

Michel Legrand  
with Stéphane Lerouge

*Michel Legrand: A Memoir*

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Kaplansky

## Passport to Hollywood

May 2011. Biarritz betrays its reputation: it looks like rain, or at least drizzle. Behind the camera, I watch the initial steps of Frédéric Beigbeder, filming the adaptation of his novel, *L'Amour dure trois ans* (*Love Lasts Three Years*). Beigbeder has asked me to make a cameo appearance in it. I like his casual demeanor, enthusiasm, and obvious knowledge of his trade. Facing the camera, the film's main character – Frédéric's double – confesses he's addicted to my music, saying: "In my life, every time things haven't been going well, Michel Legrand has been there to save me." This dramatic admission reveals the soft side of a literary critic who hides behind a mask of provocation and cynicism. At the end of the film there's a wedding during which I miraculously appear on the beach at Biarritz, seated at a grand piano. When it came to choosing the song I'd interpret, Frédéric was adamant: it had to be *The Windmills of Your Mind*. I tried to negotiate but he wouldn't budge an inch. In forty years, I've had to play that hugely popular piece thousands upon thousands of times. In the end, I gave in and accepted the idea that if I had to be limited to one song, just one, that would be it.

On the set, they're waiting for the light to be less harsh so that they can start filming. Very gently, Joey Starr murmurs a compliment in my ear, one I don't really understand: he's already knocked back a bottle of Johnny Walker. Beigbeder shouts: "Action!" The surfboards concealing me fall down and I begin to sing Eddy Marnay's lyrics: "Comme une pierre que l'on jette, dans l'eau vive d'un ruisseau" (Like a stone that is thrown / in water rushing down a stream). To tell the truth, it's my first time giving a private concert on a beach, in a tuxedo, in the rain. Being face to face with the Atlantic conjures up images of the Pacific for me, specifically California, where *The Windmills of Your Mind* was created. It was 1968.

Los Angeles, May 1967. With Christine and the two boys, we moved first to Tower Road, then to a dream villa on Oriole Drive, with a bird's eye view of Beverly Hills. Before arriving, we had to pack up everything and enroll Hervé and Benjamin at the Lycée français in Los Angeles. Frankly, the decision was somewhat reckless. It was a big risk to leave France and land in Hollywood without a real commitment. By nature, I'm optimistic and tend to accept things as they come: "Let's take the plunge and see!" But, deep down, I had my doubts and felt as if I were playing a game of Russian roulette with myself. Our little family adapted very quickly to California, a land of perpetual spring. It may seem like a cliché, but the sun is an important factor: it makes the Angelinos calm and polite. Coming from Paris, you're surprised to see big convertibles yielding to pedestrians as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It's a different mentality, very courteous, that I appreciated right away. In Los Angeles, no one runs to catch the last subway, for the simple reason that there is no subway.

Every morning, a yellow bus took Hervé and Benjamin to school with all the neighborhood children, including those of James Coburn, our next-door neighbor. The two boys loved life in California and the fact that they had a yard with swings, a swimming pool, and a tennis court. Compared to our Paris apartment, it was a world in Technicolor and CinemaScope. Almost every Sunday, we would visit musician and orchestra leader David Rose, who had just written the score for the western *Hombre*. A nostalgic lover of steam locomotives, David built a miniature train that could accommodate one person per car on the grounds of his property. Hervé and Benjamin would take their seats and make endless trips around this private Disneyland. I was fascinated and puzzled as I observed the respected composer transform himself into a stationmaster every weekend.

Not long after our arrival, a producer I'd met asked me for a favor: would I interview certain film celebrities who preferred to do interviews in French? The request was so unexpected

that I accepted. I ended up sitting across from Claude Lelouch, who was passing through California, then Claudia Cardinale, and finally, the great Jean Renoir. A small team of us showed up one afternoon at Renoir's villa on Leona Drive. The light and the colors in his garden evoked an impressionist painting. Renoir was a charming, solicitous old man whose eyes still sparkled. I felt humbled, even intimidated: he was the patron saint of New Wave directors. Not being a journalist, I probably asked awkward questions. Consciously or unconsciously, I wanted answers to these questions for myself – about the trials and tribulations of the creative process, the father-son relationship, and exile. I never saw the results of our talk on screen, as the project ended up in limbo and the producer eventually disappeared from circulation. Today, rusting boxes must be lying in some California basement, containing never-seen images of Jean Renoir in the twilight of his life as a man and artist. We spoke a lot about Los Angeles, where he had lived for almost thirty years. In turn, he asked me about my discoveries of the city.

