

The photographs on the right are worlds away from the usual iconic images of a massively popular musician. That's because the shy, stage-frightened songbird they depict died seven years ago, long before the faintest trace of success and the subtle image-manipulation that would have come with it. Dorian Lynskey meets lover and producer, family and friends and the key figures in a uniquely sad story to discover exactly why **The Afterlife Of Eva Cassidy** strikes such a powerful chord in Britain, a country she never saw, 3,000 miles from her home. »



THE EVA CASSIDY ALBUM (clockwise from above): at the age of three (right) with cousins; with lover/producer Chris Biondo in 1995; one of the few pictures of her as a performer; at age nine with plait; in 1992 with mother Barbara (left) and sister Anette.



SHORTLY BEFORE MIDNIGHT on 2 November 1996, a little-known 33-year-old singer called Eva Cassidy passed away at her parents' home in Bowie, Maryland. There were no major obituaries because outside the Washington DC area few people had even heard of her. She had released just two independent albums and not played beyond the local gig circuit. Her small coterie of friends and admirers predicted that her big break would come eventually but the cancer got there first.

A few months before she died, Cassidy recorded a session vocal for Tupac Shakur's album, *All Eyez On Me*. It was never used but

the fact that there was once a tape featuring both their voices is astonishingly apt. Like the murdered rapper, whom she outlived by just seven weeks, Cassidy has released many more records in death than in life. Thanks to a remarkable chain of events which beggars contrivance she is now one of the most popular singers in Britain.

On 17 August 2003, almost seven years to the day since Cassidy was diagnosed with cancer, she replaced Robbie Williams atop the UK album charts with *American Time*. Her previous posthumous albums *Songbird*, *Imagine* (both also number ones) and *Time After Time* have so far sold around six million copies worldwide

and entered the Top 10 in Australia, Germany, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland. Even in America, where she remains a minority taste, she has shifted 2.5 million.

There has been an official biography, a documentary for venerable USTV show *Nightline*, an item on the Ten O'Clock News and a fistful of movie offers. A singer called Lesley Curtis tours under the banner A Musical Tribute To Eva Cassidy. Even though her parents have moved house, they still get letters and visitors. They give fans signed reproductions of Cassidy's artwork and answer every piece of mail they receive.

Another keeper of the flame is Chris »

EVA CASSIDY

Biondo, her former producer and lover, whom I meet in a Covent Garden hotel. A gruff, likeable 47-year-old, he makes incidental music for the National Geographic channel but promoting Cassidy's records around the world is his true calling. Although he sometimes slips into the present tense talking about Cassidy, he is not unhealthily obsessed with her; he has a career and a girlfriend and doesn't pretend that Cassidy was flawless. It's just that he genuinely believes she is the greatest singer who ever lived – better even than Aretha Franklin or Nina Simone.

That is open to debate, but Cassidy certainly had a peculiar quality that is as compelling to her fans as it was confounding to A&R men when she was alive. She was an almost entirely egoless singer, the inverse of a star. Some assumed before meeting her that she was black or much older than she was. She surrendered herself to the song. She disappeared into it.

"There's no barrier between her and the listener," says Mark Hagen, producer of *Top Of The Pops* 2. "She sings, you hear, there's nothing in between. It's like that old soul song – an expressway to your heart."

EVA MARIE CASSIDY was born in Oxon Hill, Maryland on 2 February 1963, the third of Hugh and Barbara Cassidy's four children. It was an artistic household. Hugh was a schoolteacher, metal sculptor and cellist of Scottish-Irish descent and German-born Barbara was a horticulturalist and folk aficionado. "There was always music in the house," says Barbara.

When Eva was nine the family moved to Bowie and Hugh taught her to play guitar. Visitors to the Cassidy home at Thanksgiving would be greeted by a Hugh-orchestrated performance by Eva, her older sisters Margret and Anette and her younger brother Daniel, all singing in four-part harmony.

The bewildering eclecticism that would later characterize Cassidy's career was evident in her teens. She would sing anything, just for the joy of singing, whether that meant performing country songs with her brother at Maryland's Wild World amusement park or essaying the Yes back catalogue with Stonehenge, a high school band who alighted on their unfortunate name in the days before Spinal Tap.

At home she would listen to Ella Fitzgerald, Joan Baez, Buffy Sainte-Marie and her favourite singer, Stevie Wonder. She even used to entertain the family with irreverent impressions of the soul giant. "She would put her black glasses on and sway back and forth pretending to be Stevie," remembers Barbara. Apparently, she also did a mean Ethel Merman.

