



## **The Healing Power of Music: An Interview with Suni Paz**

**Conducted by Phil Hoose  
with an introduction by Lisa Garrison**

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**CMN will honor Suni's lifetime contribution to children's music by presenting her the Magic Penny Award at the 2003 National Gathering.**

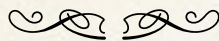
Twenty-five years ago, Argentine-born singer, songwriter, and educator Suni Paz released her first album for children on Folkways Records. Called *Canciones para el Recreo* or *Children's Songs for the Playground*, the album and cassette were reissued on CD by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in 2000 along with *Alerta Sings*, a collection of street games and folkloric rhymes from Latin America and the streets of Brooklyn, sung in English and Spanish by Suni and bilingual educators from Teachers College of Columbia University. Together, these two works launched what is one of the most prolific songwriting and recording careers in children's music today.

Suni Paz was born into the privileged world of cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina, before World War II. Her sensibilities were shaped by life as a young mother in pre-Allende Chile, immigration to Southern California at the height of the 1960s, a move to the university community of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and nearly twenty years living in the multicultural neighborhoods of New York City. Suni's work took a rare turn when she collaborated with poet and writer Alma Flor Ada on a Spanish-language reading curriculum, *Hagamos Caminos*, published by Addison Wesley in 1985. For each of the lyrics Alma Flor wrote, Suni composed music, filling six accompanying cassettes with eighty-four original songs. This would become the basis for a long-term collaboration between the composer and writer that continues to this day. For Suni, it would also open doors to work with publishers, from Scholastic in New York to Mimosa in Australia, for whom she composed music for *Mathtales*, *Cuentos de Conceptos*, twenty-four books and audiotapes featuring math story problems for K-3 classrooms. As a pioneer in the use of music to enliven Spanish language curricula, Suni Paz is without peers.

Suni has shared the stage with Holly Near, Bernice Reagon, Bob Dylan, Don Maclean, Phil Ochs, and Pete Seeger, performed with cellist Martha Siegel, written songs about garlic and frogs, taught at-risk high school students, sung for hospitalized children. Today, she lives and performs in Los Angeles with much of her family gathered close at hand. Family has been a defining aspect of Suni's music, and her sons, Ramiro and Juan, have performed with her since they were young boys. In this sense, she stands with Lomax, Seeger, and many members of CMN as part of the folk tradition of "musical families."

In every place she's been, Suni Paz has observed children and listened carefully to their concerns. And from every culture in this hemisphere, Suni has absorbed rhythms and melodic lines, elevating and dignifying Spanish language traditions by transforming and presenting them to audiences everywhere. Suni Paz works with a consistent sense of social justice and a heart constantly learning the meaning of compassion. Phil Hoose's interview captures a storyteller at her rambling best, a longtime member of CMN who lives her songs and sings her life, one day at a time.

-Lisa Garrison



Suni: I hope you don't mind if I finish my lunch while we talk.

PIO!: No problem; what are you having?

Suni: I'm eating a sort of tortilla sprinkled with Bragg's Liquid Amino Acids. Do you know what that is?

PIO!: No, I've never heard of it.

Suni: Oh, you have to try that. It's the ticket. Instead of using soy sauce you use Bragg's Amino Acids and you get amino acids in your body.

PIO!: That's a good tip, Suni, because I need them. As you absorb these acids, and before we explore your past, I'd like to know what work you're doing these days.

Suni: Now, I'm very interested in the art and healing power of music because I'm singing with children in hospitals. I had tried before to sing in the hospitals as a volunteer but they wouldn't take me. It's like the CIA or FBI: you go through a very thorough investigation. No way. Then I was called by [CMN member] David Kinnoin to work in the hospitals with funding from Pickleberry Pie. In the beginning it was a little scary. I wanted to do it but I had no idea what I was going to do. I wasn't sure I could meet the challenge. Now I think it's the best thing that ever happened to me. Now I see the reason, as clear as a bell, the reason I am in this world doing what I am doing. It's all about the importance of music, the tremendous, extraordinary power of music.

PIO!: How many hospitals do you work in?

