



NOBODY DOES IT BETTER
Simon singing strong in 2008.

She Hasn't Got Time For The Pain

Though she's been plagued by two neurological challenges—stuttering and migraines—Carly Simon keeps the beat as one of the most influential voices of her generation.

BY SUSANNAH GORA

When I was a young child," Carly Simon has revealed, "I had a stammer. And the only time it went away was when I sang. One day, my mother said to me, 'Don't speak it, sing it.' And that's what I did."

Did she ever. Over the course of a career that has spanned four and a half decades, singer/songwriter Carly Simon has recorded over 30 albums, won two Grammys and an Academy Award, and contributed some of the most culturally resonant pop songs of our time, including the coy "You're So Vain," the playful "Anticipation," the uplifting "Coming Around Again," and the anthemic "Let The River Run." Her music has given a voice to the experiences and desires of a generation of women who came of age in the 1960s.

The details of her personal life—from her childhood as the

daughter of a founder of Simon & Schuster to her passionate marriage and heartbreaking divorce from legendary musician James Taylor—are well-known, and her extraordinary gifts as a musician have inspired millions. But many people are unaware of her neurological challenges.

From Stuttering to the Stage

Simon's childhood stuttering was painful for the young girl, but it may have been a blessing in disguise.

"I developed a very serious stutter at about the age of six," according to Simon, "and had tremendous difficulty in saying anything. It was agonizing when I was asked questions at school and knew the answer—but couldn't say anything because I was scared to distort my face and voice."

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“When I was a young child, I had a stammer. And the only time it went away was **when I sang.**”

At the family dining table, whenever Simon found herself stuttering while trying to ask for something, her intuitive mother Andrea told her daughter to tap out a beat on her leg and then sing the request along with the beat.

“My mother taught me how to speak with rhythm, which is what I tell a lot of the stutterers that I come into contact with now,” Simon has said. “Because everyone in the family knew that it was very hard for me to speak but very easy to sing, we began to sing around the house all the time, telling each other to go to bed, or get up, or come to dinner.”

Although Simon has largely overcome the severe stuttering that plagued her as an adolescent, it has reappeared at moments throughout her life—for example, just before her first major performance, when she opened for Cat Stevens with her single “And That’s The Way I’ve Always Heard it Should Be.” The stammer still surfaces occasionally even now that she’s in her 60s, especially in times of stress, but Simon is philosophical about it. “What my son, Ben, says about me is that I wear my nervous system in a plume on the outside of my body.”

Stuttering is a communication disorder in which the flow of speech is broken by repetitions, prolongations, or abnormal stoppages of sounds and syllables, according to the Stuttering Foundation of America (stutteringhelp.org). Often, the stutterer will make unusual facial movements while trying to speak. It is estimated that over three million Americans suffer from the disorder, which is recognized as neurological in origin.

“Stuttering is a neurological issue,” explains Bob Leshner, M.D., professor of neurology and pediatrics and child neurologist at the Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. “It is not a psychiatric or psychological problem, even though psychological stresses can worsen the condition. The bottom line is that this is an organic problem.” Sixty percent of stutterers have a family member who also suffers from the condition.

Childhood stuttering is “extremely common,” says Dr. Leshner, who estimates that “one or two percent of our children will do this. But only one in 400 hundred adults is a stutterer. There are some people who begin stuttering in childhood, and the stuttering persists throughout their lives.” Treatment for stuttering usually involves speech therapy, although sometimes anti-anxiety medications are used. “That’s usually when stuttering is exacerbated by stress, as it often is,” says Dr. Leshner.

The fact that people tend not to stutter while singing makes for intriguing neurological speculation. “It would imply that the mechanisms underlying the coordination of sound when speaking are somewhat different than when we are singing,” posits Dr. Lessner, who points to the case of Country and Western singer/songwriter Mel Tillis. The legendary crooner, who suffered from stuttering except while singing, went on to become a spokesperson for stuttering awareness.

Simon found that words beginning with certain letters were more difficult to say than others. “I almost always couldn’t say H’s. Some days it was S’s, and some it was T’s. So I became this walking thesaurus. You learn to supply yourself with substitute words you won’t trip over.”

Dr. Leshner says this makes sense, because “the stutter usually starts on the initiating syllable of a word, not the second syllable, so sometimes substituting a word will help people get around a communication block.”

The Pain of Migraine

Simon is also one of the millions of Americans who suffer from migraines. These painful headaches have affected her at different points of her life, such as in the early days of the special friendship she shared with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The former first lady

would go on to become one of Simon’s cherished mentors and confidantes. But in the beginning of their relationship, according to Simon, “I tried so hard to act the part of being relaxed around her, but I would inevitably come home with a stiff neck and a migraine. The effort of trying to maintain the semblance of ease was very taxing.”

