

TADDLE CREEK

The Streamlined Man

Percy Faith smoothed out rock, jazzed the classics, and became one of the most important musicians Canada has produced.

By Alfred Holden

Sitting high on a bookkeeper's stool, Percy Faith bites into a crisp Northern Spy apple. Spotting him in the corner, Einar Rechnittzer, a reporter, steps toward the young musician. "You see only a sleek-headed youngster, nattily dressed, smiling, whom, if you were a truant officer, you would be inclined to order back to school," Rechnittzer wrote, a few days later, in the *Star Weekly*. The date is sometime in May, 1931, and the place is "one of the largest radio studios in Toronto," probably CKNC, among the earliest Canadian broadcasters. This young man is just twenty-two years old, but he has already made a name for himself. Indeed, "We single him out for your acquaintance," Rechnittzer wrote, "because, of all in his business in Toronto, his work is considered most distinctive."



Faith's "business"—really an art form, but rooted in fiscal reality—was the making of "modern" music for radio. Radio, so instant, so wireless, was transforming everything, people thought. Out of the ether, magically, it provided stock prices, bedtime stories, even advertising—a sort of Jazz Age internet; a cause of frustration early on when there were technical problems, but soon a source of excitement and wonder. "How is modern music made?" Rechnittzer would ask his readers, rhetorically, reporting from the radio studio. "Who mixes the ingredients for the delightful 1931 versions of the classics, and the fascinating potpourri of jazz airs ladled out to us these days in ... staggering quantity from our dance halls, our theatres and our radios? Who is responsible for the blah-blah of this saxophone in this orchestra, playing one of our dearest song and dance favourites, or the vo-do-deo-do of that trumpet in that orchestra? Who, in short, makes the popular orchestral renditions of music to-day so characteristic of the age?"

Faith eased off the stool and broadened his smile. Here, fresh-faced, apple in one hand, pencil and paper in the other, was one of the "culprits"—a musical arranger, the "unseen and unsung member of a popular orchestra," who writes the part for every instrument, weaving them around a melody until, "much as a writer weaves a finished play from the merest shreds of a plot," the three-dimensional whole emerges. Thanks to radio, Percy Faith, in May of 1931,

was a busy man, in demand to satisfy the insatiable appetite of amplitude modulation (AM radio, the only band then) for content—fresh programs, new music, variations on any theme. He revised, that very day, the arrangement for the theme music of *Canada on Parade*, one of the first programs to air coast-to-coast. (“Would you like to hear it?” he offered, hurrying over to a studio piano.) He had lately been one half of a duo, Faith and Hope (Hope was singer Joe Allabough), which mixed music and comedy in a program broadcast live on another station, CKCL, Wednesday nights at ten-thirty. Since the fall of 1929, Faith had written arrangements for just about all of the big—as big as radio in Canada got in those early days—radio programs. “Sometimes he would work all day and all night and all the next day trying to keep up with orders for his work,” someone remembered later. The shows’ names—Eveready, Wrigley, Neilson, Imperial Tobacco, Spic and Span—communicate the commercial character of the Canadian radio landscape before the CBC.

“Asked if he thought jazz was passing, he said he doubted it,” Rechnittzer reported back, on an important question of any age: public misgivings about the suspect tastes of youth. “He thinks it has quietened, softened, has reached its sentimental age.” No one could have known it at the time, but Faith was right—the remarkable era of the big bands (swinging music, sweetly played) would shortly dawn across North America, and redefine, at least for a time, the character of popular music. Faith did not, strictly speaking, play jazz, but he understood it, just as, it would turn out, he understood so much else.

Faith’s influence on music in the twentieth century was so far-reaching, so wide-ranging that it is still heard in the twenty-first. Yet, it is possible, especially if you are under fifty years old, that you have never heard of him. Among other things, Faith has been credited as the inventor of, or certainly the person who best perfected, a genre: “Beautiful Music,” now almost extinct, but which was once the mainstay of FM radio. This story spins out into a neat tale. One of the words the nineteen-thirties gave to the English language was “streamline,” which at the time referred to how architects and industrial designers were smoothing out and taking the clutter off the designs of everything from skyscrapers to pencil sharpeners. One of Faith’s CBC radio shows of the period (the arranger landed at the newly-created Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, as it was then known, in 1933, the year after it was created) was called *Streamline*, picking up on how an arranger could do to music what architects and designers were doing to buildings and products. Faith was twenty-six. Working as the CBC’s staff arranger and conductor, he developed a smooth instrumental sound that could be applied to almost any melody, from baroque to (as he would one day prove) Beatles. “We jazzed the classics, and classicized the current pop music,” said Faith. “Symphonic swing,” some would call the lush orchestral music, heavy on strings. “He is the unemployed fiddle player’s dream man,” a columnist for *Liberty* magazine noted. “He has no hesitation whatever in saying that he thinks the only ideal orchestra is one that is at least half stringed instruments.”