Suni: Well, we do two hospitals in one day. We visit Cedar Sinai and Children's Hospital. There are four people involved: two men and another woman -- Carrie Higgins, who is also in CMN. Just last week I had to do a performance in front of a child who was in chemotherapy and he looked to me like a terminal case. His name was Angel. He was so furious and scared. He didn't want to look in anybody's eyes. So I offered him an instrument, because we give away shakers, kazoos, harmonicas, bells -- instruments that were given to us by Pickleberry Pie.

I gave bells to this child but he wouldn't even look at them. It was a heart-wrenching thing. I gave them to his mother, and I was telling him, "This is for you and I'll give them to your mother." I began singing and he never looked at me; in fact, he retreated to a window, he sat there on the ledge. You had to see the transformation of his face as the songs were rolling. It was unbelievable. And then he went into his cradle and once in the cradle he put himself in the fetal position. So I said, "I think it's time for Angel to have a little nap, so Angel I'm going to sing you a song." I sang a lullaby, but instead of "sleep well my baby," I put in "sleep well my Angel." He fell asleep, little by little, and you had to see his face. The transformation was extraordinary. And that's what I think the Children's Music Network and all of us involved in it are aiming to -- we're singing to Angel.

PIO!: Suni, who sang to you when you were a little girl?

Suni: From the cradle, I always had music in my life. I felt the healing power of music through my grandfather. He was a doctor, and he lived with us. He was also a violinist and played viola, too. Before he treated his patients, he would play the violin for half an hour. I would sit there and listen to him play. I was little and I can remember.

PIO!: Before he would see his patients he would play the violin to them?

Suni: Yes, the patients came half an hour earlier to listen to the doctor play the violin and I would sit with the patients. I could see the figure of my grandfather through the thick, smoky glass doors. I would look at his figure and listen to the music and often fell asleep in the lap of a patient.

PIO!: Was yours a big family?

Suni: Yes, I call it a clan. We lived in an enormous house with sixteen rooms right in the belly button of downtown Buenos Aires. I was a real city girl. We rented that house and paid very little for it. My grandfather, my grandma, and three single aunts lived with me and my parents and five siblings.

But there was another aunt who had an incredible influence on me in terms of music. My Aunt Susanna was a writer and a poet. When she was eighteen she won a poetry award in France's Floral Games writing poems in French, which was not her first language. She became a well-known writer in Argentina. Later, when I did my masters in literature in Rutgers University, I had to write a research paper about Latin American poets. I found a book called Famous Women Poets in Latin America. I opened the book and there I found my Aunt Susanna -- I had no idea she was that famous!

She was an amazing influence. She used to sing all the songs from Mother Goose and fairy tales from every culture in the world: from Asia, from Africa, from India.

When I was seven, she gave me my first job as her secretary so I could buy a doll I had seen in a store. I had to put all her papers together and make copies. When I finished my jobs she would read me whatever story she was writing and ask my opinion. "What do you think of this?" she would say. And then she would pay me and put the money inside this enormous dictionary of the Academy of the Spanish Language.

PIO!: When did you start playing instruments?

Suni: I began playing guitar when I was twelve, but I had been singing since I was a child. My mother tells the story that in the cradle, I would listen to the sounds of passing cars and I would take the pacifier out of my mouth and sing the notes that I would hear, like the car, "toot, toot." My mother was astonished. And then when I was about four years old, I began singing marches I invented as well as marches from all around the world, like a mad child. I sang them all day long.

And then, at six/seven years old, I went for one year to a boarding school with my sisters. The first night they put me in the dorm at the side of my oldest sister. I began singing and slapping rhythms on the wooden boards that separated the beds. All the nuns came running in with their veils off yelling, "SHHH, no! You can't play music and sing these wild songs in the dorm!" They looked so extraordinarily funny. I was laughing my head off and kept playing the rhythm. Rhythms from the Caribbean were my big passion, then. I created a big scandal.

PIO!: Did you have formal musical training when you were young?