Among the peculiarities of this sprawling, incredible, excessive megalopolis, I like the fact that there are no fences between the houses. This detail symbolically expresses people's openness. Relationships with neighbors are spontaneous and friendly. I rented a small Volkswagen station wagon, tiny compared to the shiny, immaculate Cadillac of our cleaning lady. Everything runs smoothly there thanks to specialists with very specific skills. It's all very compartmentalized. They often say that in the States, it takes one person to hold the pencil and another to sharpen it. François Reichenbach, an expert on American society, told me: "Imagine a guy whose mission is to peel thirty-seven potatoes. If he only peels eleven, America stops."

Professionally, on the other hand, my first weeks were not very exciting, with some attractive proposals but nothing spectacular: advertising music for Ford and a romantic comedy starring Dean Martin, *How to Save a Marriage and Ruin Your Life*, written and produced by

another Shapiro: Stanley. Very quickly, coming up against the head of the music department of Columbia Pictures, I understood I would have to fight to orchestrate my scores myself. In the Hollywood system, American compartmentalization applies to music as well. As a general rule, composers write a piano score, which they then entrust to an orchestrator. Starting when I worked on *How to Save a Marriage*, I was asked which orchestrator I wanted to work with. When I replied that I do my own orchestration, they looked at me as if I came from another planet. To me, orchestration is an integral part of the work of composition. People never ask who wrote the orchestrations of Mozart, Ravel, or Stravinsky. When I orchestrate, I develop the composition, I modify, I transform. That's why I refused to adopt the local method, especially as all American films were orchestrated by the same troika, Jacky Hayes, Leo Shuken, and Dick Hazard, which leads to a terrible impression of uniformity.

As the sessions progressed, I never ceased to be amazed by California musicians. Very quickly, I built up an adoptive family, with Bud Shank on alto sax, Louise DiTullio on flute, Israel Baker as first violinist, Vince DeRosa on the horn, Laurindo Almeida on the guitar, and, for the rhythm section, the indispensable Ray Brown on bass and Shelly Manne on drums. I was impressed by the way these artists approached their work with immense simplicity, with humility, with respect for the composer and his music. In comparison, many French musicians tend to show up late, are undisciplined, talk endlessly about the soccer game the day before, or spend time reading the horse-racing results in *Paris-Turf*. In the United States, people show up at the studio a half an hour early to have breakfast together and then take fifteen minutes before the session begins to tune up. At nine o'clock, I would take up my baton, and at five past nine, the first piece was already in the can. It felt like a dream but it was actually happening.

The relationship with the musicians mirrors the one shared by colleagues. In the U.S., other composers see you not as a competitor but rather as a brother. I would get together with my buddies Quincy Jones and Lalo Schifrin, both of whom I'd met when they were working in Paris. Another pal was Henry "Hank" Mancini, a true star of film music, venerated for the scores of *A Touch of Evil*, *Hatari!* and *Charade*, not to mention his great successes for Blake Edwards, *Peter Gunn*, *The Pink Panther*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, for which he composed the extraordinary *Moon River*. I admired him without ever having met him. After seeing *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, he simply called one day to invite me to lunch. We felt an immediate connection. Smiling warmly, he said: "You're going to become one of us. I'm going to do everything to make that happen." We barely knew one another, I was a stranger in Los Angeles, yet from the outset he exuded friendliness. Hank promoted me, opening doors for me in Hollywood. He became the big brother I never had.