“The pain of a migraine is usually incapacitating,” explains Barbara Scherokman, M.D., a neurologist with the Mid-Atlantic Permanente Medical Group in Fairfax, VA. “Migraines are usually on one side of the head, they are usually throbbing, and they are associated with nausea, vomiting, and light and sound sensitivity. Migraine is felt to be more of a brain chemical imbalance that you inherit rather than just a contraction of your muscles.” One out of four people get migraines, Dr. Scherokman estimates, and the majority are women.

Simon tries to avoid alcohol, because she has found that it can trigger her migraines. “Alcohol has certain chemicals in it, like tannins in red wine, that can bring on a migraine,” explains Dr. Scherokman. Foods like hot dogs and bacon, which can have nitrates, are also often culprits. Dr. Scherokman advises patients to keep a food diary, so they can observe the correlation between



SING OUT SISTERS Carly (right) got a start singing with her sister Lucy, seen here in 1965.

“What my son, Ben, says about me is that I wear my **nervous system** in a plume on the outside of my body.”

migraines and the foods they eat.

Migraines are treated in two main ways: with medicines that help abort the pain and are taken at the first sign of a migraine; and with those that are taken daily to help prevent a migraine from occurring. “Many researchers believe that a low serotonin level in the central nervous system has something to do with the genesis of migraine,” explains Dr. Scherokman. It is thought that migraine sufferers often “inherit a low serotonin level in their brains, and it makes them more sensitive to different triggers,” she says. “Most of the acute and preventive medications raise the serotonin level, or act on the serotonin receptors in the central nervous system.”

Carly Simon has also suffered from depression, something not uncommon in people with migraines. “Low serotonin is associated with depression and also with insomnia,” says Dr. Scherokman. “They go together so frequently.”

Although the antidepressants known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) do increase the serotonin level in the central nervous system, they are not prescribed for migraine. “We have not found them helpful,” says Dr. Scherokman, “and frequently they make migraines worse. The cause of this may be that SSRIs affect more than just the serotonin level. SSRIs can affect other neurotransmitters and receptors.”

Simon is also, in the words of her biographer Sheila Weller, “a lifelong analysand.” Says Dr. Scherokman, “Migraines can be brought on by any internal or external stressors. Stress and lack of sleep can be psychiatric problems, and therefore psychotherapy could benefit patients with migraine. Migraine is felt to be a brain disorder or neurotransmitter/inflammatory disorder, and not technically psychogenic, but we frequently see migraine coupled with various psychiatric disorders such as depression.”

There are some lifestyle habits that can minimize migraine attacks. “We recommend eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, exercise 30-45 minutes a day, and to limit the caffeine you drink,” says Dr. Scherokman.

Simon’s lifestyle reflects this advice: “I don’t smoke, I



WELL TAYLORED Simon with former husband James Taylor in 1980, and with son Ben Taylor in 2008.

sleep for eight hours, and coffee is not a part of my life.”

Never Been Gone

But lately, Simon has been having plenty of headaches—professional headaches, that is. She recently brought a multi-million dollar lawsuit against Starbucks. She believes the company mismanaged the release of her 2008 album of new original songs, *This Kind of Love*, by drastically scaling back their music division just days before the division was to release her album.

“I was very depressed about what had happened,” Simon has said. But then her son Ben Taylor (an accomplished musician), suggested she make another album—this one filled with freshly reworked versions of her classic hits. She set up a recording studio in her Martha’s Vineyard home and got to work on the album, *Never Been Gone*, with the help of beloved fellow musicians including her son Ben, her daughter Sally Taylor, and her godson John Forte, former producer of the critically acclaimed rap group The Fugees. *Never Been Gone* was released this

past October on Iris Records (her son’s label), and is available at stores, on iTunes, and on carlysimon.com. The album’s title is an homage to the haunting 1979 Simon song of the same name, and a quietly bold response to the many people who have mistakenly assumed she dropped out of the music business. “I’ve always been here,” Simon has said. “I’ve never been gone.”

Some of the proceeds from the sale of *Never Been Gone* go towards The Carly Simon Music Therapy Initiative, a collaboration between Simon and the Berklee College of Music. Music therapy is a special cause for her because of the powerful way that singing helped her work through her stuttering as a child.

She has known much pain over the course of her life. But now, at age 63, she is also experiencing her fair share of joy. Simon is in love—with Richard Koehler, a surgeon—and is now a grandmother to her daughter Sally’s son. And Simon’s new record is getting rave reviews and climbing up the charts.

Simon herself has put it best: “Nothing stays the same. But if you’re willing to play the game, it will be coming around again.”

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