

Blue Notes

Julie Blue talks about the influence of her travels, teaching others, composing and the music in her head.



I'VE ALWAYS HEARD MUSIC IN MY HEAD, BUT IT TOOK ME A few years to realize that everyone else wasn't hearing it as well. When I was younger, almost every emotion, or a physical setting, or an exchange between people, or a train or a baby crying inspired music. It seemed pretty natural that I would pursue a career in film composing. Responding to life with music is just something I've always done.

I played piano and sang from the time I was about five, growing up in Calgary. At fifteen I got serious about studying jazz and at seventeen toured across Canada with a show band. I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn and moved to Vancouver to study music at Capilano College. This was my first taste of composing for strings, horns, and other orchestral instruments and it was the first time I was given the chance to hear the music played. I was hooked. As well as the jazz, I got a taste for classical piano and began to study with a wonderful teacher.

After music school I traveled and played and studied both music and languages. I played in a jazz band in Mexico, a Latin ensemble in Spain, did a solo gig in Japan and played with a fusion band in Australia. In Africa, music is such an intrinsic part of the culture that after spending time there, I never viewed music the same way. The African saying 'if you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing' influenced the way I shared music with the people I met. In Japan, I visited a temple in Kyoto where thousands of people were chanting to send solace to survivors of a terrible mudslide. That experience shifted my perception of music as a commodity and gave me an understanding that sound, and the intention behind it, have the capacity to touch people in profound ways. I traveled across North Africa, through Europe, and then back across Mexico. I learned some passable Japanese and became quite fluent with Spanish. I came to realize that music is a universal language and with each new culture I gained a deeper understanding of the nuances.

I came back to Canada to compose music for my first film in 1986. *Close to the Heart* was also my long time friend Shona Miko's first film. The marriage between color and sound, visuals and melody, became my passion along with the actual music itself. Having never scored a film before I had to rely on my instincts and emotional sensibilities. I quickly realized that the role of music in film is to support the story and dialogue. Shona's film was an intimate story about her grandmother who had founded an amazing school for young people who were labeled "retarded" and sent away to a home. I remember stripping away a lot of layers of music and many of the cues before hitting the right balance between space and sound.

I wrote a multi-medium family musical called *Jolly's Journey*, which was produced at the Jubilee Auditorium in Calgary. That got me hooked on not only providing song and score for other people's projects but on using projected images to enhance my own concerts and performances. Recently one of the kids' songs in *Jolly's Journey* was chosen for a birthday party scene in (the series) *Queer as Folk*. As a composer you never know where something you create will end up.

In 1988 I put my first studio together and still continue the ever-changing relationship with the amazing technology that allows me to instantly express the music that I hear in my head. Although I love to work with the computer and samples, the ultimate for me is still hearing live instruments playing music I've composed. I recently had a chance to compose a piece of music and conduct members of the VSO playing it. That was such a fabulous experience, which is owed to the Composers Guild who provided us with the chance to study with a noted conductor.

In 1990, I put together a 'gospel' style choir without the religious overtones. I really enjoy composing and arranging vocal music and working with singers. This choir, The Singspiration Singers, is still going on Tuesday evenings with on average of 60 singers. Anyone can join and I teach it without written

music in the gospel or aural tradition. It still amazes me how fast a group of people can turn into a rocking choir. It's also a very cool community of people who go out of their way to support each other. This year I added my good friend Joseph 'Pepe' Danza to the mix. Pepe is a world class percussionist and multi-instrumentalist. He teaches an African style hand drumming class on Saturday afternoons. Our last concert together, called "Rhythm of Life," featured 50 singers, 25 drummers, a great rhythm section, and a couple of fabulous dancers. The whole audience got involved and we had lots of fun. This great community experience balances out the hours that are spent alone with computers in a studio and gives me a chance to keep my piano chops up. I also work with Pepe on my film scores. He can literally play hundreds of world instruments and I love to augment the technology with interesting live sounds.

I released my first CD in 1994. Pepe and I played together in a world beat band called E-Motion. The CD is lush with layers of percussion, keyboards, and vocals. The Latin and African rhythms I learned at that time and during my travels often find their way into scenes I am scoring for a picture. The next three CDs I recorded were instrumental grand piano-based albums. *Heart of the River* and *Shining Through* are filled with original, very melodic pieces of music. Some of this music has been licensed for use in an Italian film. My distributor suggested I record something well known so I released grand piano arrangements of my favorite Beatles ballads in *Here Comes the Sun*. This CD is still selling in some Asian markets.

In 2000, I returned to my passion for singing and songwriting. I worked with Jeff Young on the recording of my most recent vocal CD *Wing & A Prayer*. I used this opportunity to get totally current with studio gear and to benefit from Jeff's amazing technical expertise. He continues to mix my audio projects. I find that I really enjoy the collaborative process and love to bring in some fresh ears for a final mix.

I was asked to teach a film-composing course a couple of years ago at AI (Arts Institute), which was then CDIS. The process of conveying something that for me is very intuitive has been interesting. Use of the technology is certainly a huge component and I continue to learn and stay current with my students.

The studio experience in recording my own CDs and playing on other people's projects prepared me for the work of composing to picture. I've continued to work with Shona Miko providing scores for her award winning documentary *Stolen Lives*, *Children in the Sex Trade* and, recently, on a U.S. TV pilot called *The Rev* on which she was post production supervisor. I have been working with Dianne and Martin Woods on their documentaries, the most recent being *CBC's Life and Times of Alex Trebek*. I also provide music for Ken Malenstyne at Big Red Barn and have done several scores for documentaries about native life in Canada's north. I've provided scores for several short films for talented up and coming writers and directors. One of these short films, with Brent Crowler, will turn into the opportunity to score his upcoming feature *Traveling at the Speed of Life*. I moved into a new house in Deep Cove and met a wonderful filmmaker named Bill Stewart who had been living there. I'm now working with Bill on his upcoming documentary and feature film.

I met Brent, Dianne, and many other great people through Women in Film & Television. I've taken several courses through the organization and find that I end up working with people that I have a relationship with. I am a Mom to Jesse who is 7 so I really appreciate the opportunity to connect with other women who are involved in making films and still find a way to keep a family going. I also like to hang out with the boys at the Canadian Composers' Guild, which keeps me up to date with the fine composers in Vancouver.

After many years of playing and composing music, I'm still passionate about it and I'm still learning something from every project. www.julieblue.com