



RITA MACNEIL
May 28, 1944
Big Pond
Singer-songwriter, business owner

The Believer *Rita MacNeil*

Some people might imagine childhood in Big Pond as a series of idyllic images: fishing lazily in the brook; playing under the apple trees; listening to the sounds of the bagpipes echoing off the hillside. And to be sure, Rita MacNeil had those things.

But she also had it the other way. Classmates teased her mercilessly about her cleft lip and her funny teeth. Her parents had vicious fights that ended in upended furniture, smashed bottles and broken toys. Rita suffered repeated sexual abuse at the hands of a great-uncle.

The early years of adulthood had their challenges too. She was a single mother. She had problems with alcohol and prescription medication. She's been poor. She's been publicly ridiculed about her weight. But there's something about the way Rita MacNeil has conducted herself through all this that has made her an inspiration to others.

Rita had an intellectual awakening in the 1970s when she became involved in the women's movement in Toronto. "It made sense to me," she writes in her autobiography. "Women had always been the ones in my life to give me strength. Yet they lacked a voice. I lacked a voice. It was like a light went on and my whole life was lit up by it." Well, as the world beyond Big Pond now knows, Rita MacNeil found that voice that was lacking, and in doing so, she gave voice to many.

Somewhere between singing protest songs on the sidewalk outside the Miss Toronto Pageant while people booed and threw things, and singing "Working Man" to packed houses in Brisbane, Tokyo and the Royal Albert Hall, Rita became a trailblazer for a generation of Cape Breton artists. Along the way, she picked up a Gemini, three Junos, five honorary degrees and the Order of Canada. She's had her own TV show, and she's also a successful entrepreneur; in 1986, she opened Rita's Tea Room in the old schoolhouse that once served as her home, and it's still going strong.

On a slow day in August, we sat down at her favourite table over a nice warm pot of – what else? – Rita's Special Blend.

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What would you say is a quality that you really have to have if you want to be a leader of people?

Well, certainly you have to be a people person. You have to be willing to listen to what others have to say. And also have a certain amount of compassion so that you can see all around the corners.

What do you mean, "see around the corners"?

(Laugh.) So you can see what's coming. So you can almost, you know— you can *feel* it. You know what people are talking about, but you also know where they're coming from. You can see around their corners.

So for example, when does this quality serve you in your career?

Well, over all my years of being a singer-songwriter it has served me with dealing with musicians – taking into account people’s different points of view, being able to work with that, and to work within it, and coming up with ways that even if you’re not in total agreement, you give it a shot and you see where it flies. Never assuming that you’re always right. I don’t like that heavy-handed kind of, oh, you’re the one that’s calling the shots. I know where my strengths are and I have a strong mind [for] what I want, [but] I usually go about achieving it in the gentlest way possible, where maybe others would come at it a little differently and hammer the nail quicker than I would. I’m a slow nail driver, that’s all I can tell you! (Laugh.)

Can you give me a specific example of a time you’ve driven the nail slowly? Where you’ve gone the roundabout way by listening to other people, and come out with something that you’re really happy with?

It happens to me all the time. And that too goes back to your personality, I believe. I’ll just give you an example. If you have a certain way you hear a song, and you know that that’s how you want to hear it, but somebody is telling you differently, that *this* is maybe how you should go.... I will listen to that, and I’ll say, “Well, you know, that’s pretty good too! But I think we’ll, you know....” It’s the way you handle it. It’s keeping that strength you know about yourself. And even though people take your quietness for maybe not knowing what you want— *you* know. And you *know*. And there’s ways to get that out there. And when you do that, I think you bring people closer together because you find out, “Oh my God! You *can* work this out,” you know?

Let’s take your successes in recent decades as a given. But when you go back to the beginning, in your beginning life as a singer or as a professional musician, what are some of the challenges

that you ran into trying to make that happen?

Well, when I started out, I sang *a capella* – and I still don't play any musical instrument. So it was a challenge for me to go forward with that. But that's all that I knew. If I was performing at a folk festival, doing a singer-songwriter circle, they would be sitting around with their guitars and playing their songs, and I admired that so much. But I would sit there and tap out the rhythm myself, and it never stopped me from going forward, because I wanted so much to do that.

The first time I *did* approach someone about working with me, I believe it was a guitar player from Ottawa. I was booked for a big folk festival in Ottawa, and I asked if he would come aboard and maybe play for me. He said he would if he could get 50 per cent of the credit for the songwriting. I did not always make the wisest decisions back in those days, but something twiggged inside me, and I passed on that offer and went ahead and did it the same old way. And I'm very glad I did that because he would have owned a half a body of my work. But when you don't chord to your music, and you hear it in your head, you've got to be careful when you sit down with someone to work that out. So I've learned. I can't play the keyboard, but I can hear sounds, so I can kind of chord through some of them. So once that's set down then no one can say, "Ah, well *we* wrote the music." You've got to be very careful, and these are things I didn't know. And also, in the publishing field, you know, there was one time I signed over my publishing, but luckily I got it back. So those are the things that I deal with personally.

