

Openhearted prayer

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

When folk singers Suzzy and Maggie Roche began collecting prayers and putting them to music, they had no idea that a national disaster would highlight the poignancy of the songs. Suzzy Roche, whose previous CDs include *Songs from an Unmarried Housewife and Mother*, *Greenwich Village, USA*, and *Holy Smokes*, decided to pursue the prayer project after participating in a forum at Harvard University's Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, in which artists explored issues of race, identity and community. Suzzy asked friends and strangers to share a poem, prayer or meditation that she could put to music. She taped copies to her apartment window and spent time "living with" the prayers, saying each one aloud and then (with sister Maggie) composing music. They recorded 18 of the songs, and named the CD after the address of the building where institute participants met.

The CD includes "New York City," which Suzzy wrote after September 11 for a memorial service at a Brooklyn fire station. It complements the collection of personal prayers by gathering up the individual voices into a communal supplication (with a quote from Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Renascence"): "May our voices rise to 'split the sky . . . And let the face of God shine through.' / Can we push the clouds of fear apart? And rest our sadness on Thy heart?"

The CD opens with Ysaye Barnwell of the *a cappella* group "Sweet Honey in the Rock" singing the traditional spiritual "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray." Her rich, deep voice seems to plead, not only for the presence of prayer in a difficult time, but for a God who will be available to respond to prayer.

The Shaker hymn "This Gospel How Precious" is also sung *a cappella*, while other numbers are supported by strings, keyboard, organ and "surprises." Some of the original meditations/prayers make for better songs than others. A wonderful song of praise, titled "Jeremiah," consists of only one verse (Jer. 33:3), but the Roches' musical setting expands the meaning of the words. Most of the prayers are hauntingly lovely, and even the pieces that are more prose than poetry are made poignant and powerful by the Roches' settings.

The prayers are meant to reach across lines of religious identity. Some of the prayers belong to people in difficult moments or who have known years of pain-- such as a Vietnam vet seeking forgiveness, a Sudanese man offering thanks for his escape from slavery, and a gay man lamenting the murder of Matthew Shepard. In one of the highlights of the album, an AIDS patient raises hallelujahs for the intervention of God in the everyday traumas of hospital life: "Father, I am calling out to you / bless each patient name by name / these are your children / Lord bless their families / and those who do not know/ you are in this / go in Lord and touch them/hallelujah."

"The thing about the recording," said Suzzy Roche recently on National Public Radio, is that "it's completely open-hearted--not one hard-edged, cool, cynical note. . . . That was very important to me . . . to keep that quality because that was the experience of doing [the project]."