

Canadian Classics: “Walk Hand in Hand” (1956)
Words & Music - SOCAN publication
Story by Liisa Ladouceur | March 18, 2016



In the 1950s and '60s, Johnny Cowell put Canadian songs on the top of the pop charts. One of his most enduring remains “Walk Hand in Hand,” a sweeping love ballad that’s been recorded more than 90 times, including hit versions by crooners Andy Williams and Tony Martin, and Liverpool beat group Gerry & The Pacemakers. He also composed hits for The Guess Who (“His Girl”) and Bill Purcell (“Our Winter Love”), and his song “(These Are) The Young Years,” in the version performed by organist Floyd Cramer, appeared in the final season of *Breaking Bad* in 2013. The 90-year-old trumpet player, a former member of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, was one of the first inductees into the Scarborough Walk of Fame.

Your music career started with the playing the trumpet. What turned you on to songwriting?
The reason I started writing songs was I met [my wife] Joan in a dance band. She was the singer. And she really looked terrific! I wanted to write her a song to sing. And I got hooked. So I just kept writing them.

What did you like about songwriting?
As a musician, it gave me immense satisfaction. I enjoyed just sitting down at the piano and playing. If I had a good idea, it just sort of wrote itself. Well, the melodies came quite easily; I usually had trouble with the lyrics. But when I finished I felt really good about it. And if I didn’t feel good about it I’d throw it in the wastebasket.

Johnny Cowell

You worked closely with the late, famed music publisher William Harold Moon. What was he like?
He was one of my best friends. We just hit it off like a couple of peas in a pod and he was the person who really got me going. He was interested in my songs and brought me into [SOCAN precursor] BMI [Canada]. It was funny, Harold would phone me up at night and say, “I’ve got a good title for you and I’d like to see a completed song in two days.” I was really sorry when he died.

Tell us how you came up with the idea for “Walk Hand in Hand.”
My wife Joan and I we went to New York on our second wedding anniversary and we decided to

take the ferry to Staten Island. And when we got there, we noticed a marquee on the theatre: Love is a Many-Splendored Thing. So we thought we'd go see it. All through the film, [the characters] are walking hand in hand. So when we came out of the theatre, I told Joan, "I think I got a good title for a song, called 'Walk Hand in Hand.'" And by the time I got back to the hotel, I'd written all the music.

There are many versions of the song — Andy Williams, Tony Martin, Gerry & the Pacemakers, etc. How did that happen?

My friend Denny Vaughan. I played on his television program and I took "Walk Hand in Hand" into the studio and he said, "This is it, I'm going to record this." So he had the first recording — and a very good one, too. He's a terrific singer. Denny's the one who took it to New York and played it for Republic Music, and they got it to RCA, and then Tony Martin. From there, Andy Williams picked it up, and several other people. It was hard to keep track. One night Joan and I were sitting in our living room and watching the Ed Sullivan show, then all of a sudden Tony Martin walked out and started singing my song. We weren't expecting it. It was just terrific.

"Walk Hand in Hand" has become a kind of wedding standard. How do you feel about that?

It's funny, some people think it's a religious song, but not to me. It's a love song. I sometimes get calls from people looking for the sheet music who can't find it. I usually Xerox it and get them a copy so they can have it at their wedding. Any time I can get someone to sing "Walk Hand in Hand," I'm happy to do it.