apart. The crowds at our shows were big but not getting any bigger. We'd already played every venue, and the fifth time around wasn't as much fun. We were dying of boredom.

We got some interest from MCA Records, and their A&R guy came to see us. Tom Paske and I also went to Los Angeles to meet with them, but before anything could happen the guy got fired and the deal collapsed.

Next, we heard from A&M Records, in Los Angeles. Actually, *I* didn't hear from them, but Dugan did. He got a phone call from our managers, telling him to come into the office for a band meeting. When he got there, he saw only Peter Diggins. Dugan freaked. Where was the rest of the band? The managers told him not to worry; there'd be a conference call with everyone, and the record company. But on the call, it was just the A&R guys, Peter Diggins, Dugan, and the managers.

What happened next blew Dugan away. The record company didn't want to sign the band, just Peter and Dugan. It's a classic story of record company folly. The Thompson Twins and Tears for Fears were popular, and A&M was looking for clones. Peter was the light guy and Dugan would be the dark guy. When Dugan asked why Charlie and I weren't included, the answer was, "They have mustaches. It's passé. They wouldn't fit in."

Can you believe it? Blown off because I had hair on my upper lip? This wasn't about music, it was about money, and it looked to me like our management was in cahoots with the record company.

Dugan considered the offer for a moment, then said no. "Our integrity and the love

among brothers was more important to me than a record deal and a career — at least with those people," he said later, when he told me what had happened. He said he'd rather break up the band.

That took incredible integrity. Most people don't understand what it's like to say no to a record company. Try to imagine Dugan's temptation. For years he'd played local nightclubs, grinding out a couple hundred bucks a week; then he joined a popular band and one day along comes a serious bite from a record company willing to sign him. And he said no rather than tie his fortune to people like that.

Still, Chameleon broke up and A&M signed Peter, thinking that he was the creative force behind the band. They didn't realize — and our managers didn't reveal — that what they'd heard on the demo tape was my production, and Dugan's and my work. Peter sounded better than he really was. A&M moved Peter to Los Angeles and worked with him writing songs and in the studio, trying to do an album, but it didn't work out and they dumped him. Two years later, Peter called me out of the blue and asked me for a job. I didn't have one to give, but I still don't understand how he had the nerve to ask.

To leave Chameleon like that was a disappointment. But what was I to do? It was over. Now I had all the time I needed to pursue my own music and not worry about what anybody else said. I knew that most of the time in the record business, if given the chance, people would tell me I was bad, didn't fit in, wasn't what they were looking for, was doing it wrong. Ninety percent of all comments were negative. But I had faith in myself. I don't know why I stayed so long with Chameleon. Maybe I was like Ulysses on his way back to Ithaca, when he checked into Circe's Island and lost track of the time. I knew I should move forward, but staying where I was had felt too damn good.

Also, I was disappointed about the failure of *Optimystique* and at a stage in my life where I needed to party, to stretch, to get crazy, to let go, to unfocus. Maybe I was tired because I'd been fixated on one goal or another for so long. I'd enjoyed the rock 'n' roll life; it was carefree. In my head, I kept hearing my dad's words: "Don't forget to live." So, I lived. But after eight years in various bands I could no longer imagine myself going from nightclub to nightclub for the rest of my life, trying to make ends meet. The situation with A&M just forced me to

face it and pushed me out the door into a new world.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

It's a cliché — but true — that life is not a dress rehearsal. You get to do it once, so do it well. I'd done my best, and now I wanted to do something else. The only problem is that when I finally reached the crossroads, I was thirty years old, and there's nothing worse than a thirty-year-old ex–rock musician who leaves the life with nothing to fall back on. You're not old, but you also don't have the unlimited energy or innocence of youth. I didn't sit around feeling sorry for myself, but I also couldn't pretend I wasn't scared that while I'd been partying, opportunities had been lost.

My spirit wasn't busted, but my equipment was. It was beat up and broken down from being on the road. New equipment would cost about $50,000 — a serious chunk of change. Unfortunately, I'd just left behind my only source of income.

To my surprise, my brother volunteered to get a bank loan so I could buy the new keyboards and studio pieces I needed to record. He'd been telling me to leave the band for a couple of years and do my own stuff,

and apparently he meant to back it up with action. I really wanted the money, but I was terrified about how I'd pay him back. Yorgo had finally earned his Ph.D., had gotten married, and was starting a family. How could I let him be liable for $50,000 if I wasn't totally sure I could make the payments? I'd never made more than $18,000 in one year — usually less — and as much as I believed in my music, I wasn't sure a derelict musician was such a good investment. I resisted for as long as I could — those were dark moments — but in the end I took the money and revamped the studio.

I also got a job so I could pay him back. After going to school for a month I became a licensed employment counselor for the state of Minnesota. The first day, I put on my suit and tie and reported to work. At lunch with all the other suits I looked around and thought, You've got to be kidding me. I can't do this! After I finished eating I got in my car, left, and never went back. So much for the nine-to-five.

One night, while having dinner at my brother's house, I met Sig Gesk, a friend of Yorgo's wife, Linda. Sig was an artist/designer and the owner of one of Minneapolis's top product packaging design firms. Yorgo put on some tapes I'd made and also

asked me to play the piano — which I didn't normally do to entertain. Sig was impressed and he said, "Have you ever thought about doing commercials for television? Your music would be perfect for it."

"I haven't," I said. "But I'd like to. I need to make some money."

"Maybe I can help," he suggested.

That night, in bed, I decided not to take Sig's offer too seriously. Lots of people talk with good intentions while drinking during dinner but don't necessarily mean what they say. But the next day Sig called and asked me which agencies I'd like to visit first. I didn't know from agencies, so he took me to lunch instead and gave me an education. Then he made some calls to the biggest ad shops in Minneapolis and introduced me to the creative directors and art directors.

My first job was writing music for a television commercial for a shopping mall called the Dales. Everyone noticed it and pretty soon people were asking, "Who is this guy?" and I had a little business going. Tom Paske got me some contracts. Eventually I wrote music for Braun coffeemakers and British Airways commercials. The first paycheck was a godsend, a serious help.

I remember telling Sig, "What you did is amazing. I don't think I can ever repay you.

Tell me what I can do."

"Don't repay me," Sig said. "Just help somebody else later when you can." He told me a story about how someone had helped him when he was younger and told him to do the same — kind of like the movie *Pay It Forward*. I've been repaying Sig ever since by trying to support people while they chase their dreams, or give them aid when they need it desperately. Each time, Sig comes to mind and I realize it's possible in ways both large or small to make a difference in someone's life.

I could have made hundreds of thousands of dollars a year just sitting around in Minneapolis, writing music for commercials. After long stretches of carrying a checkbook balance of no more than $300, if I was lucky, the money would have been a welcome change. A few ads could keep me afloat for months, and let me pay back my brother.

But then I realized, wait a minute! The money is nice, but it doesn't solve my problem. This is another detour. I want to do *my* music. If I keep doing commercials I won't have the energy or the time to do albums. Also, I'd probably buy a house, then a bigger house, and then a car and boat, and soon I'd *have* to make commercials.

That moment of clarity changed everything. I quit commercials and got back to the music. Tom Paske later told me his reaction. "You saw your opportunities, you didn't take them. You just had a one-track mind: Do albums. And that was it."

It was all or nothing. I had no Plan B.

It seems that in every culture, however tough life is and however impossible the conditions, there are some resilient human beings who find their way through, who survive and make something of themselves. Somehow they escape the horrors of where they were born. I've always wondered why *they* did it and not others. What drove them, what gave them the passion?

There are many examples from my homeland. I remember the story of some starving Albanians walking through the mountains into northern Greece, in the winter. To get lost is to die, yet they walked for forty days, braved the winter, slipped into a country where they didn't speak the language and were hunted by the police, found little jobs, sent money home, and survived. These people didn't accept their fate; they were willing to die trying to improve it.

When I finally shed all my excuses and diversions, I like to think that I became the

guy who would walk through the mountains in the ice and snow and risk his life or die trying. I was completely committed to the music and the pleasure I got from creating, from discovering the rules of creativity, from being able to hear constant improvement.

In fact, I hadn't been out of Chameleon for long when I went crazy and did an album's worth of songs. I worked seven days a week, including holidays and birthdays. I hardly ate and didn't answer the phone. My parents came to visit at Christmas — only their second time in the country — and Yorgo and his wife prepared a huge dinner. I was supposed to show up, but I was in the middle of a song and didn't want to be interrupted and lose my train of thought. Whenever inspiration struck, I knew better than to let it go. When the clock neared time for dinner, I called my parents at my brother's house.

"Mom and Dad, it's Christmas and I understand you've come a long way to see us. But I'm in the basement in Brooklyn Park and I'm working on this great piece of music, and I can't stop. If I stop now, I'll lose it. Is it okay if I don't come?"

"Okay," they said. "Of course." I could get away with my selfishness because they

understood I wasn't being capricious or indulgently blowing them off. My parents knew me well enough to realize that I loved them. My parents also knew the kind of focus I maintained. When I swam, I practiced even on my birthday. If I didn't expect to celebrate my birthday, then why feel bad for not celebrating something else?

I showed up at one in the morning anyway, spent as much time as I could, then raced back to work.

When I was consumed I'd sometimes call Tom Paske at three in the morning.

"Tom? You up?"

"What time is it?"

"About ten to three. I finished the last song. It's killer. You gotta hear it."

"Over the phone?"

"It's the best work I've ever done. Meet me at Perkins in half an hour — okay?"

"What's the temperature outside?"

"About six below — you gotta hear this. Half an hour — okay?"

"I guess I'm up then, huh?"

"Half an hour."

"Ooh!"

Tom says he doesn't know why he got up,

but he just did. "When Yanni was excited I couldn't tell him to wait until noon the next day. It had to be right then."

