

Her Only Light: Songs of Connie Converse on Folkstage

Saturday, November 16, 2024, 8:00pm
WFMT

Ronnie Kuller, arranger and conductor
Emmy Bean, vocalist

Warm-up Set

We Lived Alone
Clover Saloon
Johnny's Brother
Man in the Sky
Empty Pocket Waltz
There is a Vine
Roving Woman

Broadcast

Down this Road
Talkin' Like You
Vanity of Vanities
Incommunicado
Anyone Lived in a Pretty How
Town
I Have Considered the Lilies
Father Neptune
She Hears of Old Wars
She Devises a Lullaby
Rainmaker
One by One

Katie Klocke, violin
Doyle Armbrust, viola
Melissa Bach, cello
Lauren Hayes, harp
Michael Tran, clarinets
Barbara Drapcho, clarinet

Emmy Bean is a singer, performer, and interdisciplinary artist. Her work combines improvisation, conversation, folk tunes, narrative, poetic inquiry, political urgency and embodied expression. She writes songs and performs both as a soloist and with the trio 80 Foots. She has been seen in Facility Theater's Little Match Girl Passion and Theater Oobleck's Baudelaire in a Box. She has collaborated with Stacy Rene Erenberg, Erica Mott, Naima Lowe, Opera-Matic, the Neo-Futurists, Beyond This Point, and ~Nois saxophone quartet. Her solo show You're His Child has been seen at the Pivot Arts Festival and Rhino Fest here in Chicago. She holds a masters degree in Interdisciplinary Art from Columbia College Chicago.

Ronnie Kuller is a composer, arranger, pianist and accordionist who has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Joffrey Ballet, the Chicago Philharmonic, and Mister Tom Musick, and whose compositions have been performed at Ear Taxi Festival and recorded onto wax cylinder at Edison National Historical Park.

An excerpt from Connie's draft of a letter sent to her friends and family right before her disappearance, a week before her 50th birthday.

To anyone who ever asks, if I'm long unheard from:

This is the thin-hard sublayer under all the parting messages I'm likely to have sent: Let me go, let me be if I can, let me not be if I can't....

To survive it all, I expect I must drift back down through the other half to the twentieth twentieth, which I already know pretty well, to the hundredth hundredth, which I only read and heard about. I might survive there quite a few years - - who knows? But you understand I have to do it by myself, with no benign umbrella. Human society fascinates me and awes me and fills me with grief and joy; I just can't find my place to plug into it.

So let me go, please; and please accept my thanks to those happy times that each of you has given me over the years; and please know that I would've preferred to give you more than I ever did or could - - I am in everyone's debt.

Elizabeth (Connie) Converse

"once upon a time someone felt your loneliness.
find ancestors. become their living memorial."

- alok vaid menon

PROGRAM NOTE

By David Isaacson

In 1967, Connie Converse's friend Peter Cooper made a short film based on her song "Playboy of the Western World," featuring a new, fully orchestrated version of the tune. Connie wrote to him that "It is a treat in itself to hear my music elaborated on and 'done up' professionally." That is the treat that Ronnie, Emmy, and their ensemble present to us this evening: "doing up" a smattering of Connie's songs in a manner that celebrates her work and expands her legacy.

I first heard Ronnie playing songs by Connie Converse in a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2014. I was delighted to encounter Ronnie's lovely, thoughtful renderings in part because Converse had been a family friend when I was a kid in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Connie was part of the circle of peace activists that my parents also inhabited. My mom would even occasionally join Connie in a casual ensemble of women who met to play music for their own enjoyment (Connie on piano, my mom on her Sears-Roebuck snare drum)... but she had no idea that Connie had devoted most of the 1950s to writing and performing music, developing a small but devoted following who would gather in New York living rooms to hear her play, and even making an appearance on a young Walter Cronkite's "The Morning Show."

