



A conversation with Valerie Pearson

with Blaine Workman

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I play in a band (or two) with a friend of mine, Valerie Pearson. She plays piano and trumpet and almost every time I look at her she has a big smile on her face. Her joy in music making is obvious and I've often wondered why she is so happy all the time. So, I asked about her passion for making music. The following is a profile of a lifetime of music.



Where and when were you born?

Winnipeg, 1941.

Tell me about your early experiences in music.

I began piano lessons at the age of seven. My teacher, Mrs. Boyd taught me until I came in last at a festival and then she decided to pass me on to another teacher who could teach me more. My new teacher, Helen Aubert was much more strict and pushed me a lot harder, but I learned a lot more. I loved the piano and would get up at six in the morning to practice. I took the RCM and MCM exams and eventually earned my ARCT and AMM degrees. I always loved classical music but my dad used to play Fats Waller records and that's when I first remember falling in love with the piano. Eventually I attended Gordon Bell High School but there was only a choir program, so I didn't have any early training in wind instruments. I always wished I had that opportunity.

My early performance experiences were twofold. I played the piano at recitals and festivals and although I loved the music, I did not find the public performance experience enjoyable. However, when family and friends would come to our house I would always be asked to play and everybody would gather around the piano and sing.

Do you have a musical connection with your children?

My two daughters were born one year apart and as soon as I could, I put them in piano lessons. In junior high they both started in band programs and continued through high school. I thought I'd like to learn to play a wind instrument and because my daughter Lenaya was playing the tenor saxophone, she began teaching me. Throughout this time I was a classroom teacher at General Vanier School in St. Boniface and decided to study music more seriously. I entered the Bachelor of Music program at the University of Manitoba while continuing to teach. I performed many recitals at Eva Clare Hall and one of my highlights was playing the Grieg piano concerto with the university orchestra.

How did you get started with community bands?

I was at St. John's Music when I ran into Eli Herskovitch. He invited me to play with the Westwood Community Band. So at the age of 52, I began my career as an instrumentalist, playing the tenor saxophone. The Westwood Band was very social and the people in it were all beginners, so we had a lot of fun. Actually the band was started by then Westwood Collegiate band director, Don Bradford and parents of band students who wanted to learn to play with their kids.

I noticed that the trumpets were always having so much fun and decided I wanted to learn to play the trumpet. I got some lessons from my daughter Sharon, who is a professional clarinet player and also played trumpet in her high school jazz band. After a few lessons with Lisa Norris, I began playing in the Westwood Community Band and although it was a huge learning curve, it was always a lot of fun, just as I thought it would be.

A short time later, Harvey Winks, a member of the Westwood Band started a big band called Gig One. I played piano and trumpet in that band and now play in the Rupertsland Brass Band, the 252 Legion Band,

the Assiniboia Concert Band, The MR Big Band and the Executive Big Band. I play in so many bands now I hardly have time to clean the house!

Now that your kids have grown up, do you still play music together?

A friend and fellow community band member, Mike Slater started the Crazy 8's Dixieland Band and invited me to play piano. The personnel in the band changed a bit over the years and eventually my two daughters joined the band. From time to time my grandson sings in the band as well.

I've always thought that playing music should be fun and should be shared with others, so in the late 90's I began annual Family Recitals at Eva Clare Hall. I rent the hall for an evening and invite family and friends to perform solos and ensembles. It's one of my favourite events and it's what I always thought recitals should be; FUN.

Do you have any advice for music makers?

For parents: help your child discover music by sharing the joys of music making so they will want to continue. It has to be enjoyable and satisfying.

For young musicians: don't give up after high school. Keep it on the backburner if necessary, don't stay away too long. There's lots of opportunity to experience the joy of music making with others, just look at what I'm doing.

For adult musicians: play in a community band and attend the annual IMC Adult Band Camp. I've attended for the past 20 years and you meet and play with people from across Canada and the United States. When you go each year you make a close connection with people. It's the music that brings people together.

Any final words?

Aren't we lucky to have music in our lives?