Suni: Music was part of our lives, always. There were always guitars at home, and enormous, immense pianos. We had a music room with a grand piano, a phonograph, and my grandfather's viola and violin. We were supposed to listen to music. When we were growing up my father would sit up there and we would listen to opera. He would give us the scores and make us read the lyrics in the scores. These were in German, French, and Italian. And my father would say to us, "Here is what just happened; now you know this character comes and Mimi sings this wrenching song." And he would put on La Boheme and explain, "This is Rodolfo singing," and another time, "This is Siegfried's theme and here comes ....da doo da doo." We had to listen to operas and music even if the sky fell. We couldn't go out unless we had listened to opera for an hour, then we could go to bed or then we could go out -- on Sunday. I grew up in an incredible household.

PIO!: What was your mom like?

Suni: Very ladylike, very calm, very centered. Totally the opposite of what the rest of the household was. She was Argentinean, but her family was Catalanian. On my father's side they were all Italians. So you had two completely different personalities. My father was a volcano and my mother was a mountain, immovable.

PIO!: Given the description of the ruckus you caused in the dorm, you seem more like your father.

Suni: But I was a very timid, very quiet person. I followed orders like no one in the world. If my mother told me to do something I would do it "to a T." I was super responsible. My cousins hated me because I was so responsible. They made fun of me and gave me a name that followed me all my life whenever they wanted to tease me.

PIO!: Are you going to tell us what the name is?

Suni: They called me a little dictator, a short commander, for I commanded. They hated me for that. And I was always protecting the downtrodden. Once a little girl with a broken arm came to a party we had at our home. My cousins were running around this little girl and I was afraid they were going to hurt her so I forbade them to move.

PIO!: So even then you were taking care of children who were having a hard time. What is it about your own life that makes you so empathic with downtrodden people, like young people who are ill? What is it about you?

Suni: Well, I think the Catholic upbringing brings that out very strongly. It makes you very conscious of the other. We had servants at home and I was very aware of how they were treated even when I was very young. I think that's where it started

PIO!: Did you ever stand up to your parents on behalf of the servants?

Suni: No, because they were very well treated. My grandmother was the one that ran the house. She was a commander in every way. She was an extraordinary person, an extraordinary artist, an extraordinary cook, and an extraordinary commander. But she was worshiped, which I couldn't understand because I didn't like her very much. Her servants adored her beyond words. It was completely absurd to me.

PIO!: When you went off to university, what did you study?

Suni: Literature and Spanish. I wanted to write in Spanish, and I realized that to write, you really have to know your language inside out. I studied Spanish in Argentina. After university I went to Chile and I became a trainee advertising copywriter. I got the job by competing against other people in a writing project, and I won.

PIO!: You wrote ad copy?

Suni: Yes, for a big firm named McCann-Erickson. Back then there were two companies in Chile that were very famous in the U.S. and in Chile: Walter Thompson and McCann-Erickson. They gave the copywriters accounts that we managed. Since I was a trainee, they gave me accounts on children and cosmetics; what else? They had Coca Cola and Nescafé and other big companies, but they would not give me those. My boss and trainer, Olga Cabello, was a genius. As part of my training I had to write a story for a movie, a story for a newspaper, and a story for a magazine, and write some ads for radio. They gave you a theme and you

had to figure out what to write. They loved one story I wrote in particular. A couple of months ago I turned the same story about a ring into a short story about my life, because it was a real episode from it.

PIO!: When did you start performing songs and singing out?

Suni: I performed at all the parties we had at home or at my cousin's and then at my high school. I was the one who always played guitar and sang. I had a trio with my two brothers. We sang North American songs.

PIO!: Like what?

Suni: Sha-boom sha-boom, yadadadadadadadadadada -- remember it?

PIO!: I do [we sing]. How about songwriting? Were you doing that from girlhood too?

Suni: This is what my life has been -- a song. When I was twelve or thirteen years old, I wrote my first boleros -- romantic songs. I was beginning to feel love in my heart and you know I liked some boys, so therefore I began to write romantic songs. I wrote them and then I got sick of them and never sang them again. And one day I heard my sister singing this melody. I said, "What is that song you are singing all the time?" She said, "Silly, that's your song!" I didn't have the foggiest idea. I didn't recognize it. I forgot all about my romantic songs, but my sister loved them and learned them "to a T."

