

Sylvia Tyson looks for the smaller stories in bigger pictures



By Brock Weir

Musical inspiration can come from anywhere in the world around us.

Musicians today often cite having creative revelations the first time they heard The Beatles, or saw what the likes of Elvis Presley or Buddy Holly could do on stage through the power of television. If they came of age in the 1960s, budding musicians, appreciating the influence of the likes of Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Canada's own Ian & Sylvia, quickly learned how a few choice words striking the right chord could help bring about the change they wanted in the world.

But, while the music of Sylvia Tyson has touched generations of musicians that followed, Ms. Tyson herself found her own inspiration in the works of English literature.

"Right from the get go, I had an interest in English literature and, through that, I started finding out about the traditional English folk songs like child ballads that were often printed as poetry," Ms. Tyson tells *The Auroran*, noting these poems-cum-ballads lay the foundation of her love of telling stories through music. "When I was living in Chatham, ON, there wasn't really anybody to listen to. There were R&B stations out of Detroit and Windsor, and there was a country station. In terms of the music I was interested in, there wasn't really a creative outlet except for Alan Mills on CBC Radio."

She charted her own path, however, finding inspiration in places many of us would find the polar opposite of extraordinary. Stories are everywhere, she says, and it is up to the songwriter to find them.

Evidently, it was a winning formula as she and her then husband, Ian Tyson, took the Canadian music scene by storm with their iconic folk songs, earning a permanent place in the collective Canadian consciousness introducing such hits as *Four Strong Winds* onto the popular charts. But, no matter how successful they became, they stuck close to their roots.

"When Ian and I performed, we certainly played some major venues and that was a measure of success, just measured from performance to performance," Sylvia explains. "I measure success to the audience reactions to what I do. When I get that visceral reaction, I know that I have been successful, that they relate to what I am talking about, that somehow there is something in those songs that is very personal to them."

On January 30, Ms. Tyson will be able to take the measure of Aurora audiences when she takes the stage with John Sheard at the Aurora Cultural Centre in the opening performance of the 2015 Great Reunion concert series, spearheaded by Sheard.

The relationship between Tyson and Sheard goes back decades to working together in recording sessions and on stage. The evening promises to be a blend of their classic material along with new material which is continually being produced by Ms. Tyson, who has just completed her second book.

The 1960s and 70s were a particularly fertile period for folk not just in Canada, but around the world. Although the folk scene today does not have what Ms. Tyson describes as the 'broad sweep' of those times, it is alive and well.

'There were a lot of young people at that time, more than ever before, going to university and taking an interest in politics and social issues, and those songs speak very strongly to that mindset,' says Ms. Tyson, noting she prefers to think of herself as a singer-songwriter, rather than folk musician. 'When I was younger, I was influenced by anybody and everybody. Now, I am mainly interested in what I am writing and doing. Occasionally, I will hear a piece of music that knocks my socks off and I think that is really great, and I am glad that person is doing it, but I ceased to be a fan a long time ago.'

Last year, Ms. Tyson celebrated the 20th anniversary of Quartette, a group of female musicians of which she is proud to be a member. Describing the group both as a collective and a collaboration, it was founded by the late Colleen Peterson, who brought together a group of female songwriters to perform in the round for a special event at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. From those early days, the group has flourished.

'We are all songwriters and it affords each of us the luxury of having vocal backup that we could never afford as solo artists!' she says with a laugh.

These days, when Ms. Tyson is not writing songs, her pen is rarely idle. By the end of 2014, she had completed her second book, a sequel to her debut entitled Joiner's Dream, which is the fictional story of a family told through a series of journals kept by one member of a particular family in each generation, from 1790 to present day. The new book takes a look at the same family from the other side of the looking glass.

'I find people are endlessly interested in other people's lives and in their own family background,' she says, noting a key difference between writing a song and a novel is a novel doesn't have to be 'four minutes long and rhyme.'

'[Books and music] are both satisfying for different reasons. Music is what I have always done and there was never a question I would be involved in music. I have never done anything else. Someone once asked Willie Nelson if he ever thought of retiring, and he said, 'All I do is play golf and play music. What do you want me to give up?' and I don't play golf!'

Well, that leaves music and in considering retirement, she concludes doing what she is already doing keeps her active and happy.

'It is entertainment first and foremost,' says Ms. Tyson of what she would like to leave her Aurora audience feeling this month. 'But, I would like to think it is an entertainment that generates some thought and some emotion. I just like people to be entertained by songs and stories that they feel have some relationship to themselves and their lives. I am really looking forward to working with the musicians and meeting the audience in Aurora.'