

# B O S T O N SPIRIT

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## Can't Stop The Music

By Loren King

Longtime area singer-songwriter Will McMillan responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to take an inordinate toll on the arts and on artists, the way he knows best: with his songs.

When all of McMillan's 60-plus live shows that had been booked at libraries, senior and community centers and coffeehouses throughout Massachusetts were abruptly cancelled in March 2020 due to COVID-19, McMillan looked to his vast archive of material from two decades of rehearsals and recordings and started distributing his songs digitally.

One of them was "Let Me Be Strong," recorded some twenty years ago but with an uplifting message that seemed perfectly suited to the challenges of the current moment. McMillan contacted the songwriter, Barbara Baig, a former area cabaret performer who'd worked with McMillan and who is now an author and writing instructor in Maine. They decided to release the song on McMillan's blog, ***AMusicalLifeOnPlanetEarth.Wordpress.com***, where he writes about music, music-makers, and life — and on a new website ***LetMeBeStrong.net***.

Inspired by the positive responses to "Let Me Be Strong," McMillan plans to continue releasing an original or cover song every three weeks or so for the rest of 2021. The songs will be accessible on streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon, Pandora and YouTube. "It's Only A Paper Moon" by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg and "Something Good" by Richard Rodgers debuted in February. Other songs on tap for release online include "Plant A Radish" by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones, "Skylark" by Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer, "The Carter Family" by Carly Simon and Jacob Brackman, "We Kiss In A Shadow" by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, "The Babysitter's Here" by Dar Williams, and "In My Life" by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

McMillan has long championed the American songbook in his cabaret shows with jazz pianists Joe Reid, Steve Sweeting, Doug Hammer, Molly Ruggles and Henry Schniewind — celebrating individual songwriters such as Harold Arlen, Dorothy Fields, the Gershwins, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Jule Styne, Cole Porter, and Stephen Sondheim. These songs, he says, are "so well-crafted they sing themselves." They also "raised the bar" for his own songwriting.

McMillan, who's lived in Arlington for 30 years with his "sweetheart" Stephen Fischer, a graphic designer and visual artist, admits it was a steep learning curve to go from performing dozens of live shows to distributing his songs online. "You're not likely to make a living," since digital music services "pay a pittance to performers," he says. But it's a way for him to keep the music playing.

McMillan is no stranger to the concert stage. He sang with pops orchestras, rock bands, and a cappella groups before he turned his focus to jazz and cabaret venues, performing at beloved local spots such as Scullers Jazz Club, Sanders Theatre, the Middle East Nightclub, Bistro Duet, Arlington Street Church, Third Life Studio, and Johnny D's. For many years he hosted *Will & Company* — a series highlighting local singers and songwriters — at the Blacksmith House in Harvard Square and earned a 2002 IRNE award from the Independent Reviewers of New England for Best Cabaret Show in a small venue.

He credits his longtime accompanist Doug Hammer for providing the treasure trove of archived material. McMillan almost always recorded his rehearsals with Hammer in Hammer's North Shore studio. Now he's been able to revisit those hundreds of hours of recordings amassed over the past 25 years and is remixing and mastering the best takes of the songs in collaboration with Hammer via Zoom.

"Doug is a beautiful pianist — so playful. He's also an amazing archivist. He backed up everything so I'm finding tracks from 20 years ago, and every once in a while, the hairs on my arms stand on end," McMillan says.

Although he has always made music, it became McMillan's primary focus after being laid off from his "day job" as assistant director at the Cambridge Center For Adult Education in 2012. Teaching and connecting is still in his blood, however. He leads classes through the "Music Together" program, now via Zoom, for babies and toddlers up to five years old and their accompanying grownups. "For grownups, it's a 45-minute oasis — without phones, unless it's an emergency — of uninterrupted time with their little ones. I lead three classes each week of musical fun and silliness," he says.

Although releasing music digitally in no way makes up for the joy of live performances, it fills a creative gap and allows McMillan to connect or reconnect with audiences.

Despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic, McMillan says he's "acutely aware of how privileged I am that I have a roof over my head — how lucky I am to have some security. Sometimes I wonder about the value of music in the larger scheme of things, but then someone will speak up and remind me of all the ways that music has been a positive influence on their lives. It's not about the money — it's what I have to offer."

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