PIO!: When and why did you come to the United States?

Suni: I came in 1965. I had been in Chile for five years. By then, my husband was in Argentina and I was alone in Chile with my two children. I saw the political atmosphere changing in such a drastic way that I became very afraid for them. My neighbor who was an American said, "You should not stay in this country. You should come to the United States, where you will be able to live and have opportunities to study." I resisted, but he said, "No, if you come to the United States, you will be able to do anything you want. You are the kind of person who will succeed there." And I said, "With two kids, I won't come without a contract for work." He said, "We are going to get you a contract." And he and his wife did, so I came to the United States.

PIO!: A contract with whom?

Suni: The University of California, Riverside. A doctor there was doing books on Latin American history and sociology. He was writing a thesis and he needed someone who could understand what he was writing, keep his files, work with Spanish, write letters to Spanish doctors and Spanish professors around Latin America.

PIO!: It must have been quite a change.

Suni: I was in a culture shock. To survive, I taught at elementary schools where students were studying Latin America as part of their curriculum. I came up with the idea of teaching what they were supposed to learn through songs. I offered a teacher to do that in her classroom

for free, just to test out the idea and it was such an incredible success. I saw they were studying the pampas. I said well, Kansas has pampas, so you can compare them. Likewise, you have cowboys in the U.S. and we have gauchos; you have lariats, we have lassos; and we have this drum and these are the songs that are played in the plains -- and I made these comparisons through songs. I began to be invited to other classes, and I ended up making a living with that.

PIO!: You taught in New York City, too, didn't you?

Suni: Yes, and the experience was unbelievable. I taught at John Jay High School in Brooklyn and after that Erasmus Hall High School, also in Brooklyn. I was good with kids. I had something special and that was the music, the healing power of music. I put those kids in my pocket because of the music. So they began giving me the worst kids possible. At John Jay the principal created a special program for the children coming out of jail, and I was to teach them. We didn't have a classroom; we met in the basement of the school in areas separated by wooden blocks.

We had no books. I would just chat with the kids, and through the talking we were teaching. It was a fascinating experience. These kids were all broken souls, really, that's what they were, and I found a way to get to them. They saw that I wasn't a phony. Those kids see right through a phony person that pretends to feel their pain and their sorrow but doesn't really empathize with them. They read that so fast; but they also read when you are really authentically with them, that you love them, that you care for them, that you want the best for them. They read that also.

So I was very successful that way. I left for a while because there was an incident with guns and my brother said, "Oh, are you going to be there in the school, you are going to kill us all, we are worried." I left but I went back again because I realized that is what I like to do, that's what I want to do, and that's what I'm going to be doing.

PIO!: You had a successful performing career as well. You performed at major folk events and shared bills with people like Holly Near. How did that happen?

Suni: Always by chance. Like I said, when things are for you, when you are supposed to be doing them, they will happen. I never did any advertising or publicity for myself, but I never stopped singing. After I left California in 1967, I had to start all over again in New York. You know how I did it? I just opened the newspaper and I saw there was a big fair in Central Park with all kinds of singers and performers. So I called them and said, "I'm Suni Paz. I know you don't know me, but I come from California, I'm a singer, performer, songwriter. I'd like to be in your fair. If you'll give me a place, I will come." They gave me a platform and I stood there and I sang, and after that some people were in the audience and they were interested in my music, and they invited me to their school and to a community center, and I began again, singing all over the place. As my career developed, I was often accompanied by cellist Marta Siegel. I've worked with her for twenty-three years, and she has been very important to me. She taught me a lot about being a professional musician. Marta was very serious with music. She didn't let me fantasize and move one inch to the sidelines. She kept me glued to what we had arranged.

PIO!: When did you first record?

Suni: The first time I tried to record was when I wrote a letter to Folkways. They sent me a letter right back saying, "You are not Joan Baez and you are not Pete Seeger and we only work with people who are known." I said, "Oh well, OK, I'm not going to lose any sleep. I am going to continue singing with or without Folkways; it's irrelevant, I have work to do." So I kept on singing and the teachers began asking for my materials. So one day I received a call from Moe Asch, the head of Folkways, saying, "How come you are not in our catalogue?"

