

Quartette – Short Biography

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

"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.

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."

"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 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.

While Quartette continues to tour extensively in Canada, and plays select dates with symphony orchestras, each member has been able to maintain their individual solo careers.

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.

"It's the strength of the music, and the sound of the four of us that that has kept Quartette going," claims Sylvia. "You can have four really good voices and not have a blend. The blend is a gift."

According to Linden, "Down At The Fair" fell into place quickly in the studio. "They were really well prepared," he says. "So I got really spontaneous performances."

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 were recorded in Toronto 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 (mandolin/fiddle), Fats Kaplan (mandolin/accordion), and David Roe (upright bass). Chris Carmichael did the remarkable string parts on "Marie Antoinette." Also 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. "Gwen and I were just having fun when we started it," recalls Caitlin. "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 was scrambling for songs (to pitch for the album)," recalls Cindy. "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. We both love the song."

Even after four decades of songwriting, 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. "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."

Sylvia adds, "The line 'Off with their heads' gets a laugh from audiences."