

A photograph of a concert stage. In the foreground, a large crowd of people is visible, many with their hands raised. In the background, a man in a dark suit and tie is seen from behind, walking towards the stage. The stage area is brightly lit with warm, orange-toned lights.

PAUL ANKA

DOING IT HIS WAY

Pop Trailblazer Paul Anka Charts His Path with
HBO Documentary and New Album

BY CHRIS PARTON PHOTOS BY MARK WEISS



If you're looking for the most adaptable, plugged-in talent in American pop-music history, look no further than Paul Anka.

Since his beginnings in 1956, the ever-evolving star has pioneered many of the musical truths we now take for granted. He was one of the first pop singer-songwriters, penning his own commercial hits. He was one of the first teenage idols, drawing screaming hordes of young fans years before The Beatles. And, he became one of our first enduring talents, changing his craft with culture. Anka holds an illuminating record on that score: He's the only artist to place a song in the *Billboard* Top 100 in seven straight decades—and many of those are seminal entries to the American songbook.

On top of his own hits like "Put Your Head On My Shoulder," "Puppy Love," and more, Anka is the songwriter behind beloved songs for Buddy Holly, Frank Sinatra, Tom Jones, Michael Jackson, and Drake, among others—all while continuing to tour and record.





In fact, the classic star with a million stories is not done yet. His latest studio album, *Inspirations of Life and Love*, arrives February 13 (just in time for Valentine's Day). And in a new documentary currently airing on HBO, *Paul Anka: His Way*, he brings his stories together for the first time.

"It's easy to look back," Anka says. "But being relevant artistically is gratifying, frankly. You don't really see that coming. None of us saw it coming back in the '50s when pop music was in its infancy."

"The reality is I'm in my 80s now and even though I don't live by numbers, to be involved with [the film] for its accuracy, it's the time," he adds. "Everything in life for all of us with our lifestyle, it's all timing. Being who I am today and looking at my body of work, and all the team efforts and people I've written for, it's cool."

Born in Ottawa, Canada, the now 84-year-old has over 900 songs to his credit, with over 130 albums recorded, and 90 million sales (both LP and single formats). Anka started out performing in school and church, then borrowing his mother's car to sing at amateur nights around his hometown. He had to leave his job as a budding reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen* to start his career, and paired those writing skills with a butter-smooth, forever-young vocal to grow into the epitome of a classic pop star. A suave heartthrob in the age of pompadours and poodle dresses.

The *His Way* documentary is a trip down memory lane, but also argues for Anka's future—one with plenty of open road ahead. Narrated by actor Jason Bateman (Anka's son-in-law), it's the definitive story of Anka's life, and it begins with a 15-year-old meeting producer Don Costa in New York City, where he signed his first \$100/month deal. Anka says his writing is what sets him apart, and the youngster scored his first No. 1 with the syrupy "Diana" in 1957.

"That whole songwriting thing for me started out with me having a crush on this girl, and no one was going to write for me," he explains. "No one would even listen to me because back then it was guys twice my age making it—Sinatra, Perry Como. I was listening to Rhythm & Blues. I just wrote for myself, and from there it just kind of took off."

A certified breakout star, Anka followed up with tracks like the squeaky clean "Puppy Love" in 1960, while building friendships with contemporaries like Bobby Darin and Frankie Avalon. But behind the scenes, things were grittier. *His Way* details the heady days of working in nightclubs with mob connections and running around as a "junior member" of the Rat Pack alongside Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr.

It was not all gold records and sharp suits. Anka tells

American Songwriter he helped arrange the fateful tour for his friend Buddy Holly, which resulted in his tragic death in a plane crash. And he fell off the charts completely with the market shock of the British Invasion in the early 1960s.

Ultimately, Anka says it was songwriting that "saved" him. He toured internationally, where there was still demand for American pop stars, and wrote as much as he could—even penning the theme song to *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. He was living by the same advice he'd given The Beatles years earlier, which, ironically, led to his career slump. But Anka had nothing against the Fab Four—they were old friends he knew from their days as a blues cover band, when he suggested they write their own tunes.

"I was 17, 18 when I saw The Beatles in Paris, and they were a band out of Germany who came to see my show at

the Olympia Theater," he says. "They were a cover band copying Chuck Berry, all the American music. Ultimately, they did it better. Point being they'd sit with me and go, 'God, we admire you writing your own stuff.' And I said, 'Yeah, you got to write for yourselves—that's the only reason I'm looking at you now.'"

