CHAPTER-VII
A SONG FLUNG UP TO HEAVEN

The Old ack’s a – movering
a – movering
a – movering
the old ack’s a movering
and I’m going home  

-- Nineteenth-century American Spiritual

“Maya Angelou is a force of nature”.  -- Chicago Sun-Times

“Maya Angelou writes like a song, and like the truth”.  
-- The New York Times Book Review

“A sort of wit and wisdom of Angelou, culled from a life time of adversity and overcoming”  
-- The Denver Post

In 2002, Maya’s sixth autobiography, A Song Flung Up to Heaven, was published. It was not an easy book to write. In fact, A Song Flung up to Heaven was so difficult for Maya to work on that she decided she would not write another autobiography. As the writer explained:

The book had to deal with situations that didn’t seem to have any hope in them – the murder of Malcolm X, the murder of Martin Luther King on my birthday and the uprising in Watts. I thought everything I write says that you may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. I couldn’t see how I could find hope writing all these negatives. So I’ve written that book for six years, and it’s the slimmest of all my books (2009: 91).

A Song Flung Up to Heaven begins in 1964 with Angelou returning to the United States from Ghana in order to help the Civil Rights Movement, specifically to write and organise for Malcolm X. Shortly after she lands in California, he is assassinated before her work with him can begin. Her brother takes his grief-stricken sister to Hawaii, where she sings in nightclubs, with no notable success. Returning to California, she works as a door-to-door surveyor in the Watts District of Los Angeles, thus getting to know the
people’s poverty and anger. Therefore, she is not surprised by the outbreak of violence and senses the riots before she learns of them.

We smelled the conflagration before we heard it, or even heard about it... Burning wood was the first odor that reached my nose, but it was soon followed by the smell of scorched food, then the stench of smoldering rubber. We had one hour of wondering before the television news reporters arrived breathlessly (2002).

After a stormy encounter with her former lover, Angelou returns to New York, where she meets Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and agrees to promote the Movement. However, history repeats itself. Before she can go South for the movement, King also was assassinated. Again devastated, Angelou becomes a recluse until writer James Baldwin invites her to a dinner with glittering New York literati that reawakens her passion for writing. Friends encourage her to write and to begin by writing her life. Eventually, Angelou moves back to California and, in an effort to make spiritual sense of and triumph over her experiences, begins to write. A Song Flung up to Heaven ends with her writing the first few lines of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, opening the gate to her most important career and yet circling back to her first, most beloved book.

“Rise and be prepared to move on and ever on” (144)*, is the continuing theme of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical cycle, and the phrase succinctly sums up the story of her life. The first of this series of six splendid testaments, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, published in 1970, accounted for her first seventeen years. That memoir met with much acclaim and popular success. Succeeding volumes included The Heart of a Woman (1981) and Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now (1993).

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Angelou writes autobiography as literature, telling a story of tragedy and triumph, well stated and clearly stamped by her own unique blend of Afro-Americanism.

In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, an account of her activities during the 60s, a certain resignation replaces the contentiousness found in at least some of the books in the series. “At that point in the 60s”, she writes, “American blacks were acting as if they believed ‘A man lived. A man loved. A man tried and a man died and that was all there was to that’. Sometimes, it is hard to believe, in retrospect, that much has really changed. And yet . . .” (2002: 144).

Those born before that tumultuous decade when Civil Rights activists Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were assassinated while still in their prime will treasure the author’s personal assessments of the times and her commitment to the dreams of both men. Angelou returned from four years in Africa to work for Malcolm X, only to learn soon after her arrival that he had been killed. King also died just a few weeks after she had agreed to help him organise his poor people’s march. She supported what she believed both men ultimately sought to accomplish and did not see their goals at odds.