Like the futuristic buildings, cars, and railroad locomotives the Depression era is famous for, Faith’s music seemed ahead of its time, and probably was. “Later on, American conductors and arrangers such as Andre Kostelanetz and Morton Gould would use symphony-sized orchestras comprised of classical woodwinds, brass, and percussion to perform popular songs,” the Canadian trombonist Murray Ginsberg wrote. Faith was “adept at applying classical procedures to the popular repertory,” said one critic. “He made use of the late 19th-century orchestra, typically with emphasis on strings, and with the occasional addition of saxophones or chorus.”

For a number of reasons, Faith *was* doing something new. At the CBC he benefited from what young employees often find at fledgling organizations: a limited budget that made it necessary to innovate, and a lack of constraints that made it possible to do so. “George Taggart [a CBC brass] said, ‘This is your show, you do as you please—and here is your budget,’” Faith would remember. Among the much-imitated innovations he tried out on his later show, *Music by Faith*, was the use of ‘vocalise’—women singers who would not sing, but create special effects.

Toronto had been known as North America’s choral capital when Faith was a youth, and perhaps this had something to do with his extensive use of singers. “The budget got me about thirty men [per show], and I had something like twenty-five, thirty dollars left over,” Faith recalled in the sixties. “There was a trio around the studio at that time—three girls—and they said they would do the show for five dollars each.” A few of their friends were recruited to round out the group, for a total of six. “I added them to the flutes and to vibraphones,” said Faith, “and we got fantastic sounds with them. . . . they add the feeling of ‘the orchestra’s human after all’—it hums and oohs and aahs.”

The most important early CBC studio was located in a battery factory at 803 Davenport Road, just west of Bathurst Street in midtown Toronto. For a time, Faith rented a two-storey house at 104 Burnside Drive, at the crest of the Bathurst hill, so he could walk to work. These studios were inherited from CKNC, perhaps the very station where Faith was interviewed in 1931, the “NC” standing for National Carbon, maker of Eveready batteries. It seems like an odd connection, until you realize that many of the early investors in radio really had something else to sell—radio sets, for instance, or, in the case of Eveready, power for radio equipment.

On Davenport Road Faith faced obstacles. There was the rumble and clang of streetcars—then, as now, stored and serviced at the Toronto Transit Commission’s busy Hillcrest yards, right under the studio’s windows. Yet the acoustics inside the factory were “dead:” “We had to put [supplementary] microphones in the lavatories to get an echo-chamber effect,” Howard Cable, who succeeded Faith as staff conductor/arranger around 1940, said in 2000. “Sometimes people would come in and flush—that was a bit of a problem.”

Adversity’s upside was the critical and popular success of Faith’s radio program, which was not—as some people believed—a religious show. The players included Toronto’s best musicians of the day, among them trumpeter Robert Farnon, who went on to fame in England, Hyman Goodman, dean of Canadian violinists, and Albert Pratz, who would later become the Toronto Symphony Orchestra’s concert master. Faith’s string writing “was so spectacular that only the best violinists could play the parts,” remembered Harold Sumberg, later a violinist for the T.S.O., and who played on Faith’s first show. “It’s music for moderns, treated with originality and vitality,” opined *Maclean’s* in 1940, by which time CBC’s *Music By Faith* had been picked up by the Mutual Broadcasting System in the U.S. where, oddly, it won the ear and approval of gossip columnist Walter Winchell. “Don’t miss Percy Faith’s orchestra from Toronto,” Winchell, not given to praise much and not fond of things foreign, wrote in his syndicated column. “Full of strings and melody—best since Paul Whiteman’s vogue.”

The price of success, for Percy Faith, was a hectic schedule. “With only seven days between broadcasts, Faith hasn’t much time to sit around and wait for the divine afflatus to come upon him. He *has* to work fast,” Wallace Reyburn told *Maclean’s* readers. “[R]emember that there

are thirty pieces in the orchestra, and separate parts have to be written out for each of them.” Colleagues from New York “were amazed to learn that Faith turned out the whole *Music by Faith* program by himself.” There were regular concerts for the *Toronto Star’s* Santa Claus Fund at the elegant—and very streamlined—auditorium atop Eaton’s College Street store. Faith even wrote a tune, “Cheerio! (I’m Off to See the King and Queen),” for the 1939 royal visit to Canada, and was in charge of music for a round-the-world broadcast sponsored by the CBC during the king and queen’s stay.



Faith (centre, back to camera) conducting the CBC orchestra, circa 1940.

It seemed to friends like horn player Samuel Hersenhoren, and others, that Percy Faith worked all the time. While at the CBC, Faith and his family had moved to a home at 7 Westoverhill Road, in tree-lined north Toronto. (He’d married Mary Palange long before, in 1928; more recently they’d had a daughter, Marilyn, and a son, Peter.) There, he’d fitted up a basement workroom, “an exceedingly comfortable little den,” with panelled walls and big leather chairs. Games tables were set up in an adjacent area and, a guest observed, “while several of his friends have an energetic and none-too-quiet game of ping-pong ... he can curl up in an easy chair in the corner and, with blank score sheet on his lap and pencil in hand, turn out a sweeter than sweet arrangement of ‘Love in Bloom.’ In between choruses,” the visitor wrote, “he’s likely to join in the ping-pong. It’s one of his favourite games, just as it was the pet diversion of the late George Gershwin.”