I'm still the same way. My focus on work and my lack of structure can drive people crazy. My friends, because they're my friends, tolerate it. But it's difficult for me to have a social life because my whole life is dependent on "the monster."

I didn't know it at the time, but my parents had come to visit with the express purpose of talking me out of the music business and back into school, to get my Ph.D. When they came to my house, my father asked to see what I'd been doing in the basement. He wanted to get me alone and talk. I was excited to have the chance to show him all my new stuff. I chattered on about equipment, sounds, songs. When I played some tracks I could see his face light up. Maybe he thought it was still crazy to risk my livelihood on music, but I could tell he got it. He felt what I felt. We went upstairs without his ever mentioning his concerns about my future.

A few years later, after I signed a record deal and began to sell albums successfully, he came clean. "I was there at the family's request to convince you to quit," he said. They knew they had to pull out the heavy

artillery because I'd only listen to my dad. "But you convinced me that music was the right thing for you to be doing, so I never said anything."

Even if my father had said something, I probably wouldn't have changed my mind. I'm not sure my family understood how stubborn and uncompromising I had become. I knew I could never have a regular job; it was music, no matter what. In Greek they say, *"E Tan E Epi Tas"* as part of the Spartan ritual when a soldier is sent off to war. His mother would give him a shield and tell her son to return with it, or on it. Sure, I was scared at times, worried about how to pay back my brother, anxious about what I'd do if being a solo artist didn't work out. Some nights I couldn't sleep. I had doubts. I was broke, at times disillusioned. I searched for direction. But I wouldn't live in fear. It's just not part of my personality. It's not how I was raised.

In 1985 I got a phone call I never expected. A DJ named Richard Ginsburg, from radio station WFMU in East Orange, New Jersey, was on the line, raving about my music. He told me that he had a show called *Synthetic Pleasure* on which he played lots of electronic music — or basically whatever he liked. He

was always asking listeners to be on the lookout for new material. One day he got a call from a bus driver on the Todd Rundgren tour who said, "I've got a cassette I picked up in Minneapolis by some guy named Yanni and I think it's really worth a listen." Richard told him to send it in.

"I put the tape on the air, figuring to play a cut or two," Richard later told me, "but the station got flooded with more phone calls than I'd ever had — so I just let the tape play all the way through." The tape was *Optimystique*.

Richard started making phone calls to Minneapolis, looking for someone named Yanni. Finally he reached the Guthrie Theater, where Chameleon had played. They knew who I was and put Richard in touch with Tom Paske. Tom gave him my number.

When Richard called he said, "Man, you've got to get signed, this is incredible music. We play your music here all the time and people are going crazy. I've been trying to find you for months." He said he could even help sell my tapes there.

With that encouragement, Tom Paske and a friend in the construction business, Mark Macpherson, decided to buy my album from Jerry Steckling. Tom called to

tell me the idea. I was all questions:

"What about this Macpherson guy? Why's he doing this?"

"What can I say? I was talking to him about *Optimystique*. He really likes it. I said if he put up ten grand, I'd put up ten grand. We'd buy the album from Jerry for sixty-five hundred dollars and use the rest to put out the album."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. We'll each own a third. At ten dollars each we sell two thousand and we're even. Then we split three ways."

Silence. Tom filled it.

"Maybe he thinks he'll make money. I think he just likes the project."

"Has he got the money?"

"Macpherson has to borrow it. But if he says he'll have it, he'll have it."

"Don't we need a contract or something?"

"I'd do it on a handshake. But I'll write something up if you want."

I thought about it for moment. "Nah. It's up to you. I'd rather just be around people I trust than go through life trying to figure out airtight contracts."

"That's what I think. It's probably naïve but it's a better way to live."

"Naïve by design?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think we'll make any money on this?"

"Who knows? But I know this: That album's just sitting in the can. At least this way there's a chance it'll get heard."

"That's really all I want."

"Hey — maybe you get rich and famous off this deal. . . ."

"Right. I get the fame and you get the money."

"Sounds fair to me."

"You want to do this?"

"I do."

"Okay. Do it."

Macpherson's family kidded him about spending his borrowed money on an unknown electronic music artist, but Paske said, "Someday he's going to make his investment back a million times over, and then Mark will do the laughing."

Now Tom, Mark, and I owned the tape — on a handshake. We got artwork done for a cover and pressed a couple thousand more albums. Thanks to a little bit of an underground buzz we sold a few. Then Ginsburg gave out a number where people could call for it. A friend of mine, Kip Kilpatrick.

knew a record distributor and he ordered four hundred copies. Eventually we got rid of them all at seven bucks apiece. We didn't get rich, but we made back our investment and more.

In the meantime, the music I had played for my father just came rushing out of me. Songs like "Santorini," which was later used as the television theme for the U.S. Open Tennis tournament for years, played at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta when the first athletes walked into the stadium, and it is one of the most widely used pieces I've ever done. By the way, Santorini, the southernmost Cycladic island in the Aegean Sea, is an awe-inspiring place. Some think it's the site of ancient Atlantis. It's volcanic and dramatic. The cliffs are breathtaking and perfect for a romantic getaway. I do not like to describe what my songs are about, but I can say that "Santorini" is a day in the life of the island, from sunrise to sunset. It's like me sitting on the edge of a cliff watching the fishing boats go out in the morning; it's different ocean colors, the wind coming up, waves crashing against the rocks.

One day, Kip Kilpatrick called me from Seattle and said, "There's this new record company in New York. It's called Private Music and is headed by Peter Baumann,

one of the founding members of Tangerine Dream. I know someone there and I think they'd like your music. If you have anything, I'd be happy to send it in."

"I'll make a deal with you," I said. "I'll make you one tape. You can send it, but you have to follow up and call me back and tell me what they said. I don't want this to fall through the cracks. I want to know if they liked it or they didn't like it."

Kip sent the tape to Beth Lewis, a woman he knew at Private Music. Tom Paske, who was acting as my manager, and I also sent a copy to another record company. Before long I got a phone call from Peter Baumann. "We'd like to meet you," he said. The trip east cost $500 — my last $500. I called Richard Ginsburg and told him I was coming to town.

"Great! Fantastic!" he said. "You can stay at my house." Ginsburg picked me up at the airport, drove me to the record company the next day, and waited outside while I took the meeting with Peter Baumann.

The closest I'd ever been to New York was flying through JFK on my way from Greece to Minnesota. I felt like a fish out of water. Everything was completely unfamiliar and intimidating. I met Peter Baumann in a dark little room. He wore muted colors and was

nice looking, about five foot ten, slightly stocky, short blond hair, blue eyes. Intelligent and well-spoken. "I really liked your tape," he said, and explained that he'd started Private Music because he wanted to release music he liked that was out of the mainstream. He talked a bit about Tangerine Dream. I knew the group; it wasn't one of my favorites, but I didn't tell him that. Baumann knew how difficult it was to sell "different" music and sympathized when I told him I'd been writing it for years and just sitting on it.

The other record company also responded positively, which seemed miraculous to me since I thought I'd end up sending out a hundred cassettes and get back a hundred "no thank you" notes. I still remembered how five years earlier with *Optimystique* I couldn't get arrested.

One afternoon, Tom called.

"Hello."

"Yanni?"

"Hi."

"What are you doing?"

"I just got up."

"I was just on the phone with Peter Baumann."

"How is he?"

"He's fine, Yanni. Are you sitting down?"
"Why? What? He wants the album?"
"Oh, he wants the album all right."
"Tell me."
"He wants the album — and three more."
"You're kidding!"
"Nope. A four-album deal."
"Yes!"
"Maybe you'd like to hear about the front money."
"Oh God!"
"How about forty grand!?"
"Holy shit!"
"And the money goes up for each album."
"Is this for sure?"
"It's a done deal. He probably would have gone higher. But I took it."
"I'm gonna call Mom and Dad. I'll call you back and we'll meet somewhere."
"Unbelievable!"
"Unbelievable!"

Both companies made offers. We decided to take Private Music's offer because of Peter's experience with Tangerine Dream. I thought he'd be more artist-friendly. He'd inspired me, I felt comfortable around him, and he expected to succeed. Signing with the company was the happiest day of my life. Later I heard that Peter had told someone,

"I discovered the new Vangelis."

It was a lucky choice, because the other label went out of business in a year.

Tom Paske and a New York lawyer negotiated the deal. This was an enormous amount of money for me. It was the big time — and an opportunity to pay back my brother. I remember we were all convinced that the record company would make me a star. It was validation. I felt great. Maybe I wasn't crazy after all.

The money allowed me to rent a digital thirty-two-track Mitsubishi machine and re-record everything on the demo tape. I did it all in the basement and never went to another studio again. I also got some good album cover art.

But I still didn't have a title.

One afternoon the phone rang at my house. I answered and a voice said, "Keys to Imagination."

"What?"

"This is Richard Ginsburg."

"Hey, Rich, whaddaya doin?"

"I'm sitting here, just listened to your new tape. It's absolutely stunning. I've gone through it twice. I think you should call it 'Keys to Imagination.' "

"Okay, thanks," I said. "Sounds good.

Nice title." I never thought I'd use it, but the more the words bounced around in my head, the more I thought it was brilliant. First album, all done with keyboards. And I was discovering the keys to imagination myself by opening doors to creativity. Yes, beautiful title.

Keys to Imagination came out in 1986, and while it didn't do poorly, it didn't sell as well as Peter Baumann had hoped. We didn't get much if any airplay because the Wave, the soft jazz radio format, hadn't yet debuted, and other stations didn't understand what I was doing. Also, I didn't tour to support the record. All in all, it was a very humble beginning.

