

Fear Me Out Podcast

Episode 25

Hosted by Clinical Psychologist - Dana P. Saperstein PhD.

Guest Speaker

Peter Melnick - Music

Dr. Dana 00:00

Dana Saperstein here. I want to thank you all for listening to our podcast. Kim and I are extremely grateful. I want to remind everyone that one of the main reasons that Kim and I do the podcast is to show what it looks like for men to be emotionally vulnerable. We hope you enjoy this episode. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us with questions or comments at fear me out podcast@gmail.com. Again, thank you.

Kim Fauskee 00:25

What does Oklahoma The Sound of Music South Pacific all that jazz and La story have in common? They're all part of an extraordinary entertainment family. Our guest today is Peter Melnick, who followed his famous family's roots into the musical business and created his own success story not only professionally, but personally. So please join us as we chat with Peter not only about his family, but how music played an important role in shaping his life's journey. Along with healing the traumas he encountered along the way. Peter is a fascinating storyteller that eloquently shares the highs and lows of his life. We hope that you enjoy our conversation with Peter Melnick.

Dr. Dana 01:14

There are two basic motivating forces fear and love when we're afraid we pull back from life. When we're in love, we open up to all that life has to offer with passion, excitement, and acceptance.

Fear Me Out 01:33

Coming to you from our studio in Santa Barbara, California. This is the fear me out podcast. We're not your typical Self Help Program. Our show takes a deep dive into those psychological issues that affect us on a daily basis. We hope to shift your perspective and have you experiencing emotions differently. Now here are your hosts Kim Fauskee and Dr. Dana Saperstein.

Kim Fauskee 01:54

Peter, welcome. Thanks for being here today.

Peter Melnick 01:57

Thank you very happy to be here.

Kim Fauskee 01:58

So music is in your DNA. And you're a descendant of, of, I guess music royalty. So why don't you kind of describe your background to the listeners that may not be familiar with your name?

Peter Melnick 02:12

Well, my my mother was an incredible musician, probably the deepest musician in the family composer, brilliant composer. Amazing pianist, perfect pitch. Her father was Richard Rogers, my grandfather, theater composer. And I grew up on his music. I grew up on her music. Musics always been part of my world.

Kim Fauskee 02:37

Did you have a relationship with your grandfather?

Peter Melnick 02:39

Yeah, I mean, he lived until I was 20. And so he was he was about 56 When I was born. And 56 was a lot older than 56 is today. So he was and he was his his longtime partner Oscar Hammerstein died when I was about two and a half, three. And I think that was a devastating blow for my grandfather. And from where I sit, he was kind of he was already a little bit older than he should have been. And and he died in the end of 79. So I had a kind of a sweet, but not very close relationship with him. But he was a very important part of my life. I saw my grandparents a fair amount.

Kim Fauskee 03:24

So I'm guessing that you grew up in the theater. Your father was

Peter Melnick 03:29

My father was tone deaf, but probably one of my biggest musical influences because, you know, he would turn me on to things I never would have listened to when I was in music school. He sent me this nine record set called Einstein on the Beach, by Philip Glass. Who's a minimalist, it's a very particular sign that kind of music. And I listened to the first first half hour, is it okay to swear on here? No, absolutely. I listened to the first side of it. And I called him and I said, Why do you send me this shit? He said, I get it. But I think you should listen to second time it will repay

Kim Fauskee 04:02

your interest and how old were you when he sent this to you?

Peter Melnick 04:04

Oh, I was 22. Okay. And I listened to it a second time. And I would say for about four years, I was really heavily in the throes of minimalism, especially Philip Glass, whose music I still love. So my dad was really creative, tone deaf, and an extraordinary film producer. So I mean, he was somebody who people who know his era in filmmaking, speak of him with tremendous reverence, because he was he was quite extraordinary. So I got it from both sides, but the music was my mom's side.

Kim Fauskee 04:36

So I know I had mentioned at the introduction, that music runs through your DNA, But weren't you originally? You had gone to college in journalism, and wanted to be a writer.

Peter Melnick 04:47

Well, I went to Harvard where they don't have journalism, okay. They have the Harvard Crimson which was boot camp. It was, I mean, I learned a lot about writing from that. Basically, from when I was six Till I went to college, I kind of always intended to be in music. And knew that my mom really thought that was a bad idea. And so my first two years of college were the one time in my life when I tried to emphasize the idea that I shouldn't do it. I'm not doing it. And I aspire to be a fiction writer and in at the end of my first year, seeking some viable alternative to dropping a lot of acid with my roommates, I went out one day for the Harvard Crimson and was really on a lark, it was unplanned, and it changed my life. So I got on the Crimson. Throughout my sophomore year, I wrote a lot and decided that summer to try and try my hand at freelancing, and ended up getting hired by the Navajo times. I was doing a story based on Navajo mineral development and resources, and also a story on Tom Hayden and campaign for economic democracy out here. At one point, I had already established relations in the Navajo times, and then went out to California with my dad who lived in Hollywood near Hollywood, and was meant to be interviewing Hayden. In Santa Barbara is had happened at his wife Jane Fonda's summer camp. I got there and she said, I'm so sorry. You're being stood up. My husband is out in the fishing boat with my father. That would have been Henry Fonda. Would you like to interview me and said, and I thought about it for maybe a second and said, Yes, please.

Kim Fauskee 06:35

Let's see Jane Fonda. Let me think about the places it was a trip. It was amazing. That was at the one office and Marcus paths.

