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Photography by Cody Storm Cooper

To hear singer/songwriter Katherine Wheatley talk of her childhood growing up in Parry Sound, it sounds wildly idyllic, wonderous and maybe even a little enchanted in the simplest of ways.

Born to Michael and Diane Wheatley, as one of five children, Ms Wheatley's days as a young girl were filled with adventure and mischief spending nearly every waking moment with friends in the streets and backyards near her family's Waubeek Street home.

"We had a fabulous neighbourhood," said Ms Wheatley of the block with mostly girls, all of whom she still remembers by name. "Our addresses were all between 24 and 31 Waubeek, so we were a stone's throw from each other. Every day after school and every evening after dinner we played. We played skipping and Yogi and Deer Tag and Hide and Seek and Sardines and Car Car C.A.R. and Nicki Nicki Nine Doors."

The Wheatley family backyard was big enough for baseball, so a group often played there or in the Snider's backyard which had a badminton net.

"We raided the neighbours' vegetable gardens and apple trees," she said. "We swam, we skied, we cycled, we did cartwheels and handstands. We were always doing something. We hated being called in for dinner and for bed."

The months during the long, deep freeze of winter were also spent outside where the neighbourhood girls and boys toboganned and skated on outdoor rinks.

"We'd put our skates on at home, skate down the icy driveway then walk the rest of the way to the DOT along the snowbanks - our blades sinking into the hard snow so that it was just like walking on boots," she said. "We'd get there early on Saturday mornings and skate until the boys came and hogged the rink for hockey. Back then, girls weren't playing hockey in Parry Sound."

The close-knit family also spent a lot of time together, skiing every weekend at the Parry Sound Ski Hill and cross-country skiing at Camp Tapawingo.

"In fact, from about Grade 9 on, the high school cross country ski team was pretty much the biggest part of my life," she said.

Summer jobs for Ms Wheatley included being a lifeguard for three summers and being a sanitary engineer with her sister in Archipelago Township.

"Which meant we took care of the dumpsites," she explained.

A portable record player in her bedroom and borrowed albums from older siblings ignited a young Ms Wheatley's interest in music.

"I'd listen, over and over again, to the albums that my older sister and brother owned - Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, James Taylor, Simon and Garfunkel," she said, "I took piano lessons from Olive Perry. I think she was mortified when, every year, I'd ask to play a Burt Bacharach tune at the recital instead of something from the Royal Conservatory book. I loved songwriters."

Soon after her love affair with music began, the teen "begged" her parents for a guitar because so many of the songwriters she adored played the guitar.

"When I was 14, I remember looking under my parents' bed the night before Christmas and seeing a big triangular box - it was thrilling. I knew then that I was getting a guitar the next day," she said. "I played clarinet in the concert band and saxophone in the stage band. John McGuiirk, the music teacher at William Beatty and Jim Ferris at the (Parry Sound) high school had put together inspiring and rigorous music programs. They are probably my biggest inspirations."

Songwriting began shortly after Ms Wheatley got her guitar. However, inspiration came from an unlikely source.

"Back then, I didn't know how to write lyrics, so I'd go to the Rexall Drug store and peruse the Hallmark Card rack," she explained. "I'd combine stanzas from different cards and copy them surreptitiously into my diary.

Then I'd go home and put music to them. I knew I was doing something wrong, but it got me started."

Her first public performance was at the Bobby Orr Community Centre in 1978, singing Rhinestone Cowboy with a local band.

"I think I was nervous," she recalls. "I practiced a lot."

Following high school in her 20s, Ms Wheatley worked for several summers in northern Saskatchewan with geologist Ken Ashton. She had an interest in the field and considered pursuing a career studying rocks.

"Ken loved listening to music and he was a great guitar player. In the evenings, I'd play the guitar while Ken labelled rocks and mapped out our next day's routes," she said. "He asked one night, 'Wheatley, why didn't you ever go into music?' I responded by asking, 'Why didn't you go into music Ken?' His answer was simple, 'Because I love rocks.' If I was going to enjoy geology for the rest of my life, I better love rocks."

"But I didn't love rocks. I did, however, love music. That was the moment I began to think seriously about taking up music as a career."

Although her father had passed away by the time Ms Wheatley seriously considered a musical career, she admits her mother was worried for her.

"Music is a great career in terms of what you do and who you meet, but it's difficult financially - she knew that. I considered staying in science. I started a masters degree in Environmental Science at the University of Calgary with a focus on groundwater contamination. After a year of graduate work, I realized that unless there was passion driving me to be dogged in my studies, I might not succeed. I left the program and continued working for the Geological Survey. Through all my studies and my work in geology, I'd play at coffeehouses. I was starting to get work singing back up. It was becoming clear that music was my true passion."

A year after getting her masters, Ms Wheatley went to Africa where her sister Michele and her husband Michael were teaching in Botswana through World University Services in Canada.

"I knew it was the best opportunity I'd have to see Africa first hand, not through a tourist company," she said, "I couldn't take my guitar with me. It would have been too big to lug around given the way I wanted to travel. I was without my guitar for the first time since I'd gotten one. My fingers were so itchy to play. Instead of playing, I wrote. Writing became my creative outlet. That's when I started writing lyrics. When I got back from Africa, I had a bunch of lyrics to set music to."

However, it wasn't until many years later that Ms Wheatley recorded her first album, Straight Line.

"Boy, it's been so long since I made that record. Probably the most popular song on that album was Water Moves Me. Fishing and Main Street got a fair amount of CBC radio play. Straight Line was the only song on the album that got commercial radio play. The title to me suggested, not loss of innocence, but a longing for what used to be."

Just four years later Ms Wheatley released her second CD, Habits and Heroes with most of the tracks being what she calls "character songs."

"I wanted to reveal the characters' heroism as well as their habits," she explained. "Mrs. McIvor, for example, is a woman who's taunted by the neighbourhood kids because she has some strange habits. But she also has courage. She shows that by being independent and different and by

