



# My Way

## The Story Behind the Legendary Song

Written by Andy Owen



There are songs.

There are *famous* songs.

And then there are songs that somehow escape the world of music altogether and become part of human culture itself.

My Way belongs firmly in that final category.

It is no longer merely a record. It is much more than that. It has become so woven into all our lives, that it now exists almost separately from the man who made it famous.

Funerals. Weddings. Karaoke bars. State occasions. Retirement parties. Late-night boozing singalongs. The song turns up everywhere.

And almost always, when those opening lines begin, the room changes.

*"And now... the end is near..."*

Let's face it, very few songs in modern history possess such immediate gravity.

My Way is one of the most recognisable melodies in popular music - and one of the most performed songs ever written. I think it is one of the defining recordings of the twentieth century.

Having said that, I suspect that most people who know every word of it, have very little idea where it came from, how it was created, or the extraordinary chain of events that brought it into existence.

Believe me, the story behind the song is every bit as fascinating as the song itself. And at the centre of it, stand two absolute giants of popular music - Frank Sinatra and Paul Anka.

I make no apology whatsoever for my admiration of both of them.

In my view, they are towering figures. And always will be.

They are *titans* from an era when entertainers were not manufactured by committees, assembled by algorithms - or held together by dubious talent. They have presence, style, class - and astonishing quality. They know how to control audiences. They understand timing and delivery. And above all else, they understand songs.

*Just a word about my use of 'tense' here. Paul of course, is still with us and long may that continue. But so is Frank in so many ways. That's why I have described them in the present.)*

When I started to research this, it occurred to me, that Paul Anka was part of my own life, long before I had any understanding whatsoever of the music business or songwriting.

His hit '*Lonely Boy*' was the very first record I ever bought.

I can still remember it now. It was a momentous event for me. My very first single. I bought it at Newtons Record Shop in Shirley High Street, Solihull in 1959.



*Shirley High Street in those wonderful days. Newtons was just on the right-hand side*

It cost me six shillings and 8 pence. About 32 pence in today's money.

I paid for it with money saved from my paper round, delivering daily news to lovely people in Stanton, Sandyhill and Stoneford Roads.

That single mattered to me.

Records mattered then. They still do, to a lot of us.

The singers we admired, felt larger than life. They seemed to come from another world entirely.

And in many ways of course, they did.



Years later, I would come to understand just how truly extraordinary Paul Anka was.

By the late 1960's, he was no longer simply the fresh-faced teenager who had exploded onto the music scene with '*Diana*,' '*Lonely Boy*' and '*Put Your Head on My Shoulder*.'

He had evolved into something far more formidable.

Still only in his twenties, Anka was already becoming one of the most respected young songwriters in America.

He had moved effortlessly beyond the limitations of teen stardom and was building a reputation inside the music business, as an unusually intelligent operator - commercially astute, musically disciplined and incredibly ambitious.

Unlike many early rock and roll stars who faded as the decade progressed, Anka adapted.

He wrote constantly. He produced and arranged.

He studied the business carefully.

And perhaps most importantly of all, he understood older performers and recognised their extraordinary talent. That mattered enormously in an era when much of popular music was splitting violently between generations.

He was a remarkably intelligent craftsman.

A serious songwriter.

A musical strategist. One of those rare figures who understood not only melody, but song structure and the use of emotion.

And nowhere was that genius displayed more brilliantly than in the creation of '*My Way*.'

Ironically, the song did not even begin in English. Its origins were French.

In 1967, French writers Jacques Revaux and Gilles Thibault, together with singer Claude François, created a song called 'Comme d'habitude' – 'As Usual.'

The original lyric was not triumphant or defiant. In fact, quite the opposite.

It was melancholy. Domestic. Almost painfully mundane.



The song described a dying relationship trapped in routine. Two people drifting through the same joyless rituals, day after day. The lyrics spoke of cold mornings, stale familiarity and emotional exhaustion.

Released in late 1967, the song became a modest French hit.

And then another future legend briefly entered the story.

In 1968, music publisher David Pitt approached a young struggling songwriter named David Bowie and asked him to create an English-language adaptation of "Comme d'habitude" for the international market.

Bowie produced a version titled "Even a Fool Learns to Love." Nothing came of it. The project stalled and disappeared.

Yet the experience stayed with Bowie, who later recycled some of its melodic ideas into an entirely new composition called "Life on Mars?" - which itself would eventually become one of the defining songs of his career.

While holidaying in the south of France, Anka heard the melody and instantly sensed potential. Not just commercial potential, but emotional potential. He recognised that hidden beneath the French lyric was a melodic structure that was capable of carrying something far larger and more profound.

So, he approached the writers and bought the rights to the song. Yes, just like that. And remarkably, he secured them for a symbolic dollar. At that point, he had no clear idea what he would ultimately do with the song.

He later described 'Comme d'habitude' as a song about a boring marriage. A couple simply existing beside each other "as usual."

But he heard something else in it...

Anka and Sinatra had first met years earlier when the young Canadian singer was beginning to establish himself in Las Vegas and New York entertainment circles.

Sinatra liked him immediately.

That alone was significant. Sinatra could be generous and loyal, but he could also be deeply dismissive of younger performers whom he regarded as lightweight or opportunistic.

Yet he recognised something in Anka beyond mere teen-idol popularity.

He saw professionalism. Passionate commitment. A real work ethic.

Above all, he saw a respect for the art of songwriting.

Over time, the relationship deepened. Anka became part of the wider Vegas orbit that surrounded Sinatra and the Rat Pack years.

He observed Sinatra closely on stage - the delivery and phrasing of songs and the effortless confidence.



