

Living Alone (1989)

I used to live alone. One day I was going downstairs to get a snack and I detected a suppressed fear. Part of my brain was suppressing it but another part of my brain noticed the first part suppressing it. I realized I had been doing this for some time, every time I went downstairs. The fear was that I'd have a heart attack at home with no way to get help. I decided the only thing to do was to expose all of this fear and suppression to the purifying rays of the sun.

I don't mind living alone
I get moods but, I don't brood, no
I don't mind living alone
in fact, I prefer the food and solitude

I hope I have a heart attack
At home alone
Fall down the stairs and break my back
Can't reach the phone

I hope I die long, slow death
No gun, no knife
Plenty of time to reminisce about
How I blew my life

You won't have me to kick around
Berate, and annoy
I'll write a will in drool
Leaving everything to the state of Illinois

I hope they don't find me for weeks
Until my whole neighborhood reeks
Until my condo association
Passes around this long petition

And they convict me in the condo courts
And then evict my putrefying corpse
Then condo lawyers sue my vast estate
Because my final monthly payment is late

I don't mind...

Although I died, I'm not dead
I wake and see the pearly gates instead
Saint Peter point me to a sign that reads
"Surprise! It's creeds, not deeds!"

We don't care what you did, what you achieved
We only care about what you believed

No atheists allowed
No scientists allowed
No skeptics allowed
No fat chicks allowed

St. Peter says three out of four is a hopeless case
And so he zaps me through the floor
To that other place
Where Satan says this isn't purgatory
But there's good news
Since you belong in several categories,
You get to choose

Fat chicks are eternally ostracized
Skeptics are pre-frontal lobotomy lysed
Scientists are struck deaf and dumb and blind
Atheists, solitarily confined

I don't mind...

Half a Hand Away (1994)

I felt like writing a song one day so I thought to myself, "OK how do you write a song, say lyric first?" Well, the first thing I learned in my first creative writing class was to start with an object. A ring. Your dead child's teddy bear. So I looked around and saw my globe with its brown oceans.

The oceans on this globe are brown
The mountains bumpy
The countries yellow, green, and pink

I think the one you're in is blue
Next to some island

One hundred five degrees of longitude
Where lunch is stinky cheese, the waiters rude
The pastries Viennese, the beaches nude

Only half a hand away — suntan lotion
Only half a hand away — sand
Only half a hand away
One brown ocean

The seams don't line up properly
The North Pole's missing
And fingerprints smudge Kathmandu

The Alps are nearly worn away
Brazil is peeling

I'm trying not to freeze or come unglued
I'm counting calories in diet food
One hundred five degrees of longitude

Only half a hand away...

The oceans on this globe are brown
Chicago's gray
But don't forget this windy town a half and away

Hug Me (1976)

My all-time favorite non-Sondheim songwriter is Joni Mitchell. I was listening to one of her songs and realized she uses tons of metaphors and similes! (In case you were sick that day, a simile is a comparison "me love is like a red rose" and so is a metaphor "love is a pain in the butt." For years I had been avoiding similes and metaphors because I thought they were clichés. But if they're good enough for Joni they're good enough for Lee, so I wrote this song to make up for lost time.

I need someone to hug me till I start to wilt
Someone to wrap around me like a crazy quilt
Someone to mold around me like a clump of clay
Will intertwine our bodies just like DNA

Yeah, hug me
Somebody hug me
Somebody, body please hug me yeah

As safe as airbags and a seat belt in my Honda
As scary as a South American anaconda
Squeezing me until I happily turn blue
I'd hold my breath as long as I'd have someone to

Hug me...

It's not emotional
It's less vindictive
Like a baby at its mothers breast
Or hornets in a hornets' nest

It's nothing sexual
It's more instinctive
Just like sheep cavorting in their flocks
Like celebrating football jocks

I'm lonely as a spider when his web's destroyed
An astronaut encapsulated in the void
A missionary ostracized and in the pot
A hemophilic cell whose friends refuse to clot

Yeah, hug me...

If I don't have a heavy hugging high
I'll probably grab some passerby

But to avoid that embarrassment
I may break down and try to rent someone to

Hug me...

I'm lonely as a spider when his web's destroyed
An astronaut encapsulated in the void
A missionary ostracized and in the pot
A hemophilic cell whose friends refuse to clot

Yeah, hug me...