Hank also showed generosity to his studio pianist whose career he helped launch, a young composer whom I liked. We were exactly the same age, within a few days. His name was John Williams. We often met on Tuesday evenings, during the communal dinners that film-score composers enjoyed together. Mancini was one of the pillars of this circle. There were also evenings at the home of Saul Chaplin, the composer who co-produced *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*. Saul had a unique music library, consisting of scores of classical works for pianists at two pianos – works for eight hands and forty fingers! Pianists André Previn, Pearl Kaufman, and John Williams, who named these evenings "golden hands parties," were among those drawn to Saul's house. We laughed, drank a little, and sight-read, sometimes by trial and error, connecting with each other as we explored the same piece together. Quincy Jones worked like a maniac composing for the movies. A few days after I'd settled in, he invited me to visit him in the studio. He was recording the title song of *In the Heat of the Night*, a blues song interpreted by Ray Charles. The

latter was another artist I'd revered – particularly as the creator of *Hit the Road Jack* – long before meeting him. In the booth that day were Ray, Quincy, and a couple of young lyricists, the husband-and-wife team of Alan and Marilyn Bergman. It was their first film song. Alan reminded me that we'd played tennis together at Gene Kelly's place. I politely shook hands with them, not realizing they would become life companions and creative partners.

Six months later, Norman Jewison, a Canadian and the director of *In the Heat of the Night*, caught up with me. First, I got a phone call from Irvin Schechter, my film agent at the powerful William Morris agency. "Michel, I have good news for you: Jewison wants to shoot a new film and would like you to write the music." The rather obscure title was *The Thomas Crown Affair*. In this sophisticated thriller, a couple is played by Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway. The McQueen character is a multimillionaire who stages hold-ups perpetrated on himself in order to swindle an insurance company. I was invited to the screening of the rough cut at United Artists, where I met Norman along with Hal Ashby, the editor and associate producer, also represented by Irvin. It was quite a shock – the rough cut lasted five hours. Norman and Hal immediately tried to reassure me, saying: "Don't worry! We still have two months. Starting tomorrow, we'll begin to edit for real, even though we don't exactly know where to begin." At this admission, I realized that the crux of the plot, Thomas Crown's burglaries, took up only twenty minutes of film. Everything else was connected to the plot indirectly and could vary in length, anywhere from five minutes to four hours. Suddenly, I had a flash of inspiration. Without really thinking, I called out to Norman and Hal: "Take six weeks' vacation before starting the ending! In the meantime, without watching a single image over again, I'll write an hour and a half of music for you. I'll let my pen go where it tells me to go, unhampered by time limits. The impressions I've had today will be my guide. Then, if you like, we'll edit the images to the music together. The music will have a natural structure that

will impose itself on the film.” Hal enthusiastically agreed: “Wonderful. The score is going to tell us how to edit the film!” Norman, more cautious, said: “Why not? It costs nothing to try . . .” The producer, Walter Mirisch, expressed reservations: “It’s too big a risk. What if it doesn’t work?” I reassured him, promising: “In that case, I’ll start again from scratch.” And I added: “For free, of course.” Hearing this, he gave me the go-ahead.

And so it was that I became involved in that crazy adventure. It was my first major Hollywood film and I took the plunge. I hoped my idea would work out, but I was far from certain. In front of Jewison and Ashby, I had shown off, but deep inside me, there was doubt. For over a month, the ink flowed day and night, based only on what I remembered of the five-hour screening. Instead of working with precise timing adapted to the action, I was free to create unlimited passages inspired by emotion, hovering between jazz and baroque. The day we recorded, Jewison and Ashby were jubilant in the booth. Hearing the music for the first time, they rediscovered their film: “You know, that theme fits ideally with the chess scene, and this other one fits with the first heist. . .” All three of us spent the next two full months editing. It was like a giant puzzle that we enjoyed building, undoing, shifting, and fine-tuning. After a few weeks, the shape of the film was entirely structured around the music. To bring out the ramifications of the hold-up, Hal made the most of the split-screen technique, which is to say one screen divided into multiple sub-screens. The effect was very dynamic. Instead of having several action scenes one after another, the viewer sees them simultaneously. In aesthetic terms, this elegant, sophisticated aspect helped make the film a success.

