

Love of Broadway musicals brought Peace Corps volunteer, English teacher and would-be expat back to settle in America

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â??Bali Haâ??iâ?• the ballad from â??South Pacific,â?• one of Tina Martinâ??s favorite Broadway musicals, beckoned her to â??come away, come away â?¦ to me â?¦ your special island.â?• She followed that lure â?? of everything foreign â?? to live in Mexico in her junior year of college and after college, in Tonga, Spain and Algeria.

Broadway musicals became a â??good addictionâ?• for the young Martin when she discovered her parentsâ?? collection of 78 RPMs in their home attic. â??My mother played the piano at our parties, and everyone sang musical numbers popular at the time,â?• Martin said, â??and I memorized the lyrics to all the songs.â?•

From then on, Martin would break out in song on happy as well as melancholy occasions. At times of parting, she would sing to her youngest sister, Suzy, â??God alone knows when we shall see each other again (â??Fiddler on the Roofâ??).â?• Suzy would respond: â??Then we shall leave it in her hands.â?•



Tina Martin, second from right, with friends at Dear San Francisco, an acrobatic musical playing at Club Fugazi in North Beach. (All photos courtesy of Tina Martin)

Her addiction to Broadway musicals was the reason she ultimately decided to settle back in the United States.

A romantic dream

â??When I was 12, I thought I would marry three different husbands and live in three different countries,â?• Martin said, â??but when I was living in different countries (without the three husbands), I couldnâ??t find musicals I really loved. Thatâ??s when I knew I was an American; I had to have access to my Broadway musicals.â?•

Martin incorporated song when teaching English to Tongan children in her two-year stint in the Peace Corps from 1969 to 1971. More than 50 years later, one of her best students, a woman named Kili who became a lifelong friend, still remembers the Tonga-centric words Martin wrote to â??The Twelve Days of Christmas.â?•

In Mexico, Martin had worked in an orphanage taking care of newborn babies. But once she learned of such a thing as TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), she knew â??that was my career path.â?•

That path involved teaching English, but also learning French and Spanish and immersing herself in other cultures. â??I really only like to go to a country if I can live there,â?• she said. â??I donâ??t like just to travel through.â?•


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Martin in Algeria in 1975.

After Tonga, she spent a year in Spain and two in Algeria. In Madrid, she was able to immerse more readily into the culture because she had a Spanish boyfriend, who introduced her to his family. After a trip back to the U.S. to earn some money, she next taught English to girls in the conservative Muslim town of Medea in Algeria and studied Arabic.

Back in the United States, Martin, already holding a bachelorâ??s degree in English from San Francisco State College (now University), earned a masterâ??s degree in TESOL there, then taught at City College of San Francisco from 1982 through 2014.

Now 77 and retired, Martin keeps busy with activist organizations such as the Older Womenâ??s League and the California Alliance for Retired Americans, for whom she is a liaison with the retireesâ?? chapter of City Collegeâ??s faculty union. â??We do public actions, but a lot of work is accomplished online.â?•



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Tina campaigning last year for Proposition O, a failed effort to raise property taxes to help support City College of San Francisco.

An unusual family

She also keeps busy reading, as part of the JoMa Book Club. Married and divorced twice, she has one son, Jonathan, 44, a medical data scientist. He suggested they start the club when he was 28. â??Because we are both such voracious readers, it gives us something wonderful to focus on in our relationship, discussing fiction and nonfiction for three hours at a time.â?•

She said she is in good health, which she attributes to exercise every other day at the Stonestown YMCA, and polyphasic sleep, multiple intervals of sleep a day. â??I like to go to bed early, get up at midnight, write or do other activities and go back to sleep around three,â?• she said.

Martinâ??s mother, a gifted student, enrolled in the University of California-Los Angeles at 16, but dropped out to marry Martinâ??s father. She typed his dissertation for his doctorate in psychology, had five children, and became a â??frustrated housewife. My mother did earn her bachelorâ??s years later from Kansas State University â?? on the same campus where I was a freshman,â?• said Martin, who finished her degree in San Francisco.

Her mother became a counselor in juvenile hall and later a probation officer until retirement. Her father, chief psychologist at the State Hospital in Columbia, South Carolina and an instructor of graduate psychology students at the University of South Carolina, did what he could to counter problems he saw in society. For inviting Black psychologists at the underfunded Black State Hospital to meet with his White students, he was credited at his memorial for helping integrate the university. According to Martin, her father said, â??We canâ??t cure individuals if theyâ??re going back into a sick society.'â?•

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He also tried â??to protect his children from decadent bourgeois comforts,â?• Martin recalled her mother telling her.

He didnâ??t want them to exhibit having more than other children, locally or in the rest of the world, she said. The girls walked more than a mile to school every day instead of being part of the neighborhood carpool. Moreover, he was exceedingly thrift-conscious. Martin wore shoes with the soles falling out, making a flapping sound as she came down the stairs in junior high school. She eventually worked up the courage to ask her father for $2 to buy another pair. Her sister Dana wore her gym blouse as one of her outfits.

