

Quartette - Biography

While Quartette's catalog is filled with commendable recordings, its sixth album "Down At The Fair" is unquestionably its finest work.

Ambitious, and stylistically wide-ranging, "Down At The Fair" began its evolution with a meeting of Quartette members—Cindy Church, Caitlin Hanford, Gwen Swick, and Sylvia Tyson—in early 2007.

After evaluating the lode of original songs they had for the project, they decided to work within a grittier context than they had traditionally done. They also decided to bring in guitarist/producer Colin Linden—a long-time friend of each—to helm the project.

Over a three decade career, Nashville-based Canadian Linden has been involved in creating a memorable body of classic roots and blues recordings, whether as a producer, a solo artist, or as a member of Blackie and the Rodeo Kings. In recent years, he has produced such musical figures as Bruce Cockburn, Paul Reddick, Colin James, Sue Foley, and Lennie Gallant.

While Quartette trusted Linden's instincts, and knew they'd appreciate his musical meticulousness, as well as his signature electric and country blues guitar playing, they also wanted him to probe to its limits any musical idea that appealed to them.

"Something I addressed with Colin was the importance of players digging in—not playing as if they're playing with girls," says Sylvia. "We're not that delicate."

Still brimming with enthusiasm over the sessions at the Woodshed Studio in Toronto, and at The Rendering Plant in Nashville, Caitlin says, "We were up for a new adventure." She adds, "We knew with Colin we weren't going to get a slick record. We knew we'd get a down-home, funky sound."

"We realized he would be playing on everything, and that would mark the recording in a different way," Gwen continues. "There's a Colin signature on this album."

"Down At The Fair," however, is also the logical and a natural progression for Quartette. It precisely fits a catalog that includes the studio albums "Quartette" (1993), "Work of the Heart" (1995), and "In the Beauty of the Day" (1998). As well, Quartette has recorded two celebrated seasonal albums, "It's Christmas" (1996) and "I See a Star" (2002).

Quartette consists of four of Canada's finest musical talents that also record and perform extensively as solo artists or work extensively with other artists. Individually, from their intonation to their phrasing, and to their sense of

dynamics, their singing has all of the elements we associate with great soloists.

What makes Quartette so distinctive, other than its grasp of a wide variety of musical styles—including folk, roots, country, and bluegrass—is the beauty of their four different voices harmonizing in a wondrous blend together.

Linden says, "Sylvia has such a beautiful depth to her voice. Cindy has a healing power in her voice you associate with soul or gospel singers. Caitlin's voice is so sweet and classic. Gwen has a wonderful breathiness in her voice."

Quartette are aware of their gifts, and yet are somehow unassuming.

"Our voices are so strikingly different," Gwen agrees. "When people with really different nuances to their voices sing harmony and start nailing the harmony, it is a sound like no other."

Adds Caitlin, "We all know where we fit in the sound. I tend to be alto, and just underneath the melody. Or, if Sylvia is singing the melody instead of bass, I will probably sing her melody part as well. Cindy and Gwen are normally above the melody. We have a lot of fun arranging the songs."

"You can have four really good voices and not have a blend," says Sylvia. "The blend is a gift. There are certain songs we sing where it's the sound of the voices that will make people cry, not necessarily the words of the songs."

It took little time, according to Linden, to realize what elements worked best for "Down At The Fair" in the studio. The album fell into place quickly.

"They were really well prepared," he says. "So I got really spontaneous performances. There was never an issue of working on something until we got it right. They had it right from the first note."

What Quartette does is so self-contained that Linden opted to paint their production with broad strokes. He didn't rework their songs dramatically; rather he gently coloured them in different textures, colours and moods. All of the bed tracks in Toronto were recorded live off the floor; only the drums were separated. The four singers sang closely together, only a couple feet from each other.

There was some later overdubbing in Nashville with such top players as Carl Jackson (guitar/banjo), Stuart Duncan (fiddle/mandolin), Fats Kaplan (mandolin/accordion), and David Roe (upright bass). Chris Carmichael did the remarkable string parts on "Marie Antoinette." Providing an overdub in Toronto was legendary Canadian keyboardist Richard Bell who has since passed away.

One of the album's gems is its witty and deft title track, co-written by Gwen

and Caitlin. "I'm just amazed we got as far as we did with that song," says Caitlin. "Gwen and I were just having fun when we started it. I played a little riff on the guitar, and she came up with some lyrics about going to the fair. Then she said, 'Let's write this. Let's really do it.' It was fun coming up with the images of fairs."

Gwen and Cindy, with their friend, singer/songwriter Susan Crowe, co-wrote another album highlight, "Nothing Can Make The World Right Again." "I love that song," says Cindy. "I was scrambling for songs (to pitch). At the last minute Gwen sent me those lyrics. Within the day I had the melody. We shipped it off to Susan who finished the last verse. The next day I had to present my songs to Quartette. I was phoning Gwen in the morning beforehand, and playing it over the phone. We both love the song. I'm very proud of it."

Even after four decades of songwriting, and with over 200 songs to her credit, Sylvia says she is not a prolific songwriter. Still, "Down At The Fair" features two of her finest songs: the spiritual "Tell My Lord" (with the magnificent line, "I can tell my Lord things I couldn't tell my mother") and the remarkable character sketch, "Marie Antoinette."