I need someone to hug me till I start to wilt
Someone to wrap around me like a crazy quilt
Someone to mold around me like a clump of clay
Will intertwine our bodies just like DNA
Are molecules will interact in elementary ways
Who knows?
Are chromosomes me recombined someday

You're Perfect (1992)

You know who you are and you know you are.

You're perfect.

You're a Mozart mass, You're perfect.

You're a Michaelangelo muscle, perfect.

You're Frank Lloyd Wright
stained glass.

You're leaded.

And each leaded line is perfect.

Every modulation and tendon perfect,
triangular, sublime.

For years I looked for someone
kind enough, sane enough,
tolerably good looking,
competent at simple cooking,
reasonably bright,
passably polite.

Then you appeared from nowhere.

You found me; you found me!

You are more than kind enough,
but you ain't no saint.

More than sane enough, but still fun.

You got everything that

anyone could want:

everything that Einstein had,

everything Adonis had,

everything Saint Francis lacked;

in fact

You're perfect.

You're a Mozart mass, You're perfect.

You're a Michaelangelo muscle, perfect.

You're Frank Lloyd Wright
stained glass.

With one flaw:

although otherwise, you're perfect.

Somehow you don't realize

that I'm pure slime;
you think I'm perfect too.
Not true.

They're Only Words (1995)

I was reading one day, glanced up, and caught my lover, with whom I thought I had a perfect relationship, giving me a nasty, hateful look. It was a shock and it inspired this song.

*The **hurdy-gurdy** is a stringed instrument. Instead of a bow, a wooden wheel rubs against the strings. There are melody strings, played by a keyboard, and drone strings which give it a bagpipe-like sound. Throughout its thousand-year history, it has been used to play popular music.*

Though you probably think they're true
They're only words
Thin lines of blue
Though your promise that you care
They're only words
Mere puffs of air

They're only words
Pronouns conjunctions and
Transitive verbs
One-letter three-letter
Four-letter words

You make phone calls in this voice
That oozes charm
And I disarm
You write notes with heart-shaped dots
On all the "i"s
Those hearts tell lies

They're...

And there's that nanosecond sneer
I catch on your face
That trace of scorn gives you away
And there's that microscopic flinch I feel
As I touch your shoulder
So much colder than the things you say

They're...

Though you probably think they're true
They're only words
Thin lines of blue

Though you promise that you care

They're only words

Mere puffs of air

They're only words

They're only words

Art Institute (1979)

My homage to the Art Institute of Chicago. I feel guilty every time I play this song because even I, after decades defending weird modern Art, have finally given up on it.

They got *art nouveau*
They got art deco
They got impressionism and expressionism
An art to go
They got experimental, Occidental, Oriental
And a rental store
And much more
They got Sunday visitors

I don't know much about art
But I know what I like
And I don't like nothing here

You know, I could do half of this stuff myself
Didn't anybody tell him where a nose goes?
Honey, when's it close?

They got *art nouveau*...

Oh look at that lovely red! Do you think it'd match the bedspread?
It would probably cost you an arm and a leg!
What do you think, Fred?

Well, I don't know much about art
But I know what I like
And I don't like nothing here

You know, half of this stuff ain't nearly as good
As the Stateville Penitentiary art show
Come on honey, let's go

They got *art nouveau*...

Oh look at that lovely blue!
It'd clash with the floral print drapes in the living room
But it'd really accent the new sofa
But I don't think it'll do, do you?

Well like I said I don't know much about art

But I know what I like
And I don't like nothing here

I wonder how much these fellas get paid?
You know, Roger drew better in the third grade!

Mommy, I'm bored!
I'm bored!
Bored, bored, bored, bored, BORED!

They got *art nouveau*...
And much more
They got Sunday visitors
Lots of Sunday visitors
Hordes of Sunday visitors
From suburbia
From Oak Brook and Glen Ellen

O'Hare Terminal Five (1995)

My all-time favorite rule of songwriting is "choose a rule and break it." The rule I broke in this case was "no three-chord songs." The lyric is about my favorite terminal at my favorite airport.