The songs were a decisive contribution to the score. Norman wanted me to write two, one matching the mood of the growing love between McQueen and Dunaway, the main theme of the film, and the other for the glider-plane scene. Until then, the lyrics in English associated with my

music had rarely been a source of excitement or joy to me. But Quincy Jones whispered a wonderfully logical idea to me: “Why don’t you try my friends, the Bergmans? You’ll adore them. Besides, Jewison has already worked with them.” Having nothing to lose, I took his advice. I knew that Alan Bergman was a disciple of Johnny Mercer, my lyricist for *Once Upon a Summertime*. Was it a sign? We began to work on the songs together. A key moment in the film is when Thomas Crown prepares to carry out his second hold-up. We see him alone in his glider, drifting in the air. Although a crucial day is beginning for him, he seems totally relaxed, even detached. There is no dialogue or sound.

Jewison shot the images knowing that the music would have a monopoly in the soundtrack. When Marilyn asked him what the song was supposed to convey, his answer was: “It should reveal what McQueen doesn’t express – his nervousness, his anxiety.”

When Marilyn compared the song’s motif to a Baroque-patterned roll of tape, the Bergmans enhanced the piece with stunningly beautiful lyrics, centering on the idea of a spiral, of the cosmos, of life infinitely repeating itself. “Round, like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel / never ending or beginning, on an ever-spinning reel.” Their title for this song was *The Windmills of Your Mind*. The second song was inspired by close-up shots of the protagonists’ eyes meeting, especially during the chess game. The Bergmans named it *His Eyes, Her Eyes*. Norman asked me to sing the song myself and said he would place it prominently in the opening credits created by the brilliant graphic artist, Pablo Ferro. We still needed to find someone to sing *Windmills*. We were told of a different kind of English singer who had recently immigrated to the United States, Noel Harrison, son of the famous Rex. From a champion skier, he had moved on to acting and singing. I listened to one of his recordings and liked his subtle tonality, his British accent, and his slightly folk side. Norman, the Bergmans, and I met with him and I played him our

song. Harrison Junior pouted, commenting: “Not bad, but you may need to change some of the lyrics. They’re awkward in places.” The Bergmans scarcely had time to react when Norman leapt to their defense: “Listen, Noel, either you sing the song as written or you don’t sing it at all!” After reconsidering, Harrison turned up at the recording studio a week later, dragging his heels, and sang impeccably but stared into space. His eyes seemed to say: “I’m not going to put too much into this: this song is destined for oblivion.”

He was dead wrong. Norman loved *The Windmills of Your Mind* so much he decided it would accompany the opening credits as well as the glider scene. From the moment it was released, the film was a hit, and the song with it, topping the charts the whole summer of 1968. Harrison squeezed all he could from “his” hit before falling off the radar. Twenty years later, at a tribute to me in L.A., he appeared onstage to sing the song, his voice intact. After the show, he fell into my arms. Before I could say a word, he blurted out: “You know, Michel, I realize that.... How can I say it? I was young and stupid, I smoked, my head was somewhere else. Forgive me, and most of all, thank you for choosing me for this song.” His sincerity touched me. The smug youth was now a mature, perceptive man who could look back clearly at his professional trajectory. He’d had his turn in the spotlight for a few weeks in 1968. For those who remember him, Noel Harrison will always be the creator of *The Windmills of Your Mind*.

My first collaboration with the Bergmans forged a deep connection between us. I realized that thanks to them, I’d finally found the English lyrics that fit my music perfectly. I liked their rigor, their sense of poetry, and their use of imagery – and also that they were a couple in life as well as in their work. Their contrasting personalities complemented each other. Marilyn is very direct, a true force of nature, while Alan is gentler and more diplomatic. Our sole bone of contention was that the Bergs, as we nicknamed them, were resistant to foreign versions of their

songs. Nevertheless, I confidently entrusted the French adaptation of *Windmills* to my talented former partner, Eddy Marnay. His version begins: “Comme un tourbillon de neige, comme un vol de goélands, sur des forêts de Norvège, sur des moutons d’océan,” meaning: Like snow that is swirling / like seagulls high in flight / over Norwegian forests / over white caps on the sea. His lyrics show great poetic affinity to the original, although Marilyn was incensed by the non-literal translation of the title to *Les Moulins de mon coeur — The Windmills of My Heart*. I tried to explain the principle of alliteration, saying that every language has its specificities, that you have to forego the literal meaning in order to respect the spirit of the song. It didn’t work. From that point on, to my great despair, it was complicated, if not impossible, to have hundreds of songs that our trio created sung in any language other than English. But, very quickly, the Bergmans wanted to get back to work.

