

In The Highlands By and By
By Charles Williams

I started a family tradition in the early 80s when I was in music school and too poor to afford a Christmas gift for my mom, who was also a musician. So instead, I would compose holiday themed song, manipulate other musicians to sing and play on my recording, and then give it to my mom. I did this yearly until her death in 1996 from breast cancer. This particular song was one of her and my favorites. Every year I kept trying a different style setting for the annual composition. That year I decided to make it a celtic-tinged tune. My mom was a big fan of Broadway musicals, so I conceived the idea of a George Cohen style piece. The idea is a setting in an Scottish pub on a Yuletide night after a hard day's work at the local factory. Working class men are sitting and drinking while a tin whistle begins playing a tune....Then I imagined a fiddle joining in and the festive level rising. After the statement of the melody, a character enters. A lusty waitress, tough as nails in her right, and begins singing about the promise of the holiday season, but with a rough edge. I was trying to visualize a scene from musical.

So I called up Danny and asked him if he would do it and he said sure. He came over to my house where I had recording gear stacked in a corner of my living room. The song is actually a little challenging to just read and play in the moment, so when I put the music on the stand in front of him and gave him the tempo, he looked up at me and said, " you tricked me!" We both laughed. He said, " OK, put some coffee on, this may take awhile..." An hour later when we were done, Danny said, " hey, don't you pay the musicians around here?" I said, " Of course, what's your rate?" He answered, " How about a bagel?" So we went out for a bagel.....

After his death, I found the recording in my pile of stuff and listened to it. The lyric seemed strangely foreshadowing in retrospect. Almost like a message from him....It's odd how that can happen. I wrote it for my mom, but it has come to represent, to me, Danny in a larger context. Almost a calming voice to me now....Here is the text. (I used the Scottish 'dinna kin' which means of course, "I don't know".)

In The Highlands By and By:

Oh lend me your ears, my brothers
Lend me your ears tonight
I've a message of Hope from the Highlands a yonder
A message from the King of Light
I dinna kin if the fight be over
I dinna kin if the King has won
I only know that the message from the Highlands a yonder
Is a message of a newborn son

Hallelujah, hallelujah
It's the song I'm singing
And the bells are ringing
In the Highlands by and by

I'm glad to be able to share a slice of my life's intersection with your dear son with you. I've been meaning for the last four years to get this to you and his son. I have an acoustic jazz group these days and when we did a CD in 2002 I wrote and recorded a waltz that I dedicated to Danny. It's called 'In Lieu of Flowers'...I will send a copy of that along to you also. I treasure my memories of him and consider him a singular human being that I was blessed to know as a friend. You must be very proud of him.