When Air France
Flight 412
Approaches O'Hare

I'll be there
On tip-toe
In that mob somewhere

O'Hare terminal five
O'Hare international terminal five
Sweethearts depart
Strangers arrive

When you flew
Past Greenland
And slept through the view

I was parked on
Some tollway
Looking forward to

Watching every TV monitor
To find my favorite passenger
Not foreigners so debonair
Who rarely change their underwear
Wondering
Weather all compare
Wondering
What you might declare

O'Hare terminal five
O'Hare international terminal five
Sweethearts depart
Strangers arrive
Friends and family
Drive and drive and drive and drive and drive to
O'Hare terminal five

Lost claim check

A strip search
You crashed in the sea

With icebergs
Sharks nibbling
Your last thoughts of me

Watching every TV monitor
To find my favorite passenger
Not foreigners so debonair
Who smelled like putrefied Gruyere
Wondering
Weather all compare
Wondering
What you might declare

O'Hare terminal five
O'Hare international terminal five
Sweethearts depart
Strangers arrive
Friends and family
Drive and drive and drive
And hope that you're alive
Somewhere in terminal five
O'Hare international terminal five
Sweethearts depart
Strangers arrive
Friends and family
Usually survive

If I Were a Penguin (1974)

Whenever you watch a nature show on TV you wonder what it would be like to be a lion or an octopus or whatever. The opening discordant chord is the sound of a penguin waddling.

If I were a penguin
I'd build a nest
far more elegant than the rest
and Jacques Cousteau would be my dinner guest.

If I were a penguin
I'd build my home
with a grand staircase and a marble dome
and never steal my neighbor's stones.

If I were a penguin
no leopard seal
would dream of making me his meal
and I myself would live on eel
and only occasionally eat krill
and even then spit out the tails, yuck.

When I'm a penguin
I might not find a mate but I don't really mind.
With penguins, too, it takes all kinds.

Since I've no mate
I needn't sit on eggs and wait for chicks to hatch
nor need I vomit up my catch.
Since I've no chicks
I needn't teach survival tricks like how to swim.
Nor need I fear that maybe
some skua will tear my baby limb from limb.

Don't call me a Pittsburgh penguin.

You know,
most penguins are dumb birds.
They waste their time fishing and diving off icebergs.
I'd rather calculate what percent is submerged.
I want to see a blue whale blow
and someday kill an Eskimo
and swim Tierra del Fuego.

If I were a human
I'd live in the suburbs
and have to wear rubbers
for Illinois winters
and eat frozen dinners
and buy a new car
and never go too far.

Dead-End Blues (1979)

I was inspired by my dad, a great auto mechanic, to write a song about cars. That's all I thought it was about until my friend Barbara Vroman, a novelist, listened to a tape of it and wrote me how much she loves the "beating lust and heat" in it. She finds it "so-o-o-o sexy."

When I bought it
This car was covered with chromium
Back when I bought it
This car was covered with chromium
But this beautiful bright shiny car got rusty
And drove me deep down to the doldrums

I got a ledge to my left
Solid rock to my right
A chasm ahead
And pride behind

I got the dead-end blues
I got the dead-end blues
I got the flat tire, battery drained,
Out of gas, *cul-de-sac* blues

Gonna floor it
And drive it straight off of this precipice
I'm going to floor it
And drive it straight off of this precipice
Either that or I'll just either vibrating
My engine block knocking converting my catalyst
I'm in auto masochist

I got a ledge to my left
Solid rock to my right
A chasm ahead
And pride behind

I got the dead-end blues
I got the dead-end blues
I got the flat tire, battery drained,
Out of gas, *cul-de-sac* blues
I got the flat tire, battery drained, *cul-de-sac*, out of gas, dead-end blues

Maybe (1995)

Many of my songs feature real jerks. This is one of them. This jerk is trying to figure out how to make up with his girlfriend. My mom heard this song in progress and said, "why not just say you're sorry?" That hadn't occurred to me or to the jerk.

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Maybe a letter, maybe a card
Maybe a box of Fannie Mae
Maybe a poem, maybe a song
Maybe a dozen yellow roses

Wrong
Maybe she'll capitulate
So I should wait
Maybe she'll believe I forgot
Maybe not

Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week
Maybe she needs a little time
Maybe some romance, candlelight, wine
Music, slow dancing, yellow roses

Long stems
Gems
Maybe too late
Solid-gold paperweight
Thirty-foot yacht
Maybe not

How about something we'd really use
A digital clock radio with snooze
Maybe a sincere sorry will do
Probably a Caribbean cruise

Wait
Maybe I should celebrate
She's not so hot
Maybe it's a feminine plot
Maybe not

Maybe it's a blessing in disguise
Maybe it's fate
Maybe I should open up my eyes
I better wait

Maybe a phone call
I could explain
Maybe she'd see my point of view

Show her my soft side
Share in her pain
Throw in a poignant tear or two

No, she can see right through me
I could confess
I could come pretty clean
More or less

Maybe it's her fault
Probably she
Drove me away
Definitely

Hey Wolfgang (1977)

When I was a kid I wanted to like classical music. I grew up with lots of music, but little of it was classical. My brother had Stravinsky's Rite of Spring which I would show off to my friends because the cover had a dancer with an exposed breast. It was easy for me love Bach, Copeland, and Stravinsky, but incredibly difficult to get into Mozart. I thought I must be an imbecile for not being able to appreciate the world's greatest composer. This song came out of that frustration.