The call would come, inevitably, but would Percy Faith go? The popularity of his *Music by Faith* in the U.S.—he was No. 5 on *Variety’s* 1939 list of top attention-getters—had registered among the leading lights of American popular music. “[W]e used to get calls from Paul Whiteman, Tommy Dorsey, [André] Kostelanetz,” Faith said in a 1975 radio interview at CBC Vancouver. “‘How many men are you using?’” they’d ask. “‘Do you want to come down here?’” “He has not succumbed to the alluring offers,” *Maclean’s* reported in the summer of 1940. Faith, who liked to fish, knew that lures have hooks. He was aware that some of the biggest stars in showbiz were more showmen than musicians; he worried about playing second fiddle to them. In fact, the great Paul Whiteman—by 1940 the patriarch of symphonic bandleaders—had shrewdly found that the banner ‘Paul Whiteman’s Orchestra’ “looked almost as good outside a cabaret, on ocean liners and cruise boats, as the more significant announcement, ‘Paul Whiteman *and* His Orchestra.’” He formed a corporation, “farming out combinations of musicians, in any size band required, to be shipped where requested.”

“Whiteman, as a matter of fact, said he was going to retire,” remembered Faith, who was skeptical. “He [said] he would say, ‘Paul Whiteman Presents Percy Faith.’ I was a little suspicious that I’d suddenly become his arranger, and he’s back up there leading.”

Yet through the spring and summer of 1940, the planets were aligning for Percy Faith. On June 14th, the gifted, eccentric pianist Oscar Levant came to Toronto for a concert, *Swing in Symphony*, at Massey Hall, conducted by Percy Faith. The *Toronto Star*’s reviewer, Augustus Bridle, who was dean of the city’s music critics, saw Faith as a “musical meddler,” and was unsure the local talent would measure up. “Most of these folk [in the audience] had heard Levant on the air and seen him, informationing on the screen,” wrote Bridle. “Few of them had even seen the music-master of C.B.C. or his band of 40 in symphony uniforms.”

The orchestra was placed on Massey Hall’s gallery, in a jungle of potted palms. It consisted of “about 18 violins and violas, cellos, two double basses, six trumpets and trombones, one tuba, four saxophones, two clarinets, bassoon, flute, piccolo, percussion, harps and whatever else makes a joyful symphonic jangle.” Right off the top, Faith’s “cleverly swingized” arrangements struck a chord with Bridle, who seemed surprised, finding them refreshing and upbeat (“no superfluous calisthenics,” he wrote in next day’s *Star*). Several popular numbers (such as Jerome Kern’s “All the Things You Are” and a “pepped up” “Parade of Wooden Soldiers”) were presented. Later, the audience would hear Faith’s own modern operetta, “Radio.”

Meanwhile, Oscar Levant ambled onto the stage. Without ceremony—beyond taking a full minute to adjust the height of his piano bench—wham! He “smacked” into George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” Faith’s orchestra eased in smoothly behind him, and the rising, urbane “Rhapsody”—the signature tune of the interwar era, that jazzy, “nervous specimen of modern music”—filled the hall. They played the planned set, but it wasn’t enough; an encore or two, but still the audience hailed. Finally, Levant lit a cigarette, which he propped by a microphone between puffs, and on and on they played—Oscar Levant, Percy Faith, and the CBC orchestra, through *nine* encores that night on Shuter Street. “I doubt if Gershwin ever played it so well,” Bridle would say in his *Star* review, but the American piano player, sweating in an interview after the concert, pointed to Percy Faith. “The guy,” said Levant, “is exceptionally talented.”

Another limelight, indirect but important, shone on Percy Faith on July 20, 1940, when “I’ll Never Smile Again,” a song written and composed by Ruth Lowe, his friend and CBC radio colleague, hit the top of the U.S. hit parade, where it would stay for seven weeks. “I’ll Never Smile Again” was to be the biggest hit that Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra would ever have. And while no one knew it at the time, the 78-RPM side recorded by Dorsey’s band in New York City on May 23rd was a watershed in the history of popular music. Singing on the disc was Dorsey’s cocky young crooner, Frank Sinatra. “I’ll Never Smile Again” was really Sinatra’s hit, a brilliant song, brilliantly performed—the song that made him. “From now on, people would come to see Sinatra as much as to see the band.” More than that, “I’ll Never Smile Again” helped usher in a new vocalist era, in which the singers, not the bands, were the stars. Peggy Lee, Doris Day, and others who’d typically played cameo roles singing a few lines in big band pieces would soon find their own names displacing their orchestra leaders’ as the star attraction.