Having lived in Idaho, Iowa, and Kansas, Martin spent the last years of elementary school, junior high and high school in South Carolina. In elementary school, Martin and a friend put on plays for their classmates at recess. â??I was attracted to drama, so we put on â??The Three Faces of Eve,â??â?• she said. â??I thought it was the most dramatic thing to have three personalities.â?•

Her parents moved to Pleasant Hill, California, in 1966 when her father became a director of The Job Corps. â??I loved San Francisco, and felt Iâ??d be there for the long term,â?• said Martin, who has lived in her own home in the Parkside since 1991.

She joined the Peace Corps, she said, because life couldnâ??t get any better than getting paid to live in another culture for two years. And she wanted to shake the â??Southern ladyâ?• persona and become a â??Great Womanâ?• in the image of Isadora Duncan or Helen of Troy.

She requested to be sent to a country where Spanish or French was spoken. â??My mother was a Francophile, influenced by her French high school teacher, and I inherited that predilection,â?• Martin said.

Living â??in a different eraâ??

Instead, she was assigned to Tonga, where they spoke their own language. But she wasnâ??t disappointed. â??Iâ??m really grateful to this day that I didnâ??t get what I wanted,â?• Martin said,

â??because sometimes we get something better and thatâ??s what happened to me. I lived in a way that I never would have.â?•

Tonga is a tiny group of islands in the South Pacific Ocean, east of Australia and Fiji and south of American Samoa. Martinâ??s beloved â??South Pacific,â?• ironically, is set on two fictitious islands between Tonga and Fiji.


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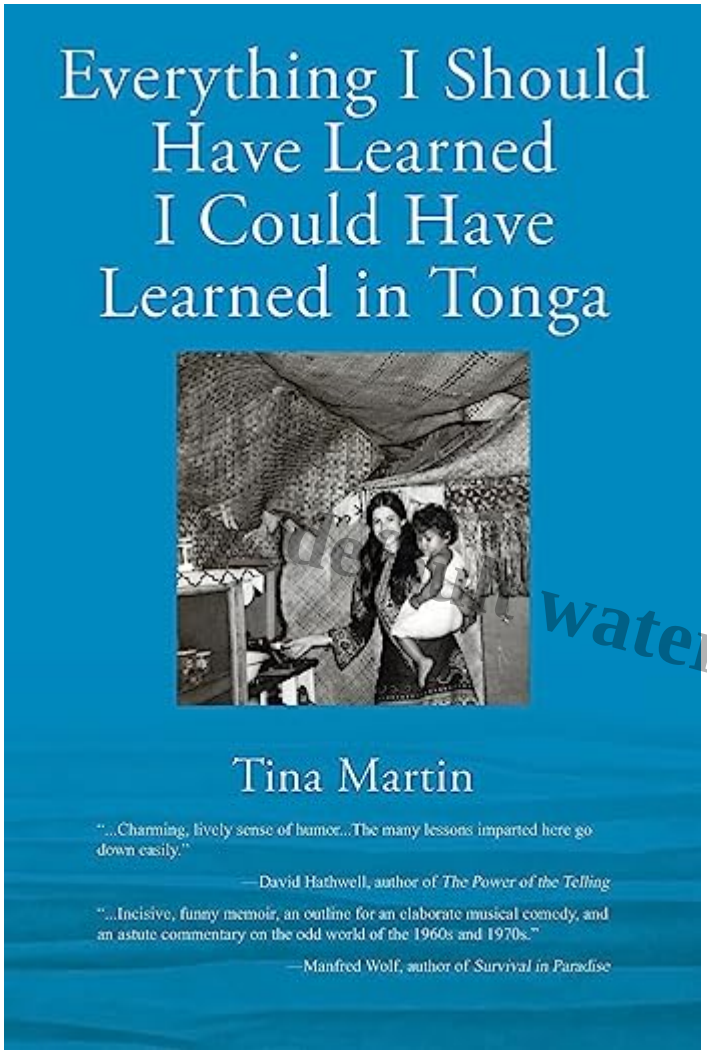
Martin in her bamboo hut in Tonga.

After Peace Corps training in Hawaii, Martin settled into the Tongan village of Haâ??ateiho, living in a tiny hut of bamboo and coconut leaves, lined with dozens of mats and pieces of tapa cloth. Without electricity or running water, Martin cooked with kerosene and drew water from a well. â??I thought of my village in Tonga as my Walden Pond in a warmer climate,â?• she said.

Her hut was often filled with her young students, who â??were with me first thing in the morning and until I blew out the kerosene lamp and went to bed,â?• she recalled, â??and I loved them even more

than I loved my privacy.â?•



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She taught them English, writing, spelling, and singing on the side. â??I used a Broadway musical song for every grammatical point,â?• said Martin, who also learned some Tongan.

Life in the Peace Corps became the subject of the first of Martinâ??s three self-published memoirs, â??Everything I Should Have Learned I Could Have Learned in Tonga.â?•

â??We were the lowest paid of all Peace Corps volunteers,â?• Martin said, â??but the only thing you needed money for was postage stamps for letters back home.â?• All over the island, coconuts, bananas, and breadfruit provided plentiful food.

â??It was like living in a different era, and you found out how resourceful you could be.â?•

Back in the current era, Martin is planning a reunion of friends in New York City to see â??Some Like it Hot.â?• They are friends she made through her best friend, another Peace Corps volunteer in Tonga.

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