Peter Melnick 06:43

I don't know, I don't know where it was. Because I didn't know Santa Barbara was way up in the hills, you end up in the hills. And the dad was the first to first of all, the guy who was cooking for the camp was a former SDS. He'd been a weatherman, actually, who'd been on the run for a while. Oh, and, and the day that I was there, Poland or Poland or was there with a guy who was touring with the wolf up? And so all the kids there were a combination of Hollywood liberal royalty, and farmworker kids. It was actually a pretty cool camp. So I gotta get to see the camps workings a bit. And then then, Jane finally gave me this wonderful interview and knowing I hadn't done my homework for it. She She pretty much at she'd say, and I bet you'd like to know how. So it was a great interview. Yeah. So I worked for the Navajo times for a year they they they were so excited by the interview I did with Jane Fonda. Because the editor of the Navajo times was kind of Starstruck, I'd like to tell you, he thought my writing was amazing. So he offered me a job. It was more like, you know, Jane Fonda? Would you like to work here? So I worked there for a fair amount of the year until I pretty much got all the angles in the paper, myself included fired because I wrote an expose a on the tribal chairman Peter McDonald and Pete McDonald, who turned out to eventually went to jail for embezzlement. But the editor of the paper wasn't so sophisticated. And he neglected the fact that the publisher of the paper was the tribe. So he ran the piece, they fired all the white people in the paper. And at that point, rather than going back to Harvard, where I had yet to do my junior year, I decided to take a year off making music with a friend who just graduated college, we moved to Tucson where some friends were really great band. And after a year, I went back to Harvard for what turned out to be my last year there, my junior year, moved into the Social Studies Department, got some social science skills, and wrote music for production of cloth

night. And kind of no winters, I beg, beg your pardon Winter's Tale, and kind of fell in love with writing music. I mean, I kind of thought, Oh, my God, I have to give this a shot. And I remember my dad came in from the, from the west coast to see it. And it was performed in Radcliffe yard out during the study day. And afterwards, he said, you know, the Shakespeare guy, he could really use some editing, but it was

Kim Fauskee 09:09

there was your validation, right? Very

Peter Melnick 09:11

sweet. And, and so that summer, halfway through the summer, on the eve of my senior year at Harvard, I had this kind of crisis. And I thought, oh my god, if I if I go to Harvard, and then go to music school, I've already taken off two years, I'll be an old man of 27 and must drop out now. And told my mother who was so upset with me that she couldn't talk to me for about three months. I got a feeling we'll touch on what went into that statement later on. But she had a very hard time with it because of her experience. And my father's advice was wonderful, which was, you know, the only way you're going to find out is to explore it. And even if you find out it's not for you, you will have had a wonderful experience discovering it, you gotta go for it.

Kim Fauskee 09:53

So your mom was still hoping that you would have stuck with that journalism path, anything but me just anything about music. Yeah.

Dr. Dana 10:00

Why was she so concerned about you having a musical career?

Peter Melnick 10:03

Well, this is where the story begins to get interesting. Yeah.

Kim Fauskee 10:08

And we like interesting.

Peter Melnick 10:10

Okay. Maybe to frame it first. I know, before we started the tape rolling you, I said something which you were hoping I might fall into it wood frame this conversation. So I'm going to just introduce myself, which is, in recent years, I've become very, very aware of the ways in which damage from one generation filters through to the next generation and it colors, the lives from generation to generation, trauma damage. And my own experience is also that it's damage isn't a life sentence, trauma is not a life sentence, there's the possibility of healing from it. And one of the most powerful things that that, to me is has enabled me to grow and heal in my own ways, is to understand what's come before to, to realize if there are certain things that used to make me get tense, get angry, get feel attacked, feel threatened, whatever choices I made. If you don't understand what's driving them, it's like an invisible hand on the steering wheel. And once you begin to see it, you have the ability to step back and think, oh, maybe that's not what I need to be doing. Or you just, there's more insight. It's also let me look at

people who were extremely difficult with understanding to get what produced who they are. And so there's your huge benefits to that,

Kim Fauskee 11:33

did that thought process just come to you one day? Or is that been any evolved journey through your time of writing music and composing

Peter Melnick 11:42

a huge journey? I'd say, a journey before I knew I was on a journey. Everything in life takes you to the next step, not to get too philosophical. But the thing which really put me onto the journey, and in a very focused way was when one of my kids had gone into a place called the meadows for. Really, it's a place where you can do serious work on trauma. And there's a family week because No, no young person gets to trauma without their parents in some way, in the picture. And my experience during that family week, awakened me to not only some of some of the ways in which I'd had a role in, in my my kids' trauma. And I'm, I'm being very circumspect here, because they have privacy. And I don't want to. But it also began helping me understand. I mean, both my kids who were there that week looked at me and said, Look, your relationship with our mother was totally codependent. And I began to understand what I began to have to understand what codependency was, where, where it comes from, I began to understand a lot about me. And that really began a conscious process I didn't have. It wasn't that a bulb went off that day and said, aha, I'm going to become obsessed with the subject of trauma and healing. But that's kind of what happened. And, and now, I find that this just looking at the world through the prism of damage and trauma and how it impacts has enabled it, it's it's one of the biggest prisms through which I look at people in general and understand the world. And I realized that there's, if you look at everything through one model, you're gonna miss out, you can't reduce everything to any single model any, any single symbol, single, single explanation for people's behavior. But that said, it's a very powerful one. It allows me to understand people who are damaging differently, understand ways in which in my life, I've been drawn to damaging situations, ways in ways and perhaps I have not pushed myself to accomplish things, which I probably always was able to, I just didn't believe in myself enough. And to understand all that without regret, because I'm more interested in. In the freedom I feel today, and the ongoing journey,

Kim Fauskee 14:26

when you made the comment about not believing in yourself. I can imagine there's a lot of pressure in a family like yours. That comes from musical royalty here in the United States. And maybe, maybe I'm just assuming, and maybe that wasn't the case. But I mean, did you have that pressure upon yourself in terms of, of making your own inroads into success in life, whether that was in journalism or music? Actually, no.

Peter Melnick 14:56

Okay. It's a really good assumption. I'm pretty common assumption. In fact, in a way, my mother's need not to not mean her inability to be supportive, sheltered me from that, to a huge extent it was much easier to be the grandson of Richard Rogers than the daughter of him, and

Kim Fauskee 15:13

then her inability to support you in terms of your musical interest or anything in life.

Peter Melnick 15:20

Oh, no, she, she, she, look, I knew that B pluses weren't good. And it wasn't because A's are an absolute it was because I got so tired of hearing it. You're capable of so much better than your teachers tell us that your cableless . I mean, I knew I knew that they were on me. And I was, you know, I went to a progressive New York private school called Dalton. And I was pretty much a bh kind of a student. I went, I went to boarding school Choate ninth through 12th grade. And the best thing about that was it got me out of the house. My parents had divorced two years earlier. And my mom was there in Hangzhou, till my mom was now married to the man who had been her psychiatrist. And my father's psychiatrist, and although he didn't see kids, he made an exception. And he saw me so

Dr. Dana 16:14

well, hopefully you saw the same psychiatrists and then your mom married him? Well, yes,

Peter Melnick 16:18

He was also 25 years older than her. That's wild. And it was a horrific situation. And I was really happy to be out of the house. I can show, I'm sure in some way saved my life.