He also saw the astonishing power the man had, together with his insecurities, moods, the private language, the toughness - and the occasional vulnerability beneath the public swagger.

All of this would later become critically important.

Anka found himself having dinner with Sinatra in Miami during one of the darkest and most turbulent musical periods of the late 1960's. America was changing rapidly. The old entertainment order was under pressure.

Rock music had exploded. The Beatles had changed everything. Youth culture had become dominant.

Sinatra himself was standing at a crossroads historically, because of what was going on in the music business.

Elvis had happened. The Beatles had happened. Psychedelia had happened. He hated it all. Sinatra - only recently the King of the World (and he was...) - suddenly looked like the last giant from another civilisation.

Anka recalled Sinatra dismissing much contemporary music with utter contempt. He simply did not understand the new world that was emerging around him.

Frank belonged to another age. An age of supper clubs. Big orchestras. Incredible lyricists. Standards. Control.

But now, in the late 1960's, Sinatra felt old. He felt he was yesterday's papers.

More than that – he felt *irrelevant*.

During dinner, Sinatra suddenly announced that he was quitting show business altogether. He'd had enough. The Rat Pack years were fading. Friends were gone. America was changing beyond recognition.

And then Sinatra said something to Anka that stayed with him:

*"You never wrote me that song."*

That sentence haunted him. Because Anka adored Sinatra.

Not casually.

But deeply.



He revered him not only as a singer, but as the ultimate interpreter of songs. Sinatra had the unique ability to inhabit lyrics in a way few performers could.

He didn't merely sing songs. He *became* them.

And Anka had always felt intimidated by the idea of writing for him.

Until that night. Because when Anka eventually decided to write "My Way," he was not imagining Sinatra from a distance.

He *knew* the man...

Back in New York, at one o'clock in the morning, Anka sat alone at his typewriter and piano and began writing. And what he did was the true act of genius.



He did not write as Paul Anka. He wrote as Frank Sinatra.

Anka later said, that he asked himself one question:

*"If Frank were writing this, what would he say?"*

And suddenly the words arrived.

*"And now, the end is near..."*

When you think about it, that opening line is perfection. Within seven words, the listener already knows that this is a reckoning.

And from there, the lyric unfolds like a final confession from a proud, ageing man reviewing the choices, victories, failures and scars of an entire life.

What astonishes me about the lyric and always has, is its restraint.

It never begs for sympathy. It never apologises. It never pleads for approval.

Instead, it simply states the case calmly and defiantly, but underpinned with an unmistakable 'fuck you' message.

*"Regrets, I've had a few..."*

*"I ate it up and spit it out..."*

*"I faced it all and I stood tall..."*

Anka understood Sinatra well enough to know precisely how much toughness, vulnerability, swagger and emotional armour had to exist in perfect balance.

Especially given Sinatra's state of mind at that time.

This is why I regard this lyric as a masterpiece of songwriting.

Not because it is poetic in the traditional sense. But because it is psychologically flawless and perfect for the recipient. Anka had somehow disappeared inside Sinatra's personality and produced a song that sounded as though Sinatra himself had written every syllable.

That is an extraordinary achievement.

But, of course, the words also speak directly to ordinary people. Because most of us, when we finally look back on our lives, don't want to see perfection.

We want to believe that whatever mistakes we made, whatever roads we travelled, whatever damage was done along the way, we did it 'our way'.

That of course, is the emotional core of 'My Way', and it explains why the song has endured for generations.

Sinatra recorded it in December 1968 in a single take.

One take. Can you believe that? Today's musicians would find it impossible to believe.

The recording itself is pure quality. Sinatra's phrasing is immaculate. The famous Don Costa arrangement rises perfectly behind him. And crucially, Sinatra never oversings it. He resists sentimentality. He allows the lyric to carry the weight.

The song became a huge hit.



In Britain, it remained in the charts for an astonishing 75 weeks - a record that still stands. And then something remarkable happened.

The song ceased to belong entirely to Sinatra. It entered public ownership emotionally.

Millions of people adopted it as their own personal anthem.

Ironically, Sinatra himself reportedly grew to dislike the song. His daughter Tina later said, he found it self-indulgent and could never escape it.

Perhaps that was inevitable. The song had become bigger than the singer. Yes, even bigger than the greatest ever – Francis Albert Sinatra.

And through all of it, Paul Anka remained impressively gracious about the entire thing. Record executives were furious that he had given the song away rather than recording it himself.

But Anka understood something fundamental...

He was old enough to write the song.

But not old enough to sing it.



Only Sinatra possessed the life experience, authority, weariness and emotional credibility necessary to deliver those words properly.

And Anka was right. No one else could have launched the song into history in quite the same way.

No one...

Looking back now, all these years later, I find the entire story to be quite moving.

Perhaps because it reminds us of a time when songs were crafted carefully. When lyrics mattered. When performers developed presence over decades rather than months.

But perhaps also because "My Way" speaks to something universal that never changes. At the end of life, most people do not measure themselves purely by money, status or success.

They ask quieter questions.

*Did I live life to the full?*

*Did I stand my ground and tell the bastards to fuck off when they needed to be told?*

*Did I make my own choices?*

*Did I remain true to myself, however difficult it sometimes became?*

*Did I listen to - and act upon - the advice of my inner voice?*

That is why 'My Way' continues to resonate across generations. And that is why the song now feels almost immortal.

Not simply because it was sung by Sinatra. Not simply because it was written by Paul Anka.

But because together, these two giants created something rare...

...a song that allows human beings to look back at their lives - honestly, proudly, imperfectly - and still somehow say:

Yes...

I did it *my way*.



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