It was not until 2009, with the album release of Connie's rediscovered songs for solo guitar and voice, that my mom learned of Connie's history and artistry. Several songs from that album, written from 1951-54, are part of the program tonight. In addition, Ronnie has arranged works from the "Cassandra Cycle" (1956-58) that were never fully realized or recorded in Connie's lifetime. In these songs, we find Converse writing in a new idiom, composing at the piano and imagining performances by the type of small ensemble you see tonight.

The brilliance of Converse's lyrics, the contemporary feel of her music, and her intriguing life story have engendered no small amount of interest over the last decade. Even Suzzy Roche and Lucy Wainwright Roche have covered Connie Converse! And Julia Bullock! Just last year, Howard Fishman's 576-page biography was published (and is the source of much of this program note). And in March of 2023, there was Catherine Lacey's novel "Biography of X," which imagines a fictional Connie Converse who lived into her 80s.

It is in the context of all this adulation and speculation that Ronnie and Emmy approach this work. Knowing them, I believe that they and Connie are simpatico artists, with congruent sensitivities and sensibilities. They have been able to finally give Connie's oeuvre the investigation and manifestation it deserves. Emmy has told me that her goal is to both honor the music and honor Connie's personal wish (as stated in the letter reproduced in this program) "to let me go, please." Connie herself might have appreciated this paradox. In her song "Trouble," she wrote wittily: "Ever since we met the world's been upside down/And if you don't stop troubling me you'll drive me out of town/But if you go away/ As trouble ought to do/ Where will I find another soul to tell my trouble to?"

All lyrics by Elizabeth "Connie" Converse unless otherwise specified
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We Lived Alone

We lived alone, my house and I
We had the earth, we had the sky
I had a lamp against the dark
And I was happy as a lark

I had a stove and a window screen
I had a table painted green
Sat on a chair with a broken back
Wearing a pretty potato sack

I had a rug upon the floor
And roses bloomed around my door
Though my estate was never high
My house was snug and so was I

We lived alone, my house and I
We had the earth, we had the sky
I had a job, my wants were few
They were until I wanted you

And when I set my eyes on you
Nothing else would do
Nothing else would do

The Clover Saloon

I'm just a dusty cowhand, a dusty, thirsty soul.
I used to keep my money in a pocket with a hole.
I've got one ambition, like wishing for the moon:
To drink a glass of pleasure,
full-measure, bulgin' out and brimmin' over
at the Clover Saloon.

I was settin' there one evening and feelin' I was straight.
A fella called me somethin' I particularly hate
I threw a bottle at him, but the feller ducked too soon.
That's how I lost my credit at the Clover Saloon.

I'm just a dusty cowhand and, brother, I am broke.
And, brother, I'm so thirsty I'm goin' up in smoke.
I've got one ambition like wishing for the moon:
to drink a glass of pleasure,
full-measure, bulgin' out and brimmin' over
at the Clover Saloon.

Threw the bottle at him and missed him like I said.
I broke the bar-room mirror and left it there for dead
I shot him through the middle to make him change his
tune.
That's how I lost my credit at the Clover Saloon.

I'm just a dusty cowhand a-waitin' for the worst.
They're hangin' me tomorrow in the middle of my thirst.
I've got one ambition like wishing for the moon:
to drink a glass of pleasure,
full-measure, bulgin' out and brimmin' over
at the Clover Saloon

Johnny's Brother

I'll tell you a story about Johnny McClory:
that's how my story was begun.

I'll tell you another about Johnny's brother,
and now you may think my story is done...

The first time I met Johnny
I could see he was bonny,
and when he looked at me how he did glow.
But just as we were gazing at each other,
Johnny's brother was down in Mexico.

I went to a party with Johnny my hearty;
I never felt so happy and so gay.
But just as we were drinking to each other,
Johnny's brother was down in Santa Fe.

And down in the garden my heart would not harden;
how well I can recall those tender scenes.
But just as we were kissing one another,
Johnny's brother was down in New Orleans.

I didn't want to tarry my Johnny to marry,
and so I got myself a wedding gown.
But just as we were wedded to each other,
Johnny's brother came riding into town.

The years have been merry,
oh, very, very, very.
I love my Johnny well and he loves me.
But all the while we're lovin' up each other,
Johnny's brother holds the baby on his knee.

