

## 'The Free Life'—a Rock Opera



Dan Koontz of East Hampton, right, spent more than a year writing the songs for his rock opera, "The Free Life," which commemorates the ill-fated balloon's take-off from a field in Springs in 1970.

Jonathan Richards and Stacy Dermont photos

**By Christopher Walsh**

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When the submersible craft Titan imploded during an expedition to the wreck of the Titanic in June, killing its five passengers, some in East Hampton Town remembered an earlier ill-fated journey, one that originated much closer to home.

The Free Life, a hot-air balloon, took off from pastureland on Fireplace Road in Springs 53 years ago this month, its three passengers seeking to make history with the first trans-Atlantic balloon flight. It was not to be: The Free Life went down in a storm off Newfoundland some 30 hours later. Rodney Anderson and Pamela Brown, a couple, and Malcolm Brighton, a British balloonist, were never found, nor was the Free Life.

"They came to Springs just looking for a flat, open space for the balloon launch, and found a community that rallied round and supported their cause," Joanne Pilgrim wrote in *The Star* in 2015, on the 45th anniversary of the tragedy. "From Dorothy and Clarence Barnes, who provided sustenance from their Barnes Country Store, to members of the Springs artist and literary enclave, such as Willem de Kooning and Jean Stafford, Springs residents got taken up by the venture."

More than a thousand people turned out for the launch, she wrote. After a delay of several hours because of wind, "the craft slowly took flight up and over Accabonac Harbor at about 1:40 p.m. It sailed out of sight, heading northeast for Europe."

Now, on the 53rd anniversary of the star-crossed adventure, the Free Life will be remembered in a new way: Dan Koontz, an East Hampton musician and composer, has written "The Free Life," a rock opera about it. With a band of mostly local musicians, he will perform "The Free Life," music interspersed with recorded narration, next Thursday at 7 p.m. at LTV Studios in Wainscott.

Mr. Koontz, who performs with South Fork groups including the Hoodoo Loungers and Edna's Kin, said last week that he did not consciously choose to compose a rock opera about the Free Life, at least not at first. "The more I think about it, the more I realize it kind of chose me," he said.

In 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic having paused live music for an extended period, "a song came to me in a dream -- I mean that sincerely. The lyrics weren't quite clear, but the melody was. I woke up and sang it into my phone so I wouldn't forget it. The title I came up with, and the hook for the chorus, was 'It's Too Late to Turn Back Now.' "

"I'm not sure where in my brain it connected to the story of the Free Life," he said, "but it struck me that it's apropos of a balloon -- you can't steer a balloon, it goes where the wind blows, and as soon as you take off it's too late to go back. As I delved deeper into the story, I kept coming up with more songs, more things to write about. It came about organically in that way, and I really didn't know quite what I was doing until four or five songs in, and said I may as well try to finish this."

While he allowed that "song cycle" may be a more accurate description for "The Free Life" than "rock opera," Mr. Koontz calls "Tommy," one of the Who's rock operas, an influential album. He was born in 1969, the year "Tommy" was released and a copy was acquired by his parents. "They listened to it a lot, I listened to it a lot, it was one of my favorites of theirs when I was a kid," he recalled. "And it definitely makes a couple of cameo appearances in my music. Some of the songs are very much Pete Townshend style," he said of the Who's guitarist and primary composer.

To this listener, demos of three of the songs in "The Free Life" also recall Americana -- the Band, for example, and Steve Earle. Along with "Too Late to Turn Back Now," "Fireplace Road" is from the point of view of a Bonacker. Another, "The Show Must Go On," "is about the pressure to follow through on a big project like the Free Life."

Mr. Koontz wanted each song to stand on its own, "so you could listen to and understand them as songs without a relationship to the story. But if they are put in the right context and order, they would help tell the story."

He also wanted the music to fit, sonically and stylistically, within the context of the era. "I thought of the collection of songs as almost an imaginary mix tape that the people involved with the Free Life would have listened to," he said. "On top of being about the story, it's also about the time."

Fifty-three years later, the tale of the Free Life remains fascinating, mysterious. "There's a little bit of a taboo, in a way, to talk about things when they end in disaster," Mr. Koontz said. "Once you get over that initial distaste for looking too closely at a disaster, you can really be drawn in and mesmerized by some of the stranger details of the story."

Anderson and Brown, she the daughter of an affluent Kentucky politician, "had never been a balloon before," he said. "Why they decided that this would be their project is totally mysterious."

Citing "The Free Life: The Spirit of Courage, Folly, and Obsession" by Anthony Smith, he recalled "strange coincidences and accidents of fate that led these people to this particular juncture in their lives, where they felt like they didn't even want to do this but had to, they had to take off because they'd already spent a lot of money and time. There was a whole crowd of people in a field in Springs waiting for them to take off. It's a strange story, compelling in a strange way."

When Mr. Koontz learned that Brown and Genie Chipps Henderson, of Springs, were childhood friends, he contacted her. "I didn't know what I was going to do with this stuff, but I sent her the songs I had. She was really enthusiastic and surprised that anybody would write songs about this tragedy. I started communicating with her, and she started getting more excited about it and really wanted there to be something, because for the 50th anniversary she had planned some commemorations, but Covid put the kibosh on that. This will be, for her, a substitute for what she wanted to do at the 50th. So we're putting this together as a commemoration of the event, but also in honor of these adventurers."

Performing "The Free Life" with Mr. Koontz next Thursday will be Fred Gilde on keyboards, with whom Mr. Koontz plays in the Moondogs, a band that plays the music of the Beatles; his brother, Andrew Koontz, a violinist; Steve Shaughnessy on bass; Bruce Beyer and James Benard on drums, and Sue Conklin and Sara Mundy on vocals.

Tickets to "The Free Life" are \$25 and available at [bit.ly/3OAIrRM](https://bit.ly/3OAIrRM) or by texting LTVFREELIFE to 41444.