Kim Fauskee 16:33

So this was happening all during your teenage years. Yeah,

Peter Melnick 16:35

My folks split up when I was 12. I went to church when I was 14. And it was my folks divorce that was really, really bad. She was hurt. I mean, my dad was not really good at monogamy. But, but in her anger, and fueled by this, this man who was something of a Svengali He nursed her hurt to a phenomenal degree. And she basically did together they said, you know, your father is incapable of love your father is a psychopath a sociopath? And do you think he'd even let you hang out with him if you weren't a cute kid? So part of there was no question of not choosing sides, psychologically, survival meant believing mommy. And

Kim Fauskee 17:24

I can see pathologize the situation to his benefit.

Peter Melnick 17:28

Yeah. And so my mother was very, very angry. And she said things, she impugn my dad's honesty, his capacity for love, he had no capacity for love, she said. And I was angry at him. But he also around the around 71. When I was 13, he got hired, he'd been a film producer based in New York, he got hired to run MGM, and moved to California. And what that meant was my hostility and I was a poster child for sullen angry adolescents, I was not really fun to spend time with him. But I loved it. I loved being with him anyway, just didn't know how much I loved it. And when I would visit with him, he was magnificent. He would, he made time for me in ways that I can look back on now and appreciate but he just did it. And and all the while the question was in my mind. Do you love me? Because I was told consciously, he doesn't. But some part of me, I think, always knew he did. And those were wonderful years.

Kim Fauskee 18:32

And let me ask you, I don't want me to interrupt that train of thought. But it's interesting when that seed gets planted in your conscious or your subconscious, right. And you're thinking God, do I really believe that or not? Dana and I talk a lot about faith and intuition. You know, it's a feeling, right. So you had that feeling kind of the feeling your dad actually loved you, right? Whether you're trying to talk yourself out of it, or talk yourself into it or not, but you had that feeling right.

Peter Melnick 18:59

Okay. Oh, yeah. But, but see, his line to me about everything my mother was was saying about him everything, not that the psychiatrist was saying there's another side to the story. But I'm not, you don't have to hear it if you don't want to. But if you ask me any questions, I'll try and answer them, honestly. But you don't have to hear my side. When I was in my adolescent absolutism, I said, well, that that must prove what they said about you, you're convicted. And by the time I figured out that that wasn't true, I no longer had to ask questions about him at all. What I now understand was, first of all, he saw psychiatrists and therapists himself to understand how to protect me and understand what was happening. And there was no greater gift he could have given me than what he did by saying that he protected me from being turned in the Solomonic story. He didn't split the baby. And I think if anything is made me made me able to

Kim Fauskee 19:56

survive it. It was that so how did you figure out the truth?

Peter Melnick 19:59

I was hoping you'd ask that question. In my second year at Harvard, I m. University Health Services announced they were going to be a short term group therapy group formed six succession group. For whatever they were, I don't think there was a very specific purpose. And it was for men, it was Harvard College not hurting Radcliffe women. And I was motivated to go to it, because I had some idea in my head that I wasn't, I wasn't being the way a man is supposed to be yours. Also, ideas I got from that awful psychiatrist, he pointed to a friend of mine, who's still a friend of mine today, and said, when Steve walks into a room, that's a real guy, now, Steve was getting laid at the age of 12. And it was,

Kim Fauskee 20:42

he was a real guy,

Peter Melnick 20:44

he was he definitely was, and Steve's a lovely guy, he's very male, but also very sweet, gentle male, one of my oldest friends. But so I'm thinking, I'm not, I'm not picking up women, I'm not doing all these mixed up ideas I had about what it's supposed to be to be a guy. And that was what carried me into the group. And the more and one of the because I'd seen that for the therapist for quite a few years, and probably the best thing I got from him, because even from pretty much evil people, you can learn something and the best thing I got from him was shit the world if you must, but don't ever shit yourself. And so I kind of have always been. I've internalized that, you know, self honesty is a very deep value. And so the more I tried in this group just to spill the beans on me, they'd say things like, what made you

think he was supposed to be asking that, that? That girl That woman out? I mean, what made you think you were supposed to go beyond dinner? Because I feel like it was part of my inadequacy that I didn't wind up in bed with this person who? And so I don't know. And they say, but by the way, tell us about this guy, you keep in touch, who's this net guy. And the logic of the group, the dynamic was such that they kept on the more I tried to spill the beans myself, the more they tried to the more they showed me that this guy was a problem. And after six sessions, I was really clear. I'd figured out who he was if he kind of crack the thing open. And at that point, I knew I knew how much I loved my dad. That was May or June.

Dr. Dana 22:17

So what most people do is assume that you're the problem. And what these people helped you realize is that what happened to you and what didn't happen for you was really the problem. Right? And it sounds like that opened some doors for you to really develop a strong, stronger bond and love for your father. A fair to say absolutely.

Peter Melnick 22:36

I remember I was heading out west for my summer freelancing. I had a car wreck, I totaled my car and wound up in Marion, Virginia and a hotel with a completely flattened car. I mean, I walked away unscathed, wow. And as I was twitching off to bed that night, you know, my legs are going this way because I went off the freeway at 70 miles an hour, went to visit recharge retired state troopers back yard, by the way. And the thought that kept going through my head was thank God I didn't die because my dad wouldn't have known how much I loved them. And, you know, for the rest of my life. My dad was very complicated. He died in the end. Technically, the death certificate said cardiac arrest. Addiction. He had a massive addiction problem. He couldn't, he couldn't escape. What was he addicted to? Probably the drug that killed him the best was coke. But he did a lot of ketamine. He did a lot of other drugs. But Coke was really the thing that did him in. But see, he was complicated. And there are things that he did that, you know, I know were lousy. I can not talk at length about him now. But I could see, I could see him in all dimensions without judgment. And none of the bad stuff. He did touch my love for him. I touched on my general assessment that he was in fact, an extraordinary human being who had really had no capacity to love himself didn't understand. There were probably eight amazing women in his life at different times. I mean, women who were extraordinary themselves, brilliant, powerful in their, in their personal in their energy and in their accomplishments. Sherry Lansing who went on to be the first woman to run Paramount Studios to a whole bunch of amazing women. loved him and long they were all they were all but the last one where it is memorial service. The last one was still too broken up to be there. He was well loved. He was well loved by his friends and in a business it's it's really full of a lot of fun. A lot of people who are instrumental with one another and he had a deep sense of loyalty and and people were they're really, really cared for him. He was extraordinary.