PIO!: Your songs and your activities have always been value-based. In all you do, you communicate values of humanity and an empathy.

Suni: That is the core of my interest. The songs I choose, the songs I write, are all about values and feelings. Like I said in a song, I put a little bit of love and care in everything I write. They're also about self-worth. However, the best lyrics I ever wrote were in a song to garlic.

PIO!: Garlic?

Suni: To garlic.

PIO!: [laughs] Why?

Suni: My mother's side is Catalanian, and the Catalanian soup is garlic soup. The Italian side of my family put garlic in spaghetti and we had to eat it, no matter what, every Thursday and Sunday. We were very Italian that way.

PIO!: A song to garlic -- here is a superb example of your cross-cultural work. Again and again you have absorbed cultures and given them to others. You are like a bee. You are a pollinator.

Suni: I never thought of that term; that's very funny. I do, I call myself "Suni Paz, a bridge between cultures." I believe in cultural diversity. I believe that it's absolutely essential to cooperate, to respect other people, respect other cultures. It makes me crazy that in New York right now schools restrict the language, they restrict the vocabulary the kids can use. For first grade, one can use only this vocabulary, for second grade, only this vocabulary. You cannot use one word out of their defined, accepted vocabulary. I'm so against this. When we were little, we were able to read and to speak other languages, and we weren't afraid of words because we were given a dictionary. The adults in my life said, "You don't know the word? Use the dictionary, don't be obtuse. Try it out and we will correct it if you misuse it."

PIO!: I want to know about the great collaboration you have with Alma Flor Ada. How did you meet her?

Suni: That is another of those things in life that wasn't planned, but that was in my destiny. Part of my mission in life was to find Alma Flor Ada. She knew my work, but I didn't know her name or her poetry. We both were invited to Texas to a public library that was going to have an exhibit of books from all over the world, plus performers performing songs from



different places, storytellers, all kinds of artists. I gave a lecture and a musical performance. When I finished, Alma Flor introduced herself and told me that she had heard my Folkways recordings. She said, "I'd like you to read some of my poems, to see if you could put music to them." Well I'd been told that by many people and so many of the poems had turned out to be rough, uninspiring, and just not very good. I was very busy, about to leave for Argentina, and I gave her my phone number and forgot about it. The day after I got back I received a call from Alma. Alma Flor is like that: if she wants something, she goes after it relentlessly. She said, "I am here in the hotel and how about if I pass by your house and I leave my little poems there?" She kept saying "my little poems," so I kept imagining these horrible little poems.

PIO!: You thought they were going to be horrible?

Suni: Yes. I kept putting her off and she kept insisting. "Look," she said. "I'm going to come by for just a second. I'm going to put the poems in your hands, or, if that's not all right, you don't even have to open the door. I can put them right in the door." Finally I felt that I couldn't mistreat a person who was so insistent. So I said, "Okay, bring them over, I'm going to receive them and then that will have to be it because I am really very, very busy" "Okay." She was there about fifteen minutes later in a taxi and so when I opened the door I recognized her from the conference. I said, "Oh yes, okay, well, do you want to come in for a second?" As she entered she said, "Here are my little poems." They were already in an exquisite book.

PIO!: Did they strike you as special from the start?

Suni: She's unbelievable. I began reading and I said, "Did you write this?!" and she said, "Yes." "Every one of these things?" and she said, "Yes." And I said, "I can tell you right now, this is a mambo. And this one is definitely a typical Mexican song, and we can put this type of music with this one..." And she said, "Wait, wait, wait! let me just get my tape recorder because you have very nice ideas." She brought a tape recorder into my house and I began turning the pages and making music to the poems right then and there.

PIO!: Right on the spot?

Suni: Yes, because the poems had music inside. I was just taking the music that was inside the poems. I was thrilled! I was going out of my mind! We didn't stop until midnight. She took me to eat something and then she went to her hotel and the next day we got together in the morning and I recorded what we had done the day before on a better recorder. And she took it to a publisher; and exactly one week later, I met the head of the company in a hotel downtown on Park Avenue and we signed the contract for eighty-four songs.