That summer I went back to Kalamata for the first time since 1974. My parents had come to America in the years in between, but I had not been home. I had stayed away because I needed to find myself and to get used to the idea that America was my home. But I missed Greece and couldn't stay away any longer.

My return moved me more than I had expected. I visited my old school and the church, went to places where I'd taken my first girlfriend, found the spot on the beach

where I had had my first kiss, and stood on the dock where my father and I had said our good-byes.

Then one day I got some news: *Ad Lib* magazine had given *Keys to Imagination* an award as best New Age album of the year. I didn't consider myself a New Age artist even though, at the time, New Age was electronic music, and only later did it evolve into something else. If anything, I was a contemporary instrumental artist, but this was my first album and first award and I wasn't going to argue. I left Kalamata and went to Japan, where the magazine was published, to accept.

A week later, Kalamata was hit by a 6.3 magnitude earthquake that virtually destroyed the town and the memories I'd just visited. I'm not normally superstitious, but I couldn't help feeling that Kalamata had waited for me to come home before it went away. Later, I wrote "Standing in Motion" about the earthquake — about surviving and persevering — and dedicated the *Out of Silence* album, which I began that fall in my basement studio in Brooklyn Park, to Kalamata. The dedication reads: "To the town of Kalamata, which stood strong and waited for me one last time."

I, too, had waited, learned through trial

and error, accumulated wisdom and experience, had many women and little money, and focused on a succession of goals. With the release of *Keys to Imagination*, the old Yanni had been, if not destroyed then at least transformed, and a new Yanni emerged. I now had the chance to be the Yanni I'd imagined myself to be for so long — as well as the Yanni I couldn't yet imagine. All I had to do was *do* it.

6

Not New Age

2:00 a.m.

"Gee, I wonder who's calling at this hour?"

"Your favorite Greek."

"What's up, Yanni?"

"I was talking to Peter . . ."

"I know, he wants you to move to L.A."

"What do you think?"

"I wouldn't live there on a bet!!"

"I know."

"Smog, crowded, phony. America's armpit."

"How do you *really* feel?"

Silence.

"You know I gotta do it, don't ya?"

"Why? You can't write in Minneapolis? We got audiotape, you know. Electricity."

"The music *business* is in L.A."

"Great. Lawyers, contracts, flashbulbs . . ."

"So you don't think I should go?"

"Nah. You gotta go, but it sucks."

"Look. I could write fine just where I am. But nobody's gonna hear my stuff. If I could go to L.A. and figure out the business side, maybe my stuff could get heard."

"And that's what matters, I know."

"Hey. If I can get my music out there, if I can get people to *hear* it, it's gonna hit 'em right between the eyes."

"I think I hear a little arrogance."

"Confidence. No, actually I'm not that confident. It's vanity."

"Do we need to get you a bigger mirror?"

"No, a bigger microphone. Look, I admit it. I want everybody in the world to hear my stuff. I want them to love it. You think I want to write this stuff and just play it for myself?"

"Okay, okay."

"Peter says I need to do this. He'll help me out. I think I gotta go."

"Okay."

"I'm going then."

"Okay."

"I'm gonna do it."

"Okay. Bye."

"I gotta do it."

I moved to California in 1987 also at the urging of Sam Schwartz, a powerful movie music agent who'd heard my albums and

wanted to get me started scoring pictures. "Come on out," he'd said. "You'll be great for the movies." I thought he could be right, and I moved not only for that opportunity but because I'd begun to feel too safe in Minnesota. The record deal allowed me to compose and record to my heart's content in my basement studio, but I wasn't being stimulated or challenged enough. I wanted to put a little more jeopardy into my life. I had this vision that being in Los Angeles would introduce me to a lot of intelligent and experienced folks; some of the best people on the planet in show business would be there, as well as great weather. I loved the idea of leaving the Midwest winters behind. To me, it had always been just a matter of time.

Tom Paske had advised me against going. We didn't argue, but he didn't believe the move was necessary. I'm sure he worried that once exposed to a fast-talking, self-indulgent lifestyle, I'd lose myself to the superficiality and be distracted from or at least be less driven about my career. But I knew it was time to keep working hard, not party. I'd just been through years of rock 'n' roll and I didn't need that anymore.

I suspect that Tom also didn't want to lose a friend. We'd grown close. I reassured him that our connection was very deep and our

friendship didn't depend on seeing each other all the time. He was my brother, part of the family, unshakable. Even our business relationship had never been about money, but, as Tom said, "I'm in this for the ride. What a great ride!" Yeah, crazy ride. He got to be in Minneapolis and deal with everybody in California, New York, and, later, everywhere in the world. He got to stay in his office, make everyone come to him, ride around in his Jeep, sleep in his own bed, smoke cigarettes, and talk to a Greek kid who thinks he's a star. Many times I would say to him, "Tom, I don't know how you get away with it, but I'm just glad to know there's a human being on the planet like you who does."

Tom is tough and straightforward, a man who doesn't waste words, so he doesn't often reveal emotional vulnerabilities, but I knew he felt things deeply. When I'd visited Greece the year before, we had said our good-byes in the airport parking lot and I saw tears in his eyes.

I flew to Los Angeles and rented an apartment for a month at the Oakwood complex in Burbank — home to traveling professionals, single guys, and soon-to-be-divorced husbands tossed out by their wives. Then I went house-hunting and found a

little place on Willow Glen, near the top of Laurel Canyon, in the Hollywood Hills. Peter Baumann, who in the meantime had moved his offices to the West Coast, stuck his neck out and guaranteed the house loan to the bank. I took that as a sign of his continued faith and support.

Back in Minneapolis, I packed my stuff, hired a truck, and drove to Los Angeles in the brown 1979 BMW 320i I'd bought a few years earlier from Yorgo for $9,000. To keep myself occupied, I decided that the drive would be a good time to quit smoking. The idea of two days and nights without a cigarette seemed horrible; if I could make it, I could do anything — and I did.

At the new house I hired a construction crew to convert the master bedroom into a recording studio, and helped out when I could. I lifted equipment, sanded wood, installed insulation. The studio was more elaborate than my Brooklyn Park basement. I turned a walk-in closet into a soundproof isolation booth where one person, maybe two, could play and sing. It was also big enough for half a drum set. I put the studio speakers where the door to the master bathroom had been, and to use the facilities I had to cut a narrow pathway through a linen closet and enter sideways. I slept in a guest

bedroom on an old mattress that came with the house and was probably the former owner's spare. A couple of springs poked out at the foot, but I didn't care.

I put my piano in the living room.

Those were the days of no distractions. I had few friends and, as for women, I saw Allison now and then, and some other girls from Minnesota who'd moved to Los Angeles or who occasionally came through. No one local. Mostly, I was a monk. I lived in the studio and lost track of the hours. Sometimes I'd go in and everything worked; other times I could stare at the walls and come up with nothing. I don't mean that I was waiting for inspiration to strike. Inspiration doesn't arrive from somewhere else and hit me over the head. It's all inside. I am responsible for it. When I *give up* control, the music comes. I was still learning through trial and error that any other approach simply destroyed the moment. Only when I let go did everything flow effortlessly and the music become available in abundance. Only then did I experience so much physical pleasure that I became ecstatic. I felt alive, bright, aware. Everything was clear and clean and in focus.

Writing a piece of music is like giving birth. I am the channel for a powerful emo-

tion inside that wants to come out, and when it's ready there's no stopping it. Sometimes I didn't eat for days, didn't make or take phone calls, cut out all other input. I had no problem being alone. I think it was Gandhi who said, "Jail is only horrible for people who can't be by themselves." Silence is not the enemy. In silence I get to think and discover. Being alone is how I recharge. I uncover truths about myself, I get over frustrations, I heal. When I'm alone is when the magic happens.

Though I mostly worked, I also wanted to enjoy life. The house had a baby-sized backyard and a hot tub under a tree. At first I used it quite a bit; being outside reminded me that I was cheating winter. When I left the house it wasn't to party, haunt nightclubs, or even go to the movies. I went grocery shopping, bought clothes, got my hair trimmed, went to the bank, ate pizza at Coyote's, got the car washed.

If it sounds like Los Angeles life could be boring, it was, but I didn't notice. Although I wanted to be there, I also had Paske's skepticism about the place. I didn't know Los Angeles and didn't want to. I was into my career. This was my shot to create my dreams. I just wanted to become better and

better at my craft because I believed that if the music was good enough the people would find it. And that's *all* I cared about. One night I left the studio about 1 a.m. and called Tom. He'd become used to the phone ringing at any hour.

"Tom. What's goin on?"

"What's up with you?"

"I started the new album."

"The new tape recorder must have showed up."

"Yeah. It's in. The new studio's up and running."

"Great. What else?"

"I got a cleaning lady."

"Don't tell my wife."

"I know. I'm in the big time."

"You're going L.A. on me."

"Did you ever notice how if we're going to clean a room, we start in one corner and then go step-by-step around the room, dusting this, straightening that. Then we see how it looks when we're done. And it always looks terrible anyway."

"I'm depressed just thinking about it."

"Well that's not how she does it."

"Who?"

"The cleaning lady."

"Really."

"She sees the whole room. She knows how it's gonna look, in her mind."

"And you know this because?"

"I took the time to watch."

"Okay. She sees the big picture in her mind."

"Yeah. The big picture. It looks like she's wandering around, picking up stuff at random. But she's not. There's no wasted effort. The whole process just flows. When she's done it looks great."

"And the point is?"

"The point is — and see if you can get this — that's what it's like for me in the studio. That's how I write. I don't start with the drums then go to the bass and on and on. I don't build it one part at a time. First I see the whole song at once. Then I try to hang on to it. If I can do that, all the individual sounds fall into place."

"Has the cleaning lady got any albums out?"

"No, asshole. She gets to start out with a room, a finite space. I start with nothing. I have to get to a place where the big picture will come. That's the trick."