I've told you a story about Johnny McClory:
that's how my story was begun.
I've told you another about Johnny's brother,
and now my story is done.

Man in the Sky

There once was a girl in the olden days
grew weary of men with a roving gaze -
'Farewell, fickle lovers; goodbye, goodbye,
for I'm falling in love with the man in the sky.'

The man in the sky, he walks in haste
with three bright buckles around his waist
and a great dog near and a little dog nigh
and a steady gleam in his golden eye.

The girl went out on a windy hill
and cried when the night was dark and still -
'Come down! come down! you man in the sky,
or else I am likely to pine and die.'

The man in the sky didn't stop to talk;
he went right on with his evening walk
and the great dog howled and the little dog whined
and the girl grew cold in the rising wynd.

She took to her bed from the light of the sun,
but when the sun his course had run
she went to her window so high, so high,
and waited and watched Orion go by.

The man in the sky, he walked in haste
with three bright buckles around his waist
and a great dog near and a little dog nigh
and a gleam for her in his golden eye.

One night she stood on her windowsill
and stepped right out on the highest hill
and climbed to the place where the planets are
and jumped from there to the nearest star.

She rocked in Cassiopeia's chair
and waked the dragon and roused the bear
and the great dog howled and the little dog whined
and the girl grew cold in the rising wynd.

She found Orion at last, and then
she found he was just like other men.

When on his shoulder her head she'd lay
his eye was a million miles away.

The great dog howled and the little dog whined
and the girl grew cold in the rising wynd
and the dragon snarled and the lion roared
and the stars flew by in a golden horde.

This tale has a moral brief to tell;
and I won't go on, for you know it well.
Remember the girl in the days gone by
who fell in love with the man in the sky.

She rocked in Cassiopeia's chair
and waked the dragon and roused the bear;
and where they buried her I forget,
but the man in the sky isn't married yet.

Empty Pocket Waltz

Shall we dine out,
my dear, and dance the night away?
Don't say you're tired;
you know you haven't worked all day.

We paid the rent
finally, and we're free to be free.
Come now and waltz
the Empty Pocket Waltz with me.

Let's close our door
and make believe we're all alone.
Grandma can't hear,
and Baby's sleeping like a stone.

We paid the doctor
his fee, and we're free to be free.
Come now and waltz
the Empty Pocket Waltz with me.

Why so unhappy?
Don't be that way.
Maybe they'll make me
queen for a day.

You'll find a job,
probably, or be free, or be free.
Come waltz again
this Empty Pocket Waltz with me.

There Is A Vine

There is a vine growing on my garden wall,
And it is brown and withered in the fall,
And in the spring its leaves are green and blossoms all
 aflame,
But, spring or fall, still I love you just the same.

There is a gate halfway down my garden wall,
And in the night I lock it, bolts and all,
And in the day it's open wide to all who would come
 through,
But, day or night, it is never locked for you.

There is a tree growing by my garden gate
And year by year it seems to stand and wait,
And here am I beneath the tree, for I am waiting too,
And, oh, my love, I will always wait for you.

Roving Woman

People say a roving woman
is likely not to be better than she ought to be;
so, when I stray away from where I've got to be,
someone always takes me home.

A lady never should habituate saloons,
and that is where I find myself on many afternoons.
But just as I begin to blow away the foam,
someone tips his hat to me and takes me home.

People say a roving woman
is likely not to be better than she ought to be;
so, when I stray away from where I've got to be,
someone always takes me home.

Now, poker is a game a lady shouldn't play,
and every floatin' poker game just seems to float my
 way.

But long before I've lost a thing besides my comb,
someone tips his hand to me and takes me home.

Don't see why they always do it -
can't be vanity; must be sheer humanity -
when some kind soul remarks with great urbanity:
'Lady, let me take you home.'

Of course, there's bound to be some little aftermath
that makes a pleasant ending for the straight and narrow
 path.

And as I go to sleep, I cannot help but think
how glad I am that I was saved from cards and drink.

