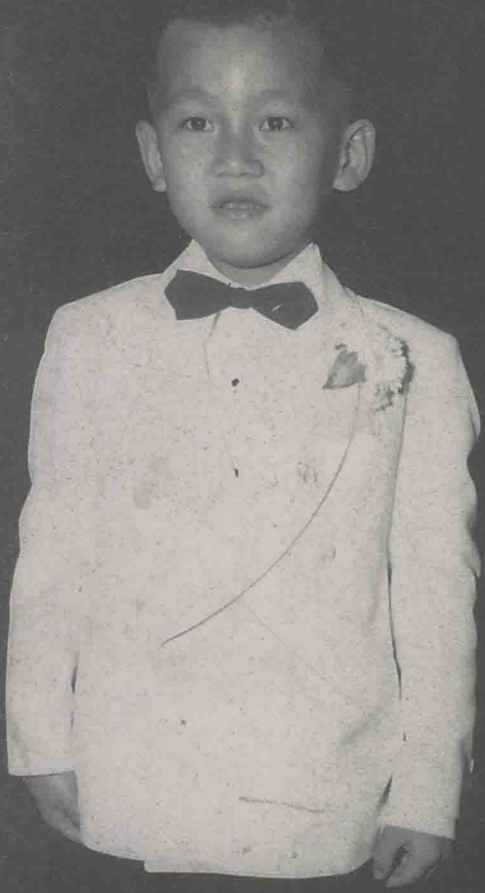
UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION



THE RICE ROOM

GROWING UP CHINESE-AMERICAN

FROM NUMBER TWO SON TO ROCK 'N' ROLL

"A wonderfully poignant and sometimes hilarious portrait of growing up American—from Chinatown kitchens and talent shows of the [illegible]he Age of Aquarius in San Francisco [illegible]otel rooms of rock stars." —AMY TAN

BEN FONG-TORRES

THE RICE ROOM

GROWING UP

CHINESE-AMERICAN

FROM NUMBER TWO SON

TO ROCK 'N' ROLL

Updated and Expanded Edition

BEN FONG-TORRES

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS *Berkeley • Los Angeles • London*

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to use excerpts from the following books and song lyrics: "That's Amore," copyright © 1953 Paramount Music Corporation and Four Jays Music Company. Copyright renewed © 1981 Paramount Music Corporation and Four Jays Music Company. "Daniel," written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin. Copyright © 1972 Songs of PolyGram International, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," copyright © 1965 by Warner Bros. Inc. Copyright renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music. "In old age, life's affairs" by Yuan Mei, from *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry*, translated by Jonathan Chaves, © 1986 Columbia University Press, New York. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

Previously published in 1994 by Hyperion
First University of California Press edition 2011

ISBN 978-0-520-26968-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

The Library of Congress has cataloged an earlier edition of this book as follows:

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fong-Torres, Ben.
The rice room : a memoir of growing up Chinese-American /
by Ben Fong-Torres.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-7868-6002-2
1. Fong-Torres, Ben. 2. Chinese Americans—Biography 3. Journalists—United States—Biography. I. Title.
E184.C5F65 1994
973'.04951—dc20

93-28111

Manufactured in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with a commitment to support environmentally responsible and sustainable printing practices, UC Press has printed this book on Rolland Enviro100, a 100% post-consumer fiber paper that is FSC certified, deinked, processed chlorine-free, and manufactured with renewable biogas energy. It is acid-free and EcoLogo certified.

ALSO BY

BEN FONG-TORRES

Hickory Wind:
The Life and Times of Gram Parsons

Not Fade Away:
A Backstage Pass to 20 Years of Rock & Roll

Becoming Almost Famous:
My Back Pages in Music, Writing, and Life

The Hits Just Keep On Coming:
The History of Top 40 Radio

The Doors by the Doors

The Grateful Dead Scrapbook

THE RICE ROOM

For my family

IN HONOR OF OUR PARENTS,

IN MEMORY OF BARRY AND SHIRLEY,

IN LOYALTY TO SARAH AND BURTON,

AND

IN LOVE OF DIANNE

•• ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ••

I'd like to thank everyone who's been in my life. But since I can't, I'll single out a few who were particularly helpful to me in the writing of this book, from jogging memories to reading the manuscript.