"Art transcends science. Just ask Schopenhauer."

"Oh, really?"

"Well, it isn't like somebody looked in a

microscope and said 'Golly. Look, an electron.' No. Somebody had a flash and figured out it had to be there. From out of nothing. Then everybody scurried around until they found it."

"You're telling me Einstein wasn't just flying around at the speed of light watching mass turn into energy?"

"You've discovered the Grand Unified Cleaning Lady Theory of the Universe."

Silence.

"You're not getting it, are you?"

"No."

"I'd kill for a cigarette."

"That I can understand."

"Bye, Tom."

"Bye."

I had made some quick money scoring a couple of pictures — something for HBO and two ABC Movies of the Week. I did them back-to-back and earned $120,000. It helped cover the mortgage, and I also bought a new tape recorder that cost $80,000. Easy come, easy go. I knew that Sam Schwartz — who had since become a close friend and helped me navigate the Los Angeles maze — could get me more work, and he wanted to, but once again I realized (and could tell that I was beginning to sound like a broken record)

that all this side work was distracting me from my albums. I told Sam I had to stop — temporarily, of course — but I knew I probably wouldn't return until I established myself and had more time to spare.

I also had a lot to learn about the business.

I thought the record company signs you, develops you, and sells you — and all you do is create the music. I thought the record company was going to make me a star. I knew Peter Baumann was trying, and he promised me that as soon as something broke, the company would jump in and support me. That sounded nice, but I kept asking myself — and Tom — this question: How would I get that break without support in the first place? I don't mean to make too big a deal of this; that's how it has usually worked in the record business for new and veteran artists alike. There's little time to grow an act. It's even worse today. Like a flop movie, if you don't make it right away, you're gone. I was luckier, but I was sometimes impatient. Frustrated.

Rather than let it make me lose my hair or go gray, or make my face cave in, I would talk it through with Tom. We spoke every day. I don't believe it's smart to repress feelings. Tom was the calm voice on the other

end of the line. He was together and didn't rattle when I vented about the difficulties of trying to kick off my career. He encouraged me but didn't pander. I could call day or night and he'd say, "You want to talk for two hours? Fine. What do you want to talk about?"

Those talks helped me keep my goals in sight and not become bitter in the process. That's key. It was also fun. I thought, "Let's show them."

When we finished talking I went back into the studio.

I don't want to characterize those days or myself as unhappy. I didn't have time to be unhappy. I was too busy in the studio, learning, composing, solving problems, inventing new techniques. Any anxieties I felt I channeled back into the work. Realizing my dreams had always required an uphill battle, starting with swimming. Besides, how many people got the chance to do what I was doing? I felt tremendous validation because I'd made it happen with hard work and single-minded focus. This is what I lived for; how could I complain?

Plus, one fact always gave me hope: Though I had a very small audience, the people who liked my music *really, really* liked it. They were serious. They sent letters

to me and to the record company. I'd meet fans who were just beside themselves, and Peter Baumann would run into people who said, "You've got a lot of people on your label, but Yanni, he's on a different level." That kind of reaction made me believe there was more out there for me; it helped deflect my fear of not being discovered. I just needed to do something. I had to find a way to get the music out.

To support my new album, *Out of Silence*, I put together a small band and toured, playing the new music as well as selections from *Keys to Imagination*. Although I'd written, as always, with an orchestra in mind, I couldn't afford one, so I reproduced that sound in the studio with my synthesizers. But because I wanted to play everything live onstage, and not against tape, I needed three keyboard players and a drummer on the road.

Charlie Adams had moved to Los Angeles about six months after Chameleon broke up, and he joined the band first. Watching Charlie play is spectacular entertainment. When he hits a drum it's like poetry. I also hired Joyce Imbesi. She's from San Francisco, and we were introduced through a friend. I admired her dexterity and her ear. She also did her own jazz-oriented stuff.

The final keyboard player was John Tesh, the former co-host of *Entertainment Tonight*. Tesh was a fan. I heard that he wanted to meet me, so mutual friends put it together; one afternoon not long after I moved to Los Angeles, he came to my house — as Tesh the *Entertainment Tonight* reporter. I didn't know that he was a musician until he told me. We hit it off and he invited me to his place in Marina del Rey, where he lived with his then-wife Julie, to play beach volleyball. After the games we'd usually have drinks and dinner. John was funny and enjoyed making people laugh. A couple of times I got pretty bombed and spent the night at their place.

One day Tesh called to ask what I was up to.

"I'm going down to Orange County to do a radio interview."

"Want me to come with you?" he said. "We'll have fun. We'll have a drink on the way down and chat."

"Okay, sure."

In the limousine Tesh surprised me. "I don't know how to say this," he started, "so I'll just say it: I'd like to play with your band. I've never been onstage for a live performance and I need the experience. It'll be really good for me and I'd learn a lot."

My face must have revealed my uncertainty.

"I'd work my ass off," he insisted. "I promise you're not going to be sorry."

I'd heard John play — beautifully — and he was very gung-ho about convincing me to give him a shot. But still . . .

"John, you've got a job," I said. "Do you realize how much we'll be rehearsing? *Every* day, including Saturdays and Sundays. How are you going to do that and still do *Entertainment Tonight*?"

"Don't worry," he said. "I've already thought about it. I'll do *Entertainment Tonight* in the morning and rehearse with you all night if necessary. I'll be fine. The show knows my passion is music and they'll cut me some slack." He was right, though the producers may have been peeved at me for pulling him away. Tesh even moved out of his house for a month and rented an apartment close to our practice space in Burbank. We worked hard and long, sometimes ten hours at a stretch, because I was just learning how to stage the music live. Tesh was excellent, a fast learner, intelligent. It didn't take long for me to show him a few things.

One afternoon we were walking on the beach and he asked, "Do you think I'll ever

make it? Do you think I'm good enough? Should I continue with my music?"

Of course he wanted his own career. Who doesn't? I said, "Absolutely. Just do your own thing." I later helped him get his first recording contract with Private Music.

Tesh was in the band for only one tour. We went to maybe twelve cities around the country. Private Music wanted me to play "selected clubs" and Peter Baumann pressed hard, but I said no. I'd already done that trip with Chameleon and I knew it didn't work. I wanted to play theaters — at least 2,000-seaters — and said I'd risk it. Everybody told me I was crazy, but I insisted that my sound was too big for small spaces, and even if only four hundred people showed up, I'd give them the best show they ever saw. You've got to start somewhere, and I wasn't going to start in nightclubs, where I'd already been. It was the right choice.

Our first date was in Dallas, in front of almost 2,000 people. I wore my usual black leather pants and a tight top. Tesh was really nervous with beginner's jitters. It hadn't occurred to me that he'd be frightened because he was on TV all the time, in front of millions. But I'd forgotten that it's not live TV; if you blow a line you stop the tape and roll again. Fortunately, Tesh was prepared.

He'd brought a bottle of Pepto-Bismol and slugged it down just before show time.

Honestly, we were all more or less in the same boat. I may have been onstage many times, but this was my first bona fide tour. Before one show, trying to get over our nerves, Tesh, Charlie, and I found Joyce's camera lying around. Someone had the idea that we should all pull down our pants and have a roadie take a picture of our butts, and then see what happened when Joyce had the film developed. I think she was at home with her parents, looking at all the concert photos, when she came across our three amigos. Surprise!

Baumann came to Dallas and after the concert he ran up and hugged me. He seemed fairly impressed. Perhaps his expectations had been low because he'd never seen me perform and because I hadn't bothered to explain the show to him beforehand. Still, it was important for me to prove to Peter that I had my act together, and I was gratified by his reaction. Maybe now he'll have more faith, I thought.

Though Baumann was happy with what he'd seen, Private Music didn't go any more out of their way to support my next tours. One time I had to twist the corporate arm pretty hard. I said, "I'd like you to back me

up to the tune of a hundred thousand dollars." If the tour didn't work, I could take a hit for a couple hundred grand, but if I lost any more I'd go belly-up. Then I made the deal too good to turn down. I said, "If I lose money, no matter what happens, the most you'll be out is a hundred grand. Even if I lose a million dollars. And if I don't need it, I won't use it."

What could they say? I was their top-selling artist. They grudgingly gave me a check, figuring they'd never see the money again, that I was just another musician with his hand in the till. The begrudging part bothered me. What I wanted would be good for both of us, but their attitude insulted me.

That mistrust was beginning to characterize my relationship with the record company, often putting me in the position of saying, "Fine, I'll do it myself. Thanks." And most of the time, in one way or another, they kicked and screamed: "This ain't gonna work."

I didn't want to hear it. I had big dreams. I was in a fighting stance. The more I wrote and toured, the more ambitious I became. I wanted people to talk about my albums, and I wanted to sell millions. I wanted to play to SRO crowds in 20,000-seat arenas. I

wanted a big sound and great lighting. I wanted to leave people floating on cloud nine after the show. I didn't have enough money yet to get anything more than rental lights and the PA system or the right musicians, but I could imagine the day when I could say, "Okay, we're going to have two months' rehearsal. How much will that cost?"

"A million dollars."

"Good. Let's do it." And be able to.

When the tour ended, one of my greatest pleasures was to return that check — uncashed. We were in the midst of some other business when I told Ron Goldstein, a smooth record executive who always lands on his feet, and who was then president of Private Music, "Oh, by the way: I've got this for you." I opened my briefcase and handed him the original check.

He said, "In my twenty-five years in the record industry, I've never seen this."

After that, Ron trusted me more. He understood that I wasn't just out to get what I could.

My next two albums were *Chameleon Days* and *Niki Nana*. Record sales and concert attendance slowly climbed. But even as my audience steadily grew, most people still had no

clue who I was or what I did. I don't mean that they thought I was a hairstylist or a Greek celebrity chef instead of a composer; I mean that even if someone knew my name and my profession, he or she often had no idea what my music was about.