People say a roving woman
is likely not to be better than she ought to be;
so, when I stray, there's positively got to be
someone there to take me home

Down This Road

Down this road
On a Monday morning
Came a-riding
Three strangers

There was one wearing green
And one a peacock feather
And one wearing overshoes
Against the wintry weather

And they gave me
Six white horses
For to carry my load
And they beckoned
Me to follow
And they took me
Down this road

Almost any day when I'm weary
Almost any day when I'm blue
Almost any day when I'm weary
Almost any day when I'm blue
I'd like to take a train and ride it
Or dig a hole and crawl inside it

Almost any day when I'm weary
Almost any day when I'm blue
It's surprising, realizing
What a little bit of dreaming can do

Almost any day when I'm blue

Talkin' Like You

In between two tall mountains
There's a place they call Lonesome
Don't know why they call it Lonesome,
I'm never lonesome when I go there.

See that bird sitting on my windowsill?
Well, he's saying whippoorwill all the night
through.
See that brook running by my kitchen door?
Well, it couldn't talk no more if it was you.

Up that tree there's sort of a squirrel thing
Sounds just like we did when we were quarreling
In the yard I keep a pig or two
They drop in for dinner like you used to do.

I don't stand in the need of company
With everything I see talkin' like you.

Up that tree there's sort of a squirrel thing
Sounds just like we did when we were quarreling.
You may think you left me all alone,
But I can hear you talk without a telephone.

I don't stand in the need of company
With everything I see talkin' like you.

See that bird sitting on my windowsill?
Well, he's saying whip-poor-will all the night
through,
Just whip-poor-will all the night through.

In between two tall mountains
there's a place they call Lonesome.
Don't see why they call it Lonesome;
I'm never lonesome, now I live there.

Vanity of Vanities

When I came into Tombstone,
There was a man there could change copper into
gold
With a brown bucket full of cloudy water
And a magic ten-penny nail.

"This will take a while," says he.
"Put your pennies in the pail;
Find yourself some scenery."

I don't know just where I went to
And I stayed longer than I meant to
Walking in the crystal air,
As I dreamed of fortune rare.

When I came back to Tombstone,
There was a man there could preach sinners into
heaven,
With a frock coat that had a velvet collar
And a tongue I'd heard once before.
"Never mind your gold," says he,
"Gold is a vanity, barred from eternity
By the needle's eye, you know."

So when I came out of Tombstone,
I was heaven-bound, and qualified to go.

Incommunicado

Shall I then expect a summer snow
Because you tell me so?
I might as well believe
My absence made you grieve.
That tongue turns rain to snow and false to true;
What's grief to me is summer snow to you.
Shall I then leave you again? - la la la la,
Or shall I stay and see true misery? - la la la la ...
Shall I then forestall your next remark
By yawning in the dark?
I know what it will be -
It's nothing new to me.
When your invention fails, remember this:
There's nothing worth repeating but a kiss;
Will you then kiss me again, la la la la,
Shall I then repeat my sweetest word
Because you have not heard?
While my confection melts
You think of something else.
Who is it leaves the other one behind?
Hold still, if you will,
So I can find your wandering mind!
And if you ask once more in your deplorable way,
"What did you say?"
In fire and fury I shall die!
- And if I fail to catch your eye,
Shall I then perish again - la la la la,
Or shall I live to be your misery? La la la la ...

Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town
(text by e.e. cummings)

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did

Women and men (both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

one day anyone died I guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

I Have Considered the Lilies

I have considered the lilies;
They never toil, they only bloom,
They never feel chilly or tired or silly
And they don't need much room.

I have considered the lilies;
I have considered how they grow,
Tell me, tell me how to be a lily If you know.

Oh, lilies toil not, neither do they spin.
I'm gonna take my working papers
And turn them in,
I'm handing over my pencil and pen,
I won't be needing my broom again,
I'll bloom by day, I'll bloom by night,
And blooming will be my delight.

Bright tiger lilies, still water lilies
See how they all dilly-dally;
Look at the daylily, lemon lily, callalily;
And the lovely little lilies of the valley.