In the early stages of research and recollection, I received invaluable assistance and support from Serena Chen, Betty Ko, Darlene Joe, Maeley Locke, William Fung, Dexter Waugh, Milly Hurlimann, and the Asian American Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

Numerous friends from grammar school through college, and beyond, surfaced over the course of my writing of this book, and although some chose to accept my offer of anonymity or an assumed name, all the people represented in the text have my deep gratitude. I extend special thanks to Ann Wai Wong, Karen

Lim Lum, Dale Evans Drew, Paul Forrest, Helen Pulver Rosenberg, Marsha Warren Addiego, Judith Smith Cushner, Lindi Bortney, Carolyn Giffin Conrad, Mary Keith, Dave Swanston, Geoffrey and Fran Link, Pat Sullivan, Leslie Yee-Murata, Amie Hill, Karen Thorsen, and my all-time favorite roommate, Tom Gericke. Thanks to Jann Wenner for all those years and stories at *Rolling Stone*; to all my radio friends—especially Gary Owens, Russ Syracuse, Tom Saunders, and Wes "Scoop" Nisker. Wherever she may be, hello to Candace Barnes. And for helping keep the memory of my brother alive, love to Norma Yee Don, Jacklyn Jordan, Patricia Higa, Skip Skeen, Ruby Webbe, Laurie Wu, and, especially, Gail Katagiri.

Gordon Lew deserves a separate thank you, not only for being my friend through these years, but for being a friend to the family as well. In the most pivotal and critical moments of my life, he's always been there.

I had many uncertain moments throughout this strangest of endeavors, this telling of one's own story, but I was fortunate to have my friend and agent Sarah Lazin keeping me on track, and I was blessed to have as my editor Leslie Wells, who encouraged me to tell it all, and then helped me to tell it as well as I could.

Finally, thanks to my loving and amazingly patient wife, Dianne; to all our friends whom we couldn't see while I was mired in self-examination, and to my family. This book is, ultimately, for all of us.

•• CONTENTS ••

THE RICE ROOM

PROLOGUE

I was walking with my father on Eighth Street in Chinatown, Oakland, toward the dim sum restaurant where *Ma-Ma* was waiting. Every few steps, I had to remind myself to slow down in order to stay with him.

Behind us, by just a few blocks, was the flat where we'd lived forty years, a lifetime ago. Around the corner, on Webster Street near Seventh, is where our family restaurant, the New Eastern Cafe, used to be.

It was spring, and my father had been extremely sick last summer; he had a whole doctor's checklist of ailments. Now, I was asking about his gout. "How's your foot?" I said.

"The same," he said. Then he added: "I sure can't lift a hundred pounds any more. Old days, I'd carry sacks of potatoes . . ."

"And onions," I said, remembering the red net sacks.

"And rice," he said. Always there was rice.

That's all we said to each other on our two-block walk to the Jade Villa, but I felt excited by the simple exchange. It seemed to be as much as we'd ever said to each other.

I thought about a remark my brother-in-law, Dave, had made once when we were talking about language barriers. Dave is a Caucasian who had it none too easy being accepted by my parents, who wanted their five children to marry five Chinese. And here was the first child running off with a *bok-guey*—a white devil.

Dave told me he felt okay. "I don't really know how your mom feels about me," he said. "And your dad . . . your dad would be a great guy to know. He seems like a regular, fun-loving guy. I would love to be able to talk with him."

"Yeah," I said to Dave. "Me, too."

Over the years, I've talked with my parents many times, but we've never really communicated.

