

Harmony Bazaar: The Little Festival that Could, and Did ... and Does

July 27 - 29 2012, Lockeport, NS (By E. Alex Pierce)

"What is your favourite thing about Harmony Bazaar," I ask Errin Williams-Spidle, Artistic Director since 2009. "Sharing it with someone new," she says. "Meeting someone who hasn't been here before and watching them get excited about women telling their stories in music at this intimate festival in this beautiful place."

Harmony Bazaar came into being in 2004 when a fundraiser for Shelburne County Womens' Fishnet, a night of singing and songwriting with local artists at the Beach Centre in Lockeport ended in a discussion about why there weren't more chances for women in Shelburne County to get on stage and showcase their talent. "Why don't we just do another one." "Another one what?" "A festival, another night like this, only for a whole day and invite everyone we know who sings or writes songs and wants to perform."

That's a rough cut of how it all started, and that's how Williams-Spidle remembers it. A lot of community involvement and many volunteer hours later, some quick intervention by the local CBDC, reliable sponsors, and Harmony Bazaar: Festival of Women and Song, is in its seventh, or ninth, year, depending on how you count. The 2004 concert was followed by another successful event in the fall of 2005, and in the summer of 2006 Harmony Bazaar ran its first one-day festival on the last Saturday in July at Sea Caps Memorial Park in Lockeport. They've been going ever since. As of July 1 this year, the booking office had sold as many tickets as it did for the full run of the festival last year. Anticipation is running high: people are booking from Moncton, Amherst, Cape Breton, the Annapolis Valley, Bridgewater and Mahone Bay, and yes, Halifax. Lockeport is on the map.

This year's headliners are stellar: Sarah Harmer and Serena Ryder, each with a full concert (Serena on Friday, 27th and Sarah on Saturday, 28th). Where else can you get up close and personal to that kind of talent on a small stage close enough to see and hear - no big screen, no big distances, just fabulous music with a beach at your back, everything you need within walking distance, even a place to park your car. (Come early!)

From year one the festival has showcased local performers, women who write songs and present them, and produce CD's, and they have never abandoned that vision. The 2006 festival featured Cathy Cook, Judi Cleveland, Lynne Crowell, Christine Crawford, Julie Balish, Jessica Keen, Tiffany Suttle, Stacey deMolitor, Pat deMolitor, Merrie Howe, Manu, Lisa Buchanan, Shelley Meisner, and Kim Atwood. Many of them return each year, and each year new singer songwriters are added.

Younger performers, girls and young women who are just getting started, get their first chance at the open mic, under the guidance of Julie Balish, many of them mentored by Cathy Cook. Notable this year are Kaitlin Williamson, Tiffani Latham, Mallory Parsons, and Jessica Jurgenliemk featured in a special concert event called "Sheroes." And there is a whole crop of newcomers lined up for the open mic. "Kids look forward to this," says a local parent. "They have a chance to make a dream come true. It's real. They practice and plan for it all year long."

Madison Violet was the headliner in the first full festival year, 2006, a one-day event; Jill Barber in year two; Irish Mythen in 2008, and Rita MacNeil and Melanie Doane in 2009. That was the breakthrough year. The little festival was struggling. It had grown from a vision to a sponsored, regular event. It needed funding to move from a community effort to one that could build a stage to meet the requirements of a name like Rita Mac Neil and compete with the summer festival calendar. Women who knew how to create successful fundraisers were now dealing with the music business, making bookings, reading contracts, coping with financial commitments in a scenario that involved waiting for grants and attracting sponsors. Cash flow was sporadic and unpredictable. They had grown in small increments, "Just the way it should be," according to Dixie Redmond, Executive Director of CBDC Shelburne, "but now they were entering the mainstream, facing big name competition and needing working capital and technical business support." Harmony Bazaar, now an entity on its own, having grown from the parent organization (Women's Fishnet), applied to the Shelburne County Business Development Centre for funding and business expertise.

This was the breaking point, and it worked. "Success never runs in a straight line," says Redmond, "and a lot of it is timing. We were there when they needed us, and they were ready to take advice and look at their business structure." Since 2009, Harmony Bazaar worked with the Shelburne CBDC, and this year (2012) they are on their own. "The key is to enable," says Dixie Redmond, "to offer expertise and capital, but not to make an organization dependent."

Harmony Bazaar can now run on its own and this year boasts a great new sponsor, the NSLC (Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation). A long time growing, and the little festival that could knows that it can, and will, continue. "The strength of the volunteers is the key to our growth and self sufficiency," says Errin Williams Spidle. "We know that the Shelburne CBDC has got our back, and we are proud to be a niche festival with a mix of big name performers and local talent." "Success is a mix of good luck and good management," echoes Redmond. "Shelburne County is a wonderful place to do business. Community is the key to everything we do. As a spin-off to Harmony Bazaar, some of the local performers have started business entities of their own."

Smooth sailing all the way? "Of course not," says Williams-Spidle, "but we have an unbeatable team here, and our crew of volunteers returns year after year."



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