

Local singer Heather Katz: 'performing is who i am?'



By Constance Scrafield

'I was just always singing. Even in school, songs in kindergarten. I went to a Hebrew school for seven years, from six to 13 years old. I learned Hebrew and Yiddish. Even now, when I go to the synagogue - which I don't do often - I can still follow along. What helped it stick was learning the songs.'

So said Heather Katz at the outset of a conversation with the Citizen.

'I think I was 10 when I got my first guitar. Growing up in the '60's, there was so much good music. My mother was with a socialist camp and I went with her every year for the whole summer. I sang there too.'

Like many artists who cannot see themselves as anything else, 'I dropped out school after grade 11 to win my fame and fortune. At the time, for a few years, Yonge Street in Toronto was closed from College Street to King during the summer months. There was music, kiosks, the restaurants had patios outside - it was great but only lasted for three or four years. I was fifteen and I used to take my guitar down there and busk for money. When I was 18, a guy approached me and said, 'Would you like to join my band?'' She accepted and there was a time of moderate success.

In 1974, Ms. Katz had a momentous occasion. She was a person who was never shy about going to the stage door after a concert. This time in particular, was a concert starring George Harrison.

'We wondered if 'Bob' [meaning Dylan, with whom George Harrison was friends] came up to see the show. I went to the back stage door - I just wanted to see him and there he was!

'It was as if Moses opened the seas - no one stopped me and I walked up to him. Said, 'Hi, I'm Heather.' He said, 'Hi, I'm Bob.' I told him, 'I play the guitar and write songs' and he said, 'Me too.'

She went on with this remarkable encounter, telling us, 'I told him about my career and told him, 'I don't know if I should go solo or work with others.' And he said he had felt that way too from time to time. So, I asked him for his autograph but I had paper and no pen and he had a pen and no paper. Finally, he wrote 'Dear Heather, Keep it up. Love, Bob Dylan.'

'He walked away and I went back to my friends and fell apart. It made a real difference. From then on, I was invincible.'

She commented, 'Music has always come to me. I put an ad in a music magazine: I am the best singer in Toronto not in a band. I was contracted by Choker Campbell and the Super Sounds. I was the only girl of six and we toured coast to coast. Eventually, I got tired of it. We were really fortunate, though. You played a pub for a week and they could give you a house, so, we were able to

cook..

As she elaborated, "I had a good time with Choker. We travelled with our albums of jazz. He had so many stories." Reflecting over the life of touring, "I learned to roll with the punches."

Between 1984 and 1988, Heather Katz was a regular on the R & B circuit in Toronto, in Yorkville. "I was pretty well known," she conceded. "I was singing with some of the best musicians in Canada, Tom Griffiths, Danny Weis, Ben Jokela. All highly accomplished and brilliant players."

The year 1988 saw Ms. Katz coming to the Orangeville area to live with her first husband, Michael. They sold their house in Toronto to buy a home in Beeton. They opened "Michael's Restaurant and Bistro" in Orangeville in July 1988, bringing their chef from Toronto.

In December 1988, their daughter was born. In January 1989, their house burnt down; they got a trailer to live in on the property while the house was being rebuilt.

On a Friday evening, in February, still 1988, with a full house booked for the restaurant, the chef called to say he "didn't want to do this stuff anymore." Then, he walked. They shut the bistro for the Friday but opened the next day, Saturday, with Michael cooking. "He was sure he couldn't do it but we reminded him of this dish and that dish that he did so well; Jefferson Mappin came to help and others. Overnight, Michael went from being front of house to being a chef and becoming a great one.

"With a baby on my front, I was doing dishes."

From there, the business went well until "they ripped up Broadway; there was a recession and the HST was brought in." In 1993, the restaurant was closed.

Recalling the story to mind, "I have no idea where I got the strength and the tenacity. I had a baby, I wasn't going to go down. I was a superwoman."

However, the marriage was a casualty.

By 1998, Ms. Katz was married to her second Michael Griffin and given birth to her second daughter. She had also started teaching vocal lessons at Broadway Musical and, in 2008, she and Michael bought the shop.

"Michael thought it would be a good retirement project and, now, he really enjoys the store. I wanted to keep on teaching and keep students studying. Not all students become professionals but they come to trust themselves, they have more confidence in themselves."

Teaching and increasingly interested in "helping people find their voices," has led to her finding her own path of helping in ways she never considered.

She tells it: "Years ago, in the U.S., I had the chance to experience my first sound meditation and found it very relaxing. I got to know the community; the relaxation with the didgeridoo. One girl, in Michigan, put a crystal bowl on my belly. I started to chant with it. I have severe osteoarthritis in my knee but when I got up from lying on the floor, I had no pain. Later, after sitting on a sofa for a while, I got up and had no pain. I went for two weeks with no pain."

She became involved with the Vibrational Sound Organization and therapy. She learned about a course with them in April which is accredited with massage therapists in the U.S. "I signed to take the course."

"They do the vibrations with Himalayan bowls, made with bronze and hand hammered. I wanted to do workshopping doing vibrational chanting with the sound. I took the course to develop my own modality."

In order to certify her own designs, she was required to do 10 pro bono sessions in the U.S. "I finished the tenth [this weekend] for my certification," she said with real happiness. "When it comes through, I'll hang up my shingle."

"This is my own modality: I'll use a massage table but people keep their clothes on, not like massages. I place a bowl on the body. Playing the bowl is an active thing. The vibrational therapy is very gentle; everybody falls asleep for some of it and has a reduction of stress."

The bronze bowl is played by hitting the sides with a "soft" mallet. "A measured strike allows the bowl to vibrate," Ms. Katz explained. "Put it on your belly helps some places as the tension is reduced in your body and on your spine helps the shoulders and the neck.

"As a teacher for 20 years, for self-empowerment, using their own voices, I'm developing a workshop: "Reclaiming your Voice." She said, "Being a healer is new for me."

Look for the Heather Katz Band this Saturday, June 2, at 7:00 p.m. at the Blues and Jazz Festival at the TD Local Stars Tent.