

Memories of Johnny Cowell

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As Told To Matthew Scholtz

(Johnny Cowell has been designated by Town Council as Tillsonburg's Favourite Son, and for good reason. Born and raised in this community, Cowell carved out an international reputation as a music composer, with more than 200 songs to his credit. Prominent among these are his hit songs "Our Winter Love," which reached the Top Five in the Sixties, and "Walk Hand in Hand With Me", recorded by Gerry and the Pacemakers, Tony Martin, Andy Williams, among others. The Guess Who made a Number One hit out of his song, "His Girl". Many of his songs have been recorded by prominent musicians and singers, as well as by himself; he has produced and been involved in numerous recordings – popular and classical – featuring the trumpet skills Cowell first developed while growing up in Tillsonburg in the 1930s.

With one foot firmly in popular music, Cowell had the other foot in classical music as the principal trumpeter (1952 – 1991) for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, for whom he has composed a number of selections. His compositions and arrangements have also been featured by other major symphonies. Cowell has been a frequent trumpet soloist not only with the TSO, but also with the Boston Pops and the Cincinnati Pops, among others.

He remains musically active in various orchestras and bands in the Toronto area, where he has lived since 1941)

Although I have lived in Toronto for many years and traveled professionally around the world, I will always consider Tillsonburg as my home.

I was born on January 11, 1926 in a house at 10 Potters Road. For some strange reason, that house was eventually moved to 40 Tillson Street, and another house was built on that location.

My formal schooling began in the basement of the Tillsonburg Public Library, where I attended kindergarten before graduating to Rolph Street School. Leighton Ronson (who still lives in Tillsonburg) was (and remains) my best friend at the time (primarily because his mother and my mother were close friends.) Leighton and I weren't exactly the best behaved of students. More than once, our teachers had to separate us to keep the peace in the classroom. I wasn't considered the brightest kid in class, but I wasn't the dumbest either.

My Dad worked at the Tillsonburg Shoe Factory (once located on north Broadway in the parking lot across the street from the old Imperial Hotel) as a trimmer. His job was to trim the excess leather off the bottom of the shoes. Often, I would meet him at the factory at noon and the two of us would go for lunch at our home at Durham

and Queen Street. That was in the days when people worked in factories close to their homes, not out in some industrial area at the edge of town, as is now common. And families ate all their meals together.

But his real love was the Tillsonburg Citizens Band. Dad could play just about any instrument the Band needed, although he was really the Band's manager. He didn't mind just sweeping the floor when needed.

My mother was born in Aylmer and was a really good-looking girl, someone my Dad noticed at a hockey game. Although she was at the game with another fellow, my father sort of had eyes for her and was determined to get her attention. So, during any break in the game, he would try to impress her by skating past her on one foot. My mother was not exactly bedazzled by his performance that night. But he persevered, and eventually she gave into his attentions. My parents, Thomas (b. October 23, 1901) and Fay Mildred (b. 1904) were married in the Tillsonburg Methodist Church on November 23, 1923.

With my mother on piano and my dad on various instruments, there always seemed to be music in our house. My mother especially liked to play hymns. I still have her hymn book. Despite her talent at the piano, she never played in public except to accompany me.

Much of that music went into the community when I joined my Dad and uncles Ally and Gord in the Tillsonburg Citizens Band concerts on the bandshell behind the old Tillsonburg Public Library. Although the Band didn't advertise their occasional concerts, Tillsonburg was a small town and the word would quickly get around that the Band would be performing. Often people would sit in their cars parked along both sides of Washington Grand, and instead of clapping their approval, they would toot their car horns.

The Band members managed to talk Tillsonburg Town Council into granting them some money to build a rehearsal hall. With the money for the materials, the band members managed to add a small rehearsal room near the bowling alley in Market Square, just south of the old Town Hall.

Tillsonburg was a really good town for music in the Thirties.

Besides the park pavilion, the Band would perform in the Town Opera House, which was on the second floor of the old Town Hall, complete with a balcony. Besides band concerts, the Opera House was the scene for local theatrics, minstrel shows, pageants and touring entertainment. That all disappeared in the Fifties, when television kept people at home.

