

Relaxed and reflective

A Wawota woman is beginning her career as a recording and performing artist, bringing her light, jazzy music to the heart of the Prairie and its residents.

BY CHRIS ISTACE

As a Music for Young Children (MYC) program teacher, Penny Buhr Johnson was constantly inspiring kids to write and perform their own compositions.

When some students asked to hear some of her own work, she decided it was time to practice what she taught.

More than 15 years later, Penny, a new resident of Wawota, has performed her compositions internationally and will have her second CD released in the fall of 2008.

"The students inspired me because I was teaching them to compose before I had ever composed a song myself," said Penny, who has been singing and playing piano since she was eight years old. "That's how I started and it felt like I had the bug. The songs just came together after that."

Penny's music could be considered adult contemporary, but she describes it as a relaxed and reflective style that has a touch of jazz.

Her influences include Keith Green, an American gospel singer, songwriter, musician, and contemporary Christian music artist from the 1970s. Green died in a plane crash in 1982.

She also looks up to Paul McCartney.

"He writes such simple songs, but you just go, wow, how did he do that," she said.

"I've always been interested in people who played piano and sang."

While her music is secular in nature, her Christian faith has also influenced her work.

"I find that people respond to the songs that offer comfort because they are about the promises God gives you that He'll be with you," she said. "That's good for everybody to hear, whether they believe in God or not."

The final influence on her music is physical in nature.

At the age of 16, Penny was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a group of genetic eye disorders that causes abnormalities of the photoreceptors of the retina and leads to a progressive loss of vision.

"My mom and her mom had it, so it wasn't a big shock" she said.

"I think it actually improves my music because I have to listen and think harder to figure out why and how a song works. I think the music becomes more vivid."

Today, she is considered legally blind. The disease played a role in the end to her 19-year MYC teaching career.

MYC is an international music teaching program that boasts 24,000 students and 900 teachers on three continents.

In 2006, Penny—with the help of her brother Jason Buhr, a musician with a recording studio in Winnipeg—recorded her first CD called *Soulmates Forever*.

Of the 11 songs on the CD, most are original compositions.

"Quiet Love" is one of her favorite songs on the recording. The song—one of the first she wrote in 1992—came to her after a walk along the river on a sunny day with her daughter.

"And your sweet voice echoes



Chris Istace photo

Inspired by the positive feedback she received from an impromptu concert in Mexico, Penny Buhr Johnson, a pianist and vocalist from Wawota, began performing in Canada with a concert in Wawota last November. Her second CD is due to be released this fall.

soft/Like the bird that soars on high/Oo I feel the gentle breeze of summer/In your sigh," the song says.

Another favorite is "Heart of Love."

"It says everything I want to say about getting a brand new spirit," she said. "The words are actually from Ezekiel in the Bible: 'I will give you one heart/I will give you serenity/I will give you a heart of love/Overflowing heart of love.'"

"It represents the promise of hope, a new life and a new spirit and that's what I think about this music. It really can give new hope, new life and a new spirit."

Penny says her music comes from a variety of sources. Sometimes she dreams of a melody or a line or it will hit her while she's doing other things.

"I've had a melody in my mind and I'd run to the keys to play it because I think it must be a song beginning to run in my head," she said.

At other times, someone she is talking to will say something that she thinks will make a good lyric or the bud of a song.

Much of her work comes from life experience, especially during times of struggle or sadness.

"It takes something major to happen in life for something to come up and write about," Penny said, mentioning that her song "Now I Must Sleep" was written not long after her father died.

Soulmates Forever is being sold at Wawota Flowers 'n Things and at King's Department Store in Carlyle.

The Mexican motivator

Penny and Delmar were celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary when an impromptu performance began Penny's trek to performing her music live.

After handing her CD out as a gift, she was asked to sing in front of the people the couple

had met. After finding a piano in a nearby church, she gave an off-the-cuff concert for anyone within ear-shot.

The man who suggested she sing to them was enthralled with Penny's talent and told her she should perform at an upcoming major event.

The promoter of the concert, who rarely changes a set list once an event is established, was blown away by Penny and her music and decided she would be a valuable addition for the English speaking members of the audience.

Instead of flying home at the end of their vacation, the Johnsons stayed for the concert so Penny could take advantage of the opportunity that had fallen in her lap.

She originally planned to play two songs from her repertoire, but the headline act had technical difficulties and she ended up performing for 40 minutes.

Someone at the concert was so

impressed with Penny, it led to an opportunity to record her second CD, which is due out in the fall of 2008. The couple returned to Mexico this winter to record vocal and piano tracks for it. Production of the recording is ongoing.

"In Mexico, it seemed like her music was so appreciated there that it got her thinking maybe she should be doing this back in Canada," said Penny's husband Delmar.

Penny performed to a capacity crowd at the Wawota Town Hall last November. Two more concerts are planned for this month. On March 15, she plays at 7:30 p.m., again in Wawota. She will be at the Carlyle Theatre at 7:30 p.m. on March 29.

"We're just starting to work on a schedule of events to play," Penny said. "I was so committed to teaching before. It was always the priority."

The move to Wawota

Delmar said the move to Wawota has allowed Penny's budding music career to flourish.

"The move here has freed her up from teaching and financially, we're more free to pursue this," he said. "We don't have the Okanagan mortgage to deal with anymore."

The Johnson family includes Penny, husband Delmar and six children aged 10 to 24. The 10-year-old, a 13-year-old and a 17-year-old still live at home.

The Johnsons moved to Wawota from Oliver, B.C. last June. The main reason for the relocation was to bring the family closer to Delmar's work as owner of Ogy's Ice Cream-Mini Golf at White Bear Lake. He has owned the business for 10 years, forcing him to be away from his family for long periods before they could join him at White Bear during the summer.

"After 10 years of that, we got tired of that routine. We just had to simplify our life a bit," Penny said about the move.

Penny has ties to the area. As a child, her family often visited her father's sister in Carlyle.

But after investigating several communities, the Johnsons decided to set roots in Wawota.

"When we realized we were going to do this (move to Saskatchewan) we analyzed all the towns within a half hour of White Bear," Delmar said. "Wawota stuck out as being small enough and quite friendly."

Other influences on their decision included affordable real estate, the thriving school and the fact that Wawota is reported to have some of the best quality water.

Penny's career may get another boost this summer when she and her 17-year-old daughter travel to Colorado to participate in a large music festival. The event hosts many music industry representatives who provide suggestions to performers who want to improve their work.

Several performers may also be offered contracts with recording companies looking for new talent.

Penny is jumping at yet another opportunity that's fallen into place since a chance meeting on a sunny vacation.