PIO!: That's a lot of songs...

Suni: After I signed I thought, "God knows how I'm going to write eighty-four songs, but I'm going to do it." And when the time came, I said to myself, "Well, let's just start with this." There were six books with fourteen songs per book. Can you imagine? I began by saying, "Start in book number six and go to book number two," and then I realized I was never going to make it skipping around like that. I thought, "I'm going to have to do it like a soldier, you know. Like automat."

PIO!: One by one.

Suni: Yes, open the book to number one and start poem one; then two, then three, all the way to fourteen, then close the book and begin with book number two. And I did it like that and I arrived perfectly on time; in fact I even finished before they expected. That's what today is Musica Amiga.

PIO!: Didn't you two do an "ABC" for farm workers?

Suni: Oh yes. It's called Gathering the Sun, and I love it. Alma and I had been talking about farm workers for years. She wrote the poems and finally sent them to me and I wrote all the songs, and then nobody wanted them and they sat there for quite a long time.

Then one day she called me and said, "Now they want it," but they changed the lyrics so I had to rewrite half of the songs. I love the work we did.

PIO!: What attracts you to CMN? Why have you stuck with it so long?

Suni: Well, because CMN stresses the values that I value. I have the brochure right here, right in front of me. It says, "cultural diversity, cooperation, self-esteem, peace and non-violence, social justice." That's what I want, too. Social justice, especially. I became aware of social justice when I saw the situation of the maids in Argentina and through Eva Peron, when she changed all the rules. Then, later, I became super aware in Chile.

PIO!: Could you tell us about that?

Suni: In Chile the children were birds without feathers in the streets. There were wild, wild groups of children running naked in winter in the most bitter winter, blue children.

PIO!: You saw them?

Suni: Oh yes. The first day that I went with my husband into the streets with our two babies, we stopped in a bakery. As we were about to enter, a wild group of about fifteen children swarmed in. Half of them barefooted with light little clothes, no underwear, whatsoever. The little girls were practically naked and blue; the cold was unreal. They stormed inside the bakery and begged, "Please give us something to eat." And the guy said, "Get out of here you miserable kids!" cursed them up and down, ran after them and grabbed the head of the kid that was closest to him and kicked them out. We were astonished; we couldn't talk, and my husband and I were looking at this. Then one of the girls peed in the entrance. The owner came, red in the face, and they all ran away. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. The first thing I asked of every Chilean I could find was, "Who are these kids?" They were called "mushroom kids." They were just there. They just grew up there, hungry, crying, raped, everything you can think of that is horrible.

PIO!: How awful.

Suni: It is horrible. All the time I was in Chile you would be walking in the streets and all of

a sudden you would have two or three kids at your side feeling your pockets to see if they tinkle. If they tinkle it meant you had money inside. And they will say, "a little coin, a little coin." In the beginning you will give them, but if you give to one, you would have five coming to you. So at the end you learned -- which was horrible, but you had to do it -- when they came to you, you would end up saying, "Get out of here, get out of here!" and push them away.

PIO!: Which makes you feel terrible.

Suni: Imagine.

PIO!: Tell us about your children.

Suni: I have two boys from my first husband, who, by the way, was a true artist, and we sang together. Singing with him was unbelievable. I can't explain that experience. And now I am sort of reliving it because one of my sons, the youngest one, Ramiro Fauve, is also a true artist. In the CD he sings with me. He is a muralist, and also a singer/songwriter. Fabulous, fantastic. Also, he is my recording engineer now. We just finished two recordings. One is Pio-peep. In that CD all the songs are from Latin America from the children's lore. First I do all the songs in Spanish, followed by all the songs in English. The other is an ABC about the sea -- Coral y Espuma -- with Alma Flor's lyrics and my music.

PIO!: And your other son?

Suni: Juan Fernandez, that's his name, is also extremely musical. But he feels music through keyboard and guitar. He is a fantastic guitarist. He plays blues and he loves Herbie Hancock. In reality, I have three kids, since in this country I was married to a man for fourteen years, and he had a daughter whom I raised. So to me, Kjersten is my daughter and we love each other very much.

