

# Scarborough Bluffs is Home to Celebrated Songwriter



by Kathryn McGrath

This is the first in a series of articles about local residents who have made their mark in business, sports or the arts.

Scarborough Bluffs resident John Cowell has enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a musician. He is also one of Canada's most successful songwriters, with one of his songs having been recorded more than ninety times. Young people may not recognize his name, but his songs have recently enjoyed a revival due to their play on successful television shows like *Breaking Bad*, *Call The Midwife* and *Heartbeat*.

Cowell, who recently turned 91, was born in Tillsonburg, Ontario, to a musical family. As a child he never had formal music lessons, but he idolized his uncle Gord who played the trumpet. At age five he was given a battered old trumpet and his destiny was set.

"I took to the trumpet like a goose to water," explains Cowell, who says he could teach himself to play songs just by listening to them. He played his first trumpet solo in a local church at the age of six. By age seven, he was asked by a London radio station to play on

air and by eight he was a soloist for the Ontario Bandmasters Association.

By the time Cowell was 15 he had taught himself to play many of the trumpet solos by big bands and orchestras he heard on the radio. He got his first big break during the Second World War when Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) trumpet soloist Ellis McIntock enlisted.

"The TSO was looking for a replacement so I sent them a letter saying, 'You're looking for me!' But I didn't tell them I was 15," he recalls with a laugh. Too impatient to wait for a response, he rode a transport truck to Toronto and persuaded a TSO conductor to grant him an audition on the spot. He did so well he was asked to perform the next day for the Toronto Philharmonic Band Committee.

The decision to hire Cowell was unanimous but, because of his age, special arrangements were made to get him into the musician's union.

At that point he became the soloist for the Toronto Symphony Concert Band, which comprised the best musicians in Toronto. A year later he joined the TSO.

"My mom was not happy

because I had to quit school, but dad was gung ho," Cowell says.

By age 18, the young musician was asked to join the Navy's band as their cornet soloist. Within three days he was fitted for a uniform and shipped to Victoria, British Columbia. The day the Japanese surrendered, John Cowell played his trumpet to exhaustion and split the tissue in his lips. Doctors told him he would never play again and honourably discharged him.

Back at home and depressed, Cowell decided to try his hand at composing. He submitted an arrangement called "The Hour Before Dawn" to the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, which immediately gave him a scholarship to study composition. Once more, he was off to the big city.

Determined to play trumpet again, Mr. Cowell kept practicing and he healed enough to play gigs with bands around Toronto. One night, on stage at the Royal York hotel, he spotted a "fabulous looking woman" named Joan, a local singer who eventually became his wife.

"I thought, 'How can I get her interested in me?'" recalls Cowell. He decided to write her a song, which he called "Walk

Hand In Hand". Not only did he get the girl, but the song became the biggest hit of his career. It was recorded by many artists, most notably Andy Williams, and was number one on many charts.

He went on to pen many more hits, including "Winter of Our Love", "Stroll Along With The Blues" and "These Are The Young Years". His songs have been recorded by many artists, including Chett Atkins, Engelbert Humperdinck and Gerry and The Pacemakers. He even wrote a tune called "His Girl" which was recorded by Canadian group The Guess Who.

Cowell was also commissioned to write fanfares for visiting dignitaries like Governor General Jean Sauve and the Queen.

Through all of this, he played with the TSO as their principal cornet player. He has been able to make a living as a musician and composer in part because he never suffered stage fright. "People always asked me 'What goes through your mind when you perform in front of 2,000 people?' and I'd say 'This is exactly where I want to be!'"

He even filled in one night for Doc Severinsen of The Tonight Show, who was unable to perform at a scheduled Toronto concert.

Among his many honours, Cowell is the recipient of the Toronto Musician's Association

Lifetime Achievement Award and is a member of Scarborough's Walk of Fame. While many of Mr. Cowell's compositions were written in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, their resurgence means new audiences are hearing them.

"I'm surprised but very happy," says Cowell. "These songs were written when ballads were popular. The writing style is so different now."

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