Those born in the wake of those times, seeing them only through the eyes of history, are offered a unique perspective into the causes of the devastating riots that broke out in many American cities in the late 60s. Angelou writes about her 1965 discoveries as a door-to-door consumer surveyor in Watts a few years before everything came unstuck. It was not hard for her to understand why people burned their own homes and looted community stores. The poignant beauty of Angelou’s writing enhances rather than masks the candour with which she addresses the racial crisis through which America was passing.
The book is more of a summing up than a breaking of new ground. Much of Angelou’s wisdom has already appeared earlier in the series. For example, she repeats here—using slightly different wording and context—the advice her grandmother gave her as a child, earlier reported in *Nothing for My Journey*:

“Sister, change everything you don’t like about your life. But when you come to a thing you can’t change, then change the way you think about it.”
“[You’ll see it new, and may be a new way to change it](2002: 144).

On the whole, Angelou’s book is a worthy addition to what she originally set out to accomplish: to examine that quality in the human spirit that makes it continue to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. What has served Angelou well is now bestowed upon us. Her autobiographies are statements of profound faith and hope.

Angelou has been writing her autobiography in memoirs since her first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in 1970. Four others followed, the last being *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*. This latest instalment, *A Song Flung up to Heaven* – the sixth volume of her memoirs—begins with Maya Angelou’s departure from Ghana in late 1964.

After many years in Africa, Angelou was returning to the United States to work with Malcolm X, who she had met during his trip to Ghana. Shortly after arriving in San Francisco to spend a month with her mother and brother, Bailey, Angelou was visiting a friend when she received a phone call. It’s another friend, who in the course of conversation observed how “crazy the negroes” (2002: 56) in the United States are, “otherwise, why, would they have just killed that man in New York?” (2002: 56).

That man, of course, was Malcolm X, who was assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom in front of his wife and children. Stricken with grief and confused about
what to do and where to go, Maya’s brother, her life-long rescuer, once again saves her, by finding her a nightclub gig singing in Hawaii. The work was easy, but she enjoyed only limited success. She discovered that a “real singer” (Della Reese) was packing them in every night at another club.

Realising that she wasn’t a singer, Angelou decided to give up her job and returned to California – this time to Los Angeles. There, she found a job canvassing residents in Watts, where she got to know the neighbourhood, and indirectly, the people. She saw the devastation that joblessness and the lack of education created, and felt the futility and anger of the black men who lived there. So the Watts riots in 1965 were no surprise to her.

However, the enormity of the riots and the press reaction to them did stun her. She remembers talking to one French journalist who insisted that the French had never had slaves. Her persistence stopped when Angelou reminded him that France had ruled Haiti, Guadeloupe and Martinique. “None of the Africans went there on the i/e de France,” she said. “They were taken there on slave ships” (2002: 57).

Things quieted down in Los Angeles for Angelou when her bombastic lover from Ghana – who she refers to as “the African” (2002: 57) – arrived to take her back “home” (2002: 57), he told her. But Angelou had her ever-present allies close at hand in San Francisco. She calls her mother and Bailey for their help, and once again they came to her rescue, somehow diverting the African to Mexico and then back to Ghana, while Angelou eventually landed in New York city.

Sometimes thereafter, Maya writes, Dr. Martin Luther King sought her out to get her to work for him on his Poor People’s March and campaign. As she explained it,
need someone to travel this country and talk to black preachers . . . I need you, Maya,” (2002: 57), he said. She did not turn down the offer.

She was preparing to travel to the South when she learned that Dr. King had been shot. Angelou became despondent and reclusive for a time. It wasn’t until her friend James Baldwin invited her to dinner at the home of cartoonist Jules Feiffer that she finally came out of hibernation. The dinner somehow succeeded in invigorating Angelou’s passion for writing, and it was there that she was encouraged by her friends to first write about her life. She moved to Stockton, California, and while there, in a quiet moment, she wrote the first line of what would eventually become *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Though relatively short, her latest memoir offers a glimpse into the life of a literary icon in the making, profoundly influenced by historical events and history makers – Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, among others. Told with a measure of hindsight, this instalment only adds to the wonderful riches that have come from Maya Angelou since her first memoir. *A Song Flung up to Heaven* reveals what it takes to make a phenomenal woman.