Hey Wolfgang, you little twit
Take your magic flute and stuff it
Hey Wolfgang, you little shit
Take your magic flute and stuff it

When I was young I was sure
I'd be a great connoisseur
Of fine music and art
But to this day I still can't stomach you, Mozart

You'll never be on my juke
Your music makes me puke
It's also prissy and quaint
And rather elegant but funky it ain't

Hey Wolfgang, you little bum
Take your high-heeled shoes and stuff 'em
Hey Wolfgang, you little twit
Take your magic flute and stuff it

Now I can groove on Van Gogh
And I can move it to Bach
I'm not that big on Gauguin
But I sure did Ludwig Van

I gave the old college try
Now I'm into most of you guys
But lately I feel so dumb
Can't understand where you and Wagner are coming from

Hey *Richard*, you paragon
Take a Viking helmet and sit on it
Hey Wolfgang, you little twit
Take your little baton and stuff it

I always wanted to be

A child prodigy
But I weren't no genius like you
When I was thirteen
I was still faking stomach flu

You were on a stage
Conducting your symphony
I was in my backyard
Getting chased by a bumblebee

Hey Wolfgang, just wait and see
You're going to live a life of poverty
But don't worry, your music thrives
Soon as you bite the dust at thirty-five
Hey Wolfgang, you little shit
Take your magic flute and stuff it

Chemistry (1986)

I read a book on how to write lyrics. I hated it. I disagreed with everything the author said. But open-minded guy that I am, I decided to write one song following all her rules. Of course the song turned out great.

I hated it in high school
In homeroom I would dread it
I couldn't comprehend the concepts
I didn't get it

But after all these years alone
I finally have found
You needn't know covalent
From ionic to be bound

'Cause we've got chemistry
There's chemistry between us
Chemistry
It doesn't take a genius
I'll never understand
But I know when I see
Chemistry

We'd sneak into our laboratory
Fool around at night
We'd mix the funny chemicals
Make colored light

We'd shake each other's test tube
We'd do experiments
We blew up in a flaming inconceivably intense

Incomprehensible
Unfathomable blast
So unpredictable
We thought these bonds would last
Unanalyzable
Wasn't luck, wasn't fate, wasn't magic

Had to be chemistry
That chemistry between us
Chemistry
It's so mysterious

I'll never understand
But I know when I see
Chemistry

These chemical reactions
High school teachers don't explain
What makes them easy to begin
But so hard to sustain?

I still don't know a thing about it
But at least I've learned
What's wrong with chemistry is
You get burned

I don't like chemistry
That stuff is dangerous
Chemistry
It's too mysterious
I don't like mysteries
Didn't like getting B's
In chemistry
I don't like chemistry

Imperturbable (1980)

Looking back at the dates when my songs were written I discovered that two of them, written a year apart, say opposite things: the first "I'm strong, I'm tough," and the second: "I'm delicate, I'm fragile." This is the first of the two. I wonder what happened that year. [The second, "Handle with Care," has been recorded but not yet released. (July, 2016)]

You can make a date and break it
That's unkind
I don't mind
I'm imperturbable

You can show up late and fake it
That's unfair
I don't care
I'm imperturbable

I can spice up my life
I'm herb-able
I can park all my dreams
There curb-able
I can live anywhere
I'm even suburb-able
I can change parts of speech
I'm interjection adjective noun and adverb-able

Though you suck me like a leech
My heart and mind are out of reach
You'll start to find I'm imperturbable
I'm un-disturb-able

Sell me timeshares in Wyoming
That's awfully cruel
But I'm no fool
I'm imperturbable

Cowboys honk and give me fingers
That's rather crude
I'm never rude
I'm imperturbable

Steal my blue suede shoes
Steal my shirt
I won't be miffed

They were a gift
And I'm imperturbable

Walk all over me just like I'm dirt
Be a heel
It's no big deal
I'm imperturbable

I am no rock
You could cover me with paper
I am no island
You could test your atom bomb on me
Don't call me Bikini

Bus Driver (1977)

I used to live in Chicago.