Alan introduced me to one of their close friends, also a dedicated tennis player, filmmaker Richard Brooks. Several of his movies were already classics, including *Blackboard Jungle*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Lord Jim*, and *The Professionals*. The feature film that brought us together was called *The Happy Ending*. Brooks wrote and directed it as an act of love for his wife, actress Jean Simmons. It is the portrait of a forty-year-old woman who decides to leave her husband and their comfortable upper-middle-class life to find freedom and fully enjoy the last vestiges of her youth. To write the theme song, I was summoned to the Bergman residence where we ensconced ourselves for an intensive creative session. I proposed that they make up song titles I would see what they inspired on the piano. Perhaps I subconsciously wanted to go back to Chris Marker’s method in *Le Joli Mai*. The first suggestion was “There’ll be Snow for Christmas.” On the keyboard, my fingers tinkled out an uninteresting tune. The next was “Love Falls with the Autumn Leaves.” The result wasn’t much better. Suddenly, guided by what the film was actually about,

they called out a title in question form, “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?”, essentially asking how we should spend the time that’s left to us. I improvised a bittersweet melody structured on the meter of the question, and asked, “Do you want something like this?” “No,” Marilyn exclaimed, “we don’t want something like that. We want exactly that!” The problem was, I hadn’t jotted anything down. The notes I’d just played had already evaporated into thin air. “Don’t worry,” Alan smiled, flourishing a small tape recorder, “I recorded you! Can you please give us two or three hours to create the lyrics?”

As if they were escorting a child to daycare, they dropped me off at a neighborhood theatre that showed double features – two movies for the price of one. I returned at the end of the day. The lyrics were absolutely brilliant. They reflected the Bergmans’ forte, the ability to convey deep, at times contradictory emotions with words that everyone can understand. *The Happy Ending* was not a success in the United States and wasn’t even released in France. But our *What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?* outlived a film that was an immediate flop, and, freed from the images, took on a life of its own thanks to recordings by Sarah Vaughan and Barbara Streisand. Yet the melody had come from me instinctively, in just one go, like automatic writing – a title that sparked a theme, a theme that sparked lyrics. Sometimes, the road to creativity is unfathomable.

An unexpected shift occurred early in 1968. At Warner Brothers, I composed and recorded music for a romantic comedy, *Sweet November*, with the indispensable Ray Brown on bass, and Shelly Manne on drums. At the time, Shelly had a famous jazz club on Cahuenga Boulevard, Shelly’s Manne-Hole. During the break, I was working on a piece at the piano when Shelly interrupted: “Say, Michel, how would you like to come play at my place? You, Ray, and I would make a wonderful trio!” How could I refuse? Especially as I adored Shelly’s sunny personality, optimism, and mordant sense of humor. A month later, we had a gig at his nightclub for a week.

We were really doing it for the fun of it, the joy of playing together. We simply decided to divide the (potential) takings into three equal parts. However, without knowing it, I had broken a Hollywood taboo, the unwritten rule that a film composer is not allowed to perform at a jazz club! Hearing about it, Irvin Schechter was irate and called to tell me to cancel the gig immediately. “Why, what’s the problem?” I asked innocently. His tone became confrontational. “How do you expect me to get you top dollar at Fox or Paramount if you play in a nightclub for ten dollars?” I tried to reason with him: “But Irvin, we’re talking about two completely different types of performances. I’d almost pay to do a concert with Ray and Shelly!” He banged down the phone, outraged by my stubborn refusal to give in. As a result of this conversation, I left the William Morris Agency. It helped that Mancini directed me to his own agent, Alvin Bart, who represented the top film composers.