When we talk, it sounds like baby talk—at least my side of it. The parents say what they will in their native dialect of Cantonese. I pick up the gist of it, formulate a response, and am dumbstruck. I don't know half the words I need; I either never learned them, or I heard but forgot them. The Chinese language is stuck in its own place and time. When we were growing up, we learned to say police in Chinese: *look yee*. That means "green clothes," which referred, we'd learn years later, to the uniforms worn by the police in Canton. There are no Chinese words for "computer," "laser," "Watergate," "annuity," "AIDS," or "recession." When the telephone was invented, the Chinese, who concocted so many things that the rest of the world had to find words for, simply called it "electric line."

What I speak, then, is patchwork Cantonese, with lots of holes, some of them covered up, to no avail, by occasional English words that they may or may not understand.

What we have here is a language barrier as formidable, to my mind, as the Great Wall of China.

The barrier has stood tall, rugged, and insurmountable between my parents and all five of their children, and it has stood through countless moments when we needed to talk with each other, about the things parents and children usually discuss: jobs and careers; marriage and divorce; health and finances; history, the present, and the future.

This is one of the great sadnesses of my life. How ironic, I would think. We're all well educated, thanks in part to our parents' hard work and determination; I'm a journalist and a broadcaster—my *job* is to communicate—and I can't with the two people with whom I want to most.

Our language barrier stood, heartless and unyielding, when we suffered the first death among us. When we most desperately needed to talk with each other, to console and comfort one another, words failed us.

And yet, that death led to the first chipping away of the language barrier. Through a trusted family friend who acted as interpreter, I was able to talk with my parents about their lives in China; about their early years in San Francisco and Oakland; about their goals for themselves and their family.

I talked to my parents for our entire family, to allow all of us to have a good, long look over that wall. I also did this for my parents; to let them sit atop the wall for a moment, to give them a chance to learn a few things about us, things we'd never been able to express fully, fluidly, with all intended nuances.

For so long, I had wanted to tell them the most basic things—why I chose the work that I did; what that work involved; why I didn't marry the Chinese woman they'd wanted me to; why I married the woman I did. I'd wanted to let my father know that, whatever hardships he endured, his children admired him, and that I, in particular, traced my own successes to him. The long stretches of silences; the clumsy give-and-takes notwithstanding, I had learned from him.

And I wanted to explain the conflicts we all felt, growing up both Chinese and American, and the choices I made, of wading not only into the American mainstream, but then into the counterculture of the sixties. I wanted to explain the frustrations my sisters, brothers, and I felt over our obligations to our family businesses throughout our young lives.

They never understood why most of us ultimately rebelled, in one way or another. But we had our reasons. We had to deal with numerous contradictions in the instructions they gave us in life. We would succeed in school and in white-collar careers, but we would also spend after-school hours studying Chinese and working at the restaurant, leaving us little time for homework and next to none for socializing. We were made to feel guilty if we wanted to do what others did; to have what others had. We were torn between obligations to the family and the freedom we naturally wanted.

I didn't explain all of this during the conversation with the interpreter between us. That's a lifetime of talking. But we concluded the talk with a sense of many missions accomplished.

They learned enough about me, and I learned enough to tell my story. It is an equally Chinese and American story. It is told by the son of a mother who always wanted the best for me and whose influence I sense every day, and of a father who worked endlessly throughout his life. As it turns out, my brother-in-law Dave is right. He *is* a great guy to know.

•• 1 ••

THE MAI FONG

The rice room—the *mai fong*—was the generic name for an area in the back of our father's restaurant.

From the time of my birth in 1945 until they sold the restaurant ten years later, the cafe at 710 Webster Street was my home away from home.

Sometimes, it was just plain home.

It is a bank now, but when I see the numbers over the doorway, it's my place. Outside is where I stood and played with firecrackers and came close to blowing off a thumb. Inside, straight past the row of tellers, I can still make my way through to the kitchen and beyond, past the door on the left that led out to the backyard. Straight ahead was the bank of iceboxes where we stored the soda pops and beer, and to their right were the cantankerous generators, the boxes on boxes of canned water chestnuts and