Dr. Dana 25:12

Sounds like he was a really remarkable and complicated person. And what about your preteen years? What? Well, I mean, it sounds like when their marriage fell apart, things were really difficult. What about when you were a little kid?

Peter Melnick 25:26

Well, you know, he was the madman generation. Dads weren't, we're not the norm wasn't to be hands on that some some dads were just by nature, but, but it was much more normal, especially if you were young and ambitious. And in a very creative world. He and I never threw a ball. Which is fine by me at this point, because I, you know, I'm, I'm not, I got athletic credit in high school for taking piano lessons. But, um, but so I would say, I can't really give you a good sense of how much time you spent with me, I would say. It wasn't a lot. But it was enough. And my feeling is, the big surprise when I came to look back at my childhood as an older adult, is that I think I sustained much more damage in my relationship with my mother. They were both damaged people, they both cared a lot about damage. But hers, for reasons we might find ourselves talking about, had more of an impact on me. And the thing which I discovered about my dad, really, in more recent years when I've gone back to, I'm writing a book about my family. And when I began to really research him. Also, towards the end of his life, I discovered something which I didn't log in before. Part of his trauma was that his dad died in a car accident when he was nine. And he was very telling. What happened was his father, his father was driving. He was an associate of a single car spin off when the car rolled over several times, and he drove home. And a day later, he's beginning to feel bad. Two days later, he's feeling really crummy, so he gets to the hospital. It turned out I think he had a perforated duodenal ulcer. And by the time he got to the hospital, it was too late. His widow, my grandma grandmother, said basically it was a death warrant of poverty because you didn't go to a doctor if you didn't absolutely have to, because he was scraping by and thought he was okay. My dad was sent to stay with an uncle and his family when he went into the hospital. And they were cousins and dad at this point is a nine year old. And the story he told was that one of his cousins collected stamps. And dad stole a stamp. And shortly thereafter, the phone rings and it's the uncle who calls to speak to him and says, Danny, I have to tell you, your father just died. And the link was forged. And what that says if you think about it is first of all, if you are doing something that could cause your father's death, you must be very powerful. And very bad. Wow. I don't know if the story is true. If it isn't worth it's an embellishment. It's revealing nonetheless. And I think and what I put I knew the story before. But what I put together eventually was that my grandfather, Ben, was actually a pretty great father. And my dad adored him. And so the loss was huge. And also it put another piece in place. Dad had a role model and a loving father. And the thing which people who knew him told me about him, I had dinner with an old friend of his two nights ago with my wife, Talia. And the old friend, Howard Rosenman said to nominate your father had door and I've heard this from so many people. And when I was a kid, I would dismiss him. Yeah, yeah. But he did. He absolutely adored me. And now I understand why it was in his bones.

Dr. Dana 29:15

Why? And what about your mom?

Peter Melnick 29:18

Oh, she loved me very much too. Okay. But it's a very different story. And it's easy to identify his trauma and easier to give you the story. This part is a little bit more complicated. I'll try and I'll try and come into a little section of it. She was born in 35. She was the second daughter of Richard and Dorothy Rogers. Their first daughter Mary was born in January of 31. My grandfather, I think, and my grandmother got pregnant, like six weeks after they got married. They're often on their honeymoon in Europe. And the idea is they're going to have this wonderful tour of Europe and then end up in London where he's got Going into rehearsals with Larry Hart with a show called Evergreen. Actually, it's not

rehearsals yet it's development. She gets in, she finds herself. By the time they get to London, she's having what turns out to be morning sickness, she has a really difficult pregnancy. And you know, he didn't expect to get pregnant so early, but he's pretty excited. It turns out, he was actually pretty looking forward to having kids. But pregnancy is a disaster. I mean, she, the baby is born safe and healthy in the end, but she has a terrible pregnancy. PS, my grandfather's older brother is a newly anointed OBGYN. And the huge pressure on my grandmother is he's going to be your doctor. And nobody says to her, if you don't feel good about this, maybe you should say no, it's not a possibility. So she's feeling ill, she's now got Woody Rodgers poke around where she doesn't want to poke around. And then when they get back from England to America, he has to leave for the west coast where they're about to start writing for film, and she can't go because she's too sick. And then when he comes back, he has again, he has to go to England to be and the correspondence between them when, when he's on the boat going to England and when he's in England, in rehearsals is transformative in their relationship. And devastating. He learns he learns it's not okay to talk about the baby, the infant, because, you know, she, she's, she, she's, she doesn't accept it. She's angry. Basically, the dynamics of the relationship begin getting very complicated here. But there's, you know, he writes, this is very abstract. There's he writes to in one letter from the ship crossing, and it turns out he he's, this is another story, but he suffered from profound depression, and drank to try and self medicate. The thing, which really gave him shelter from depression was theater. When he was in theater, you almost never suffered depression, and that was his place of joy. So he writes, he has a dream on the boat. And he says, In the dream, the baby's born, and it's you and me and the bait and hold the baby up and the baby reaches out to me, and kisses me in the face. Do you think that's possible, darling. I mean, and he's describing this baby with so much love and says, of course, but he's, he hates the secret. Of course, I'll always love you more. And, but he describes this in a way that it's it, there's probably yearning for this. He's describing this loving, family moment. And it's part of who he was. That had to get tamped down for all kinds of reasons. Fate. That's 31 When Mary is born, and my mom was born in March of 35, by which time they're, they're back from living in California, the theater is beginning to come back alive. It's the depression. And he's got he's very, very busy. He is He is huge in the theater world. And so his time is limited. By the time mom was four, she, her musical talent is extraordinary and begins to really emerge. Mary's got musical talent, but it's not like mom's Mary will go on to be extraordinary. In her own way. She writes, once she writes Once Upon a Mattress is a composer, which is still done. So whatever, I don't think it's an extraordinary work musically, but it's a piece of it's a piece of theatre that still revived so you gotta give her that. But she also wrote Freaky Friday, one of the seminal children's books of all time, one of the delightful children's books, Mary was very smart and very funny and very talented. But words didn't emerge till later. And literally that household was built on music. And my understanding of my grandparents was, my grandmother really didn't, didn't. She didn't like being a mother, she was rejecting her kids. I loved her as a grandmother, but she was really an unloving mother. The only love that was going in the household, really, for those two kids was my grandfather's. And it was genuine. They both say this about him, and they felt his love for them was real. But it was very compartmentalized. 10 minutes here, and then it was almost like a piece of China put back in the cupboard. Now I'm back to work and you're off. And the thing was, when my mother began to emerge as having this quite extraordinary musical talent, that became a point of connection for the two of them. And I think her older sister, Mary, she's, she's struggling to get oxygen in that household. She's struggling to have anybody validate her existence, and Mary was a very big personnel already that must have been extraordinarily tough. So there was a seminal event. I want you, there's a long story