Our trio’s concerts took place at Shelly’s under ideal conditions. Just one rehearsal and we took the plunge that same evening. Surrounded by these two luminaries, I sensed that I was growing as a musician. Ray had started out in Dizzy Gillespie’s band before becoming Oscar Peterson’s bass player. And Shelly had been a drummer for Stan Kenton. He was an all-round musician, just as comfortable in a trio as in a large band, in the studio and on stage. With them, I practically didn’t have to do anything, just let myself be carried along. Nat Shapiro concluded an agreement with Verve to record us two evenings in a row. The result was the live recording, *Michel Legrand at Shelly’s Manne-Hole*, my first trio album in the United States. When I held the sleeve in my hands, I felt a thrill. I had just joined Charlie Parker, Count Basie, and Ella Fitzgerald on a mythical jazz label! Perhaps my excitement seems ridiculous, but for a Frenchman who immigrated to the United States, it was not. This galaxy of big names shaped my culture. From then on, we were connected through the same record label.

My performances at Shelly's Manne-Hole were very beneficial to me, offering a breath of fresh air and a break from the furious pace of composing for film. The respite re-energized me. A few weeks later, another unexpected proposal came my way. As a workaholic anxious to explore new experiences, I couldn't turn it down. A new friend and producer, Marty Ransohoff, hired me to write the music for a film by John Sturges, who had directed *The Magnificent Seven*. After having been labelled a "romantic composer," I now found myself involved in a sweeping war saga produced by MGM, *Ice Station Zebra*. Sturges came straight to the point: "You're going to think me old-fashioned, but I'm filming in Cinerama and want music from the first to the final image, and it's got to follow the action very closely." Complying, I settled into the great tradition of the Korngolds, Miklós Rózsa, and Dimitri Tiomkin, writing page after page, scoring thousands of notes from the opening credit until "The End," with appropriate passages for the beginning and end of the intermission. Looking over my shoulder, Marilyn Bergman discovered the avalanche of sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and exclaimed: "But this is Harlem!"

After *Thomas Crown*, it was a different kind of pleasure. *Zebra* was a genre film, with codes to respect and rules that had to be accepted. To approach this movie with preconceived ideas would have been a serious mistake. For images of the nuclear submarine, *USS Tigerfish*, I created an epic theme with steel-like resonance by making good use of the brass section with four horns doubled by Wagnerian *tubens*. Recording at MGM was like making a fiery offering to the Hollywood gods. I found the work fascinating, a journey into the epic films that had set me dreaming when I was a child. After my collaborations with Godard, Varda, and Marker, I felt as if I were working on another level, not necessarily better, but very different.

Soon after *Zebra* was completed, Ransohoff introduced me to a remarkably talented young filmmaker whose second feature film, *This Property is Condemned*, had attracted a lot of attention:

Sydney Pollack. I wrote the music for his *Castle Keep*, a war film that incorporates elements of surrealism while reflecting on the role of art. The ambitious, rather strange film begins realistically in 1944, with American soldiers besieging a French château in the Ardenne Mountains, then shifts into a kind of surreal dream. Sydney encouraged me to give my imagination free reign, to dare to create the great mixes that really excite me, in this case, interspersing a Stravinsky-style orchestration with a vocal blend of jazz and Baroque (the Swingle Singers). Pollack proved to be a bubbly, curious playmate, infinitely more cultivated than the average Californian. This was a one-time collaboration, however, which to this day puzzles me. As a spectator, I watched him climb the heights of success, especially with the magnificent *The Way We Were*, for which Alan and Marilyn wrote the lyrics. Sydney and I had worked passionately together, but years later, I still have a sense of unfinished business.

Despite the bond of kinship between the Bergmans and myself and my excitement at having made contact with Jewison, Sturges, and Pollack, I began to experience a vague anxiety. Where did it come from? How did it start? I don't know. Coming out of the sessions for *Castle Keep*, I was keenly aware of feeling that something was wrong but couldn't understand what had triggered it. The success of *Thomas Crown* had led to numerous proposals and I accepted most of them, to the point where I was overwhelmed by internal panic, beset with an irrational fear of failure. "It's too much work. How will I manage?" I lost sleep. A doctor prescribed barbiturates so I could return to a normal cycle. But the heavy dosage quickly turned me into a zombie who knocked back five pills at ten o'clock at night, five more at four in the morning, and swallowing five uppers at nine o'clock to be able to get out of bed.

