



# BIG CITY TALENT in a small town girl

BY ROBIN CONNELL

THE AUTHOR WITH HER MUSICIAN HUSBAND, PERFORMING AS THE PAUL BREWER & ROBIN CONNELL DUO

**WHEN I'M ASKED** how I came to be a professional musician, I sometimes feel nonplussed. How could I *not*?

Music was central to everything in my family of origin. My parents, newly wed in Detroit, purchased a piano two years before their first car. At family gatherings, the piano was the hearth we gathered around, singing songs with gusto. At the nightly dinner table we sang "grace," often in two- or three-part harmony.

My father taught me to play some of his favorites at the piano long before my feet could reach the pedals. We even had a piano in our little cottage in Northport where I spent childhood summers. It was in that small town that I had my first professional music gig: playing guitar and singing at Timber Shores Resort.

Loving small town life led me to take a year off from college. I lived in a one-room schoolhouse in Lake Leelanau and worked at Sugar Foot Saloon. With no phone or TV (or internet!), I relished the isolation and practiced piano many hours.

When the lease was up, and affordable housing was difficult to find, my roommate and I put up a tipi in Peshawbestown (where the first casino was built a few years later). It was a short bike ride to my village maintenance job in Suttons Bay, where I enjoyed doing things such as painting "The Hose House." At that time there was still a fire engine on the ground floor and a piano on the second.

Most workdays for me ended with a practice session on the keys.

Tipi life is not for everyone, but it was delightful for me that summer. It only remotely resembled tent camping. On cool evenings we had a small fire in the middle, keeping cozy even as we gazed up at the stars through the open smoke flaps. The laundromat next to the church had a bathhouse attached. We took daily showers there and also filled a 55-gallon oil drum with water for our huge garden.

Friends often stopped by and we spent many evenings sitting around a fire outside singing songs and playing guitar. Life was simple. (That whole area is now paved over with parking lots—didn't Joni Mitchell write a song about that?)

The summer after graduation I lived in a tipi again, played folk guitar at The Keller, and otherwise tried to figure out what to do next. Shockingly, I received a call offering me a job in a Top 40 band in New York City. I left a week later with big dreams and expectations for my career. I stayed for 12 years.

Those years provided memorable experiences not possible elsewhere. There are stories I can tell about entertaining famous folks such as Billy Joel and Elizabeth Taylor at my restaurant gig on 46th Street, meeting musicians such as Mick Jagger and Tony Bennett in studios and at parties, and playing Cole Porter's piano at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

What kept me in the city, what was most rewarding for me, were the opportunities to learn from, and be mentored by, great jazz musicians. These were people I revered and had listened to on recordings, never dreaming I would get to meet them, let alone study or perform with them, all of which eventually happened! Due to my versatility, I survived by working as a pianist, keyboardist, vocalist, music director, arranger and composer, sometimes all in one day.

However, life was hard in the city for a gal who loved small-town life. The glamour was tempered by the bad: cars stolen and broken into, being stranded on subway trains at 2 a.m., hauling heavy equipment by myself, and receiving frequent unwanted advances from men simply because I worked in nightclubs.

I didn't make enough money to take vacations to escape the city like others did. So, finally in 1990, I accepted a job at Interlochen Arts Academy in order to visit my family easily in Northport during the summer. Thus began my 20 summers as jazz faculty at the camp.

How could I not devote my life to music? It seemed to be a part of every aspect of my existence. After a bungled first marriage, I remarried—a musician. His son, my stepson, has become a world-renowned jazz bassist and our own teenage son is just as obsessed as the rest of us with daily practicing, listening and studying. Music is the universal language.

## Grand Traverse Woman

With my summer job at Interlochen ending in 2009 and my son reaching age 10, I witnessed my music career evolve yet again. After years of part-time teaching and playing behind other musicians, it was time to add "bandleader" to the mix.

My current jazz quartet includes my husband on trombone and vocals and sometimes our son on bass. We perform consistently around the state. Our quintet adds Traverse City's own jazz saxophonist, Laurie Sears. Recent performances include shows in Baldwin, Beulah, Idlewild Music Festival, Mackinaw, Crystal Mountain, Spring Lake, Grand Rapids, Jackson, Leelanau Uncaged, and the Buttermilk Jamboree Music Festival, even at Cordia in Traverse City.

These days I am beginning to fill the role of elder stateswoman in my world of music. I try to include one "youngster" in the band whenever possible. I recall being taken under the wings of the older musicians when I started performing. Now it's my turn to pass the baton. Not much brings me more delight than to watch the next generation learning the ropes.

Sometimes I feel I let others, and myself, down by not following through with the high-level, big-city career I had originally envisioned. I can feel a pang of regret when I see an article about a woman friend who is now touring Europe or being commissioned to write for

an orchestra. I was one of those women and on that trajectory. But the self-pity fades pretty fast.

I feel incredibly blessed to be able to continue doing the two things I love most: teaching and playing jazz. I also love my husband, son and stepson, and have no regrets over making my choice to raise a family. That may sound cliché, but the jazz women who were my peers, and now tour the world, mostly had to make the opposite choice. It's not fair, but it is still that way.

I've never made much money or received employee benefits, and may never be able to retire but, I ask, retire to what? How can I not be a musician?

This past summer was my third summer performing frequently at Lelu Café in Northport, sometimes as a duo and sometimes with my band. In July, my teenage son began playing upright bass beside me. He has no idea how poignant it was for me to have him play some of his first real gigs with me in Northport this summer, the town where I also played my first gigs. His grandma, my mother, cheered him on just as she did for me all those years ago.

The only life choice I've made that wasn't first and foremost about pursuing a life in music was my decision to become a mother. Then again, as I watch my son perform, perhaps it was.



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