The popular version of the “I’ll Never Smile Again” story casts Lowe as an amateur songwriter who produced a one-hit wonder. Indeed, to get Dorsey’s attention, she had

camped, fan-style, outside the stage door at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto when Dorsey was playing at the bandshell in the summer of 1939. But the truth was that Lowe was an accomplished musician. She grew up in west-end Toronto, plugging into the city's music scene at an early age, and, in the thirties, still in her teens, signed on to play piano with the orchestra of Ina Ray Hutton, one of the few successful all-girl bands of the period.

Touring with Hutton, Lowe met and married a Chicago song publisher, Harold Cohen, who died suddenly of kidney failure. Lowe returned to Toronto to be with her family, and her grief inspired the song, which she wrote at the home of her mother, Pearl, who by 1939 had rented a third-floor flat at Ernsbert Court, the apartment house at 723 Bloor Street West, on the south side at Christie Street (their telephone number: MELrose 1092).

Lowe's son, Tom Sandler, remembered in 2000 that his mother "apparently let Percy Faith listen to it [at work], and he thought that it was really quite a song." Faith arranged and presented "I'll Never Smile Again" on his CBC show, making an acetate demo for Lowe—the one she finally convinced Carmen Mastren, Dorsey's guitarist, to listen to. On it, Faith's strings were as smooth as a Packard straight-eight. Though Dorsey's version was the hit—Sinatra exploited the song's slow tempo and maudlin tone for a sound that resonated perfectly in the early months of the Second World War—Faith considered "I'll Never Smile Again," the top hit of 1940, as a tipping point in his career. "I began to receive bids from the U.S.," he remembered in 1952.

But it was not offers from the likes of Paul Whiteman, or acclaim and confidence gained from concerts with Levant at Massey Hall, nor the success of Ruth Lowe's song that finally pulled Percy Faith, now thirty-one, from hometown Toronto. No, it was something quintessentially Canadian.

His name is not recorded. There were others who came before, and many more who would follow. "In 1940, a CBC executive ordered the *Music by Faith* budget cut," a columnist in *High Fidelity* would explain many years later. By September, the show—the most popular in Canada and the only one that showcased the CBC's prowess south of the border, where the weekly program out of Toronto climbed to third in the national ratings—had been cancelled. As Faith remembered, "when you're making ninety dollars a week and suddenly there's none in, and you have two kids running around the house, you get hungry." After the cut ("Same story every year—any year at all," Faith's friend Norman Campbell, a former CBC television producer, observed in 2000), Percy Faith weighed the U.S. offers anew. Indeed, in June, just after the Levant concert, he found himself on a train to Chicago, with just a trunk and a suitcase, to answer an emergency summons to fill in as conductor of the *Carnation Contented Hour*, an NBC network show broadcast from there. The program's maestro, Josef Pasternak, had suffered a heart attack at rehearsal, and died. NBC was trying out replacements, four weeks at a time, through the summer. "I went down and did the four, and made more money on those four than I did in the full year on the *Music by Faith* show." The Toronto conductor was flabbergasted; when NBC offered him the job permanently, "I went."

The downside in Chicago was that the *Carnation Contented Hour*, sponsored by the Carnation milk company, was to *Streamline* and *Music by Faith* what a Model T Ford was to a sleek Chrysler Airflow. "I felt that [at the CBC] we were sometimes ten or fifteen years ahead," and the U.S. networks about that distance behind the times, Faith told a radio interviewer in 1958. "I slipped back about thirty years when I accepted that show."



Faith conducting his orchestra in the nineteen-fifties.

The program, presented every Monday night, certainly had its archaic qualities. Instead of a slick opening theme, the music show started with the sponsor's jingle—a commercial—ponderously sung by a chorus: “There's contentment at the close of day/when the cows wend their peaceful way/down through shady lanes and nooks/going wading through the brooks”—the long way back to the barn, surely. (Strangely, the claim was made that the milk was “irradiated.”) From premiering new works like “I'll Never Smile Again,” Faith found himself rearranging such leaden classics as Brahms' “Hungarian Dance No. 1” and waltzes by Franz Lehar. Just the same, for Faith, who by now felt ready for a crack at the big time, it was an entree into the United States. He moved his family to a home in Wilmette, on Chicago's north side. Among the projects that kept Faith's talents sharp was an operetta, *The Gandy Dancer*, for which he won a prize. When the *Contented Hour* moved to New York in January, 1946, the Faiths settled at Great Neck, Long Island, a short rail-commute through Queens from NBC's studios at Rockefeller Centre in Manhattan.

Yet Percy Faith still counted himself among music's avant-garde. “Anyone who knows me or my music realizes that I stand with the progressives of jazz,” he would reflect, a bit later, on accusations that his work on programs like the *Contented Hour*, or *The Pause That Refreshes* at CBS, where he moved in 1947 (guess who was the sponsor), made him “a symbol of commercialism.” “I like bebop,” he told the *Star Weekly*, which sent reporter Charles Dexter to interview Faith in New York in 1952. “I often go to cellar cafes to hear it... . But I've learned that no one can take the public where it doesn't want to go. Only a handful of musical highbrows enjoy modern jazz no matter how extraordinary it may be.”