There are a couple of reasons why. To learn about me, they had to find me. To find me I had to somehow get their attention, which was another uphill battle. I had realized as early as *Optimystique* in 1981 that I would have a hard time getting anyone to notice instrumental music, and I was prepared for that. We lived in a rock 'n' roll era. You couldn't find me on MTV or on any radio stations except the Wave. They played instrumental cuts, though now it's mostly what they call "smooth jazz."

I was in a box. All I could do was continue to write, record, perform — and push wherever I could. But exposure is an obstacle course that requires proper advertising, tour support money, creative marketing, and word of mouth. I figured if I did my part then the record company should do theirs, especially since my sales kept growing. When I brought up the subject, Peter Baumann was always encouraging, but it was tough to get him to put his money where his sentiments lay.

And money alone couldn't do everything.

The difficulties of my quest to be heard were compounded by my music being called something it isn't. When I recorded *Optimystique*, my songs were called "electronic" because they were performed with synthesizers. Unfortunately that wasn't considered "real" music. It was thought of as rubber music. Cool. Repetitive. Techno. Droning. Mine wasn't anything like that, but because I used synthesizers I got lumped with that group.

Next my music was called New Age, a label meant to conjure visions of artists who say "Ommmmm" a lot and use the ambient sounds of tree frogs, crashing waves, and waterfalls to enhance meditation. That's never been me either; it's just not what I do. Ironically, I'm criticized by the real New Age people for being way too intense. Had I been willing to accept being a niche artist, I wouldn't even mention this, but that was never my goal, and anyone who listened to my music had to be pretty dense not to realize that it never fit any prefab definitions. Was I angry? A bit. I knew that I was an odd duck. I just wanted to write the music that I enjoyed and reach people who might enjoy it, too.

These days this stuff bothers me much,

much less — not at all, actually. But when I lived in Los Angeles and was eager to get my music out to as many people as possible, my emotions seesawed. I'd be pissed off one day, not dwell on it the next, then my blood would boil until I'd focus on more important things.

One thing I never had a problem with was people hearing my music and deciding it wasn't their cup of tea. I don't like all kinds of music either. What bothered me was the New Age label scaring away people who might like what I do. I didn't like it when, because of a label on a record store bin, or a review, someone could say, "No, no, I hate that crap," without ever hearing me.

This much I know: It's very difficult to lie with instrumental music. You're asked to describe an emotion, but not with words. Words you can fake; anyone can say "I love you." Try to communicate "I love you" without words; if you've never felt love then there's no chance in hell that you'll accidentally choose the right notes to describe the emotion.

Instrumental music works on us subconsciously. If it doesn't move you emotionally it's meaningless. The music has to give you goose bumps. It's not something you understand intellectually, you just *know* it. That's

what I love about instrumental music. It bypasses logic; it's not something you analyze. You enjoy it or you don't.

Whenever I talk to the press, inevitably I'm asked the "New Age question." I've always responded by saying that New Age is not a musical term but a philosophical point of view.

It's quite simple, really.

Some critics and journalists understand and leave me alone. Others make fun. I don't remember the first time I heard someone call me "Yawnee," but I can take a joke. Sometimes I even call myself "Yawnee." I like the *New Yorker* cartoon of a dentist asking a patient in the chair, "Yanni or Novocaine?" What's wrong with people using my music to get away from pain? If you think about it, it's not a bad thing. Do I mind people making fun of me? No; I think it's cool. It's fair game, particularly in this culture. There's no one sacred here.

Sometimes what was written just made me laugh out loud. One of my favorites is the reviewer who wrote about my shoes. He came all the way out to my concert and ended up talking about my shoes. Now *that's* funny.

The bottom line is that I like what I do. If

it sounds good to me, it goes out. If it doesn't sound good to me, I erase it. Will everybody like what I like? Absolutely not. That's impossible. As soon as you put your art out there for people, someone will say, "Because it is blue, I love it," and, for the exact same reason the next guy will say, "Because it is blue, I hate it." Once you understand that, there's freedom in the creative process. Otherwise, your creation is just a reaction to criticism. You won't be able to let your mind run and say, "What would I like to do today?" Instead, you'll hear a little voice in the back of your head: "You must get it under four minutes long, and have a good rhythm, and get some lyrics." That's enslavement.

In the beginning, like most people who aren't used to the press, I was a little taken aback by some of the responses; they seemed so unrelated to what was really going on. Then I realized they had *nothing* to do with what was really going on.

It took me a few years until I was able to get it and say, "New Age, Schmew Age, who cares? How do you like this *song?*"

I've never taken shots at critics because what is there to respond to? I'll say it now: *Critics are always right.* Anything they say is correct. If it's art they're writing about, then

everyone has the right to a response.

Before my career took off, I watched an interview with a famous sitcom actor from a show I loved. When the guy told the story of how he'd once gotten a bad review for some performance and became so terrified that he wouldn't even go out shopping, that stopped me in my tracks. I thought, Why would you do that to yourself? Think of how many people enjoy what you do. Why would you let a review potentially ruin your life?

No one likes rejection and I'm no exception. But if you're an artist, you must *expect* rejection. It comes with the territory. Be prepared for it. Your reaction to rejection is what's important. If it overtakes you and fills you with self-doubt, fear, and insecurity, then it can be very destructive.

After listening to one of my albums, my aunt Sofia said, "I don't like any of the songs that have drums. I prefer the gentler pieces." And guess what: She was right. That's what she likes. I don't take it personally, and that attitude is what gives me my creative freedom. Today, I call it the Aunt Sofia Principle.

Just because critics like you doesn't mean you'll sell albums, and if they hate you it doesn't mean that you won't. When did you last go to a critically panned movie and have

a great time anyway? The media has its opinion, but any artist who depends on being a media hit is lost in the long run. Believe it or not, the media is a tiny audience. Loud, but tiny. You've got to show your art to the public. They decide. In that sense, the opinion of my neighbor the garbage collector is just as important as any critic's.

Sometimes I'd like to say to a reviewer, "If you think my music is boring, great. Now let's go to your house and you play me the music that you think is not boring." And maybe when he does that I'll go, "You listen to this?" I'm certain we'd both have a good laugh — and connect as human beings.

If I have any complaint it's that there are rock critics, jazz critics, classical critics, but not many *music critics*. A job requirement should be that you've heard a zillion different types of music and are open to all of them. You should find beauty everywhere. You should listen to country & western as much as jazz, opera, classical, rock, pop, rap, grunge, and R&B. Check out Algerian music. Egyptian, Israeli, Asian. I don't write only in 4/4 time. I like 7/8, 9/8, 5/8, Middle Eastern scales, blending classical music with rock, and world culture beats. I draw from many influences.

In truth, the media missed me. They

never helped me succeed and they didn't help me fail. I've never been theirs. They didn't find me, the people did.

Sometimes being found can change your life.

In early 1989 the actress Linda Evans and her friends were sitting around at her home near Seattle, listening to my music and wondering, "What would this guy say if he knew how much we played his albums around here? We should let him know."

Because of the profound effect Linda had on my life, I've invited her to join me for this part of the book and speak in her own words.

LINDA: *The music was so heart-tugging and soul-searching and beautiful. It was my favorite. I went to a school where a thousand people adored him and meditated to his music. They felt that it helped them attain certain levels of consciousness because it was so inspiring. One day we had the music on and said, "Maybe he doesn't know there's a bunch of maniacs up here who think he's a great guy. Let's call him! Let's invite him up here and tell him we love him."*

Linda was nominated to call for the most pragmatic of reasons: because she was *Linda*

Evans. Everyone figured I would return her call. She told her assistant, Susan, "Find this Yanni guy. I think he's Japanese." Susan called Private Music and reported back that I was Greek, not Japanese, that I lived in America, spoke English, and was finishing up an album. "He doesn't like to talk to anybody when he's doing an album," Susan said, "but he'll be through in a month and then you can talk."

I knew who Linda was. When I first came to America in 1972 I remember seeing this beautiful blonde woman on TV in the dorm lounge, in a rerun of *The Big Valley*. I even told a friend about this "ungodly beautiful girl."

Years later, when I returned to Greece in 1986 to see my parents, sometimes we'd be eating al fresco, under the moon, on the balcony overlooking the bay, and my mom and aunts would *leave the dinner table* to watch *Dynasty*. I'd never watched a whole episode. Who had time? I usually said, "What are you guys watching TV for? Why don't you come out here and look at the moon and the beautiful view?"

I was wasting my breath. The show, and Linda, were extremely popular with Greeks. My mom and aunt would talk on and on about "this Linda Evans girl," so I finally

gave in and watched a bit and still thought she was stunningly beautiful.

Before I actually talked to Linda, her assistant called me to ease the way. "What's she like?" I said.

"She adores you so much," Susan said, "it's going to be easy. Don't worry about it. She's crazy about your music and it won't be a big deal."

That relaxed me. But only a bit. I was no stranger to women who liked me, but a famous, beautiful woman wanting to speak to me just because she liked my music was very exciting and a nice ego stroke. It made me a bit nervous. I had no idea what to expect, no idea of what to say or how to say it. Turns out Linda was anxious too, and had almost reconsidered the whole thing because she'd never made one of these calls, either.

When Linda rang I realized that she didn't know much about me. Right away she confessed that she'd thought I was Japanese. We probably talked about the weather for the first few minutes, but soon I felt like I'd known her all my life. Linda is very down to earth. Extremely intelligent.

The conversation lasted about an hour. We spoke about my music, and then we got

into life. We seemed to agree on a lot of things important to both of us: existence and existing, with how you look at life and how you enjoy the *now*.