The latter is a story of a deluded woman working as a maid in a hotel who believes that in a perfect world she'd be the Queen of France. The song is a reminder that all around us are people whose lives we know nothing about, and some of them are quite delusional.

"When I was a kid I knew a girl who was adopted, and her name was Marie Antoinette," Sylvia explains. "She truly believed she was descended from the Queen of France. I thought that was an interesting concept. The line 'Off with their heads' gets a laugh from audiences."

In pitching songs for Quartette to perform or record, each member understands that songs must not only be of the highest caliber but must provide good vocal parts for all. Also the song has to be fun to sing, not just once but, perhaps, for years.

Says Caitlin, "Cindy came up with a fabulous phrase, 'What else have you got?' We all have had those moments. But it means we are going to have the best material we can come up with."

"We've all had songs turned down," admits Sylvia. "It has nothing to do with the quality of the song. It has to do with how it works for Quartette."

Quartette was formed for a concert at Toronto's Harbourfront in the summer of 1993. The following year, the group received the Canadian Country Music Association's award for best vocal collaboration. In 1995 and 1996, it garnered Juno Award nominations for top country group. An hour-long showcase on "Adrienne Clarkson Presents" on CBC-TV introduced them to an

even wider audience in 1995.

That summer Quartette found themselves closing the Edmonton Folk Festival as a "Quintette" with fellow Canadian singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell. The five traded verses and harmonies on Mitchell's beloved "Circle Game."

While Quartette continues to tour extensively in Canada with a three-piece back-up band, and play select dates with symphony orchestras, each member has been able to maintain their individual solo careers. Sometimes only barely.

Says Cindy with a laugh, "My most schizophrenic moment was a gig in Calgary at a community festival in the summer (of 2007). On the Sunday, Quartette was onstage from 1 P.M. to 1:30 P.M., and I performed with Lunch At Allen's from 2:15 P.M. to 4 P.M. That was wacky!"

"When Quartette started we said we were still going to do our solo careers," recalls Hanford. "Doing other projects has allowed us to do and explore different things."

Meanwhile, within Quartette, Sylvia takes care of financial and contractual matters; Church handles travel and booking itineraries; Gwen oversees rehearsals and hiring musicians; and Caitlin acts as the product manager for their catalog.

"It's the strength of the music, and the sound of the four of us that has kept Quartette going," says Sylvia. "We were once asked by an interviewer if we ever have cat fights, and we all broke up laughing. Only a guy would ask that question."

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Cindy Church has been a leading figure in Canada's roots music scene for two decades. In 1987, she co-founded the traditional country trio Great Western Orchestra which recorded a remarkable eponymous album for Sony Music Canada in 1989.

Originally from Bible Hill, Nova Scotia, Cindy's musical influences were primarily country and traditional music. "I grew up in a country music household," she says. "Strictly Hank Snow, Kitty Wells, and Jean Shepard."

Like the other Quartette members, Cindy maintains her own solo career. She has released three solo CDs—"Love On The Range" (1994) "Just A Little Rain" (1995), and the self-titled "Cindy Church" (1996).

Cindy also performs with two other groups, Lunch at Allen's (with Murray McLachlan, Ian Thomas and Marc Jordan), and performs with "The Nearness of You," a tribute to songwriter Hoagy Carmichael also featuring Joe Sealy and George Koller.

Originally from Bainbridge Island, Washington, Caitlin Hanford immigrated to Canada in 1978 after graduating from McGill University. During this time, she met her husband and songwriting collaborator, Chris Whiteley, and subsequently moved to Toronto where this successful partnership led to two critically acclaimed albums, and a Juno Award nomination for top country group in 1984.

In 1989, Caitlin and Chris formed the Adobe Brothers with various musical friends. They perform acoustic country, western swing and bluegrass music, both vintage and contemporary. In 1997, she released the fine solo album "Bluer Skies."

Caitlin is also a member of the roots-based trio, the Marigolds with Gwen Swick and Suzie Vinnick.

A member of Quartette since 1997, Winnipeg-born Gwen Swick is an accomplished singer/songwriter, guitarist and bassist who lives in Elora, Ontario.

Her solo releases include "Gwen Swick" (1993), "A Pebble of Mercy" (1995), and "Love and Gold" (2002). Additionally, she recorded five albums with the traditional folk trio Tamarack during the early 1990s.

Gwen is a member of the Marigolds, along with Suzie Vinnick and Caitlin Hanford. As well, she writes and arranges vocal music for choirs.

Gwen's music has been featured on several film soundtracks, including "Never Talk to Strangers" (1995), and Terrance Odette's award-winning Canadian features, "Heater" (1999), and "Sleeping Dogs" (2006).

Sylvia Tyson first made her mark in the '60s with the folk/country duo Ian & Sylvia which recorded 13 albums. Ian and Sylvia, who married in 1964, were at the forefront of the '60s North American folk movement.

Following Ian & Sylvia's breakup in 1977 as an act and as a couple, Sylvia released seven solo albums.

In the '70s, Sylvia hosted CBC-Radio's roots music series "Touch The Earth," and hosted CBC-TV's "Country In My Soul" series.

Sylvia received Canada's highest civilian award, the Order of Canada in 1995. She is one of the founders, past president, and song honoree of the Canadian Songwriters' Hall of Fame. She was inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame in 1992, and the Canadian Country Music Hall of Fame in 2003.

Sylvia has completed her first book, a work of fiction.