What would you say are some of the qualities that you drew upon in that time to make the kind of decisions that maybe were tough to make then, but now sitting here in your Tea Room you're happy to make?

Because of what I feel about what I do. It's a passion that's like a river, it's right through you, and you can't let it go because it's so much part of your expressions, your life, the lives of others, things that you're learning. It's my words. It's my work. And I knew then, "I don't want to let it go." So I think the quality that would bring that out in you would be one that kind of gives you that gut feeling, that old feeling – you know, "This isn't right, so don't do it. Think how you value what you've done, and how you feel about it, and where you want it to go."

Where did that come from? Where do you think that came from in you? A lot of people know some of your life story, partially from interviews you've done, from the songs you've written, from your autobiography *On A Personal Note* where you've talked about some of the physical challenges, like your surgery for a cleft palate when you were young, some of your – in some cases – painful shyness. Some of the early relationship problems that you had that you fought through. Early lack of success in the music business. You came through them.

Where did that come from? From someone that's been self-described as "painfully shy"? Where did it come from, to stick with something that other people were telling you is not going to happen?

Belief! Belief in yourself. You can be shy, you can work through all kinds of struggle, but somewhere deep down you have to have that belief or nothing is going to happen. So, I think it's belief in myself that was enforced or given to me by certainly my parents, and their belief in what I do. You know, I have a line in one of my songs about my parents: "You taught me well. How I remember the words that you said would come back again and again. I didn't realize when I was your child just how the journey would end." So it's words that were spoken to me that come back, and you find that belief in yourself. You can be shy. You can have lots of

struggles. You can waver. You can mess up. You can do all of those things that we all do. But if that is such a strong passion inside you for your work, then you can find that belief in yourself.

I often hear in interviews musicians who have both been around for some time, and who are up-and-coming, mentioning you as someone they see as an influence, both artistically and professionally as a mentor. Someone who came first. How do you see yourself?

Better on some days, I'll tell you that! (Laugh.) Well, I'm always honoured when young performers come to me for advice or want to know what "the secret" is. And God love them, I wish I knew. I get tons of emails, and CDs, and [people asking,] "What should I do with this?" And I always say the same thing. You have to be careful what you say to young, impressionable people, because it's very easy to turn them off their course. So I always say, "Believe in what you're doing." That's the strongest thing that you can have. Believe in what you're doing, and if you feel good about it, then you stick with that and don't let anyone change it. You know, music is very complicated – I mean, even opening the CD wrapper is a pain! (Laugh.) So I don't know what to tell you – just go for what you believe in, and stay strong!

And that's good advice. But I mean, there are many, many people who believe in themselves and their talents but who are, in the end, mediocre or average in their talents. How do you recognize what the real deal is, if you're a leader of people?

How do you tell them, "No, you suck"? (Laugh.)

You got it! I was trying to put it more delicately, Ms MacNeil....

Listen: (laugh) I don't. I don't. Because you know who's going to tell them? They're going to find out themselves when they present themselves to other people, and they know they can't make a go

of it. It's going to happen. It's going to happen. But you can't rip somebody's belief. They have to find out themselves. And who are we to say? Because they might have something that an audience would love, that maybe you or I wouldn't get. Who knows? You never know what could happen. So I could never say ... um, I could probably *think* it, and the only way I'd go around that would be to explain how hard it is, and certain steps that *I* took. You can only give that sort of knowledge. That's what I'm talking about: the quiet interference that you give, where somebody else would hit the nail harder and say, "You know what, I wouldn't waste my time." And maybe they shouldn't. But who are we to say, if you have a dream, "Don't waste your time"? There are different degrees of the dream. Maybe they'll get to sing in a church, or another place that keeps them very happy. And I always say that, you know, "This is what you really want, but think about it, and think about it hard, because it's not easy. The place is flooded, and it's hard to get a little corner in there." But, who's to take their corner? *I'm* not going to do it.

What's the source then, do you think, of your continuing to believe in yourself even when you weren't making any money, and you weren't getting a lot of response, and it was a strain on your personal life to be travelling? What at its basic level made you say, "I'm going to keep going in spite of all that," instead of trying something else?

Oh my goodness. I really love to do what I'm doing, and that's something that's always been with me. And even going through hard times, the hardest thing would be if you told me that I couldn't do that anymore. And there was a period there where I wasn't very well a few years ago, and I had to do a TV special through all that horrific time. But once I got up there, I forgot what state I was in. I was just so delighted that I could do what I was doing, even through those troubled times. I don't know if you can pinpoint that or call that what it is, but for me it's like

an elixir, it's wonderful. I love people, and when I reach out and they reach back, I think that's the greatest gift of all. That's what keeps corners of the world going, and I love that. I wish it was for everything and everyone.