I hope to look through my life at life. I want to use what has happened to me – is happening to me – to see what human beings are alike.

- Maya Angelou (1992)

*A Song Flung up to Heaven* is the sixth and final instalment of Maya Angelou’s series of autobiographies, completed sixteen years after the publication of her previous autobiography, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*. Angelou wrote two collections of essays in the interim, *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey* and *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, which writer Hilton Als called her “Wisdom Books” (2011: 11)
and “homilies strung together with autobiographical texts” (2011: 11). She also continued her poetry with several volumes, including a complete collection of her poems, *The Complete collection Poems of Maya Angelou*. In 1993, Angelou recited her poem *On the Pulse of Morning* at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, becoming the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961. Her recitation resulted in more fame and recognition for her previous works and broadened her appeal “across racial, economic, and educational boundaries” (2011: 11-15).

By 2002, when *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* was published, Angelou had become recognised and highly respected as a spokesperson for Blacks and women. It made her, as scholar Joanne Braxton has stated, “without a doubt, . . . America’s most visible black woman autobiographer” (1999: 4). She had also become, as reviewer Richard Long stated, “a major autobiographical voice of the time” (2005: 84). Als writer Hilton A/s has stated, Angelou was one of the first African-American female writers to publicly discuss her personal life, and one of the first to use herself as a central character in her books. Writer Julian Mayfield, who called her first autobiography *I Know Why the caged Bird Sings* “a work of art that eludes description” (2011: 11-15), stated that Angelou’s series sets a precedent not only for other Black women writers, but for the genre of autobiography as a whole.

Hilton Als called Angelou one of the “pioneers of self-exposure”, (2011: 11-15) willing to focus honestly on the more negative aspects of her personality and choices. For example, while Angelou was composing her second autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name*, she was concerned about how her readers would react to her disclosure that
she had been a prostitute. Her husband Paul Du Feu talked her into publishing the book by encouraging her to “tell the truth as a writer” and “be honest about it” (1998: 14). As Richard Long reported, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* took sixteen years to write because it was so painful for her to relive the events she described, including the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Paul Laurence Dunbar whose poetry inspired both the titles of Angelou’s first and final autobiographies in her series. The caged bird, a symbol for the chained slave, is an image Angelou uses throughout all her writings.

Angelou returned to the same poem, she based the title of *Caged Bird* upon for the title of the final instalment of her series. As she had done in *Caged Bird*, she used the third stanza of the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, “Sympathy”. Along with Shakespeare, Angelou has credited Dunbar with forming her “Writing ambition” (1998: 168):

> I know Why the Caged Bird Sings, ah me  
> When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,  
> When he beats his bars and would be free;  
> It is not a Carol of joy or glee,  
> But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,  
> But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –  
> I know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

I asked for the music, then invited it to enter my body and find the broken and sore places and restore them. That it would blow through my mind and dispel the fogs. I let the music move me around the dance floor.

As can be deduced from where the book starts and ends, Angelou was very much involved with fighting for equality for African-Americans, and in this book, she makes no apologies for it. She doesn’t hide her thoughts; she offers them straight to us.

The Africa-American leaves the womb with the burden of her colour and a race memory chockablock with horrific folk tales. Frequently there are songs, toe-tapping,
finger-popping, hand-slapping, dancing songs that say, in effect, “I’m laughing to keep from crying” (2002). Gospel, blues, and love songs often suggest that birthing is hard, dying is difficult and there isn’t much ease in between.

Angelou also manages to tell us what she thinks are problems that women, in particular black women, are facing. She talks to them about their lives and their worries, and relates it back to us.