here someplace. There's a seminal event that happened when my mom was about four. She told her parents, I made some music, I want to play it for you. And so one afternoon, they sat as she went to the piano, feet don't even hit the floor when she's in the bench and she plays this piece. And the penultimate note is that the way the bottom end, she reaches down and she plays the low note and then she slides off the piano and she walks around the back of it. She was aware it was theatrical, and she hits the final note, which is a really high little thing. And that's the last note and her parents burst into roars of laughter. Mom described it as the one moment in her life, the one memory she has a both of them being genuinely, really happy with her. And it's a lovely moment. Part two of the story is the next afternoon. Mary's up in her room and mom has my grandmother's with Mary. And Mary has a meltdown and says she's ruined my life. You know, because Mary Mary, she takes piano lessons. She's thriving. Mom was somebody who for three years fooled her teacher by Denise thing. She was learning how to learn how to read music, she had said to the teacher about the new piece that was assigned. Would you just play me one second here how it supposed to, and her ear was so extraordinary that until she got well past Bach, minutes and diffusers and things she could play. She could play from memory back, which you heard once as a four year old. No, but she started taking piano when I guess five. But she went until she was eight. And she'd been taking lessons for like three years. She could do that. And eventually they discovered and she learned how to read music. At one point, the people that Manasquan music told her parents that she could concretize. But what so so she was extraordinary. And Mary was eclipsed. And what my grandmother told Mary and the only reason I could know this is because somebody told somebody else, Granny, I think granny told my mother. But what granny said to Mary was you couldn't do more to create toxic sibling rivalry for the ages. She said, they're they're married. I'm sure Linda doesn't mean to Lord her talent over you. It both. It both says Your sister is lording her talent over you. And it says your sisters that talented. My mother, the little sister, always wanted Mary's approval. But what she learned when she heard that same thing from her mother was that thing you do so well, that thing you love. Whenever you do it, you are hurting your sister. So music for my mother was instantly a matter of complex feelings. It was her great joy. She she was at peace when she played music and when she made music, like no other time in her life, and it was clouded. So that's part of the answer. But also, my mom is she's growing up begins to figure out that her her father's a source of love and he's missing an action. And she by the time she's a late teenager, she's begun to form her own judgment, which is from my mother, the world was divided into people who are real authentic. And the superficial. Superficial art was was one of the word her code words for people who, for example, sell your family by doing superficial things like I don't know, making musicals. So she thought he gave up on his he betrayed his family to pursue his career. And I didn't understand any of this as a kid. What I thought as a kid was she I've gotten another music she wrote she gave up writing music when I was about two. And the music she wrote before that, including she wrote with Mike Stewart, who went on to write lyrics for Hello Dolly. She she had the imagination to take this book by TS Eliot called Old possums Book of Practical Cats and she set it and tried to get the rights to turn into a show and Elliot's widow didn't give it to her. He was smart. He eventually gave it to this guy named Andrew Lloyd Webber and it became cats, right. But and mom also said about bunch of a known for music was really wonderful and very special. I mean, she sounds she actually wrote Rogers tunes that Rogers friends into thinking that it were his he did it once on a lark, and played, had friends of his over for dinner one night mutual friends, and had a new Lyric of Oscars that he hadn't set yet. And she said it and she played it for the friends. And afterwards, she should have told them she really should have told them afterwards that she'd written it but they called up my grandmother and said, Oh,

we had a lovely evening with with Danny and Linda. I love the new song. And when they found out what she'd done, my grandfather didn't say anything. He just Stoney, and my grandmother ripped her a new one. And what I assumed was, he didn't take enough interest to say to her, of course, you sound like me keep on writing through, keep on writing, you're gonna sound like you, you can't help it, you're talented. And I thought maybe because he didn't encourage her, she turned it away from. I don't think that was it at all now, because my mom actively discouraged me from playing music, if it's in your blood, you gotta do it. I don't think that he, I don't think I can lay that one on him. But what she did decide is if you, if you, don't want to be a superficial person, if you don't want to betray the people you care about, like your kid, you show up for them, and you abandon this other stuff. So when I come along, now, she was a wonderful classical player, and I'm a rocker. You know, if you listen to me, I can play classical music with some facility, but no one was ever going to think I was constantly concretizing material. I'm a decent guitarist, but I wouldn't hire me in a session for that either. And my mother would listen to me play and she'd listened to me spending hours with my Beatles records and singing Bob Dylan trying to sound like Bob and and she thought he's not talented, as she probably generally thought that at the time, but it was also her own, what she was bringing the baggage she was bringing. So when I told her I was going to leave Harvard for Berkeley, it must have felt to her like I was going to the dark side. I was betraying everything that she'd hoped I would be a true and honest human being for the superficialis. So it took her I mean, she eventually figured it out. And she became incredibly supportive of my music before she died. She couldn't do it back then. So that's some I probably answered about five questions.

Kim Fauskee 41:43

Yeah. The interesting thing to me and I want to go back to why when your mom stopped, I don't know the exact musical. I mean, she didn't talk to you about that. I mean, obviously,

Peter Melnick 41:55

gave me a dozen different acts. She gave me about four different explanations for it really. She explained that she didn't think she she, she didn't think that she could ever get anything else except a second rate Rogers composer. That none of the explanations really felt authentic to me. Because I knew I knew how good she was. And she never stopped playing. I grew up listening to her music, and I steal the pieces. I've taken the trouble to learn her pieces. I grew up listening to her play.