Oh, lilies toil not, neither do they spin
I'm gonna take my working papers
And turn them in.
To be more splendid than Solomon
I'll walk around wearing the morning sun
The sun by day, the moon by night
And blooming will be my delight.

It would be fun, but I'm afraid that I would freeze.
King Solomon was not arrayed like one of these.
So, lilies, I can't afford to dilly-dally;
I've got to work for my cotton, work for my denim,
Linen and damask and challis
Not like the daylily, lemon lily, callalily
Or the lovely little lilies of the valley.

I have considered the lilies;
I have considered how they grow.
Tell me, tell me how to be a lily
If you know.

Father Neptune

When my man goes to sea,
He steps so high and free
I think I know as I watch him go
That he has no need for me, for me.

And when my man comes home,
And waits a while to roam,
I think I see when he looks at me
That he's dreaming of the foam, the foam.

I'm not a pious Christian, and I do not go to mass,
But I pray to Father Neptune to let him safely pass.
I sing to the god with the three-pronged rod
And the whiskers wild and free
That I've got a man with a beard and a tan
And a passion for the sea.

He rides through the foam
And the cold and the warm
And he loves to risk his neck
And I'd like to know when he goes below
That it's just below the deck.

Oh Neptune, Father Neptune
I'll tell you fair and true
That if you should lose my sailor
I'll sing no more to you.
When he's home from sea he is half with me,
And he's gone when I close the door
And it's still his creed that he has no need
For a wife except on shore.

I know it's a boat that keeps him afloat
But I'd like to think it's me,
And if it were not for this
I would sink to the depths of the sea.

She Hears of Old Wars

Beyond them,
Beyond them lay the lakes of shadow
Where the sun was drowned;
And pausing,
And pausing in a perilous meadow,
They set their tents all around.
Dark horses flew among them
With wings like knives;
They roused the sleepers up where sleep had flung
them
And seized their lives –
Swept them from the perilous meadow,
Plunged them in the lakes of shadow –
And brought word home to their wives.
... We found them,
We found their campfires dry for lighting
Under ancient thorns;
And pausing,
And pausing in the smoke of our fighting
We heard the sound of their horns.

She Devises a Lullaby

This is the center of the world's dark circle –
A dark, slow circle spun by the loving stars ...
Like myself, all things adore you;
Close your eyes – I will keep watch for you;
Sleep...In the world's dark circle,
The dark, slow circle...
Do not listen to the screaming train –
It will run down after a mile or two;
Do not worry, the moon is on a chain –
It can only smile at you;
In cities where tigers creep
They've put away the tigers –
Sleep ... in the world's dark circle,
The dark, slow circle...
Now all thunder muffles up its riot;
Broken levees keep their flood;
Now all armies stand apart in quiet;
Deadly wounds hold back their blood –
Of all things I, at least, adore you;
Close your eyes, I will keep watch for you –
In the center of the world's dark circle,
The cold, slow circle
Spun by the stars.

The Rainmaker

(the refrain has been adapted from a quatrain by an unknown English poet of the 16th century)

I'm going over Sugar Hill to help them do the haying
Some old crow is calling after me, but what can he be saying?
Morning words and morning birds and sunshine in the lane
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain
down can rain?

I'm going over Sugar Hill to do the raking after
All the hay we've made until today should reach the highest rafter.
Not a haze for seven days, the sky as bright as pain.
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain
down can rain?

Men must be so early up and off to work together –
I'm going over Sugar Hill and railing at the weather.
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain
down can rain?
Then should my love be in my arms and I in my bed
again –
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain
down can rain?

One by One

We go walking in the dark.
We go walking out at night.

And it's not as lovers go,
two by two, to and fro;
but it's one by one -

One by one in the dark.
We go walking out at night.

As we wander through the grass
we can hear each other pass,
but we're far apart -

Far apart in the dark.
We go walking out at night.

With the grass so dark and tall
we are lost past recall
if the moon is down -

And the moon is down.
We are walking in the dark.

If I had your hand in mine
I could shine, I could shine
like the morning sun -
like the sun.

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