

But as 1954 drew to a close, Frankie noticed his companion slowing down. It took longer to walk those streets or to navigate the high grass below the Huey P. Long Bridge, which straddled the Mississippi River. Frankie practiced beneath that bridge three hours each day, as the trains passed overhead. He'd become quite skilled at rhythm and blues, and he strummed to the beat of the wheels when they hit a gap in the rail joints. The hairless dog would look up at the noise.

"Chuckutty, chuckutty," Frankie would sing.

But in recent weeks, nothing Frankie played could raise the creature's head off its paws, not even when he imitated the high warble of a young Elvis Presley and the scrubbing rhythm of his new record called "That's All Right (Mama)."

"You are a tough audience," Frankie said.

The dog sneezed.

"What do you want to hear?"

The dog blinked and looked directly at him.

"Mmm? Something slow and pretty?"

Frankie leaned against a tree and began picking at a 2/5 progression. The air was warm and the sun ducked behind a single white cloud. Frankie's memory drifted. Before he knew it, he was fingering "Maalaala Mo Kaya," the song he'd once played to honor the buried dead in a Spanish field. Frankie hadn't tried this piece in many years, and he was surprised by how easily it came back to him. Its simple melody was soothing. The hairless dog gave a big, silent yawn.

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When Frankie finished, the animal came to him and Frankie scratched its ears. The dog licked his fingers.

"Thanks," Frankie said, smiling. "Now I'm all sticky."

The dog turned and walked to the river's edge. The muddy current was moving quickly.

"Hey, careful," Frankie yelled, leaning forward, but for the first time ever, the animal turned and growled, causing Frankie to lean back, confused.

There are songs that you play that you have to restart, and songs that you play that you never get right. But when a song is complete, there is no more you can do.

The hairless dog leaped into the water and paddled away.

Frankie watched limply, knowing somehow he was not supposed to follow, even as the last member of his original three-piece band disappeared down the Mississippi River.

A moment later he heard a rustling in the tall grass behind him. He turned his head and squinted into the sun. He saw a figure hovering above him, smiling.

"I hear you've been looking for me," Aurora York said.