A few years later, Anka was 24 and spending much of his time in France when he wrote his most enduring hit. He had always wanted to write a song for his hero, Frank Sinatra, but now Ol' Blue Eyes was retiring. The surprise announcement hit Anka hard, so he sat down and penned "My Way" in about five hours. The defiant anthem speaks to Sinatra leaving show business behind—and as always, do-

ing so on his own terms. But it would become an anthem of self-determination, recorded by everyone from Nina Simone and Elvis Presley to Aretha Franklin and Sid Vicious.

"I realized, it's everybody's song," Anka says in the film.

Elsewhere, the doc traces a riveting path through Anka's love life and 1970s resurgence, reinventing his craft in Las Vegas to write era-defining hits like Tom Jones' "She's a Lady." That reinvention continued through the '80s, '90s, and even 2000s, when Anka did a whole album of rock covers. *Rock Swings* put a classic-pop shine on tracks by Bon Jovi, R.E.M., and even Nirvana. Later, the estate of Michael Jackson released two songs he and Anka had co-written, including "This Is It" and "Never Felt So Good" (with Justin Timberlake). And in 2018, one more collab, "Don't Matter to Me," was released by Drake (with Jackson's posthumous vocal).

No matter the era, Anka's lyrics cut to the heart. And his story is like a timeline of American music.

"Going through memories was a great experience. I could have reached out and touched it; it seemed like

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yesterday," Anka says of the documentary's production. "... When I looked at all those images in those early [days], it all came back to me how glamorous it may have looked on the surface, but I was fighting for my life trying to keep it together."

The fight continues today, and Anka still performs with the voice of a "40- or 50-year-old." His classic "Put Your Head On My Shoulder" went viral in the early days of TikTok, and now he says 20-30 percent of his crowd is Gen Z.

"I look down at these girls screaming at me and I'm saying, 'This is ridiculous,'" he says with a laugh.

His Way covers part of a recent world tour and comes full circle, with Anka back in New York City for Times Square New Year's Eve celebrations at the close of 2023. Yet it's not the end of the story. He tells *American Songwriter* another world tour is on the calendar for 2026, with dates scheduled from January through June. And in a long-anticipated move, Anka has approved the production of a Broadway musical telling his story. It's somewhat ironic, since he's still writing new chapters.

Asked about why he keeps going, keeps traveling, performing and working, he responds with the classic swagger of his youth.

"I'm always amused at that," he says. "When you find a passion for something, and you're in the one percent of the one percent of us lucky enough to be in this business on your own terms. ... Who the hell would ever give it up? I'm still healthy. It keeps me young. I'm always writing. I work when I want to work. I'm going to Chile to play to 10,000 people in a stadium. I'm going to Mexico after that."

Plus, he's still recording. Featuring 11 tracks—nine new songs and two enduring hits, redone for the moment—Anka's new album, *Inspirations of Life and Love*, arrives next month. With his velvet-smooth vocal in fine form and the same easy air of sophisticated cool, his work has always had, the set begins on a modern-feeling country rocker. "Just Can't Wait" shows Anka's adaptability remains intact, and then he shifts to rich orchestration, courtesy of the Hungarian Orchestra in Budapest.

