

Regrets? He's had so few

Ben Raynor, Pop Music Critic,
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Trumpeter and songwriter Johnny Cowell never left Toronto, despite the lure of Broadway and Nashville. His friends are celebrating his remarkable career with a 90th birthday bash.

You know we had hitmakers in Toronto before Drake and the Weeknd, right?

One of the city's unsung songwriting heroes, Johnny Cowell — also a renowned trumpet soloist who spent 50 years playing off and on with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra — turned 90 years old last Monday, and will receive a much-deserved birthday tribute from his old mates in the Hannaford Street Brass Band with a [west-end house concert](#) on Sunday. He and his wife of 62 years, Joan, are finding all the attention a little embarrassing. But if Cowell is too modest to (pardon the expression) toot his own horn, there's no reason why others shouldn't toot it for him. The list of his achievements is rather staggering; around 90 different recorded versions exist of his 1956 ballad "[Walk Hand in Hand](#)" alone, for instance, while 1966's "[His Girl](#)" was a No. 1 hit in Canada for the Guess Who, and his 1963 hit for Floyd Cramer, "[\(These Are\) the Young Years](#)," recently experienced a minor revival after it was included on the *Breaking Bad* soundtrack. Cowell, however, will be the first to tell you that he'd be more comfortable simply playing trumpet onstage on Sunday night than hearing other people sing his praises. He swore off playing professionally when he realized his trumpeting was no longer up to his own high standards.

"I didn't give up the trumpet. It gave *me* up when I was 87," he laughs in the living room of the immaculately preserved 1950s suburban home he and Joan have shared since 1957. "I can still play it, but nothing like I used to. And that's the trouble. Different bands in Toronto have offered 'Come and play in our band,' but whenever I'd pick up the trumpet and practice, it didn't come out the way it used to when I was really playing good, you know?"

Cowell's devotion to the trumpet has kept him in Toronto since he first hitched a ride into town from Tillsonburg on a transport and bullied his way into the Toronto Symphony Band at a thoroughly cocky 15 years of age.

His friendships with the likes of Cramer and Chet Atkins resulted in numerous exhortations to move to Nashville during the '50s and '60s, when the varied likes of Andy Williams, Tony Martin, Vera Lynn and Gerry and the Pacemakers were ensuring that "Walk Hand in Hand" remained a fixture on the charts.

Famed theatre producer Alexander Cohen once offered him a dream opportunity to mount a musical he'd written about the life of 19th-century boxing champ John L. Sullivan in New York City, too. But Cowell never bit. The allure of winding up on Music Row or Broadway or cranking out hits in the Brill Building couldn't sway him from his

first love.

“I was doing so well in Toronto, making good money playing shows and everything. So I turned it down. I didn’t go. And we often wondered what it would have been like if I’d gone to New York,” he says, with no audible regret. “Nothing ever really took over from the trumpet playing because I loved the trumpet so much I could never stop playing it. It was just part of me.”

“He’s stayed in Toronto all these years and a lot of people don’t even know he’s here,” chimes in Joan, a feisty, 89-year-old former singer whom Cowell met while filling in on trumpet for the weekend dance band she used to front at the Royal York.

“If you didn’t have a good job or you were doing nothing, you’d jump at something like that and you could probably have a fabulous career. But he loved playing the trumpet so much he just couldn’t pass it up. So you never know what could have happened.”

Cowell’s career didn’t really suffer for him not leaving Toronto, of course. He gave up writing pop songs at the end of the ’60s when the Beatles and their ilk took over popular tastes because “I didn’t really feel like I was into it enough to write that type of music,” but found a healthy second writing career as an arranger for Toronto Symphony Pops and a composer of his own symphonic material, much of which is collected for the ages on 1997’s *The Art of Johnny Cowell*.

He also had a choice gig as legendary film composer Jerry Fielding’s principal trumpet player whenever he’d come north to Toronto to record his soundtracks (“It was cheaper”) — right up until Fielding died of a heart attack at the Windsor Arms Hotel while recording for *Cries in the Night* in 1980.

So, no. Cowell has no regrets. Except one: “I wrote a song for Frank Sinatra but he never recorded it. A friend of mine, Jimmy Parish, he sang it just like Sinatra would do it and it was a good song. I don’t know if he ever saw it or not, but it was written strictly for him. But he didn’t do it.”