At the end, I said, "I love talking to you," and asked if I could call her. She had sparked my interest. I loved her sexy voice. But as a guy, I tried to be a little cool — a leftover from my rock 'n' roll days.

Linda said, "Sure. Call me any time." And then she said, "If you ever want to come up here, we'd love to have you. I have a house on a lake. It's a big place, a mansion. You'll have your own room. You can come and stay, and meet these people who love you. And feel free to bring your wife, or girlfriend, or boyfriend. Whatever."

"Thanks," I said, smiling to myself. "It would just be me."

Now that I've known Linda for so many years, I can see why I was immediately attracted to her. She gives off incredible energy. She picks you up and makes you feel good about yourself, and she does it instinctively. I've watched her do it over the years with everybody from the wardrobe girl to Prince Albert.

When we spoke again, I learned that Linda had just moved to Seattle and wasn't

interested in having an acting career anymore. She was fried after ten years of *Dynasty*, going every morning into makeup and shooting day in and day out. It was time for her to live.

Unfortunately, living was something I didn't have much of a chance to do. Even after four albums, I still spent most of my time on my career. I hadn't had a steady relationship since Sherry, and I still wasn't looking to find a girlfriend or a wife. But the way I felt about Linda, just over the phone, made me start to wonder.

When I care for a woman I'm very committed in my heart, but I knew that being with me could be hard on someone who's not self-sufficient and together. When I write music, I go away, and not just physically. I distance myself mentally, and that's much more difficult to deal with. You can't talk to me because I'm not interested. I don't hear anything. I don't watch television. I don't eat. I sleep one or two hours at night, then I get up and go right back to the studio. How many women can put up with that?

I felt I had to tell Linda about my life. Warn her.

"Of course," she said, the next time I called. "That's exactly what I'm trying to learn how to do. What you do naturally, that

ability to focus and be creative, that's as close to God as you can get, and it's what I'm studying."

I was stunned. "But how do you know that?" I asked.

"Because I know," Linda said. "Your passion is to write music. My goal is to find the passion inside of me and inside of everybody; that's the beauty of all of us. That turns me on. It is so exciting and so powerful and so magical."

Linda was far more successful than I had ever been, and was successful for such a long time. She seemed to understand the power of her mind and how to use it to create the life she wanted. "I know exactly how you're supposed to do everything," she said, "because I did it."

When I heard that I thought, Really? Wow. Maybe she does understand me. I had told Linda about what I believed were the worst parts of me, the aspects that would drive anyone away, yet she didn't seem to mind. In fact, Linda encouraged them. She said, "Absolutely. That's the only way to be if you're an artist. It's wonderful that you can do that."

The more we talked, the more I kept looking at the phone and thinking, Who is this woman?

* * *

One afternoon Linda called me and said she was coming to Los Angeles and we could finally meet.

LINDA: *I really liked Yanni on the phone, but to tell the truth, I was very busy in Los Angeles, so even though it was my idea to get together, I was so preoccupied that I arranged to have us meet only an hour before I got on the plane to go back to Seattle. While I got ready to go, my oldest friend, Bunky, said, "You know, that Yanni person is coming."*

"Oh yeah," I said. "Thanks."

"He'll be here pretty soon," she added, "so get packed now."

When the doorbell rang she said, "Do you want me to get it?"

"Buzz him in the gate," I said, "I'll get the door."

Linda opened the door. She said, "Hi, come in." She was beautiful. She led me into the living room.

LINDA: *I looked at Yanni and my breath left my body. I could not believe that I had called this guy. I took one look at him and was madly in love. It was like the sky had*

opened. Lightning went off. I just stared at him. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. My heart was beating. I don't know how long that went on. It was probably only a few seconds, but I felt like I'd been staring for an hour. I thought, Oh my God, I never would have called him if I'd known he was so beautiful. I never would have had the nerve.

I didn't notice any of this, of course, because my reaction was pretty much the same. In fact, I don't remember much because of how intensely I focused on her.

LINDA: *We were glued to each other. I have never had an experience like that. The main love in my life had been John Derek. As a kid I had a movie poster of him over my bed. When he and I broke up, Barbara Stanwyck said to me, "That's it, Audra." Yes, she called me Audra, my character's name on* The Big Valley. *"That's it for you. You'll never love again. It happens once, if you're lucky. Me and Robert Taylor. You and John."*

I thought, I hate that; I don't want to think I'm twenty-seven and I've had all the love I'm ever going to have in my life. Time went on, no big love showed. Then at forty-

seven I opened the door and here's Yanni. It was the last thing I thought would happen.

Also, he was twelve years younger than me. Of course it bothered me. I couldn't imagine what it meant to be with a man twelve years younger. I had arrived at a point in my life where I was really happy with who I was. I was content. I had broken up with a guy I'd been with for a few years, who everybody said I should *marry because he was such a good man and so honest and decent and right. But I said, "That's true, but I'm not in love. I'm not settling. I'm never going to settle." By the time I met Yanni I'd been by myself for a year and a half.*

A couple of hours later I was on the plane home — and stunned. I said to Bunky, "I don't know what's going on. I have these feelings and I don't even know who he is. How can I love him without even knowing him?"

Soon, I took up Linda on her invitation to visit Seattle. She could have sent a car to the airport, but she insisted on picking me up herself. Her home then — she's since moved — was part of a private community. Set on a rise, the house looked out over Gravely Lake, and it was a short walk

through the rose garden and trees to the shore. There were even a couple of balconies and waterfalls. I had my own room.

We hung out from morning until night for about a week, and spent a lot of time on the lake in a little boat drifting into the sunsets, talking endlessly. But it was never simple conversation. An energy kept cycling back and forth between us. The more intense it grew, the more we just wanted to melt into each other and become one. You can't imagine how powerful and seductive — and scary — that feeling of utter attraction can be to two people as independent as we were. It was a perfect scenario in which to fall in love. As Linda says, "It was something we couldn't walk away from, so we just walked into it."

When it came to being intimate, I didn't want to jump the gun. I was a little guarded. Maybe still playing it cool. But I wasn't thinking in rock 'n' roll terms; it wasn't like that. Not even remotely.

It took a few days, but the inevitable happened, and that's when our romantic relationship began.

7

The Perfect Woman

I very quickly realized that Linda was the perfect woman for me, and I was the perfect man for her. We were in love. We were financially independent. We weren't emotionally insecure. We needed each other, but not like, "I must see you, talk to you, hold you, and hear you say you love me every day — or else I'll come unglued." We trusted each other completely, and kept that trust no matter how long we were apart.

Sometimes I'd stay with Linda in Seattle. Other times we'd meet somewhere in the country when I was on tour. Though it must have been tough, Linda often rode on the bus with the rest of the band for a week at a time, crammed with me in the back lounge/master bedroom, over the engine.

I loved having her with me. At the shows, Linda was my eyes and ears. She roamed through the house and gave me a critique every night: This part was good, this didn't work out very well. Linda has excellent musical taste and a strong visual sensibility.

She helped me immensely.

But now and then I'd say, "Linda, what are you doing here? Why don't you go home? This is crazy." We'd leave town after the concert and drive all night but get no rest because there's nothing harder than lying in a bunk bed trying to sleep when you're riding over potholes and bumps and going airborne every few miles. New York State's highways were the worst. Then we'd arrive in the next city about four or five in the morning and pull up to the hotel. Weary, we'd slip into our shoes, throw long black coats over our pajamas, and stumble into the lobby trying to look presentable. Ladies and gentlemen, Yanni and Linda Evans. By the time we got to our room we were wide awake.

The first time Linda came to stay with me in Los Angeles I was uncomfortable with how modest my home was compared to her mansion by the lake. I mean, she may have loved my music, but I didn't have a lot of material comforts to show for it. Linda didn't mind; she knew I put all my money back into my career. When she visited we rarely went out. A small place down the street delivered pizza and other wonderful meals. We ate off paper plates because no one wanted to do the dishes. To Linda's

credit she never once complained about sleeping on my cheap mattress, about my mismatched towels, about doing laundry in the garage.

She even liked my crummy old car. One night we had to attend a black-tie function at the Beverly Hills Hotel. I knew everyone would show up in their Mercedes and their limousines, but Linda insisted we pull up in my ugly brown BMW. I was embarrassed but Linda didn't care. I think she wanted to teach me something. "So what?" she said. "It doesn't matter."

That night I met John Forsythe for the first time, as well as Linda's friends Mike and Mary Lou Connors — he was Mannix on TV. Linda had told me that Mike was really funny and very straightforward.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said. "I hear you're a swimmer."

"Yeah."

"What kind of swimming do you do?"

"I do the freestyle and butterfly."

"Butterfly, huh?" And without missing a beat he looked at Linda, smiled, and said, "Hey, he must be a great lay."

I wasn't about to deny it. Linda laughed her buns off.

I've always lived in the moment. Sometimes

it was a little too in the moment for Linda. She'd never met anybody quite like me. She tends to be structured and likes to plan. If Linda asked me in the morning what I wanted for dinner that night, she'd be ready to go to the market, buy what we needed, cook, and serve it at a predetermined time. But I'd say, "It's morning. How would I know what I want for dinner?"

"Well, how do I buy it and cook it?" she'd ask, with just the tiniest bit of exasperation.

"We'll just see."

Maybe I drove her crazier than she let on, but Linda would take a deep breath and say, "I'd like to be more like you. I've got too much structure in my life. I want to relax more." Of course, I understood that come dinnertime I might not get anything, or not what I wanted because I wouldn't plan ahead.

By the way, Linda is a killer cook — actually, a killer *chef*. She works very hard at it. I started to gain weight.

Since breaking up with Sherry I had been afraid that if I was with any woman on a regular basis it might cause a conflict with my music. Until I met Linda I had not let anyone close enough to have to think seriously about the problem.

