

Marjorie Cullerne

Roses, Stars & Breezy Ballads

BY DAVID MORRISON



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Life can sometimes lead us down fascinating paths of coincidence. Take this article, for example. Until a few weeks ago, when casually selecting her from a shortlist of possibilities as my subject for this first issue of a new decade, I had never before encountered the name of Parksville resident, Marjorie Cullerne. Yet I soon learned to my delight that our lives have been hazily entwined for over forty years. I admit that in the grand realm of chance the connection is more tenuous than extraordinary, and far from unique, but a very real link exists.

As I've mentioned before in these pages, the majority of my working life has been devoted to the music industry. But what I've not previously related, or needed to, is that my portal into the world of music was my dear departed grandma, Marjorie Jones. She was passionate for music and never happier than when tinkling the keys of her upright piano, singing her favourite songs. As a child I'd watch and listen transfixed as she serenaded me with scores of evergreens such as *We'll Meet Again*, *Sentimental Journey* or *Mona Lisa*. I remember them all and have often wondered how my life might have panned out had I not been exposed to this powerful early influence.

Another big favourite of grandma's was *Roses of Picardy*. An early 20th century classic, she performed it for me often. Had she ever had the opportunity to record this romantic chestnut, her rendition would today count amongst the nearly 700 known versions that include interpretations by the legendary ilk of Frank Sinatra, Perry Como and Mario Lanza.

The lyrics to *Roses of Picardy* are by songwriter Frederick Weatherly (1848-1929), but its lovely, emotive melody was composed by the prolific British genius, Haydn Wood (1882-1959). Perhaps you will now forgive this extended introduction when I reveal that Haydn Wood was none other than Marjorie Cullerne's great-uncle! Thereby the bridge from my childhood to this article is complete.

Marjorie and her French partner, Gilles Gouset, are deep into an extensive research project on the famous relative whose best-known song (of about 300 great works) held me so rapt as a young boy. Thus far the fruits of their sterling efforts include Gilles' 2005 book, *Roses de Picardie, Histoire d'une Chanson, Légendes et Réalité*, and their jointly-produced CD entitled *A Breezy Ballad: Songs and Ballads of Haydn Wood* by bass baritone Shae

Apland, pianist Sharon Wishart and soprano Marissa Famiglietti, with Marjorie's violin on three tracks. Additionally, there's their truly excellent, steadily expanding website devoted to the man's life and work. It's a dizzying resource bulging with information and archive materials and positively exuding the elbow grease behind it.

Wood was also a noted violinist, one of several professional violinists in Marjorie's ancestry. All things considered, it should come as no surprise that she, as a dedicated teacher and performer, is likewise in thrall to this instrument. What does amaze, however, is that rather than following this strong family tradition, her start on the violin, aged six, arose more by accident than design.

"It's such an interesting story," she begins. "I had four or five professional musicians in my family, but although my dad was real proud of his musical family, it wasn't his idea for me to start playing the violin. It was mainly because of an itinerant violin teacher who knocked on doors in the neighbourhood, offering inexpensive lessons."

Once she started to play, however, the young Marjorie developed an ingenious violin practice routine that, while keeping her

hand in on the four strings, enabled her to simultaneously indulge in another keen interest.

"I had these books by Enid Blyton," she says. "My favourites were *The Island of Adventure*, *The Castle of Adventure*, *The Sea of Adventure* – the 'Adventure' series – and what I would do is read one chapter, practice 15 minutes, read another chapter, practice 15 minutes, read another chapter...that's what I did for years and years. I was much more methodical then; I wouldn't be able to do that now!"

Later, with the end of school days in sight, Marjorie's father, though supportive of his daughter's burgeoning musical talent, concerned himself with how she intended to make a living.

"Dad said: I know you are a musician, but what are you going to do for your bread and butter?" she recalls. "He wanted me to become a secretary in the salmon cannery where he worked, so he really had no thoughts of me becoming a professional musician!"

Today, you could say that Marjorie has done extremely well for herself by ultimately choosing music and the violin, not salmon cannery secretary, as the career path she wished to follow. She received a Bachelor of Music from UBC and a Master of Arts from Ohio State University in Columbus, majoring in music history with minors in violin at both institutions. She has played (Violin II) with the Vancouver Island Symphony since its inception in 1995 and performed with other orchestras, chamber music ensembles and string quartets, both at home in Canada and around the world. Marjorie has also been a performer and instructor at the Nanaimo Conservatory of Music for over 30 years and spent four years teaching Suzuki Violin at the Vancouver Academy of Music. She performs solo as a 'strolling' violinist. With Parksville guitarist Peter Leclerc, as Starlight Reverie, she draws on a substantial canon of light music perfectly suited to weddings, garden parties and functions requiring a soothing sound. Then there is Marjorie the violin teacher – the aspect of her dedication to the instrument she seems to hold most dear.

So, all in all, Marjorie has carved out an impressive career with one in her hands, but did she choose the violin – or did the violin choose her?

"When I look back there was all this stuff that could have influenced me, but didn't," she says of a fact to this day not lost on her. It does indeed seem incredible that the violin has played such a significant role in Marjorie's family history, yet the line did not continue as a matter of generational course. In reality she could have picked up any instrument whatsoever, or no instrument at all, so maybe fate intervened to ensure the violin found its way to her? Perhaps, as the title of the popular Haydn Wood/Lillian Glanville song suggests, it became her destiny because *The Stars Looked Down*? On those paths of coincidence, in the grand realm of chance, you just never know.~

For further information, bookings, CD sales and more:

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