Then, as before, Faith saw his role as an interpreter who understood “the shopkeeper, clerk, high school girl or truck driver” who might be repelled by abstract, distracting jazz. “The arranger can enrich recordings with advanced ideas. I haven't compromised—I still record music with my own special stamp for albums which are intended for a long-term sale. But I would get no hearing at all if I did not use my energy and experience to create music the people like best.”

The reference to “albums” said a lot. By 1952, the radio artist was recording in a big way. He had begun in the forties, “cutting sides” (what they did in the era of 78s) for major labels like Mercury and Decca, but also smaller ones like Allegro, Design, Majestic, Varsity, Royale and Rondolette. It was just a walk from Columbia Broadcasting in New York to Columbia Records, where Faith moved in 1950 to wear several hats. “I could record with as many men and do as many albums as I like,” he remembered. But, as director of Columbia’s popular division, part of his contract said “I must help develop these youngsters.” CBS had on hand a veritable war surplus of still-young singers from the tail end of the big band era, and some altogether fresh men and women. Percy Faith’s all-in-one job was to coach them, pick (or write) some promising material, do the arrangements, and in some cases, as he did with Tony Bennett and Johnny Mathis, go into the studio and back them up—musically and otherwise—at their recording sessions.

It may have been Faith’s instincts, or his kindness, but he managed to pull some of them back from the brink. “Tony Bennett was actually on his last four sides . . . and then he would be through,” Faith found, not long after his arrival. Columbia “had given him a year, and nothing much happened.” So he studied Bennett’s material and technique. “He began his career by singing rhythm songs in too loud a voice and at too high a pitch. I advised him to sing smoothly and reduced his register by two notes,” Faith said a year or so later. And “I did have this song in my desk, which I had planned for myself. But it needed words, and I turned it over to Tony.” “Because of You” sold more than one-and-a-half-million copies, making Bennett a star.

Rosemary Clooney wasn’t thriving at Columbia either, despite being known through big bands and radio. Faith added folksier tunes to her repertoire. She made a hit with one of them, “Come On-A My House,” and it was on and up from there. By 1957, according to some later liner notes, “she amassed more than thirty hits,” five topping the million mark.

And so forth at the label, as Bennett, Clooney, Mathis, Day, Guy Mitchell, and even a gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, were moved onto the charts. On the hit parade, too, by 1952, had been some of Faith’s own recordings, in a range of tempos—the velvety “Song from Moulin Rouge,” the lively Latin number, “Delicado,” and an arresting, unusual version of “April in Portugal.” Few artists benefited as much as Faith from the new hi-fi (for high fidelity—that is, sound close to the original), which highlighted strings. Pressed on smooth, long-playing vinyl, and played on the new FM radio, the full, delicate sound of Faith’s arrangements was finally audible. “This is music in the true romantic manner: sumptuous, melodic, and brimming with beautiful harmonies,” an anonymous writer would state on the notes to the LP *Percy Faith Plays Romantic Music*, released in 1953. The album’s cover, a colourful Kodachrome of a couple sharing moments at a picnic, mirrored the audible realism inside the sleeve. Faith’s more upbeat interpretations of Latin music, on such albums as *Viva*, featuring Mexican songs, and *Malaguena: The Music of Cuba*, shimmered with strings and percussion and were big sellers. Hi-fi: in the fifties the very term came to mean clarity and modernity. Compared to hi-fi, the comings of stereo in 1958, and digital in the eighties, were merely fine tuning.

“Each Tuesday I begin to write arrangements. I often work from 10 A.M. until 2 the following morning,” Faith would say about his work habits (unchanged from his CBC days) as he polished music for his own records, and for various artists at Columbia in New York in the fifties. Others would say that the job made him “one of the ten most influential music men in the United States,” and that Percy Faith had reached “the peak of the music pyramid.”

Yet Toronto was never taken out of Percy Faith: not from his soul, not from his music. A certain self-effacing reserve—virtuous from a human, moral point of view, perhaps a handicap in the rough, higher echelons of the entertainment business—characterized his work at Columbia. He had a tough time breaking into film music. “They will not hire a man if he lives in Toronto or New York—you have to be there [in Hollywood],” Faith said. But in 1955, when Doris Day insisted Faith do the score for *Love Me or Leave Me*, he earned an Oscar nomination. Faith tried, but ultimately failed, to help Sarah Vaughan—”one of the most beautiful voices in the world”—cross over from jazz to mainstream. On “Music Row” at CBS in New York, Faith had to contend with the absolute rule of Columbia’s “famous bearded Mitch Miller ... the all-powerful A and R [for artists and repertory] man.” And while they seem to have gotten along, “at some point Percy was shafted out, or something happened to him,” and his power as a music executive was on the wane.



A mid-career publicity shot.