Kim Fauskee 42:23

Do you have an assumption, though? It's what I said, Oh, it's what you said. Okay.

Peter Melnick 42:27

She was trying to figure out who she wanted to be. She was in a marriage. It was, I'm sure it was already in trouble. But they didn't know it yet. And she was trying to be a loving mother. And so I think she was conflating some really great values, with some very harsh judgments, and She hurt herself along the way.

Dr. Dana 42:51

How does this translate into what you're doing in your life now?

Peter Melnick 42:56

Well, let's see. The music part. I simply, you know, when I left Harvard for Berkeley, I never looked back in terms of music. Music helps me breathe. And I love it. And it's taken me many years to get to the point where I can say, I think I've got a special talent. I believe in it. I couldn't have said that 10 years ago, but I do now. So that's what I did today. That's part of it. I spent many years on the film side doing film scores. And around the turn of the century, I began to explore musical theater and immediately found that I'm better at that. I love it. And so it gives me joy. I have fun doing it. And that's part of it. But I started out and I used to write songs. I aspire to being a singer, songwriter. And I love James Taylor. I love Joni Mitchell and Paul Simon and Dylan Of course, and an also wonderful songwriter named Dory Previn, who I became very close to, and I wrote a song, three or four months after I got married, which was a really, I'll say today looking back on a really good breakup song called helpless. And I sent it to Dori and she wrote me a letter back almost immediately. And basically what she said is, you're really talented. You've got the goods in the world. And when you can really turn the microscope on yourself, and you've got the goods and yourself, you really have something, which is exactly the kind of advice that should send you to the piano and the guitar and writing storm. And right around that I stopped writing for, oh, pretty much 30 years stop writing songs, personal songs. I wrote a few for my son when he was a little kid . I wrote plenty of songs for movies that were storytelling for a movie, but I didn't try and write personal songs. And I think It was happening. I knew that at some level, I told the truth in the song. I knew I knew that there were problems in this marriage from the very beginning. And it scared the shit out of me to find out what I might find out if I kept on shining that light inside. So I stopped writing songs. When the marriage broke up, I, I began writing songs again. Actually, the first song I wrote was for my daughter who I had said, you wrote something for Daniel, everyone's thing for me. And I thought, Oh, okay. And what I wrote to her was, was a very strong song about things that I felt she needed to know at that point. And she loved that I wrote it. I don't think she wanted to hear the song a whole lot. But it got me started. And for the next few years, I sort of fantasized about maybe I can write enough songs to have an album one day, and some voice in my head still said, but you're not really a songwriter? I didn't. I didn't take it seriously. And that, that gets back to the question you asked as well. Why didn't I believe it? If I don't think I'm so damn good? How come? I didn't believe in it? My answer about my mom was, she loves me very much, very much. But she didn't like me, in part because she didn't like herself. And there was a lot of me and a lot of her in me. So she didn't see me as an honest person. As a kid, I told a lot of lies. And part of her dislike, the self dislike, and whatever came out with me was, if, as a parent, I know if your kid tells a lie, there's a way to say it's not good to tell a lie, without saying you're a liar. Right? And the way my mother approached it, the lie attached to my soul. And as I got older, it was that's your father in you. So there was a lot of negative self image there. And also, you know, on the one hand, it never occurred to me when I started to work in the film world, that it might be tough that I might not succeed. And that was idiocy turn. I mean, the film business is really tough. And I did succeed in it. But it was, it was really tough. I mean, I paid a lot of dues. But there so there's a combination of unrealistic self confidence. And at the same point, not really believing in myself. Yeah. And I think what happened in the same post marriage, not only as I start to write songs, and evolved into, into writing songs that I'm really proud of that I think, tell truth that I tell him in a way, that's my way that's unique. And it's part of it really is part of my self identity. But in addition to evolving into that part of my identity, I also was a parent post marriage. And I mentioned that time at the meadows and how I began to understand not only the damage that my kids were exposed to, but how it may have affected them. But you know, looking at

aspects of what what did keep me in that marriage for 30 years and what, what what defines what define it was love, but what define what are the elements that you can deconstruct love, and it's still love, but if but when you're deconstructing it, you can look at? Well, one of the things I think, I was drawn to, you know, that old old song that goes, I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad, well, my mother could be loving, and she could also be disapproving. She didn't know she didn't know until the 90s, after her mother died, and she began seeing it quite well. The therapist didn't realize that she'd been a lifelong depressive herself. And, you know, when I was a little kid, I remember one of the great things she was able to do for me, just instinctually she'd come home sometimes. And I learned to be incredibly sensitive to her moods, I could tell if she was in a bad mood. She was cold, aloof, disapproving. And at some point, she learned to say to me, I'm in a bad mood, darling, has nothing to do with you. And I think I got it. So I think that disapproval that that critical, the controlling part of her was part of what my theory about love is, in part, you seek out what was defined for you, as home, you look, you look to recreate what's familiar. And so if you come from a relationship with that for a mother, you fall in love with somebody who has in a different way, elements of that, if you've got, if you're a woman, and as a little girl, you had a father who was abusive. That may there may be a relationship between that and if you find yourself as an adult woman in a relationship with somebody who is both a source of love and out of nowhere SWAC whether it's verbal or physical abuse it you may just have gotten unlucky, but maybe you were drawn to somebody who you didn't even you fell in love with them before. A year. or before, you saw the slightest conscious hint of this thing, but you have an invisible radar. I think that was true for me. I think I fell in love very quickly. And it was some time before I recognized that. Before I encountered the things, which I later on came to see as a very painful part of the relationship. I think there was an energy that some part of me got and picked up on long before I could, I was conscious of it.

Dr. Dana 50:29

Yeah. So tell us a bit about what you're doing now in your life.