In the winter of 1986, Chris Biondo was a bassist and producer working with a band called Method Actor. Method Actor songwriter Dave Lourim told him he had heard this amazing singer and Biondo challenged him to bring her along to his Maryland studio. He remembers his first sight of Cassidy, arms hugged

around herself, shivering in the driveway.

"I like to see how people respond to me kidding around with them when I first meet them. Sometimes they don't realise I'm just trying to loosen things up. So she's up against the side of the house and I'm like, 'Get in there!'" He laughs. "She got scared and said very little to me for that whole session." Scared or not, Cassidy sang all four vocal parts impeccably. "It was perfect synchronization, one-take, each one. She bullseyed it every time."

In one of her few interviews, Cassidy described her approach in florid terms. "I really like to create the sound of a choir the most. If you could see what it looks like when I shut my eyes and listen, you'd see the sound as angels spanning the universe."

Later, Cassidy called Biondo about recording a demo tape. Getting together Dave Lourim and friend and pianist Lenny Williams, Biondo recorded Cassidy's first ever solo performance, a version of Billie Holliday's *God Bless The Child*.

Terry Wogan: "We played *Over The Rainbow* and the response was incredible. People rang in asking to hear her again and again"

"I'd never heard anyone sing as good as Eva," says Biondo. "I thought, This is strange. There's this girl, she's a friend of mine and she's better than anyone I've ever heard. This is like living next door to Da Vinci."

After a while Eva began coming in every week on her day off from her job at Behnke's Nurseries, a garden centre. It sometimes seems as if Cassidy made a phenomenal number of recordings but Biondo claims there should have been even more. "A lot of it got erased because one 16-minute reel of two-inch tape cost \$160. We erased things because we didn't know Eva was going to die, because we were cheapskates, because we always thought we could do things better."

The next step was for Cassidy to build a live reputation but that was easier said than done. She would go along to open mike sessions in the Washington area but refuse to sign up. Then she would sign up but decide not to play. Finally she was persuaded to sing, but her stage fright was crippling.

"I wish I could think of another word," says Biondo. "Some people are afraid because they think they're going to freeze up or puke or people are going to laugh. She felt, 'Well this is an inconvenience. Until I play them the correct amount of songs for the correct amount

of minutes I have to stand up here and then I can leave.' There were times she enjoyed playing small places but I don't think it's something she craved."

Richard Harrington, the *Washington Post* writer who wrote the first ever newspaper feature about Cassidy, saw her play three times. "She had minimal eye contact and conversation, pure commitment to the moment and the meaning of a song, inevitable discomfort at public interaction, gratitude at attention being paid to the music, not herself."

Cassidy had even less confidence as a songwriter. Her sole successful attempt, originally called *Hear*, will be released on a future album as *Somewhere Sometime*.

Working as a session singer to fund her own music, Cassidy's earliest recorded appearance was unlikely in the extreme: *Livin' Large*, the 1989 album by Washington DC rappers EU. She went on to sing choruses for Tupac and corpulent Californian MC E-40. "I had her sing a hook that said 'I want to thank you pimps and players' and I couldn't even imagine it," rap producer Nicky Scarfo told Richard Harrington. "But the way she sang it, she made it sound good."

As a session singer Cassidy was a consummate professional but as a solo artist her tastes were too wide for a rigidly codified record industry. She would record four-track demos that hopped between genres and left A&R men baffled. "In my view her problem was that she was too good a singer," says Terry Wogan, who first brought her to British listeners on Radio 2. "She could sing anything – folk, jazz, ballads, rock – and in some ways she fell into the gaps inbetween."

"The problem was she could sing a telephone directory, but she didn't have a musical point of view," says Blue Note boss Bruce Lundvall, who would later sign Norah Jones. "I have to admit I'm guilty of passing on a brilliant career."

Cassidy was never especially ambitious. She doubted her own abilities and refused to compromise her principles, whether that meant changing what she wore (she preferred baggy casual wear to dresses) or limiting what she sang. She met with Lundvall in 1994 but it came to nothing. Other A&R men got short shrift. "We had people from major record companies come along and see Eva sing," says Biondo. "They'd talk to her and they didn't like what she said so they'd leave. She told one guy that she wouldn't do any pop crap."