But Faith’s albums sold, even as rock ’n’ roll stole the imagination and record dollars—and, some thought, the minds—of youth. In 1957, a panicking Bing Crosby told a U.S. senate committee investigating the music-publishing industry that the songs kids liked were just “so much trash,” and having a bad effect on the morals, ideals, and tastes of the general public. Yet a subheadline on a United Press item covering the hearing, carried in a Toronto newspaper, read “NOT SHARED BY FAITH.” “He feels the oldsters don’t have too much right to throw stones at rock ’n’ roll,” reported the *Star*, whose writer tracked Faith down at his parents’ home on Castlefield Avenue in North York.

Though he didn’t say it that day, the fact was that, if Faith didn’t like rock yet, he saw more possibilities in it than in “Yes, We Have No Bananas,” “Mairzy Doats,” and “Barney Google.” “In trying to be liberal about it,” he recalled in the sixties, “I discovered that the thing that gets them is the rhythm.” In 1963, Faith produced *Themes for Young Lovers*, an album made up entirely of Top 40 rock ’n’ roll hits, to which he gave a big-orchestra treatment. Among the songs he arranged—all were more classic than anyone knew at the time—were “Rhythm of the Rain,” “Up on the Roof,” “Our Day Will Come,” “I Will Follow You,” and “The End of the World.” *Themes for Young Lovers* went gold; the jacket notes of the sequel, *More Themes for Young Lovers*, poked fun at the apparent contradiction here. A

teenager is told to turn his radio down: “Don’t you youngsters ever listen to good music nowadays?” says the annoyed father. A year later, the story goes, dad brings home *More Themes*—Faith orchestrations of the hits he had earlier deplored, songs like “Sugar Shack,” “Wives and Lovers,” and “Popsicles and Icicles.” “I guess you’re not really so old after all, Dad,” the son says. “Have a ball!” declared the epilogue to the story. An amateur reviewer wrote on Amazon.com’s web site in 1999, commenting on a compact disc reissue of *Themes*, “These arrangements were by no means ‘elevator’ versions of the original songs, but tasteful treatments which highlighted the quality of the song writing which made them hits.” Heard in 2000, the album’s sound and songs evoke images of the smart places, cars, and fashions of the day: open-air shopping centres, Ford Galaxies with red upholstery, women wearing white gloves, and Jackie Kennedy’s pillbox hats.

It was modern music, but in its essentials it was vintage Faith, and in particular ways a manifestation of Toronto—*old* Toronto—of all things. “Percy Faith declares his musical philosophy is based on his experiences as a youth,” a *Star Weekly* writer said in the fifties; “TORONTO EMERGES IN THE SMOOTH MR. FAITH,” a headline of the same era declared. And it was so true.

Percy Faith was born in Toronto on April 7, 1908, the son of Abraham Faith, a tailor, and Minnie. He was first of eight Faith children who grew up at 171 Baldwin Street, in the Jewish pushcart market district that later became Kensington Market, and a few blocks west at 256 Palmerston Avenue, south of College Street, where they moved in 1924. “Our family was not a musical family,” he would insist, but Percy must have broken the mould because, at six, he could be heard on Baldwin Street playing “ditties” on the family’s dinnerware. His mom signed him up for violin lessons; when he seemed allergic, she switched him to piano. And it *was* a musical neighbourhood. “Our families lived next door [on Palmerston],” remembered Toronto trumpet player Morris Isen. “Percy’s mother would complain that her son couldn’t practise the piano properly when I practised my trumpet.”

Faith attended Lord Lansdowne public school, meanwhile studying piano at the Canadian Academy on Spadina Road, and wondering whether he should instead become an architect. (He later saw the new City Hall as a healthy sign Toronto had lost some of its reserve, though he still has his own.) At twelve, he landed a job participating in one of the memorable phenomena of the era—performing live to silent movies at the Iola Flicker Theatre, deep in Toronto’s east end. The boy who, as a man, would arrange and rearrange, reinterpret and reinvent music from Bach to rock, learned a bit about improvisation here. “Youthful Percy didn’t even see the movie beforehand,” by one account. He’d arrive on the Bloor-Danforth streetcar (the theatre paid his fare), “dash into the darkened theatre, sit down at the piano [with a stack of sheet music or phone books on the bench, for added height], and wait. The title, ‘Triumph of Love,’ or some such thing, would flash onto the screen and he’d at once launch into some ‘love’ music. He hadn’t the least idea what the opening scene would be, but as soon as it appeared he would have to switch to something appropriate—perhaps ‘ocean-liner departing’ music, or ‘football-game’ music.” (Faith would one day record albums on those themes.) “I was 15 when I played solo after school to Bill Hart’s gunfire and the Talmadge’s love scenes,” Faith himself would recall.



Faith with his daughter, Marilyn, circa 1966.