Peter Melnick 50:34

I'm remarried, and we married a wonderful woman who I'm very much in love with. And probably our first date, which was a seven hour lunch, we discovered this conversation about trauma and damage and healing, and discovered that it was a huge part of both of our journeys. I won't talk about her journey here. She talks about it freely, but I would leave that to her. But our connection was, was in part, on a soul level from the very beginning. Part of it was we were both people on a journey from damage. And we've worked through a lot of stuff along the way. Learning about what it means to heal from that with each other. And it's not all been easy. But we've gotten to a place where it's very powerful. And we're still working on the process. But so part of what I'm doing now is I'm in a loving relationship. That is part of my continual journey of freedom, I continue to cut that sounds like a new age cliché. I actually mean, in a really concrete way. I've been able to turn away from relationships in my life that I've recognized, are and had been for a long time, toxic and painful and damaging and realize I don't have to be there. I don't have to be and I won't. And to do that is incredible. There's a sense of elation. I mean, I was walking the other night with my dog. And I was thinking about one of these relationships that I've stepped out from and feeling, you know, the opposite of pain, feeling actually a kind of joy. Now, I've sent you a bunch of my songs, Dana, and I write about things like death

and dying and dementia and the DS. And I jokingly have said to people that you know, just wait for my song about colonoscopies.

Kim Fauskee 52:46

So I can't wait for that one seriously. Yeah,

Peter Melnick 52:48

but I do. Right. I mean, Talia has occasionally listened to a new song and said, Would you mind handing me a razor blades, I can just slit my wrists. And, you know, I inevitably try and lighten up.

Kim Fauskee 52:58

So that's true love

Peter Melnick 53:01

it, this is very true love. This is wonderful love. But,

Dr. Dana 53:06

but it isn't gonna interrupt you just for one second. Your songs may have been about difficult subjects, but they're really beautiful. Thank you. So I agree. My experience was that thank you, the content may be difficult, but the melodies and the lyrics and everything, just and you know, I sent them to Kim and my wife and received the same response from everyone. This is amazing. This is really sweet. Well, so I just want to make sure that I mean, I know that when you're doing it, you're obviously going to be a bit more critical naturally. And, and, and curious about how other people are going to receive the you know, the information. But if you do that subjects of great service by making them beautiful, and it's about healing, it's not just about the, you know, the colonoscopy, it's about healing. It's about healing.

Peter Melnick 53:58

I thank you and tell you will thank you as well, because I'm, I'm really good at leaving out that part. Yeah, it's,

Dr. Dana 54:04

I mean, it's really, really important because part of what, why we came in I started the podcast in the first place is that we want to show that men, especially men of our generation, are capable of going deeply within themselves, and taking responsibility for the things that we need to and doing everything we can to heal ourselves and to help the people in our lives heal. Right. And you're and you're doing it your way. I do it my way. And Kim does it his way. Yeah. And they're all very different approaches to the same destination.

Peter Melnick 54:35

So I thank you for that. It's a really great interruption. I appreciate it. Okay. But where I was going with that, is that for the first time, I mean, I've actually not the first time I've written love songs, I've written love songs for Talia. And we wrote a song that's very much about the journey of healing that we read a poem that was the inspiration for the song she read a poem that she wrote at our wedding called the hug of your soul. And then Um, I, I turned that into a song that I sang to her. At our wedding, that's

really our first song together. So I have written some up and happy songs. But um, but this was different this idea, and I haven't written it yet. But the idea is for a song, that's really an expression, a joyous shout about breaking free, personal. I've written songs about a song I sent you called freedom from within. That's an expression of the belief that you can liberate yourself. And that freedom from within is the goal. And I've written one of the other songs I sent you called, sometimes a monster has a bridge, lay it down all that you're feeling, it's not really freedom, it's not really prison, when you're holding the key given for the yearning for some kind of healing. Your soul is on a journey, it needs to break free. So I've written songs that talk about wanting to get there. But this idea is what I can only write today. I'm able to write it now a shout of joy that I'm getting there, I'm in that place, I've got at least one foot in that place. So for me, understanding what's happened to me, understanding with I hope, not guilt, but ownership, what responsibility I have in the lives of my children. And understanding that I really, I have, I have so much to be joyous about in my life. And my job is to grow. But part of my job is to grow.

Dr. Dana 56:35

Well, one of the concepts that Kim and I are wanting people to start to think about is the notion of conscious introspection. And you are the living embodies the

Kim Fauskee 56:45

epitome. He's the epitome of conscious introspection. Yeah. continues to be.

Dr. Dana 56:49

It's very sweet. Thank you. And I guess, I guess

Kim Fauskee 56:54

I'm sitting here, every thing that Peter was saying, I'm sitting there going, yep, yep, shaking my head, yes. To all that, because the journey he he's been on is very similar to mine. You know, you know, I had a complicated relationship with with my mother as well. And I won't go into that. I've gotten into that too many times on this podcast, but I'll have to listen. Yeah, but But anyway, a lot of that journey that you've been on that evolution that you've that you've are conscious about, and have felt. So a lot of where I am now. So when you talk about being free and freeing that bandwidth, I totally get it. Yeah. And if I can preach anything on this podcast, and is to, for people to listen more than once to what you've just said in this last hour here, and take that to heart. Because, like you said, we do have the key. It's it's, we just have to do the work. And we have to not fear the work. And you're a living example of what happens when you do the work.

Peter Melnick 58:05

One of the things that's been a gift, it I haven't had to work for this. It's just part of what I've got.

Kim Fauskee 58:10

But But you've had to put in maybe work is the wrong word to use. But you've put an effort into it, you've put in the effort to recognize it, you've put in an effort to filling it in some of it's not good feeling either

Peter Melnick 58:21

or not. But I'm going to do it here, which is I've been blessed that I don't hang on to anger. I don't, I don't, I don't have a need to forgive people. But I think that's not true for everybody. I think I'm just fortunate, I haven't had to work at that one. But I think a lot of folks I know have carry a lot of anger for where they've been damaged. And it's, it's preachy to say, forgive every one of the things that wouldn't there's a great quote about blame is blame is a poison pill that you that you take hoping the other person is going to dive in. So I don't mean to be glib about it. But I think the more you look at these people who may have been your damages. Through this prism, I'm talking about where you look at and think what they didn't do, they didn't choose to be damaged because they didn't choose their own damage, right. And the more you see that, the easier it is to transcend whatever anger you're holding on to. And, and that's also a very, very liberating thing.

