



Delicious sounds from the *Wild Strawberries*

Barbara Sibbald

Strawberries' sound: www.cma.ca/cmaj/vol-160/issue-4/0616.htm

Ken Harrison's band has a gold record, a Juno nomination and a contract with one of Canada's premier independent recording labels, but despite his success as the composer and lead musician with the Wild Strawberries he says he will never leave medicine. You can have 2 careers, he insists, pointing to hero and role model Charles Ives, a renowned symphony composer who was also an insurance magnate. "Music and medicine may not seem compatible, but they are," he says. "My practice opens my eyes up to the world and I bring that to my music."

For 30 hours each week Harrison, 34, trades his keyboards for a stethoscope at Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. He spends half the week in emergency and admitting, and half as a physician counsellor on a community treatment team of nurses, social workers, psychologists and others. They bring health care to patients who frequently miss appointments and fall through health care's cracks after discharge. "I get to practise a bit of everything and I still compose."

Music and medicine have been integral parts of Harrison's life since childhood. Born in Thailand, where his GP father and nurse mother were missionaries, Harrison yearned from an early age to follow in his father's footsteps. After moving to Cambridge, west of Toronto, he began piano lessons and was composing by age 10.

Harrison and his high school sweetheart — now his wife — 31-year-old physiotherapist and singer Roberta Carter-Harrison, are the heart of the Wild Strawberries, with other musicians coming and going as needed. Harrison, the composer and main lyricist, plays keyboards and a startling array of synthesizers.

The couple started jamming with friends during university and in 1988 got their first break when "Crying Shame" won a new music contest on a Toronto radio station. "It was fun to hear our song on the radio," Harrison explains. "I got the bug."

To avoid the expense of recording he created his own stu-

dio, and the couple's first recording — the cassette *Carving Wooden Spectacles*, with the title taken from a Flannery O'Connor story — was released in 1989 and sold 3000 copies.

After graduating from the University of Toronto in 1990 and interning at Montreal's Jewish General Hospital, Harrison began practising in Toronto and the Strawberries began performing live. Their CD *Grace* attracted the attention of a major label, A&M, which distributed their third release, *Bet You Think I'm Lonely*, in 1993. That CD garnered them a Juno nomination, a cross-country tour and a contract with Nettwerk, an independent Vancouver company.

Their next CD, *Heroine*, went gold by selling more than 50 000 copies. They also had a song on *Women in Songs*, a compilation CD that sold 200 000 copies, and participated in Lilith Fair — a concert tour featuring female musicians that

makes about 70 performances across North America during the summer months. To date, Wild Strawberries have created 9 music videos and their songs have been included in 2 movie soundtracks, *Foxfire* and *At Satchem Farm*.

The album *Quiver*, released a year ago, has special significance for Harrison because his mother, Eunice, plays piano on the final song. She began "tinkling the ivories" after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease 2 years ago. "It's been great for all of us to hear her," he says.

Quiver garnered critical acclaim but has sold only about 14 000 copies, mainly because it "baffled the radio people," says Harrison.

It is difficult to slot the Strawberries into a particular musical genre, because just when you think you have them pegged, they change. "We always want to make our next record something we haven't done before, otherwise we get bored." Harrison's far from bored these days as he composes the music for their next CD, due out this year. He relies on the expertise of a one-person focus group, their year-old daughter, Georgia.

"I bring her down [to the studio] and see if she jumps during the music. She's been jumping lately." ?



Dr. Ken Harrison and Georgia