At the age of three, I had the nerve to ask Santa Claus to put a trumpet in my Christmas stocking. And I did get the trumpet, but it was just a toy one. Two years later, my uncle Gord gave me the real thing, although it was one of his old beat-up instruments.

He put so much mileage into that instrument that he had to weld pennies on the valves to keep it going.

Nevertheless, I was thrilled to get it. To me, it was the greatest gift ever; Uncle Gord succeeded where Santa Claus had failed.

That old trumpet set me off on my career. Although I have had many trumpets since, I do regret not keeping the one that got me started. I have no idea where it is today.

But I know where my old cornet is, because I still have it. Martin Boundy, director of the Citizens Band and organist at St. Paul's United Church, brought me a beautiful cornet from a trip to England. (By the way, he taught me piano lessons privately.) Somehow, my parents scrapped together the money to pay for the trumpet (and the lessons) and with that amazing instrument, I was able to improve my playing considerably. I lost track of that cornet until, right out of the blue, I got a phone call from a stranger who said he had a cornet in an old case with my name on it. I really wanted to buy it back, but the fellow said, "I won't sell it to you, but I'll let you keep it until you don't need it." I guess I always needed it, because I still have it. It was like finding an old friend.

Tillsonburg, of course, had no music teachers at the time. My uncle Gord played trumpet but he was just an amateur player and certainly not a teacher. However, there were lots of bands on the radio to give me role models, and exposure to music of the kind I liked to play. And my piano-playing mother helped me a lot. To improve my musical skills, I played trumpet in every church and at every strawberry social in town.

I never had a trumpet teacher. I simply listened to a lot of music wherever and whenever I could, and then figured out how to duplicate that music on my trumpet.

At one point, someone said to my father, "You know what, Tom? Your kid plays better than you do." That comment bothered me, but it didn't bother my Dad.

The old Opera House was the scene of my debut performance. Being a small fellow at the age of six, I stood on a chair for the benefit of the audience, and played my first solo, "Abide With Me", accompanied by my mother.

My Dad, being a wonderful promoter, always made sure I was visible to audiences by having me perched on a chair whenever I performed a solo.

A year later, I found myself in a small room at the CFPL radio station in London. At the piano was Russ Gerow, a fine musician from Tillsonburg and the pianist for the station. Just the two of us played music as the featured artist on a radio program called the Sleepy Time Express.

With Martin Boundy's help, I entered a number of music festivals throughout southwestern Ontario which brought me a number of gold medals. But one festival stands out in my mind.

In 1937, at the age of 11, I was waiting my turn to compete against 30 other contestants in the 12 and under class at the Waterloo Music Festival. Since I was number 24 in the competition that day, I had a long, boring wait ahead of me, so I skipped out to watch the girls in a highland dancing competition.

I knew that I would prefer to watch young girls dancing, to listening to a bunch of 11 year old boys on trumpet. As I watched the girls dancing, I had absolutely no idea that among them was a young girl named Joan. Years later, she would become my wife.

It is indeed a small world.

I really enjoyed my music, but there were other activities in Tillsonburg that kept me occupied. We would often clear the snow on Lake Lisgar and play hockey. Not with rubber pucks and hockey sticks. We couldn't afford those. Instead, we used tree branches for sticks and anything – rocks, balls, pieces of ice - as pucks.

Saturday afternoons would often find me immersed in another world at the Capitol Theatre, which was in the building now occupied by Peter's Restaurant (SE corner of Broadway and Brock St.) Not often, because I couldn't always afford the 10 cents to get in.

I did have a part time job, racking balls on the poolroom tables of McKenny's Poolroom on Broadway. I could also often be found at the Oxford Street poolroom owned by Tillsonburg Mayor Bill Sutch, who would sell my father and I a 25-cent roast beef sandwich and glass of milk. It often struck me as a little funny that on Saturday night, I would be in a poolroom, and on Sunday morning, I would be attending First Baptist Church with my parents.

