

A native of Tillsonburg and now living in Toronto, Johnny Cowell carved out an illustrious international career as a trumpeter with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and other orchestras, including dance bands. Cowell also won distinction as an arranger, pops orchestra leader and composer of such hits as “Walk Hand in Hand With Me” and “Our Winter Love” as well as classical pieces for the TSO.

Part One of this three part series on the life and career of Johnny Cowell appeared in the Tillsonburg News on February 9, 2009 and Part Two on May 1.

Johnny Cowell’s Memoirs, as told to Matthew Scholtz

My interest in composing music really began with the accidental damage to my lips that seemingly spelled the end of my trumpet playing career.

After my lip healed and I could play again, I remained interested in composing. However, when a certain girl came into my life, I shifted my emphasis from classical to popular.

I knew I wasn’t going to win the attentions and affections of this wonderful person with classical music.

Shortly after I met Joan, I began to compose songs that I would ask her to sing, with me accompanying her on the piano.

This musical courtship continued for a while until I finally won her heart; we were married in 1953.

The following year, CBC picked up my composition, “I Promise You” (which I had previously written for my wife) and featured it as the theme for a television show.

When CBC performer Denny Vaughan asked if I had any songs of interest, I offered him a song entitled “Walk Hand in Hand”.

He sat down on a piano, played it through, and then exclaimed, “Boy, I really like this song. I’m going to record it.”

And he did.

As so did countless others, turning it into my very first big hit.

That song had its genesis in Staten Island, of all places.

My wife and I had often gone to New York City on our anniversary. On one of those trips in the mid-fifties, as a change of pace, we took the ferry to Staten Island. There we wound up in a movie theater where we saw “Love is A Many Splendored Thing.”

As we left the theatre, one image remained in my mind: that of Jennifer Jones and William Holden walking hand in hand during a number of scenes in the film.

“Hand in hand. That’s an interesting title for a song”, I thought to myself.

By the time the ferry landed back in New York, I had the entire song worked out and the lyrics came just as easily after that.

When you get a good idea for a song, it just seems to write itself, seemingly with very little effort.

Surprisingly, while “Walk Hand in Hand” became an international hit, and a long-time favourite at weddings, it was initially banned at the BBC.

Because the song includes the line “God is our destiny”, BBC programmers considered it a religious song and would not allow it on the air.

Despite this, two versions of Walk Hand in Hand With Me topped the British charts in 1956. Tony Martin's version was Number One for several weeks, while Ronnie Carroll took the song to Number 7 and kept it in the top 50 for 33 weeks. In 1965, Gerry and the Pacemakers brought it back to the charts a second time.

For some reason, "Walk Hand in Hand" was a bigger hit in England than anywhere else in the world.

Even greater success followed in 1963, when my song "Our Winter Love" reached number five on the hit parade.

That wasn't even the original title of the song.

I had received a phone call from the legendary Chet Atkins, a producer for RCA records, looking for songs for a planned record album featuring the music of famed trumpeter Al Hirt.

So, I went into a studio, recorded a demo and sent it plus the music for my composition, "Long Island Sound."

Four weeks passed with no word. Did Atkins like it or not?

Atkins never did call, but my song must have been passed around, because pianist Bill Pursell called to say he liked it and wanted to record it.

But the instrumental was a little too long. So, I sliced out the bridge section that Al Hirt was supposed to play as a solo.

I didn't want to do it, but if I wanted my music recorded by someone other than Hirt, I was going to have to make the change. However, without Al Hirt playing on the record, I really saw no hope for the success of my song.

Having compromised on the length of the music, I thought that was it.

But it wasn't.

I was going to have to compromise just a bit more. Why?

Because the record executives didn't like my title.

One of them suggested "Our Winter Love". They reasoned that it would then be seen as a seasonal song and would be sure to get airplay every winter.

So, it was time to compromise once again. I had already given up an important bridge in my song, and now I was being asked to give the song a new name.

But there was still more politics to be done.

RCA had one more condition: if I wanted my melody to see the light of recorded day, it would have to have different lyrics.

Although "Our Winter Love" was initially intended as an instrumental, I decided to write lyrics based on the new title. I was pleased with the lyrics. RCA was not.

And whether I liked it or not, an RCA executive would be writing new lyrics.

Finally, with new lyrics and without the trumpet bridge, "Our Winter Love" RCA released the song and made it an international hit.

And to this day, Bob Tubert, a retired RCA executive, receives a royalty check thanks to my song's continuing success.

From time to time, I would do my own recording in studios around Toronto, assembling a group of fine musicians and bringing them into a studio to record popular songs using my own arrangements.

These easy listening recordings were mainly produced by CKEY radio in Toronto and used on air, but also sold commercially.

Of course, on the classical side, I can also be heard as a featured soloist on two Toronto Symphony Orchestra recordings.

Of the 200 songs I have written, I am pleased that 150 were recorded by a variety of instrumental and vocal artists.

None of these recordings include my wife Joan. When I met her, she was a dance band vocalist. However, she gave up that career after our daughter Marcy was born in 1961, when she became a stay at home mother.

She has always been someone who has been behind me 100%.

There are many roads I have taken to fulfill my career, but there is one road not taken – the one that led to the United States, where so many Canadian entertainers furthered their careers.

After the **success** of Walk Hand in Hand With Me, the doors of U.S. music publishers and producers opened wide to me, especially in New York and Nashville.

After film composer Victor Young heard a trumpet tape recording of my music, Young let me know he had a job for me in Los Angeles, but I was too involved in musical projects in Toronto.

But I didn't need to leave Toronto to play music for film.

American film composers often used Toronto musicians because of the favourable exchange rate, and because Toronto musicians could play their film compositions as well as American musicians.

As a result, I was able to be part of the orchestra for film scores for the movies Escape From Alcatraz (1979), and Cries in the Night (1982).

My second opportunity to move to the United States came in 1960, after I had written a musical based on the life of the boxer John L. Sullivan.

At the time, I was in the orchestra for the musical "Camelot" which was at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre in its pre-Broadway try-outs. This gave me the opportunity to give a copy of my musical to the show's producer, Alexander Cohen. He really liked my songs, but felt the libretto needed more work. So, he asked me to come to New York to work with a writer to improve my musical.

But I was already working steady, sometimes seven days a week, doing everything from the symphony, to TV shows, band engagements, radio ad jingles, and film and music recordings.

My wife and I agreed that we would be taking an awful chance, leaving behind a successful career in Toronto, for uncertain success in New York.

So, we stayed in Canada. But we have often wondered what would have happened, had we chosen the road not taken.

These days, at the age of 83, I no longer compose music, but it is a source of endless satisfaction to know that my music remains popular.

And it all started with a beat-up trumpet given to me by my Tillsonburg uncle.

Would I have become a trumpet player without my uncle Gord giving me that beat-up old trumpet when I was five years old?

Yes.

I know with all the certainty in the world that someday, somehow, I would have gotten my hands on a trumpet and fallen in love with it.

I was just lucky that I was granted an early start.