To tell the truth, the loss of sleep was not an illness in itself, merely a symptom. I was falling into a deep depression. Sometimes I would spend hours shut up in the dark, motionless and

weeping. I managed to write a little, but the price of concentration became more and more painful. Christine, powerless, did her best to keep the boys at a distance. To make matters worse, for the first time in my life, I became obsessed by visions of death. I was sure I'd see my own death, feeling that it was close at hand and I could touch it. My doctor sent me to a well-known psychiatrist who charged three hundred dollars per half-hour. The sessions verged on the absurd. I asked him questions that he answered, but I said nothing. In a few weeks, I'd become the antithesis of myself. I no longer had any interest in music or in life. Filled with despair, I saw a mental image of Dr. Michel Fouquet, Maurice Chevalier's doctor, whom I'd met backstage at the Alhambra Theatre in September 1958. He'd since become a friend. In a last-ditch effort, I found the energy to call him in Paris. When I described my state, his instructions were succinct: "Say nothing more. Return to France immediately. I'll make sure you enjoy life again."

I contacted Warner Brothers, with whom I had signed for *The Picasso Summer*, a film based on animated images of paintings by the Spanish master: "when I return, I'll finish writing and record." They gave me their blessing, as there was a postproduction delay. We closed up our villa on Oriole Drive in March 1969. The boys were upset and couldn't understand what was happening — we'd given them a taste of a new life and suddenly took it away. Christine promised them that our return to France was temporary. It was a lie, but we didn't know it yet. The four of us never returned to live in Los Angeles together. That time already belonged to the past.

The day after we arrived in France, Doctor Fouquet assessed the seriousness of my condition and dictated the most radical treatment, the only one possible — quit everything and begin anew. This meant stopping everything at once, barbiturates, cigarettes, alcohol, and coffee. He prescribed Anafranil, two pills a day, warning me of the Stations of the Cross ahead: "Go to your country house and get into bed. You won't be able to speak for a month, or move for two. I

will have to feed you intravenously. This step is mandatory for you to heal.” I went seventeen days with no sleep whatsoever. The more the tired I became, the more it was impossible for me to sleep. I had become a vegetable, inert, incapable of opening my mouth, deprived of the slightest command reflex between my head and my body. Silence was my new language. I was unable to leave my bed. Only my eyes were able to follow the people who passed in front of me. That was my sole activity each day.

On April 15, in the early morning, the phone rang. It was the Bergmans. Usually, Christine shielded me from the outside world, but this time she insisted I take the phone. Marilyn’s voice exploded, euphoric. “Michel, we won, can you believe it?” The evening before, in L.A., we had won the Oscar for best song for *The Windmills of Your Mind*. Without cracking a hint of a smile or uttering a syllable, I listened to Marilyn. The paradox was complete: I saw our win as a defeat.

On the eighteenth day, sleep returned fleetingly, in a brief window of one hour. This increased to two hours the following day, which meant I was finally beginning a new cycle. Gradually, I was able to utter two, then three words, move a finger, then two, then open my hand. In all, it took me three months to be able to lift myself up. At first, nurses had to support me to take a few steps. I felt as if I were a child again, starting everything from scratch. There followed a long rehabilitation, both physical and mental. Fortunately, my return to life was in step with the return of spring.

As soon as I could walk, Christine and I spent a month in the pure mountain air at a family-owned pension in La Foux d’Allos, a ski resort in the Alpes-Maritimes region. Every day, Raymond Moretti drove up from Nice to visit us. My spirits and my zest for living gradually came back. When I returned to Paris, Erma Levin, the music editor of *The Picasso Summer*, was ready and waiting for me. Warner Brothers had especially sent her over from Los Angeles. The day of

the recording session at Studio Davout, I tried to hide my nerves. It was my first recording in six months. From the time I'd entered professional life, I'd never been away from the studio for such a long period. Perhaps it's here where the evils of my breakdown had rooted themselves: in the infernal pace I had adopted since my admission to the Conservatory – twenty-five years of compulsive music-making, a kind of hyperactivity for which my psyche paid the price. I was at the height of my glory, and I sank. The United States entered the Great Depression in 1929; forty years later, my great depression began in the United States.