With one breadwinner and eight kids in the family, the Faiths weren't well off. Their move, in the twenties, was to Palmerston Avenue, not the boulevard with its mansions, broad lawns, and fancy street lamps. Yet Faith was not working to support his folks, but, ambitiously, to pay for music lessons at the Toronto Conservatory of Music (later renamed the Royal Conservatory). The conservatory's excellence was known across North America; its enrolment, by the early twenties, would rise to five thousand students, boosted, in part, by the excitement generated by radio. But Faith probably knew the music school mainly by its hulking presence at College Street and University Avenue near his home—a red brick pile, three storeys high, on the southwest corner, capped by a wide cornice. The building was connected to a church-like concert hall with cupolas on its peaked roof.

“I was going to school during the day, you know, studying Latin, French, history, arithmetic—and music,” Faith remembered. “I didn't have time for baseball.” No, he didn't; the conservatory was run under the strictest discipline by musicians who were, or thought of themselves, as legends. Ernest MacMillan would become principal in 1926; composer Healey Willan was vice-principal while Faith attended and had been head of theory. At fourteen, the boy was studying harmonic structure under Louis Waizman (“purportedly born in the same house as Mozart”) and piano with virtuoso Frank Welsman, founder of the first Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Waizman, a “musician of the old school,” noticed young Faith's tendency to “jazz” the music he studied. “I was ready to jump two or three years ahead of what I was doing,” Faith recalled. “But I was told by my harmony teacher, ‘You must learn the basics. You must learn Bach, all the preludes and fugues, on the piano, then orchestrate them for string quartet, for brass quartet; learn Beethoven. Learn that foundation, and then when it's become part of you, forget it and go on.’” At the conservatory's annual concert in 1923, Faith made his concert debut at Massey Hall, with a piano performance of Liszt's “Hungarian Fantasy.”

But he would not be a concert pianist. One day in 1926, after the move to Palmerston Avenue, Faith was at home practising. The only other family member around was his sister Gertrude, who was three. He heard her scream. Rushing upstairs he found her aflame. She had been playing with matches. “I took her clothes off while it was burning,” he remembered, “and it burnt my hands.” Both kids would mend, but Faith, then eighteen, changed direction. Unable to play the piano for nine months, “I put a pencil in the bandages in my hand,” he said, “and I started to study composition. When I found that then I knew what I wanted to do.”

Reflecting on the incident later in life, Faith said, “they say something good comes out of everything bad.” And indeed, “it made a new life for me.” When talking pictures came along, for instance, Faith was ready to arrange songs for the newly-swinging hotel orchestras, or do the music at the department store restaurants, like the glittering, Jazz Age Arcadian Court atop the new wing of Simpson’s on Queen Street. “Often, when I played at a restaurant, I had lots of fun in naming the note in which a dish crashed to the floor from a waitress’ loaded tray, or calling the tone of the squeak made by the chairs as the patrons pushed them back to rise from the table.”

By the time he landed in that radio studio on Davenport Road in May of 1931, Percy Faith, twenty-two, Toronto-born and shaped by the city, was already one of the most rounded, experienced, and accomplished musicians in Canada. “His life has been colourful,” the *Star* reported. “And his ideas are ambitious.”

“We went up to the balcony of a Montreal theatre,” Norman Campbell, the CBC television director, remembered in 2000, “and saw *The Guns of Navarone*.” Percy Faith had conducted the music on the live TV special *Twenty-five Years Tonight*, broadcast out of Montreal, celebrating the CBC’s twenty-fifth anniversary, and he and Campbell hit it off.

Faith was always turning up at the CBC, playing the C.N.E., coming back to Canada. In the seventies, he would establish a thousand-dollar music scholarship at the University of Toronto. (“Better than a few words on a headstone,” he told music writer Peter Goddard.) Such a fixture was he at Camp Arowhon in Algonquin Park, where he’d go every year to fish, that some folks didn’t know who he was. “Well, yes. I can play a little bit... I can give it a try,” he told Corry Steenkist, who spotted him idly plunking the piano in the camp mess hall. She needed live music for the kids’ aquatic show and drafted Percy Faith. “He and some of the other guests seemed to get a big laugh out of the way I bossed him around.”

Faith, himself, was more careful. “I remember that he confided in me that he had a tough time remembering the names of people he hadn’t talked to in many years, but who somehow expected to be remembered,” said Alex Barris, a CBC broadcaster, on an edition of Vicki Gabereau’s program *Variety Tonight* in the eighties. “Faith never once let anyone feel the least bit offended. He chatted amiably with total strangers he pretended to remember. That was easier than hurting their feelings.” Appropriately, Barris summed up, “Despite his long-running success, he was a pleasant, gentle, unpretentious man, known by many hundreds of musicians for his warmth and humour.” Yet Faith was no pushover. In the forties, *Maclean’s* had observed, “Percy Faith is tall, well built, very dark. There is a certain boyishness about his manner that is disarming, but his musicians know that he can be firm and far from easygoing with them if a piece they are rehearsing isn’t coming along as it should.”