I see a sweet old lady
Waiting at the stop
I'm gonna make her move now
I'm gonna make her hop

I'm gonna take her token
Say something obscene
Then I'll accelerate her
And rattle old bones up and down my machine
'Cause I'm a

Bus driver
Chicago bus driver
CTA bus driver
I rule the road in my mean movin' diesel machine

I see somebody running
As it starts to pour
Just before he gets here
I'm gonna slam that door

I'm gonna leave him dripping
Love to see him soaked
And then I'm going out splashing
I'm going to find out who sinks and floats 'cause I'm a

Bus driver...

I see a blind young woman
With a big Great Dane
That dog is gonna chase me
When I snap her cane

I'm gonna leave her breathing
Out of my exhaust
I'm gonna leave her spinning
You've never seen a little lamb look as lost as that

Blind woman
I got a blind woman

I got seventeen winos and one black bum
I got a little baby carriage and a flock of nuns
I got twelve old ladies and three wheelchairs
I got a real fun job and I got no cares
'Cause I'm a

Bus driver...

Carte Postale (1995)

When my love travels I get plenty of letters and phone calls and postcards. But I don't write happy songs, so I just made this up.

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Two Sunday Tribs, big coupon pile

One crummy *carte postale*

Eleven days, *vin ordinaire*

One crummy *carte postale*

Prioritaire

Republique Française

Photo aerial

One crummy *Tour Eiffel carte postale*

Echoes of you in every room

Your PJs, your perfume

Here's your shampoo

And your broken glasses

Worn-out designer jeans

Flowery sheets

Pictures of your mother

Your frozen coffee beans

Three Sunday Tribs, big coupon pile

One crummy *carte postale*

Seventeen days, *vin solitaire*

One crummy *carte postale*

Prioritaire...

Unwatered fern, library book

I promised to return

Seven châteaux

Three cathedrals
Bore-dox
Vair-say and
Charter's blue
Strolling the Champs-deli-zay, feet aching
Wish mine were aching too

Four Sunday Tribs, big coupon pile
One crummy *carte postale*

784.5 JOP (1988)

I was at the library browsing the CD collection, classical, of course, because I'm a grown-up, when I caught a glimpse of something wild out of the corner of my eye. It was a Janis Joplin CD stuck in the classical section by mistake. It was such a shocking juxtaposition I had to write a song about it.

Twenty years ago she was not my favorite singer
Twenty years ago I was not her biggest fan
Twenty years ago she was overdoing sex and booze
I was in my library soberly learning to cruise

Twenty years suburbanized me
Amadeus civilized me
Janis Joplin is ancient prehistory
Now I'm into Claude Debussy

Browsing in the audio section lazily
Suddenly the classical collection is spinning crazily
How astonishing! What a shock! Amazingly!
Stuck between the Mozart and Bach: paisley!

784.5 J-O-P

784.5 JOP

PROPERTY OF NAPERVILLE LIBRARY
PLEASE DO NOT RETURN BOOK DROP

Living in the land of bland one is seldom surprised
So it really blew my mind when I realized
That a wild flower child could be categorized
With the Dewey decimal digitized between her eyes

784.5 J-O-P...

Twenty years ago she was not my favorite singer
Twenty years ago I was not her biggest fan
Now that I'm a big boy
 I'm overdoing sex and booze
Listening to Janis and thinking about
 So much to lose

Like her shy mysterious smile
Mona Lisa on a motorbike
And her weird and wonderful style

There will never be another number like

784.5 J-O-P...

Janice dreamed of being free

She's free now at the library

Her greatest hits are on CD

Twenty years from now she'll still be

784.5 J-O-P

784.5 JOP

In the Woods (1990)

This is one of those songs I wrote just for myself.

I don't know why I've always loved the woods
I don't know one species from another
To me a tree's a tree
a leaf's a leaf
they're brown and green and gold and red and pretty

I don't know why I've always loved the woods
I don't know one species from another
To me a birds's a bird
a fish a fish
a squirrel a rat
and poison ivy is just another flower

I haven't done the woods in months
today I forced myself
so here I am awash in autumn leaves
and babbling brooks
and thoughts of you

Now I know why I've been avoiding woods
Because we always did the wood together
Because you knew one species from another
'Cause every squirrel, fish, and tree I see
reminds me how alive we used to be
and how without my boy scout guiding me
it's lonely in the woods