

A close-up, over-the-shoulder shot of a person with long brown hair writing in a notebook on a rustic wooden table. The person's left hand, adorned with a ring and several sparkling bracelets, rests on the table. The notebook is open, showing handwritten text. In the background, a lit candle in a glass holder provides warm, ambient lighting. The overall mood is intimate and creative.

# Karen Robinson

*with* Larry Bjornson • David Burton • Dave Staples

When We're Together

## Musicians

**Karen Robinson:** vocals, guitar (*Breath*), rhythm guitar (*A Song for Mississippi John Hurt*), wine glasses (*The Night the Lights Went Out*)

**Larry Bjornson:** acoustic bass

**Dave Burton:** drums, percussion (congas, guiro, tambourine, vibraslap)

**Dave Staples:** piano (*City Birds, I'm Hoping You Do, Night the Lights Went Out, Sings Her Heart Out, Stories and Wine, Delay is Not an Option*), trombone (*Night the Lights Went Out*), bells (*Breath*), Rhodes, organ, synth

**Holly Arsenault:** piano (*Autumn Wind, Breath, End of Time, Feather & Bone, Gamecock, Nothing To It*), vibes (*Breath*)

**Chris Mitchell:** flute, tenor sax, bari sax, soprano sax

**JP Cormier:** mandolin

**John Campbelljohn:** blues guitars

**Gina Burgess:** violin

**Danny Martin:** trombone (*Gamecock and His Hen*)

**Marie-Neige Dupuis-Carbonneau:** clarinet and bass clarinet

**Hamish Gordon:** oboe

## Thanks!

Thanks to **Janice Isabel Jackson**, friend and vocal coach extraordinaire, who helped me reach the inside of the songs and pull them out to where they could really be heard.

To **Erin Costello** for generous advice to produce the album myself, and the mantra, "The best idea wins... always".

Special thanks to my adult children, **Amos** and **Hannah Sarrouy**, for turning out so well despite all odds and for helping with yet another album.

Special thanks to **Scott Ferguson**, whose musical wisdom, technical prowess, and generous guidance can be found throughout this album. Scott, you are the backbone of this project.

And to "Mista Bruce" a.k.a. my supportive, wonderful, husband **Bruce Sarty**, for loving me just as I am, for keeping the band fed and welcome in our big living room as we arranged the songs (while social distancing with masks in the middle of a global pandemic!), for your special meals at breacktime, and for adding enthusiasm and humour to an already uncommonly fine time. I must mention his me-nagerie – he trained squirrels to swim in the pond for peanuts and to climb up his legs too. However, squirrel eyesight seems poor – they can't tell Bruce's legs from those of musicians trying to get into the house un-accosted. (Sorry, Burton!)



## "When We're Together"

The most wonderful gift to me was to spend session after session with these musicians. I treasure how we laughed and how we worked as one. I had mentioned to Larry that I was preparing to do another album. He quietly said he would like to help with the arrangements if he could. It got me thinking. The result was a plan to work as a unit – four of us – and use a creative process that would be as important as the end result: no stress and lots of freedom to try things. I cherish the daily teasing and laughter, the in-jokes, and that we always took time to give each idea its due.

It amazes me that in the midst of a world-wide tragedy, a pandemic that has left millions of families in mourning, we were able to cautiously come together over many months (virtually when necessary) and create this music. We started in my big living room in August 2020, wearing masks and social distancing, with doors



and windows wide open, and 2 air filters. Each day I would play a new song or two for the band, and then the fun would begin as we jointly arranged the offerings.

By October we moved our ideas into Scott Ferguson's recording studio to record the rhythm section (piano, drums, bass) and guide vocals. It helped to have isolation rooms for recording. Session musicians joined us over the fall and winter months to add their magic. Sometimes we were shut down for weeks at a time.

By the time the third Covid wave came, Larry, Staples, Burton and I tried editing and mixing via Zoom, thanks to Scott's technical abilities – no small feat. We developed new skills, and it worked.

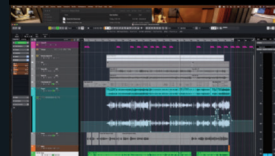
I've always marveled at how the usually rhythmical instrument, drums, can become descriptive and emotional in Burton's hands; how Staples' deep musical knowledge and expressive abilities tie everything together; and Larry's technical command and creativity could always be counted on for something interesting and innovative, to which the rest of us would respond, "Why, that's so crazy, it just might work!" At one point I voiced my awe at the skills of this team to make the songs come to life. Scott swiveled his chair right around to face me and said, "Yes, but Karen, these songs are worth it."

We started with the plan to do one album, but soon were carried into the second album, which will be released soon after this one. Every day we were inspired by being together (a strong reason for the album title choice) and the feeling we were sharing something special. We were, from beginning to end.