By the late fifties, film music had become Faith’s Holy Grail; the family (grown, and largely kept from the limelight) moved to Los Angeles in 1960. “You do come to the end of the line... You’ve done all of Cole Porter, you’ve done all of Gershwin,” he would tell Elwood Glover, on the CBC television profile that Campbell produced in 1966 for the network’s Music Canada series. “The release is out-and-out composing ... through the medium of movies.”

Faith, in the end, was “Not adept at the machinations of Hollywood—he was perhaps too testy and blunt for the politics of that Byzantine place,” commented *High Fidelity’s* Gene Lees in the seventies. Toronto broadcaster Greg Gormick, who spent some time in the

Hollywood scene, thinks Faith was too cool in that wacky world. “He wasn’t a screamer, he wasn’t nuts, and he didn’t drive people crazy. Faith just did his stuff.” In the end, he wrote music for eleven movies—mostly terrible ones—for which he nonetheless wrote exquisite scores, like the one for *The Oscar* in 1966, which was “full of song—joyous, witty, sardonic, and delicately tender.”

“[He] has not,” Lees would lament, “received his due as a composer.”

But the CBC profile, *Percy Faith: Off the Record*, made in Toronto the summer and fall of 1966, and broadcast November 2nd, would give him his due as a Canadian. It would reveal the essence of Percy Faith—a man serious about music that wasn’t. But even then, he was never *too* serious. “I hate to say it, but you can play my version [of a song] . . . and go ahead and practice putting, or have dinner, or even take a shower,” Faith himself said on *Off the Record*. Midway through the show, while directing the orchestra from the piano, playing his million-seller hit “Theme from A Summer Place”—written by veteran Hollywood composer Max Steiner and arranged by Faith for the 1959 movie—Faith turns to the camera and shrugs. “Go figure,” his look says. “It is probably the largest sales-wise of any of my records. But it’s not the one I’m most proud of by a long shot.” *Off the Record* did present Canadian Shirley Harmer (who later sang in the Florida club and cruise circuit), singing one of Faith’s best compositions, “Maybe September,” from the score of *The Oscar*. The song “has an unusual or even startling construction,” Lees would later write. “It reaches its end and then totally unexpectedly continues into an exquisite coda, an entirely new melody.”



Faith and Shirley Harmer during the taping of Off the Record in 1966.

Much of the TV program was videotaped at CBC’s Studio 7 on Jarvis Street. The orchestra included many of his old players from *Music by Faith*, but younger ones too, including Moe Koffman. Campbell commissioned from Faith an arrangement of “O Canada” for the program. A separate music soundtrack was pre-recorded at Hallmark Studios in Toronto, but even so, videotaping Faith’s complex, tightly-woven arrangements “took an awful lot of preparation,” Campbell remembered. “You have to be a fast cutter . . . because Percy didn’t linger on any particular instrument for long solos. I would have to write in every moment,

‘Open Camera 1, pull back from Percy Faith. Cut to Camera 2, over the back of the strings. Camera 3, through the harp. Camera 2 again. Camera 1 on the side shot.’ I mean, the control room was bedlam. You hear the music, but that’s just a guide to us yelling at each other.”

Spliced, *Wizard of Oz*-style, into *Off the Record*, a black and white show taped in a studio, was one of the first colour segments to go out over CBC television’s airwaves. It was filmed on location at Sandbanks, an area of massive dunes and beaches on Lake Ontario, near Picton. The camera was a special Kodak “which you could speed up, so that when you played it back it was in slow motion,” according to Campbell. Martine van Hamel, a dancer trained at the National Ballet School, frolics across the dunes and dances in the surf, to the sound of Faith’s recording of “Celia’s Waltz.” With the slow motion, “everything was just slightly easy.”

Easy. As in easy-listening music by Faith, “the king of mood music,” as Clyde Gilmour said, introducing selections from a two-LP opus, *The Columbia Album of George Gershwin*, on CBC’s *Gilmour’s Albums* in the nineteen-nineties. Critics of serious music never forgave Percy Faith for what he did. When Faith died of cancer in Los Angeles on February 9, 1976 (too many of his Columbia album covers showed him smoking while in the studio), the *Toronto Star*’s Dennis Braithwaite would write, “an exploiter rather than a creator, Percy Faith can’t be said to have advanced the popular music of his time. Rather, he led a massive digression from its vital main flow and direction.” True, in a way, but missing the point, which was never so serious. One of his last releases was called *Disco Party*; Faith’s final Columbia album, *Summer Place ’76*, which he arranged and recorded while he was seriously ill, bounces with the beat of the moment—the life-affirming thump of disco, the youthful twang of an electric guitar—against those shimmering strings.

“He admits there is precious little aristocracy about any of the popular tunes of the day,” the *Star Weekly* reporter wrote after visiting Percy Faith in the studio that spring day in Toronto in 1931. “But with the same half-dozen rhythms and melodie formulae, they have been developed by the arranger to a degree of prettiness. He feels there is need for lots of this light, unimportant music, uninspired and fearfully perishable. Music meant for nothing but song and dance.”

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