“Maya Angelou tells us that “It’s okay to be emotional, to break down and cry, when things don’t go well. But she also tells you that after having that good cry, we must wipe your tears dry, stand up, and face another day with your head held high”. And the best part is, she tells all this without being preachy about it” (2008: 1).

* A Song Flung up to Heaven * is the culmination of a unique autobiographical achievement, a glorious celebration of an indomitable spirit.

All six of Angelou’s installments of her life story continue the tradition of African American autobiography. Starting with *Caged Bird*, Angelou made a deliberate attempt while writing her books to challenge the usual structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre. Her use of fiction-writing techniques such as dialogue, characterization, and thematic development has often led reviewers to categorize her books as autobiographical fiction. Angelou stated in a 1989 interview that she was the only “serious” writer to choose the genre to express herself. As critic Susan Gilbert stated, “Angelou was reporting not one person’s story, but the collective’s. Scholar Selwyn R.Cudjoe agreed, and viewed Angelou as representative of the convention in African American autobiography as a public gesture that spoke for an entire group of people. Angelou’s editor Robert Loomis was able to dare her into writing
*Caged Bird* by challenging her to write an autobiography that could be considered “high art” (1995: 91) which she continued throughout her series, including her final autobiography.

Lupton insisted that all of Angelou’s autobiographies conformed to the genre’s standard structure: they were written by a single author, they were chronological, and they contained elements of character, technique, and theme. In a 1983 interview with African American literature critic Claudia Tate, Angelou called her books autobiographies. When speaking of her unique use of the genre, Angelou acknowledged that she has followed the slave narrative tradition of “speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first-person plural, always saying ‘I’ meaning ‘we’” (2011: 11-15). Reviewer Elsie B. Washington agreed, and stated that *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* “offers a glimpse into the life of a literary icon in the making” (2002: 57) influenced by historical events and personalities such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin. The book is framed by two “calamitous events” (2002: 61)—the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Angelou recognised that there were fictional aspects to all her books; she tended to “diverge from the conventional notion of autobiography as truth” (1998: 34). Her approach paralleled the conventions of many African-American autobiographies written during the abolitionist period in the US, when truth was often censored for purposes of self-protection. Author Lyman B. Hagen has placed Angelou in the long tradition of African American autobiography, but insisted that she has created a unique interpretation of the autobiographical form. In a 1998 interview with journalist George Plimpton, Angelou discussed her writing process, and “the sometimes slippery notion of truth in
nonfiction” and memoirs (Spring 2006). When asked if she changed the truth to improve her story, she stated, “Sometimes I make a diameter from a composite of three or four people, because the essence in only one person is not sufficiently strong to be written about” (Spring 2006). Although Angelou has never admitted to changing the facts in her stories, she has used these facts to make an impact with the reader. As Hagen stated, “One can assume that ‘the essence of the data’ is present in Angelou’s work” (1997: 18). Hagen also stated that Angelou “fictionalises, to enhance interest”. Angelou’s long-time editor, Robert Loomis, agreed, stating that she could rewrite any of her books by changing the order of her facts to make a different impact on the reader.

Like Angelou’s previous autobiographies, Song received mostly positive reviews, although as the Poetry Foundation has said, “Most critics have judged Angelou’s subsequent autobiographies in light of her first, and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings remains the most highly praised” (2011: 11-15). Kim Hubbard of People Magazine, for example, found Song unsatisfying and “hastily assembled” (2002: 56), but poetic like Caged Bird. Many reviewers appreciated what Kirkus Reviews called Angelou’s “nice structural turn” of framing Song with two assassinations. Paula Friedman of The New York Times Book Review appreciated Angelou’s “occasions of critical self-assessment and modesty” (2002: 49) not present in many other autobiographies. Patricia Elam of New Crisis agreed, stating that there is much to admire both about the book and about the “large life”, full of tension, laughter, and love, it describes. Elam also called Song “a spirit-moving work that describes Angelou’s journey through an authentic and artistic life” (2002: 49).