PIO!: Suni, do you still have time to perform, other than in hospitals?

Suni: I do a lot of performances in public libraries. Also, last year and this year I've had a contract to do eighteen classes in a school. Nine are for second to fourth graders, and the others are for kindergarten and first, and they are all bilingual. Some are all in Spanish and some are only in English, so I sing now pretty much in both languages.

PIO!: In your career as a singer/songwriter, how important was getting famous to you?

Suni: I couldn't care less.

PIO!: You've never lusted for the big time?

Suni: No, because I was offered the big time. I was offered a big contract to sing in Las Vegas and it was going to be a fantastic thing. It was going to be for grown-ups. Which is what I wanted to do then -- I wanted to sing adult songs only. My big discussion with Moe Asch at Folkways was about that very subject. He said, "I want a children's album." And I said, "Well, I want an adult album." "I want a children's". We kept arguing. He said, "Ok, you give me

two children's albums and then you'll have your adult album." And I said, "No, first I do the adult, then I do the children's." He was impressed because I dared to stand up to him. Nobody stood up to Moe Asch. Well, he loved me for that, because I have never been afraid of authority. Authority to me is moral authority, it's not power. I don't care about that. We got along famously. He was a visionary and he was right.

PIO!: You were the little dictator just grown up, right?

Suni: Exactly [laughs]. The most extraordinary people I have found in my life have been the most humble people in the world. You know, you give me a big name and jewels and diamonds and I sit on that, I really don't care at all, because that's not where I have found the real values of life. I've found the real values in very humble people who shared everything they had. Once when I was living in the countryside raising angora rabbits with my husband, I became very ill. This family killed a lamb, the only lamb they had. They had been raising it for months and months. When I was finally recovered, they killed it and they invited me and my husband. They had one fork and one knife. And the head of the household cut a piece of lamb, ate it, passed me the fork and knife, and I ate. It was like the last supper. It was an incredible experience. The same fork and knife kept being passed from hand to hand all round the table.

PIO!: So getting famous hasn't mattered to you, but making music has?

Suni: I am alive thanks to music. Music has been the one thing that has held me together. It is my glue. I don't know what I would do without music. It's the only thing that makes sense to me. Singing for children makes sense. Singing for destitute children makes even more sense. I also believe that anything can be taught through music. In fact, in 1994, when I was teaching, I made a chart called "Spanish for Life." It was an interdisciplinary, multicultural approach to teaching Spanish from the classroom to the community through songs and poems. There is nothing you can't teach with music: math and science, health and nutrition, environment, literature, history, social sciences, geography, psychology, all the personal things, development. Everything can be taught through songs you know; songs have such a way of getting to the soul of people. The right song will make even tough, gang kids cry. I did it with "El Condor Pasa" and its beautiful Spanish lyrics.

PIO!: You make it almost seem like music is a living thing.

Suni: It is. Absolutely. It is a living thing. It is also the first nourishment. And when they take the music from the children or they distort the music and give them these messages that are horrifying, you are also affecting their soul. That's why I find those horrible songs that you hear, in rap and other media, so destructive.

You can transform a soul, touch it, open it up through music. I believe in the goodness of the human soul because I see that in children. Children are born and they have goodness in them, but if you destroy that, you have finished the child. You distort it and it's very hard to change it back. I used to work solely with adults and I used to be very political, and then I asked myself, "What am I doing singing in a mirror to people who are already convinced? Why am I preaching to people that already know the canon? What am I doing?" And I began to talk to the children. They are the seeds of life. They need the nourishment. Adults don't

need me. All they need is someone to tell them what they want to hear. I don't want to do it any more.

PIO!: If you had any advice for us, those of us in CMN who offer our souls to work with children through our music, what would you say?

Suni: I would say love them. Love them and respect them. That's all, that's all we need to do. The child has to know that you care for him, that you love him. If you love them and respect them you've got them already. But if they don't feel that love, then it's going to be very difficult to reach them or communicate with them.

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