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A Chart-Topping Cave Dweller

By TONI BENTLEY

Songwriter Diane Warren works seven days a week, often 12 hours a day, and refuses to be far from a keyboard. A creature of habit, she has started every day for the last 25 years with an ice-blended mocha that she picks up driving east from her house in the Hollywood Hills to her studio in a grungier section of Hollywood. Mouse, her cat, rides in the passenger seat of her blue Bentley coupe and, upon arrival, joins her 18-year-old parrot, who lives at the studio. It is clearly where Ms. Warren really lives too.

Ms. Warren was born in 1956 into a Russian immigrant Jewish family in Van Nuys, Calif., the third child of an insurance salesman father and a homemaker mother. Obsessed with listening to the radio, at age 7 she pointed to "the name in parentheses" on her older sister's albums and said, "That's what I'm going to be—the songwriter."



Emily Shur for The Wall Street Journal

"If I didn't have the outlet of my songs, I'd be dead, homeless, crazy," Warren says.

Those parentheses have included the name Diane Warren on more than 1,500 songs, including hits like Céline Dion's "Because You Loved Me," Toni Braxton's "Un-Break My Heart," LeAnn Rimes's "How Do I Live" and Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing." Her songs have been recorded by Roberta Flack, Eric Clapton, Elton John, Ringo Starr, Cher, Rod Stewart, Patti LaBelle, Barbra Streisand, Tina Turner, Roy Orbison, Whitney Houston, Gloria Estefan, Christina Aguilera, Carrie Underwood, Mariah Carey, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw and Mary J. Blige, to name a few. She was the first songwriter in the history of Billboard to have seven hits, by different artists, on the singles chart simultaneously.

She works at the studios of Realsongs, her publishing company, which she started in 1986 in one small room. The company now occupies the entire floor, but that room, which she still works in occasionally, has remained unchanged and, apparently, uncleaned for 25 years.

Ms. Warren admits to a certain superstition about the "Cave." Cassettes are piled on the floor, tables, chairs and piano in dangerous disarray. "I like cassettes for playback," she said. "I can take the cassette out, and I know the song is there. If it's digital, I don't know if it's there. I'm old-school: My writing tools are a notebook, a pen and a cassette. If it sounds good on a cassette, it's good."

Songs come to Warren from anywhere and everywhere. "They can start with an idea," she explained, "a title, or the chorus or a good drum beat. 'Un-Break My Heart' came to me as a title. It popped into my head, and I thought, 'I don't think I've heard that before, that's kind of interesting.' I started playing around on the piano with these chords and did a key change, and then I knew, 'OK, this is magic.'" The song went platinum in seven countries.

Ms. Warren doesn't read music and snoozed through the one music theory class she ever took. She considers her lack of formal musical training to be a source of freedom. "I'm always doing things you're not supposed to do musically, but, hey, I don't know any better!" She said the writing of a song is "like being in a really cool place in the forest, and figuring out how am I going to get out." She writes one a week.

"I don't ever write lyrics first and then the music. They come together." She composes on a piano, various synthesizers and sometimes a guitar, the first instrument her father gave her as a child. In the Cave she still occasionally uses her original Yamaha DX7 synthesizer from 1985.



Realsongs

"My writing tools are a notebook, a pen and a cassette."

Though Ms. Warren is most famous for her ballads—songs that center around the romantic notion of one love forever—she has been single her whole life. "I write the most intimate songs, some of the biggest wedding songs, but I know nothing about intimacy. But I feel it, the yearning," Ms. Warren said. "In real life, I'm afraid of it. I haven't been in a relationship for 20 years. If I didn't have the outlet of my songs, I'd be dead, homeless, crazy."

In the larger of her two recording studios, Ms. Warren asked a couple of engineers to play a new Cher single called "You Haven't Seen the Last of Me" from the

upcoming film "Burlesque." Everyone sat except Ms. Warren, who stood, eyes closed, in a black T-shirt that reads "Traumatized by Mediocrity," tight black jeans and black-lace up sneakers studded with rhinestones. While she beat time with her foot, her body moved with the song, clearly inside it.

In her newer writing room at Realsongs, the carpet is purple with a green border, and there is a gold throne with daggers criss-crossing for legs next to one wall. Ms. Warren sang two songs, one she finished last week and one she's still working on. Her voice is classic rock, beautiful and warm, operating at a lower decibel level than some of the huge female voices like Céline Dion and Whitney Houston that are associated with her songs.

Ms. Warren may be "missing the intimacy gene" for her own kind, but she is clearly passionate about the more noble beasts. She gives vast amounts of her considerable fortune to various animal charities. Her eyes well up talking about a photo she was sent that morning of an abused German shepherd. Ms. Warren has a special love for the massive grey pachyderms who, like her, are vegetarian. "Elephants fall in love for their whole life, and they cry," she said. "They die of a broken heart."

Greatest Hits

The only time anything has been moved in songwriter Diane Warren's "Cave" was during the big 1994 earthquake. Piles of cassettes remain where they landed then.

At age 14, Ms. Warren says, she ran away from home for two weeks and stayed with "some bank robbers and junkies" in a motel but returned home because she missed her cat.

Ms. Warren says she sometimes writes songs from a man's point of view, other times from a female point of view. She likes being able to inhabit both.

Leaning on the entrance desk at Realsongs is Ms. Warren's red bicycle and a rock that reads: "I'm not moody, disorganized or self-absorbed, I'm artistic." When she feels like taking a break from writing, she'll grab the bike and head out to Sunset Boulevard. Julie Horton, her executive vice president, prefers not to accompany her: "She's a crazy bike rider, up and down the sidewalks, going against traffic."

Ms. Warren doesn't care if the average listener doesn't know she wrote a certain song. "I want them to believe the singer so much that they believe they wrote it. I just want my name on it—and on the check!"

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