Only twice did she complete an album. In 1992 she released *The Other Side*, a collection of jazz and blues standards in collaboration with Chuck Brown, the man who pioneered the short-lived Washington DC dance phenomenon Go-Go in the late 1970s. "Listening to her voice, I thought she was much older," Brown told an interviewer at the time. "Yes indeed, she really took me back. I said, 'This lady needs to be heard.'"

In 1996, she released her solo debut, *Live At Blues Alley*, recorded at the Washington DC

club. It featured several songs which would reappear on *Songbird* but she had a cold the night it was recorded and wasn't impressed. By her own standards she was never good enough.

CASSIDY AND BIONDO were friends for 10 years and lovers for just three. She had a few other relationships but none lasted long. "Eva is someone who doesn't need the baggage of somebody else," says Biondo without rancour. "She was concerned with people's feelings. However she was concerned with making sure that she wasn't inconvenienced by other people's lives either, and that's a fairly strong approach to interacting with people."

But she and Biondo remained close friends after the split, even going on holiday to the Caribbean together, and the relationship was good while it lasted. They shared a house in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, and lived like any other couple, going out for a movie and a pizza or staying in to watch Cassidy's favourite show, *Seinfeld*. Neither of them had much enthusiasm for cooking or housework.

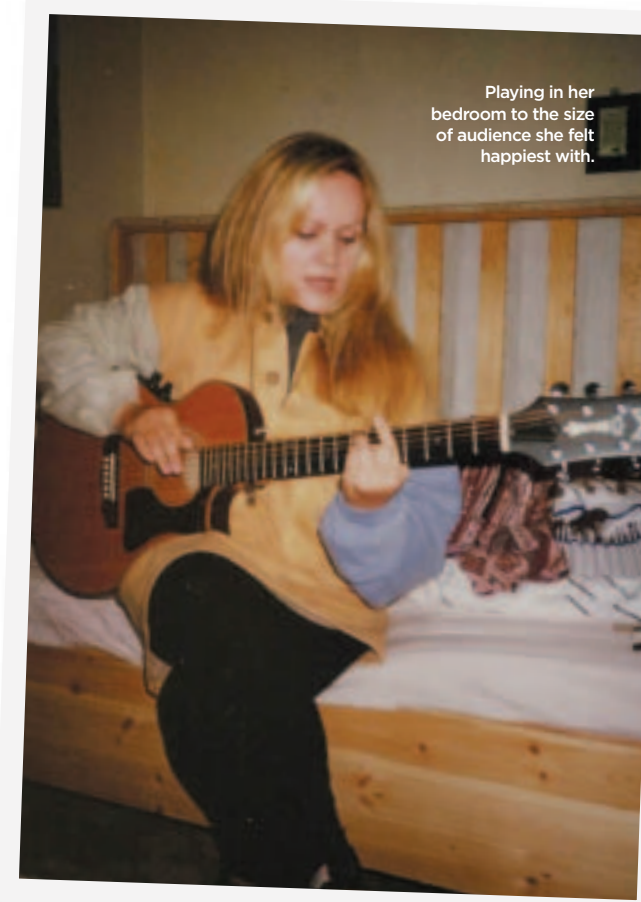
Cassidy was a keen amateur artist. She tried art college but, says, Barbara, "she always wanted to do things her own way and that didn't sit very well with the professors there." She would settle on a new project, launch herself into it for a week or two then never touch it again. "She made me a coffee table with marble in the middle with all these Roman guys playing flutes," says Biondo. "She made me a clock, she made me a cigar box, she wrote me a poem. You couldn't go into a gallery and see 100 Eva Cassidy paintings. You'd see 16 paintings, 20 clay pots and a picture of 8 gardens that she's made, stuff like that. It's like her music."

She was also a nature lover. In spring she and Biondo would go cycling, winding along the side of the Potomac river, up Mount Vernon to George Washington's birthplace. She also cycled with her mother. "She had such a keen eye and nothing ever escaped her," says Barbara. "She would point things that I just wouldn't have noticed, like the filtering of sun through foliage or a little snail or a pretty stone on the beach."

There's a risk that memories like this might resemble particularly saccharine moments from a made-for-TV biopic but Cassidy was more complex than that. Like most people she teemed with contradictions. She was a fiercely loyal friend who felt hemmed in by relationships; a long-distance cyclist who smoked Marlboro Lights and dined on hot dogs and pizza; a fragile performer who carried out heavy manual labour at the garden centre. In the end, it was her love of the outdoors which

proved fatal. "In hindsight she should have stayed out of the sun," says Barbara, "but when she was a teenager nobody realised how dangerous it was."