Kim Fauskee 59:26

You also said something I wanted to go back to as well as about calling the toxicity out of your life and not feeling that there was a sense of loss. And I completely understand that because, you know, I've gone through that probably the last five or six years and kind of getting rid of that toxicity, getting rid of what wasn't working for me. Right. And then, in retrospect, looking back on it and thinking boy, it wasn't as hard as I thought it was gonna be I don't know. haven't suffered this tremendous sense of loss from not being friends with these people, right going forward. And that, you know, I feel freer.

Peter Melnick 1:00:11

Isn't it surprising how things that you for so long can take for granted as as facts disappear?

Kim Fauskee 1:00:18

In I'm so in my head about letting somebody down, and how somebody's going to either judge or think about me that I probably waited years, right to do that, just because I didn't want to feel that way. So you're writing a book? And I don't know, you talked about this early on, but you're writing a book about your family, lineage and heritage. You talk a little bit about why that?

Peter Melnick 1:00:47

Yeah, it's um, it's, it's, it's a special book. Because I started off I wrote an article for the dramatist, which is the publication of the Dramatists Guild, which is the organization that represents authors, composers, lyricist in theatre. And I wrote a piece called My grandfather, Richard Rogers, which was motivated by the fact that the the last few books that have come out on him major biographies have kind of accepted this a very, they've got a sort of a straw man picture of a wax museum, picture of this guy who was kind of a gray suited businessman who was not very nice, not very warm, who just happened to write the most extraordinary music in the world. And a, I just always knew that there's that's that's a people said that because they couldn't get a handle on. They couldn't figure out who

Dr. Dana 1:01:39

he really was. It doesn't make any sense to look at it from that perspective.

Peter Melnick 1:01:43

But you know, Stephen Sondheim who was another one of the gods, an extraordinary writer, and had a terrible one, one writing relationship with my grandfather, it was not good. Right after Oscar died. And it was the last time Steve wrote with somebody else being the composer and he was rearing at the bid to write his own music, and rightly so. And he said, famously, talking to Oscar was his mentor. As a kid, Oscar mentored Steve as a writer. So what he said was, Oscar is a man of finite talent and infinite soul. And Richard Rogers is a man of infinite talent and finite soul. So Stevie was not so sweet to either his mentor or my grandfather. But my, my feeling was always I don't know what the hell finite soul is supposed to mean. But the guy who wrote the chord changes on the sound of music, toward the end of his great years. Those chord changes don't they? They're not pretty from central casting. They're, they're beautiful from God. So I wrote this article, and began to begin to fathom who he was. And when the article was done, I had a few friends who said, you know, you should write the book. And I set out, I began to try and write to do that. But I realized I don't really I don't really want to be a biographer. That's not That's not where my interest lies. I do want to reveal him in a much more loving and complex way. I mean, I have, I owe him so much, both music jeans that I know, I'm really lucky to have the gift of having grown up around that music. I did see a lot of shows as a kid. Every time there was a revival, I got to see it. And he was a sweet grandfather. Also, I grew up very privileged, I grew up getting to go to great schools. I made a really good living as a film composer, but I always lived in places better than where I could have afforded on my salary, thanks to an inheritance from my grandparents. So I've got many different reasons to feel protective of him and loving and not want to be silent when he's getting pilloried in the world. So I set out to do that. But these other things, we've been talking about my own journey, my own discovery. As I started to get deeper into his life, I began to describe my grandmother as an unloving mother. I didn't tell you some of the trauma that she came from that has a lot to do with that. But the deeper I got into it, the more I began to understand things that happen. Going back to her father, my great grandfather, who I never knew because he became depressed after the crash and most probably his falling from a balcony. Manhattan apartment was most probably a suicide, almost certainly. So the more I began to look at these different people, I saw connections between what happened to my grandmother, and what happened to my mother as a child, and that aloof coldness I described when she was depressed and how that affected me. And, and seeing all these things that became such a powerful way of understanding my family and although on both sides, you know, there are two people especially my grandfather and my father who were very prominent and very successful, there are others to Mary and her son, Adam Gettle. Also a wonderful theater composer. Even though these are illustrious people, you might say, well, that they're different from ordinary people. Actually, they're extraordinary. And we're all human beings. And the, what part of what I have to accomplish in this book is make people read it in a way that they see. It's actually a universal story. It's universal, because what happens between parents and children is universal. And the message is I'm trying to convey the story I'm trying to tell, can can can give something to a lot of different kinds of people. So it's a book that importance of biography because it does go all the way through my grandfather's life and my father's life, but it's not. It's not, you know, 1000 page, multiple biography. It's, it's a book about trauma wending its way through the generations of a family trauma and the possibility of healing.

Kim Fauskee 1:06:06

Yeah, we're real people, real stories, real emotion, and how we can not only understand that, but you feel it. Right, as well. And if

Peter Melnick 1:06:15

I if I write it, well, it'll first of all, scratch that itch I that was planted for me as a kid in college, which I wanted to write a book one day, I would really I would like to read a book. But it'll also I think it'll it'll, I think people will will probably love it. People would love to read about my grandfather. And, you know, there are many people alive today, who I hear it all the time. I love your grandfather's music. It's given me so much. Through the generations, every high school kid has done a Roger show at some point.

Dr. Dana 1:06:43

Well, my wife has a prime example. Yeah. So to be

Peter Melnick 1:06:47

able to find out this guy wasn't just as great as grade, two dimensional character. Oh, my goodness. There were things in his own heart that explain why he was able to write the music valley high to the Sun Valley High, famously in five minutes, there would be that song, your own special dreams, your own special, I forget exactly the lyric in that one. But it's it the song is an expression of such yearning for love and safety. Where did it come from? Deep within. And I think people will love reading about that. And I think it will also give some people insight into things they can relate to in their own complex family lives.

Kim Fauskee 1:07:24

Well, Peter, I really appreciate you being here and sharing the stories not only about yourself, but but your family and in your journey and where you are today. And I'll be certainly looking forward to reading that book as well as I'm sure a lot of our listeners. So again, thanks for being here.

Peter Melnick 1:07:39

Thank you guys so much for having me. I

Dr. Dana 1:07:40

really enjoy that we'll have you back again when the book comes out and you can promote it a bit and I would love that we'll go from there.

Kim Fauskee 1:07:47

We love that and tell some more Richard Rogers stories at that time. Yeah, got it. Thanks, Peter. Okay, thank you. Thank you.

Fear Me Out 1:07:53

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