I also picked up pocket money by working Saturdays for Clark & Stansel's Meat Market on Oxford Street, delivering meat to their customers.

As much as I loved Tillsonburg, I knew that if I wanted to build a career in music, I would eventually have to leave for Toronto where the best musicians in Canada seemed to be.

One of those musicians was Ellis McLintock.

Not having the benefit of trumpet lessons, I would use CBC radio as my classroom, and McLintock, a cornet soloist with the Toronto Symphony Band, was often my best teacher. I loved to listen to his playing, knew all his best pieces, and tried to copy his style as well as I could.

It was a fateful day in 1941 when I learned on the radio that McLintock would be leaving for the RCAF band in Ottawa and that the Band would need a replacement.

I desperately wanted to be that replacement.

Within an hour, I had a letter of application in the mail to conductor Laidlaw Addison, who promptly replied that he would like me to come to Toronto for an audition.

One little item that I failed to mention in my letter was that I was only 15 years of age, and that would set off all kinds of consternation later on. However, by that time, I had my foot in the door, and that's all I needed.

A week later, my parents (who had no car at the time) put me on the Watt's Transport truck, which made a daily run to Toronto at 4 a.m. As always, my parents were supportive of my musical endeavours, but they fully expected me to return to them in Tillsonburg and complete my schooling.

I never did return to live in Tillsonburg. Or complete my high school education, something I have always had mixed feelings about. In one way, I would have liked to at least have finished high school, but I honestly have no regrets at having dropped out of 1st Form high school at 15 to become a professional trumpet player in Toronto. I would never advise a student to leave school unless they were absolutely sure that the rest of their lives would be happier and successful if they did.

Arriving early in the morning in Toronto, I had an address but no way to get there. Thankfully, a warehouse worker took pity on me, gave me street directions and two streetcar tickets: one to get there, and another to get back for the return trip to Tillsonburg at 2:00 p.m.

I never made it back that afternoon.

Around 9:00 a.m. that sunny morning, I stood at the door of the Addison house, ready and raring to go for my promised audition.

Eagerly, I rang the doorbell. But no one came.

Finally, a large man wrapped in a nightgown opened the door, looked at me in surprise, and bellowed, "What the hell do you want?"

Nervously, I replied that I was Jack Cowell from Tillsonburg and I had come to audition for him.

He looked a bit surprised and stunned until I presented him with the letter he sent me.

That seemed to bring him around a little but he was still unsure about me.

"How old are you?" he asked.

When I told him I was almost 16, he told me the Band needed someone older and more experienced, and he started to close the door. However, after having my hopes up for so long and so high, I was not going to be turned away so easily.

When he realized I was not going to go away, Addison sighed and asked me in to audition. Perhaps he hoped that I would prove to be inadequate, and then he could kick me out and get back to bed.

But he didn't get back to bed as quickly as he had hoped.

To be sure of making an impression, I played two of the most difficult solos that McLintock had played with the band. When I finished, I turned to him with great anticipation, and to my relief, I could sense that he was thinking things over.

Finally, he admitted that he couldn't promise me anything, but he would arrange for me to stay overnight. The next day, I would audition for the job in front of a committee of the Band at the Varsity Arena.

That audition proved successful, but there remained the problem of my age. If I wanted to be a member of the Band, I had to belong to the musicians' union, but the union would not accept anyone younger than 16.

After a quick conference with the union president, Addison managed to work out a deal: I couldn't join the union, but I would be designated as a junior union member. And that was my ticket into the Band.

But there was yet one more problem.

At my first rehearsal, the conductor introduced me to my fellow Band members, saying, "Gentlemen, this is Jack Cowell from Tillsonburg, wherever the hell that is. We now have three Jacks in this Band, and that's one Jack too many. So, in this Band, he will be known as Johnny."

And so I was christened Johnny Cowell, a name I would keep professionally for the rest of my life.

But to my friends back in Tillsonburg, I would always remain Jack.

My greatest dream had now come true. I was now the cornet soloist of one of the finest concert bands in North America.

It was the end of my beginning in Tillsonburg.

And the beginning of my career in the rest of the world.