In 1993 Cassidy had a small malignant mole removed from her back and doctors believed they had stopped the cancer from developing any further. Three years later



During her final weeks she lay in bed at her parents' home, cared for by her sister. "She was loved to the very last minute of her life"

she developed a pain in her hip and thigh and had to walk with a cane. She assumed she had sprained something while working on a mural in a school cafeteria.

In fact X-Rays at Johns Hopkins hospital revealed that the cancer had worked its way into her bones and lungs and was eating her alive. She was diagnosed in August 1996 and told that in all likelihood she had just four months to live. She opted for the most invasive and aggressive treatment, which involved replacing her hipbone and subjecting her to chemotherapy.

"A lot of people choose not to have it because the survival rate is so low they figure, 'Why go through the hell?'," says Biondo. "Your hair falls out, you lose weight, you throw up all the time, you have a temperature, shit like that. So she went through all that because she wanted to live." He says she never once complained.

Cassidy didn't have health insurance so a group of friends and fans organised a benefit gig on 26 September at the Bayou club in Georgetown. She had so many fans at the Washington-based Recording Industry Association of America that they made her a gold disc, even though her modest sales fell well short of the requisite amount, and presented it to her that night.

Cassidy sang backing vocals with Chuck Brown on *Red Top* and closed the night with a solo song, Louis Armstrong's *What A Wonderful World*. She was a heartbreaking sight, using a walker to get to the stage and wearing a beret to hide her chemotherapy-induced hair loss. "Everyone's crying and she's singing great," says Biondo, choked at the memory. "At the very end of the song it's like, 'I think to myself' – she stops singing, she looks around and sees everyone looking at her – and she says, 'What a wonderful world'. That was it. That was the night. I've got that on videotape, man. I look at it sometimes and I just lose it."

"It was a living wake in some ways since so many people knew Eva was terminal," says Richard Harrington. "When she came onstage you could feel the love, the concern, the fear, probably some pity, as well. I don't think I'll ever hear *What A Wonderful World* in anybody but Eva's voice."

That was Cassidy's last performance. During her final weeks she lay in bed at her parents' home, cared for by her sister, a registered nurse, and visited by a constant procession of friends. "She would call them her 'angel brigade'," says Barbara. "She was loved to the very last minute of her life." Even Bruce Lundvall came to apologise for not signing her.

On the morning of Friday 2 November it was obvious that Cassidy wouldn't last the day. She was shivering and virtually comatose and a Unitarian minister came to give the final blessing. Biondo couldn't bear to watch any longer and left that afternoon. He received the phone call from Barbara a few hours later.

"It's not something I would ever do again," he says sombrely. "If you're ever in a situation where you're with somebody you love and they're dying, don't leave. Don't do what I did."

A few days later, Eva Cassidy's ashes were scattered by the side of St Mary's river in southern Maryland, on the shore where she used to come with Barbara to walk and swim, and carried by the wind. >>

EVA CASSIDY

THE AFTERLIFE OF Eva Cassidy began when friend and songwriter Grace Griffith sent one of her records to Bill Straw at Californian independent label Blix Street. Straw agreed to release *Live At Blues Alley*, *The Other Side* and *Eva By Heart*, the album she was working on before she died. Shortly afterwards an old friend of Straw's, Martin Jennings from Anglo-Australian indie Hot Records, came to stay.

"He put the tape in the payer and after about a minute I said 'Bill who the hell's that?'," remembers Jennings. "Straight off the bat you knew she was a great singer and then out came this awful story. What an evening that was. We were excited and horrified at the same time. It was like watching the car go over the cliff at the end of *The Italian Job*. Noooo!"

Straw combined highlights from the three extant Cassidy albums into *Songbird* and he and Jennings released it in their respective countries in 1998. Two years later one of Hot's pluggers brought it to the attention of Terry Wogan's Radio 2 show. "My producer, Paul Walters, was given *Songbird* in the hope that it might be considered for Wake Up To Wogan," relates Wogan. "We were absolutely stunned by the voice and the simple arrangements of the songs. We played *Over The Rainbow* on the show the next day and the response from listeners was incredible. People rang in asking to hear her again and wanting to know where they could buy it. We are both quite proud of the fact that we 'discovered' Eva Cassidy."