I'm very difficult to deal with, particularly when I write music, because as I had warned Linda, I go away mentally and physically. Music becomes God, and everything else is secondary, including a relationship. Including myself. My willingness to ignore my own basic needs like eating and sleeping and contact with the outside world — even love — pretty much justified my behavior. My parents would have liked me to come to Christmas dinner when they had visited some years before, but they understood my need to focus. When I went into the basement for three weeks and came out ten pounds lighter, my friends didn't think "creative person," they thought "he's weird," but soon they also accepted the process.

Linda was the first woman I'd met who didn't think it was weird when I went into my cave for a week.

Linda said, "Living in society is strange. What you do in your room with your creativity, that's not strange. That's real life."

I'd say, "Really? And you don't feel threatened by any of this?"

"No! Far from it: I'd like you to teach me how you get there."

Linda loved the music so much, she couldn't wait until I had a new song to play

for her. She would say, "Go write it so I can hear it." Linda understood my creative process and was exactly who I needed to have with me in order to do what I did. She kept me straight and balanced; she inspired and encouraged me. Far from being bothered by it, she admired my ability to detach, even though she once told me it was scary as all get-out to be with someone who could completely turn off everything. She knew that my detachment allowed me to see more clearly, to create without judgment.

We talked about my role models: not just Beethoven and Mozart, but Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates. I admired the brilliance and longevity of their accomplishments. I also wanted to know how to reach great levels and move people. I knew that I wouldn't if I did only the minimum work required of me every day.

When you grow up in Greece you see ageless monuments everywhere you look. We still fuss over what the ancients created two thousand years ago. I thought, What could I make — it doesn't have to be music, it could be anything — that anyone would care about two thousand years from now? That question inspires respect, even for bad antiquities. Whatever the quality, it was a creation powerful enough to survive. I took

that seriously. That meant a lot to me.

When I was in the studio, I thought only about the music. When I was with Linda, she was all I focused on. I didn't bring my briefcase to the beach, as they say. I didn't talk about work at the breakfast table. I didn't read the paper, either, or watch TV. Instead, we connected. We traveled, had fun being together wherever we were, and had serious discussions about creativity, philosophy, and life.

Passion defined us. We had great sex and a great love. We are both very affectionate. I held her hand all the time. We kissed often. We slept wrapped up in each other all the time. Every few days for us was Valentine's Day, and yet Linda didn't care whether or not I remembered an anniversary.

As for my previous romantic history, Linda seemed amazed that I wasn't jaded by my years on the road playing rock music.

Linda: *Yanni told me all about his rock 'n' roll days, being admired and adored, having access to all the women he wanted. He also told me that he woke up one day and said, "Been there, done that. This isn't going to take me where I want to go." And he just stopped.*

Sometimes I thought about that after we'd been together, making love, and I'd ask him, "How can you be so innocent? How can you be such an innocent man after what you lived through?"

"Linda," he'd say, "it's just what I did; it's not who I am. It does not define me."

Linda discovered even more about me when we went to Greece to visit my parents. They adored her immediately, and the feeling was mutual. They were delighted that a strong, stable woman had finally come into my life. The wonder of it was that Linda's parents were alcoholics and she'd overcome a very tough childhood. She used to tell me that my parents were extraordinary in the way they'd allowed me to be me. More than once she said, "If I come back in another life, I'm going to be first in line for them as *my* parents. If you try to get them again, I'll beat the hell out of you. You're not getting them a second time."

"I could go to Greece and move in with them right now and be very happy," she says today.

In Kalamata, we swam often and walked all the time. One day we went into a field next to my house to photograph butterflies. I had been taking pictures of one in particular. Usually, they fly away, but for some reason this one let me get closer and closer. In fact, she wouldn't leave. I gave Linda the camera, I sat in the field, and I imagined this butterfly landing on my finger. I put out my hand and waited. She flew close, circled, then darted away. Then her mate came and they swirled together for two or three minutes. And yet I remained still until, as if she were mesmerized by me, the butterfly landed on my hand, just as I'd imagined. It was amazing. That fragile creature stole my heart, and the experience reaffirmed my belief that I could create the life I wanted.

In the afternoons, when everyone took naps, I would pull one of my father's books of Greek philosophy off the shelf and read to Linda. "Listen to what Socrates said . . ." I'd read the ancient Greek, then translate it into English. One I remember is when Socrates was asked by a younger student: "Tell me what is better: To get married and have children, or not?"

His answer was: "Whichever one you choose, you'll be sorry."

We both laughed.

I'd been with lots of women, but not in many long-term relationships. Linda had been married twice before and was far more expe-

rienced in that sense than I. She was together, intelligent, funny, witty, challenging, sexy, beautiful; she was a woman, not a girl; an adult, not a scared kid who relied on me for her well-being and her life. Yet we never really talked about marriage except to acknowledge that Linda didn't need to get married again, and that I didn't want to, as they jokingly say, "Make the same mistake once."

"Besides," I told her, "as far as I'm concerned we're already married. You're the only woman in my life. Signing a piece of paper is not necessary. I'm committed."

Eventually, the subject of children came up. I had thought about it long before and decided I didn't want any. Family and children are an extremely profound and consuming experience. You do that and guess what? You can't go in the direction that I headed. At least I didn't believe I could. I didn't want to have kids and then be one week in Japan, the next week in Russia, while the kids were home with the nanny, needing Mommy and Daddy. It was tough enough for me to be so focused on my career in a relationship with a woman. Everyone needs attention, and kids need lots more. You can't come home fried from the road, or emerge from three weeks in the studio, and not want to talk to them. After being raised

by my father, I thought, If you're not going to be a great father, don't do this to another human being.

And still . . . one night, Linda and I were lying in bed and I said, "Linda, I'm thirty-five and you're forty-seven. Maybe you want to have a child."

She didn't answer.

"I have the luxury of having children ten years from now if I want to. But you don't. So . . ." And then, with absolute sincerity, I said the words I never imagined I'd ever say, "I'd be more than happy to have a child with you, if you choose."

She started crying.

LINDA: *I'd had this big dream during* Dynasty *about having a baby that the press went crazy with. In truth, I never really wanted to be an actress; I just wanted to have a husband and a baby. For reasons of fate and life, it never happened. Yanni knew that. And I knew when we met that our relationship didn't necessarily have to be a forever thing, and that if he wanted a wife and kids, that at my age I was not the best choice he could make in a woman. He said he didn't want children and that was that. But one night, out of the blue, he made the offer and it just touched my heart so much. Here*

was this man who was so freedom-oriented and so independent, offering to tie himself up as much as any man can. I cried and cried. I was just stunned. I said I wanted to think about it. Then I realized that his life was so full of going and coming and doing, and that if I had a child, I'd be the kind of mother who would be there with the child. I couldn't leave a child with a nanny and go off with him, so I didn't know how we would have a life together. I could have the dream of having a child come true, but then I didn't know how I could be with him. And I loved him so much.

Linda thought it over and said it was too late and that there were too many things about herself she wanted to work on. I accepted her decision.

Just as Linda gave me space to be myself, I gave her the same space in return. I know it may seem from the way I speak about her that she did not have a life apart from me, but that's not accurate. She'd already done Hollywood and walked away. Now she had her school and her friends. Linda enjoyed the simplicity of the life she had earned.

Linda is very spiritual and always on the lookout for ways in which to improve her-

self. She would go on retreats with her school and teachers for a month at a time. I wasn't into it, but I wasn't threatened by it, either. I respectfully bowed out of studying the metaphysical and she never tried to push her beliefs on me.

One of Linda's big goals was to reach higher levels of focus and creativity. She'd say, "I've been going to school for six years and I bust my ass. You just do this on your own, without anybody ever telling you, and you do it better than most of us in school. How the heck did you arrive at this?"

I would explain, using music as a metaphor. I probably didn't tell her anything she didn't already know, but it often makes an impact when you hear your own wisdom in someone else's words:

"If you *are* the music, you can write the music. If you're not the music, you're outside, judging it. Judgment and creativity are opposites. Both are valid, but they can't exist in the same place at the same time. To create, you have to become one with your creation and let it flow freely. You have to be in the zone. For me, I have to become one with the music. The instant I begin judging my creation, I find myself outside looking in, and the creative moment is gone."

Then I'd say it in another way: "Be the

music. There's a truth to it. If you want to write music, you've got to be the song. If you have any thoughts about that song while you're writing it — if you say, 'That's a great song!' or 'That's a terrible song!' — you're outside; you've lost it. You're not in the creative moment anymore, you're an observer looking in. Now you can't create."

"But how do you learn to do that?" Linda would ask.

"How? By doing it wrong all the time," I'd say. "And doing it over and over again. Eventually you are just there with what you're creating. There's plenty of time for judging later."

After five years with Private Music, during which my record sales and concert attendance slowly yet steadily improved, I had the opportunity to make my dream of hearing my music played by a symphony orchestra come true.

The idea had always been in the back of my mind, but I'd never had the money to carry it off. I had to use a synthesizer to pretend there was a horn or string section in addition to my band, and it was very limiting. And I knew the dream could have a dangerous outcome. Acts like Emerson, Lake, and Palmer had tried touring with an or-

chestra and gone bust, canceling their shows. The highway was littered with people who had attempted to do what I longed to achieve.

In June 1990, a big radio station in Dallas sponsored a benefit concert to fight AIDS and invited me to appear with the Dallas Symphony. I jumped at the chance. It was a golden opportunity to test the water, to figure out how to work with all those musicians, and to master the technical aspects of arranging and amplifying an orchestra to make the music sound the way I heard it in my head.

I also wanted to film the show, otherwise my first experience would be just like any other concert. People might talk about it afterward, and maybe I'd get a good review in the paper, but so what? It would be dead forever. But I discovered that the cost of using only three or four cameras was prohibitive.