Los Angeles, August 1969. I returned alone to the City of Angels to honor several commitments, including scoring the Richard Brooks film, which was followed by a crazy TV show with Julie Andrews and Harry Belafonte, produced by Gower Champion. At that point, I knew I would never live in California again. The depression had a positive effect in that it allowed me to take stock and become aware of certain fundamental realities. I wanted to spend time in Los Angeles but not live there. My initial amazement at the city had given way to a more realistic view. And, whether I liked it or not, Paris was part of my identity. I was too attached to its bistros, its people, and above all, to my chosen family, meaning Devos, Moretti, Dréjac, Sempé, and Folon. I'd forged many ties in Hollywood circles, but, with the exception of the Bergmans, I had no really close friends there. When I was away from France, I'd missed the difficulties of everyday life, the bad weather, exorbitant taxes, and the strikes. The changing seasons, as well. To appreciate summer, you have to have gone through winter. Los Angeles is a place where the weather doesn't change. After a while, the permanent sunshine is somewhat disquieting.

In the end, I was tormented by a memory of Édith Piaf. My last visit to her left a troubling footprint on me. It was around 1962, a few months before her death, for a disc project that never saw the light of day. Weakened by illness, "la Môme" advised: "If you go to the United States,

make sure not to live there, or you'll lose your talent." After a year and a half spent there, I could see how right she was. In Los Angeles, you die little by little, you wilt, you see your personality get smaller. When you first arrive, you're bursting with ideas and enthusiasm. Then, as you're in contact with American life, so centered on money and profit, you become like everyone else, you flatten out. You come with your basses and your trebles and end up in a middle register, without any vitality. That's Hollywood: a monstrous machine that swallows composers up and spits them out. Or at best, your mind shrinks. Before the trap closed in, I thought of Piaf and, with the reflex to survive, I spread my wings.

My plan was straightforward. I would to continue to write for American films but travel to Los Angeles from time to time, as proposals presented themselves. Of course, Alvin Bart and Nat Shapiro tried to reason with me: "But, Michel, you can't have a career in Hollywood and not live here!" "Sorry, but I'd prefer to live in France and travel to California every month if need be, as productions dictate."

This way of doing things suited me perfectly, especially as I became used to composing on airplanes. I just needed three seats for spreading out my scores. I was no longer idle on those thirteen-hour journeys. A part of my existence played out above the Atlantic. This was my new lifestyle, which seemed best for my family and for me. So 1970 was a year of renewal. Christine and I had just bought a large property near Dreux, a little over an hour south of Paris, a kind of Eure-et-Loir version of Oriole Drive. That June, when Christine gave birth to our daughter Eugénie, to me, the event symbolized my own rebirth. It was also the year I received my pilot's license. Finally, returning to Europe allowed me to work again with three loyal film directors, Jacques Demy with *Peau d'Âne* (*Donkey Skin*), Jean-Paul Rappeneau with *Les Mariés de l'an II* ("The Married Couple of the Year Two"), and Joseph Losey with *The Go-Between*. The cloud of

depression and its accompanying anxiety appeared to have gone for good. It had taken me several months to emerge from the tunnel. I would soon turn forty, but I'd found the serenity to usher in a new chapter of my life.

Coda: Fall 1992. In Los Angeles I was recording the music for a Paul Mazursky film with the promising title of *The Pickle*. François Reichenbach used this opportunity to shoot a documentary about me. He filmed the sessions and followed me on friendly visits to Gene Kelly and Quincy Jones. I suggested to Hank that we be interviewed together by François, and he agreed. In front of Reichenbach's camera, Hank stared at me mischievously. It seemed that he had a confession to make but was hesitating. In the course of the conversation, he broke in with: "You know, I'm the one Jewison contacted to write the music for *The Thomas Crown Affair*. I wasn't free. Jewison insisted but I gave him your name, saying you were perfectly capable of replacing me. Well, Michel . . . I never dared tell you but today, it's ancient history." Surprised, I burst out laughing, hugged Hank, and thanked him warmly, twenty-four years after the fact. Hank gave me everything: his friendship, his advice, his agent, and the movie that established me in Hollywood. But he had the supreme elegance to wait a quarter century to reveal what had happened behind the scenes of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. With Mancini, who was greater? The man or the composer? I would say both, without hesitation.