In the following months *Songbird* sold 100,000 copies, missing the Top 75 by just one place. The tipping point came when *Top Of The Pops 2* producer Mark Hagen obtained a 10-fi clip of Cassidy performing *Over The Rainbow* at Blues Alley. Hagen admits he took some persuading. "It's a ropery old bit of footage. It's camcorder, one-shot, bit wobbly, black-and-white. It barely meets broadcast standards but after a while it got to me so I could overlook the technical shortcomings and focus on the performance and the voice, which was startling."

Hagen hedged his bets by screening the clip at the end of the 13 December edition of *TOTP2*. That way if viewers turned off it wouldn't harm the ratings. But they didn't turn off. In fact the letters and emails flooded in solidly for months. On 7 February, *TOTP2* showed the song again to mark the week of what would have been Cassidy's 37th birthday. "There were astonishing emails from people saying they'd watched it and burst into tears," says Hagen. "It completely struck a chord with people."

It is a uniquely compelling bit of footage. The poor quality lends it an intimate verité feel and when the caption halfway through reveals that she is dead it comes like a punch to the stomach. Knowledge of a premature demise always encourages the listener to search for hidden meanings and *Over The Rainbow*'s wistful, transcendent longing for a world far away from this one attains an unbearable poignancy.

On 18 March 2001, *Songbird* completed its 1010-day climb to number one. *Imagine* reached the same position a year later, and *American Time* a year after that. Clearly this was not a freak occurrence. "There's a big audience who have an appetite for music but they're not being exposed to the kind they like," says



Her parents Barbara and Hugh receive the platinum discs for *Songbird* sales in the UK.

Part of her appeal is simply musical; Cassidy's work is preserved by the enduring romance of unfulfilled promise

Hagen. "Subsequently we've had Norah Jones but at that time there were no channels for that kind of material. The death thing is an element but it's not necessarily *the* element. If it was then she wouldn't still be having number one albums."

There is something singularly potent about a performer who dies young, particularly if, like Cassidy, Nick Drake or Jeff Buckley, they never attained mainstream success while they were alive. Part of the appeal is simply musical;

Cassidy's work was never scrubbed clean for mass market consumption so it remains indelibly authentic. But there's also the fact that she's frozen in time, preserved by the enduring romance of unfulfilled promise. Dead singers won't date appalling celebrities, collaborate with clods, abandon their principles or lose the plot. They won't let you down.

The guardians of their legacy, however, can let you down very easily indeed. Just consider Tupac Shakur's prolific posthumous career, which has taken on an increasingly ghoulish taint as quality levels plunge floorwards. Everyone involved in Cassidy's music is determined not to let the same thing happen.

"It's a very difficult line to walk," says Jennings. "We don't want to be seen as scraping any barrel bottoms but we haven't done that."

Biondo is acutely aware of walking that line. Although he has no say over what is released he is responsible for supplying the recordings and he knows that Eva would not have thought they were good enough. "We're dealing with a lot of music that was never intended to be on record. And I'm guilty. It's my fault. But I would say what's out there with someone singing as good as Eva? I mean I listen to the record sometimes and if I was a recording engineer I'd laugh and say who's the asshole recording this shit? But then I listen to Eva and my God this girl can sing."

Barbara Cassidy says there will only be two more albums and she regularly turns down offers of a Hollywood biopic. "If a movie comes out it has to be the truth," she says firmly. But Cassidy recorded so much material over the years that some of it is out of her family's control. There have been two below-par unauthorised releases – the slick, hollow *No Boundaries* and a reissue of Method Actor's debut – under Cassidy's name and the Cassidys are suing some of their daughter's former acquaintances in an ongoing case which they are unable to discuss.

Biondo reserves his anger for the music industry. Although he still makes a living out of it, he speaks like a man disillusioned. "Eva was alive and she was always good and they should have seen it. People die, people get sick – I don't know how you could ever stop that – but when people who are supposed to find talent can't see how good Eva is and hire people who sing out of tune, that's what makes me mad."

Biondo wonders sometimes how Cassidy would have reacted to success if she had lived to see it. "She would have liked interviews like this. I don't think she would have liked television or live radio or high pressure things in big auditoriums. But I think she would have liked people telling her she was good."

He tells a story about the time in June 1996 when she played at Borders books in Rockville, Maryland. "A lady came up and said, Can I have your home address? I want to write you a letter. And the letter said, 'My husband died and I have been depressed and after seeing you play I have begun to live my life again because I know that the world is a beautiful place.' How could you not be touched by that?" ■