I called George Veras, a senior producer at CBS Sports. We'd been introduced a year earlier by John Tesh. I liked the way George had used my music on TV to open *CBS Sports Saturday* and *CBS Sports Sunday*. Other producers there had used music I'd written for the U.S. Open Tennis and the Tour de France broadcasts, the World Figure Skating Championships, and other

on-air promotions. George and I hadn't met face-to-face, but we talked on the phone now and then, and as two Greeks in the entertainment business we hit it off immediately.

I said, "George, can you help me? I'm playing with the Dallas Symphony. I can't afford to film it. We're not looking for the best production on the planet, but I want a visual record of this concert. How can we do it?"

"We can videotape it," George said. "I've never done a music concert, but how hard could it be? I could get a truck and some lights, and we could figure it out." He even offered to direct. "It's gonna look great," he promised. "I can use the same guys who shoot the Dallas Cowboys games. Ten cameras."

"Ten cameras?" That set off alarms, but I told him to look into the cost. The next day he had an answer: "Forty grand."

"You got it," I said.

George asked why I'd picked him.

"Because everyone else wanted two hundred and fifty grand . . . and somehow I trust you."

Next, I went to Private Music to drum up moral support and a little money, bearing in mind Peter Baumann's mantra: "As soon as

we know you have something, as soon as you have a hit in our hands, guy, we're going to put so much money into you it's going to really happen. All we need is the break."

This time I thought I finally had what he wanted. With great passion I explained my plan to play with the Dallas Symphony. "It's going to help me move beyond my New Age piano-player image," I said.

But instead of enthusiasm, Peter only had doubts. "Who is George Veras? This won't work. It's crazy to spend any money here." He passed.

I couldn't believe it. I wondered exactly what kind of break he'd meant: Somebody guaranteeing 8 million albums sold? No one can promise that. Peter was a good friend, but he also seemed like a scared kid whose pattern was to promise yes but always say no because he really didn't know what to do with me. I'd always thought that Peter knew more than I did — and maybe it was true — but if I let him talk me out of filming the show I'd be selling myself short.

I told Linda what Peter had done — or rather, not done. Linda was more than a lover and an inspiration, she was a mentor. A stabilizing and motivating force. She'd been in show business for many years and knew things that Tom and I didn't. I lis-

tened. Given the opening, a new side of Linda emerged. "Your record company is full of it," she said. As an actress who'd taken advantage of her own breaks, Linda understood opportunity when it came along. "You have twelve sets of balls. They have none. Everything doesn't have to make money right away. It's an investment. Your music will sound great with an orchestra; it should *always* be played that way. It's your calling."

What she said next surprised the hell out of me: "Go tell them I said they're a bunch of fools and I'll pay for it myself. I'd invest two million dollars in you tomorrow because I know I'm going to make my money back."

I knew Linda would have given me the few thousand I actually needed — though I'm not sure I'd have taken it. At least it was nice to know the money was there if I wanted it. It made me a bit bolder. I went back to Peter and said, "Linda thinks you guys are a bunch of fools and have no balls."

As Linda had probably figured, Peter was so insulted that he agreed to give me a little money to cover George Veras's fee.

The CBS truck showed up in Dallas and preparations began.

George Veras says that for him, "It was like a regular TV shoot. The interesting thing was meeting in the dressing room. I walked in and Yanni had his shirt off. He was wearing black pants, sitting on the couch, and smoking a cigarette. And there was Linda Evans, who I'd never met, showing him all these outfits. It was like walking into the middle of a marriage argument, or into the middle of Brent Mussberger and Phyllis George disagreeing over leads. Linda was saying, 'You need to wear this to look good.' Yanni said, 'I only perform in black. That's who I am. I'm a rock and roll guy, and that's all I wear.'

"I said, 'Hi, I'm George Veras.' "

I looked up and introduced George to Linda, who said, "Maybe this guy knows what I'm talking about." She held up a black outfit and a white outfit. "What do you think?"

George said, "You know, Yanni, you do what you want to do. But what color is the stage?"

The stage was black.

"What color tuxedos does the orchestra wear?"

They wore black.

"Well, I'll tell you what," George said. "If you wear black when we shoot you, your

head will look like a pimple on an elephant's ass. Now, if you want to do that, cool."

"Oh!" Linda said. "I like this guy!"

George said, "Why don't we do the first half of the rehearsal with you in black, and the second half in white? Then we'll come back and view the tapes, and decide then."

George is a cigar-chomping, straight-talking streetwise fighter from New York. He was also diplomatic. I liked him, too.

I'd never been shot before by a professional with a long lens camera and some lights behind me. Later, when I looked at myself on the monitor, I thought, White looks great! And I noticed something else: A white outfit changes color with the lights. It makes you look interesting. Black hair, white clothes, black backdrop. I was learning.

George had also put a light directly behind me. Every time I threw my head back, it lit up my hair, making it glisten through the beads of sweat. As we rolled the tape, the guys in the video truck said, "Holy shit! This is the money shot." George called it the Jesus shot. I don't know about that, but it looked good.

I've since gotten a lot of flak from the media for wearing white onstage. They keep looking for some mystical, spiritual significance. There is none. I did not want white. I

lost that argument, but it was absolutely the right choice.

The show got a killer review in the *Dallas Morning News*. I was relieved, but I still thought we did a lousy job with the orchestra sound. I'd put the microphones as close as I could to the violins, but the musicians would get annoyed and push them out of the way. The best way to play with the sound would be to tear the orchestra apart and reconfigure everything — not that I could at the time. A microphone not only picks up the sound you want, but the sound around it. You have to isolate the instruments that make a lot of noise — drums and percussion; you don't want to put the trombones right next to the violins. A cello is very sensitive, so its microphone has to be even more sensitive. When you take an instrument that's meant to be heard acoustically, in a room, and amplify it to 110 decibels, it becomes a different instrument. Each instrument also has its own quirks and its way of being treated. I had to study each one and create a way to fasten a microphone to it, not to mention find the right microphone for that instrument, then run it through the console for its own special effects, equalizers, compressor limiters, and

gates. Only then would I have a *sound*. It took me six years of trial and error to get it right. The result is an enormous power and range onstage. My concerts can be as gentle as a single violin or flute and as powerful as a full-on rock band.

When I was at Linda's house we spent a lot of time on the boat on Gravely Lake. She would drive while I water-skied, then we'd go out to the middle of the lake, turn off the engine, listen to music, and talk.

Linda liked to play my albums on the boat's cassette deck. Until I met her, I'd never been able to listen to my music with others around. I believe in it with all my heart, but I'm also shy about it. I want people to feel they can say, "Turn that stuff off and play something else." When I'm around they don't feel comfortable doing that.

One day, after Linda and I had been together less than a year, we took the boat out and put on a tape. The player had no auto-reverse; after twenty minutes it would stop and I had to flip it to the other side. I got fed up and said, "Why don't I just make us a cassette that will run forty-five minutes? Tell me which songs you like. What are your favorites?"

Linda was always very positive. Rather than say, "I don't like this song," she'd simply avoid playing it. But that day we listened to all five of my albums in one sitting. When she'd say, "Oh, I love that one," I'd write the name on a list.

Back in my studio I created an order for the songs she'd picked and put together her personal compilation. I brought the tape with me to Seattle the next time I visited. When she played it I realized that it didn't sound or feel like any of my albums. It was my music, but because of the selections and running order it had a very different sensibility.

Houseguests would say, "What is that?"

"It's a little tape I made."

"Hey, can I have a copy?"

I made a few duplicates for friends, but after about thirty I got tired. Instead, I went to Private Music and said they should release it. They said, "Yeah. Great idea." That's how *Reflections of Passion* was made. In fact, Private Music liked it so much they sprang for a music video also called *Reflections of Passion*.

After the Dallas Symphony concert Linda and I kept talking about my frustration with Private Music. For five years I had been

living in Los Angeles, with more people telling me more ways to get my music across than Greeks sitting in cafés drinking coffee beneath the stars. I sold more albums and played to bigger crowds than ever, and I'd finally worked with an orchestra, but it was all because of my efforts, not the record company's.

In other words, it was the same old story: I needed to find a way around my perceived limitations. I wrote contemporary instrumental music that everyone called New Age, and I was considered a much tougher sell, to a smaller and supposedly less accessible audience, than bands who wrote three-minute formula songs and got on MTV. I knew it was true, but that didn't make me feel any better — or any less ambitious.

Linda sympathized. She loved the music, and based on her experience as a much-adored public figure, she believed that I had an audience out there that the record company was missing.

"Great," I said. "But what do you know about the *music business?*" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "But I still know a lot more than your record company. They have no clue."

"But I can't force them to spend money," I said. "Besides, maybe I'm not ready yet.

I'm still developing. Peter says that in a few more years I'll mature and be ready."

Now it was Linda's turn to vent. "You'll mature into what? Peter just allows you to believe that he knows more than you. You've already done it! You wrote *Reflections of Passion*." Linda thought that instead of finding clever ways around obstacles such as the New Age label, Peter was blowing me off, pacifying me. "Your music is full of passion. When we do breathing exercises to it at the school, we end up screaming and driving energy into our heads because it gives us the feeling we can do anything. New Age music you fall asleep to."

She asked me again, "What are you going to mature into? What are you waiting for?"

The answer was rooted in conflict. Peter was my friend. We had dinner often. He'd helped me buy a house. He'd signed me, for goodness' sake. I was ambitious, competitive, and upset that opportunities had been missed and that things were taking so long, but I still trusted him. I believed in what he said despite evidence of his reluctance to take risks for me. I had a hard time admitting that maybe he was out of his depth.

Perhaps it would have been easier if, as a person in authority, Peter had been more like my Greek teachers: mostly inflexible.