

## NEWS

## Tillsonburg 'Favourite Son' Johnny Cowell, one of Canada's greatest trumpeters, dies at 92

By Chris Abbott, Postmedia Network  
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FILE PHOTO - Published in January 1964 - TILLSONBURG NEWS Songwriter Johnny Cowell, formerly from Tillsonburg (son of Thomas Cowell on Simcoe Street), is in New York this week to receive a special award for his hit song 'Our Winter Love' (1963). This is the second time he has received such an award. In 1957, Broadcast Music Inc. of New York awarded him a Citation of Achievement for his hit song 'Walk Hand in Hand.' Johnny has been trumpeter with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for the past 12 years. He left Tillsonburg when he was 15 years old to become soloist with the famous Toronto Symphony Band. He played his first trumpet solo in the Tillsonburg Town Hall when he was six years old.

Johnny Cowell was 15 when he left town, but he was always proud to call Tillsonburg his hometown.

After moving to Toronto, he went on to become one of Canada's most successful songwriters and one of the country's greatest trumpeters, playing with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra from 1952-1991.

Cowell (1926-2018) died Monday, less than two weeks after his 92nd birthday.

Matt Scholtz, a long-time friend, remembers listening to rock n' roll growing up in Kitchener in the 50s and 60s, but there was one song - an instrumental version of Our Winter Love composed by Cowell - that really stood out for him.

"It just fascinated me," said Scholtz, who later took a job as librarian in Cowell's hometown - eventually becoming the longest-serving librarian in Tillsonburg's history (40 years).

Scholtz discovered the local library did not have any material on its future Favourite Son - Cowell later joined an illustrious group of Favourite Sons and Daughters from a variety of fields including arts, culture, business, sports and philanthropy that now includes Gerry Livingston, Colin Campbell, Richard Nemeth, Margaret Fishback-Powers and Dennis Fairall.

"There was nothing at all in the library on a guy like that," said Scholtz. "So I wrote to him in the early 70s and told him that I would like to build up a file of information so that people would have it if they were looking it up. So that's how I got to know him."

Cowell was happy to contribute his story, and when he was in town he would stop by the library to visit Scholtz.

"He was very supportive of my wife's (Betty) choir," said Scholtz. "He gave permission to my wife to write a choral piece for her choir, so they could sing that song as part of their Christmas programming."

Betty also sang Cowell-composed song Walk Hand in Hand many years at weddings.

"That was a really popular song for weddings in the 50s," said Scholtz. "It was a real thrill for her to meet the guy who composed the song she had been singing all those years."

"Walk Hand in Hand was a really amazing song," Scholtz added, noting the 1956 song hit the Canadian charts when Gerry and the Pacemakers covered it in the 60s (No.10). "So there's a band taking his song and turning it into rock n roll. The Guess Who also recorded one of his songs, His Girl (which reached No. 19 in Canada)."

Scholtz wrote Cowell's memoirs in 2009, cementing their friendship and giving Scholtz a wealth of Cowell stories.

"He was in the Naval Reserves during World War II and they put him in the naval band. When the victory in Japan came along there was a big celebration, so he played all day. The next morning his lips were shot... he was playing the trumpet so hard he crushed the muscles in his lips and the doctor told him he'd never play trumpet again."

That's when Cowell turned to composing songs, said Scholtz.

"Then surprise, miracle of miracles, his lips healed and he was able to play again."

"So he built a career not just as a trumpet player, but as a composer. He really crossed popular music with classical. He was principal trumpeter for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, but he also did a lot of pop songs. He told me he used to be very busy composing jingles in Toronto."

Based in Toronto, Cowell resisted invitations to move to Nashville or New York.

"He turned it down, he just preferred to stay in Toronto. That doesn't mean he didn't go to the States, he went to the States an awful lot as a guest trumpeter, but that was all. He played with bands in Toronto and he made a number of records - he did popular music but he also did classical music as well."

It was the classical music with TSO, said Scholtz, that was Cowell's 'bread and butter.'

"He said that's what paid the bills. That allowed him to compose music as well."

Cowell got his start when an uncle, one of three who played with the Tillsonburg community band, gave him a battered trumpet.

"It was so battered the valves were kind of shot," said Scholtz, "so they welded pennies on top of the valves so he could have something to press on. Coins welded on it, that's how bad this thing was."

At the age of six, accompanied by his mother on the piano, he performed for the first time in the Town Hall, a large room on the main floor that was used for theatre and music.

By the age of 10, he was considered a trumpet prodigy in Tillsonburg.

"He was basically self taught. His mom was a piano teacher, so she gave him the theory of music and she taught him to play the piano, but that didn't work. His father was also part of the Tillsonburg community band, who gave him the pop side of it. So he was lucky to have parents on the classical side of music and the popular side of music."

A few years later the Cowells heard on the radio the Toronto Symphony Band was looking to replace a trumpeter.

"So he thought, 'OK, maybe I'll go apply for it.' So his parents put him on a bus in Tillsonburg. They kind of humored him and let him go... told him to come back thinking you're not going to get this job."

So Cowell left for Toronto.

"The bandmaster looked at him kind of funny and said, 'You're pretty young.' And he was young - younger than the 16-year-old they were looking for. He basically lied about his age."

Cowell got the job and didn't return to school.

"He told me that his one big regret in life was that he was not able to finish his high school. He wished he could have at least finished his schooling as his parents expected him to. His parents expected him to come back to town... and he never did. They never thought it would work out that way."

Scholtz attended Cowell's 90th birthday party in 2016.

"He and his wife (Joan) were in just the greatest shape, they were vibrant, very much alive. He chatted with everybody. It was a great time. That was two years ago in January."

"The last time I talked to him was in the fall and he was feeling pretty badly. His voice was starting to go, it wasn't very strong. But his memory was still sharp. I think it was just... 92 years of age, it kind of catches up with you."

Scholtz noted that Cowell was always very supportive of the music program at Glendale High School.

"He would often come to town and perform a benefit concert - a solo - at St. Paul's and the proceeds from that went to the high school music program. And some of the money went to my wife's choir as well."

"He would come to town and basically give a history of the trumpet. His favourite trick was to take a hose and a funnel and put them together somehow and turn it into a trumpet - the kids would be amazed that you could take such ordinary things and turn it into music. It was really quite impressive."

Cowell retired from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in 1991 at the age of 65.

"He had to," said Scholtz, "because the Toronto Symphony Orchestra had a policy - you were done at 65. They tried to make an exception for him, but he wouldn't accept that. He wanted to give somebody else a chance. After that, he would play with the Scarborough community band and various other community bands and he would still be available as a soloist at various concerts in Toronto."

One of Cowell's biggest thrills, said Scholtz, was filling in for Doc Severinsen, leader of Johnny Carson's Tonight Show band, in Hamilton.

"Johnny said people were kind of upset in the beginning, but he won them over."

A memorial for Cowell was being planned, according to Jean-Marie Barker of Counterpoint Music Library Services, to be announced at a later date.

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