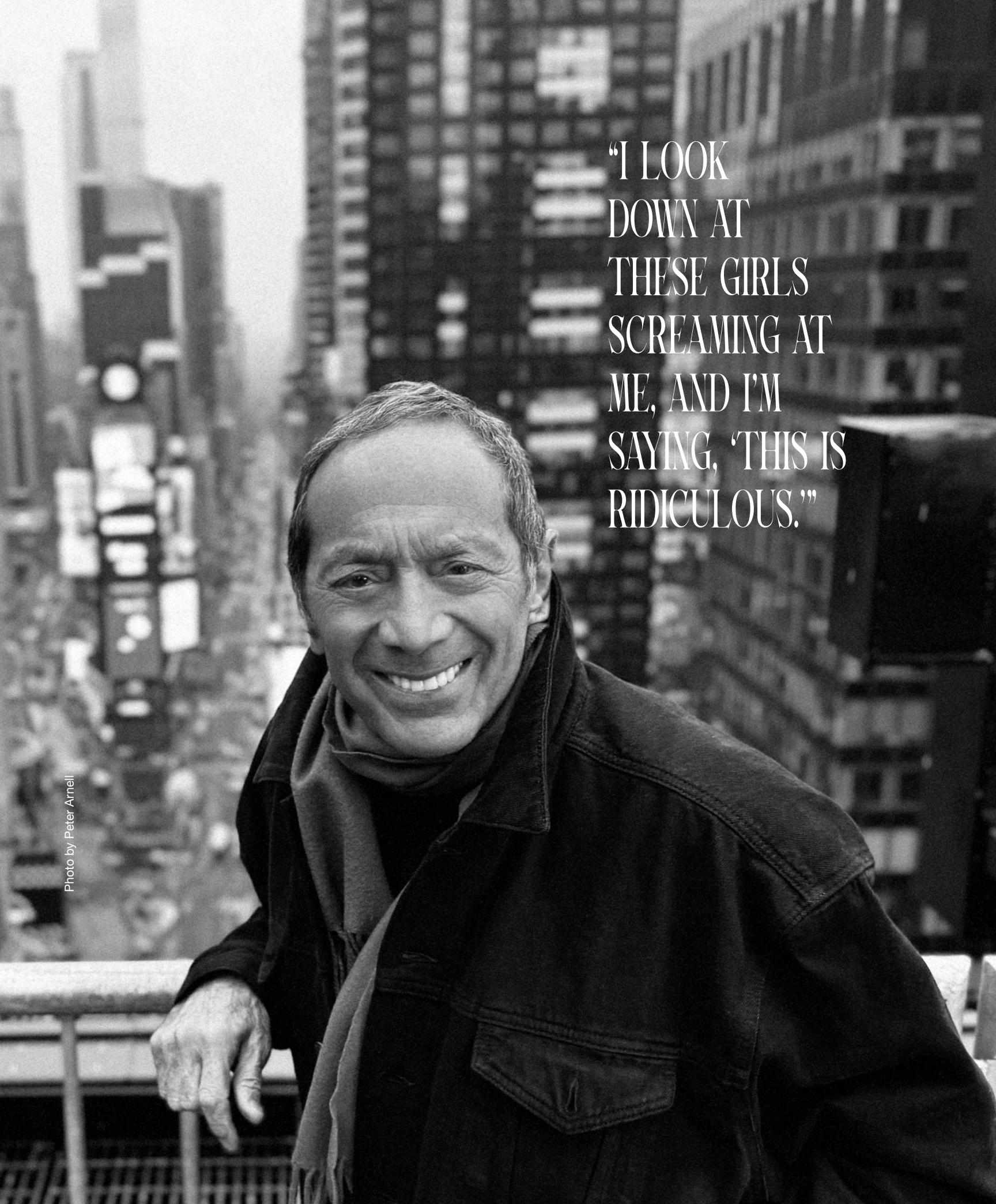
There's a new version of the Michael Jackson co-write ("Love Never Felt So Good"), and with the idealistic "Freedom for You and Me (Freedom for the World)," Anka speaks to the modern moment in culture and politics, reflecting on 70 years of change. The song was originally a hit for David Hasselhoff in the early '90s, so you can add the Baywatch star to his Rolodex of chart toppers.

"It's the same issues that are going on today. It's nothing different. Politicians messing everything up. Greed," he says of the re-made anthem. "The new stuff on there of mine is all dealing with the strongest emotion in life that we all have. And that's love."

Anka's album ends on yet another adaptation—a new version of the Sinatra hit "That's Life." And what a life he has seen.

"I don't know when the exit is for me," he says. "I live and I don't stand still, because they throw dirt on you if you do. I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I saw Sinatra retire two times, and here was my idol, sitting at home playing with trains, just hanging and getting bored. When you've got the kind of gift we've all been given, that we're lucky to get, it never dies. Art has no time limit to it. You're living that moment of creativity all the time. You don't turn it off."

"I've seen guys do that. They stand still and they die. I don't want that. I want to stay active while I can. There's no way I'm stopping."★

A black and white photograph of a man with short, light-colored hair, smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark, high-collared jacket over a dark turtleneck. His right hand is resting on a metal railing. The background is a blurred city skyline with numerous skyscrapers.

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