Billed as Maya Angelou’s sixth and final autobiography and arriving more than 30 years after the publication of her first, I Know Why the Caged Bird
Sings, this new book is like an inspired conversation—the kind you might have with a wise and comfortable stranger seated next to you on a long bus ride. It doesn’t wrench or disturb the way her first book did, but instead shares with subtlety and sometimes intimacy, experiences from a well-traveled life. Rather than struggling to recall the details of a distant past, Angelou sketches the scenes with broad familiarity, as if using a memory brush, and the reader is transported just the same”.

Patricia Elam, New Crisis (2002)

Reviewer Margarret Busby, who saw Angelou’s final installment in her series “not so much an ending as a beginning”, called Song “the culmination of a unique autobiographical achievement, a glorious celebration of indomitable spirit” (2002: 6-14). Like other reviewers, Busby considered Song a series of “beautifully crafted vignettes” and found the book concise and readable (2002: 6-14). Scholar John McWhorter did not look at Angelou’s use of vignettes as positively, and stated that all of her books were short, divided into “ever shorter” chapters as her series progressed, and “sometimes seem written for children rather than adults” (2002: 40). McWhorter recognized, however, that Angelou’s precise prose and “striking and even jarring simplicity” (2002: 40) was due to Angelou’s purposes of depicting African American culture in a positive way. Busby also recognized Angelou’s ability to find inspirational lessons from adversity, both nationally and personally, although the emphasis in this book was on the personal, especially her dilemmas as a mother and as a lover.

Amy Strong of The Library Journal, perhaps because Angelou’s life during the time the book took place was full of more personal loss than conflict and struggle, considered Song less profound and intense than the previous books in Angelou’s series, although she predicted that Song’s direct and plainspoken style would be popular. Publishers Weekly, in its review of the book, agreed with Strong’s prediction and saw “a certain resignation” in Song, instead of “the contentiousness” in Angelou’s other
autobiographies. The reviewer also stated that those who lived through the era Angelou described would appreciate her assessment of it, and that *Song* was “a story of tragedy and triumph, well stated and clearly stamped by her own unique blend of Afro-Americanism” (2002: 61). The assassinations Angelou reported on in *Song* provided the book with depth as Angelou described the events of her life, which would be “mere meanderings” if described by a less skilled writer. The reviewer was able to see Angelou’s “gracious spirit” and found the book “satisfying”, although he considered it a “sometimes flat account” that lacked “the spiritual tone of Angelou's essays, the openness of her poetry and the drama of her other autobiographies (2002: 61).

Both McWhorter and scholar Hilton Als, writing in *The New Yorker*, found Angelou’s writing throughout her series self-important. Although McWhorter has admitted to being charmed by Angelou’s sense of authority she has inserted into her works, which he calls her “black-mother wit”, he considered Angelou’s autobiographies after *Caged Bird* “smug”, and has stated that she “implicitly dares the reader to question her private line to God and Truth” (2002: 35). Als agreed, stating what made *Song* different from her preceding volumes is her “ever-increasing unreliability” (2011: 11-15). Als stated that Angelou, in her six autobiographies, “Maya has given us . . . the self-aggrandizing, homespun, and sometimes oddly prudish story of a black woman who, when faced with the trials of life, simply makes “do” (2011: 11-15). Als believed that Angelou’s essays, written in the 1990s, were a better culmination of her work as an autobiographer.

Maya Angelou’s is a rich life. She has danced and sung in theaters and nightclubs, acted, written and directed works for the stage television and film she is a
college professor, serious scholar and a generous mentor. She is the loving mother of one son, a proud grandmother, and wise, doting great-grandmother. She is a woman with a grand passion for life that she has shared with husbands and soulmates, with family, chosen kin, and an enduring ever expanding circle of friends; she lives the life she sings about on the page to the fullest. Indeed, “she is a woman, an African woman, a Renaissance woman in the truest sense of the word” (2008: 3).