Thank you, gifted and skilled musicians, Larry, Burton, Staples and the one-in-a-million Scott Ferguson. Each song has each of your fingerprints and I cherish the memories I relive when listening. Thank you for your brilliance and your friendship. I count every day we spent together among the best times of my life. XO

*Karen*

## Mixing songs via Zoom during a lockdown



*"There was something magical about this. I have lost track of how many wonderful days we all had together on this awesome adventure." – Burton*

*"Thanks for bringing these beautiful songs to us, bringing this band together, and for this creative process." – Larry*

*"It is a rare chemistry between these 5 people. I've never been in a process quite like this. It went way beyond the bed tracks, where we musicians usually stop. We were comfortable to be artistic – to go with someone's idea and see where it took us. The synergy of the team, the mutual trust and respect, was amazing. Everyone relished this." –Staples*

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### 1. The End of Time

arranged by **Larry Bjornson, David Burton, Holly Arsenault, and Karen Robinson**

I say I don't write love songs, but this is a love song, no question. A touch of Latin with Burton playing the kit as hand drums. Larry created the lick. Janice Jackson said this recording makes her want to lie in bed quietly and dream.

### 2. Feather and Bone

arranged by **Bjornson, Burton, Arsenault, Staples, and Robinson**. Gospel vocal back-ups co-arranged Scott Ferguson and Karen Robinson

One night at dinner Bruce asked me, "Is everything alright? You are so quiet." Turned out I was deep into this song that had presented itself out of nowhere. I was writing it in my head. Soon it was on paper and its debut was in the Bedford Canada Days virtual concert. It then went into the hands of the band for arranging for the album, where Holly added gospel chords to the preacher's verse and Scott and I added me as a full gospel chorus. Staples' Hammond organ, Burton's cymbals, congas, guiro, vibraslap, and Larry's genius at bass in the solo and outro express this person's bumpy life as the song unravels at the end.

### 3. I'm Hoping You Do

arranged by **Bjornson, Burton, Staples, and Robinson**

Another love song, I guess. But more about addictions. It's a song that could be sung angrily. I chose to sing it this way, this time. A woman may forgive just about anything if the man is trying.

### 4. City Birds

by **Karen Robinson** (lyrics) and **Mike Cowie** (music)  
arranged by **Bjornson, Burton, Staples, Cowie, and Robinson**

My last album, Karen Robinson WITH, was produced by Mike Cowie. He then brought me some interesting melodies, and asked if I'd like to contribute the lyrics. For this melody, Mike said "How about birds that live in the city?" I took the challenge. Birds have found their place among the "shining trees that scrape the sky". Listen for Burton's drums that carried us throughout. I can almost feel the wind in Staples' synth solo section - I smile every time I hear it! (He also played organ and piano, after trading off the bass line to Larry's upright bass). Hear the atmospheric solo sections under spoken word, the sounds of traffic, sirens, car horns and busses on Halifax's Spring Garden Road, and the large murder of crows that settles each dusk where the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse used to sit at Mount St. Vincent University. Collecting sounds personally added an unexpected layer to the songs for me.

### 5. Breath

by **Karen Robinson** (lyrics) and **Mike Cowie** (music)  
arranged by **Bjornson, Burton, Arsenault, Staples, and Robinson**

For this one, Mike suggested a love song focused on the theme "Breathing", and left me to it. The band's arrangement took it even further. Breath, an essential of life, is used to express finding unexpected completion and healing through love.

### 6. Sings Her Heart Out

arranged by **Bjornson, Burton, Staples, and Robinson**

I first performed this as spoken word, and it worked that way too. But music is so central to the story, I was compelled to make it a song. None of us escapes pain, and most of us find solace of one sort or another in music, as a listener or otherwise. Music is a gift, as are these musicians who finished these songs with me. It is hard to fathom that all the string parts are Larry's bass, not cellos or violas! He plays acoustic bass brilliantly always, but his arco bass in this song is ethereal, with the final note a skin-tingling harmonic.

## 7. Nothing To It

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Staples, and Robinson*

Sometimes songs come from a challenge. When my next album comes out, listen for the source of this song! The source song came to me as I commuted daily from the country to work in Halifax – quickly written and put to memory while driving safely. I couldn't be late for work! It is a good song. But later, after I played it for a songwriters' session, a colleague wondered what would happen if I tried to make a more sensual version. A lesson in how a good idea can take different routes to completion.

## 8. The Night the Lights Went Out

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Staples, and Robinson.  
Staples wrote the quartet*

Astronauts tell us they can see the glow of cities across the globe from space. This song tells of light and the fabric of life – thread, lace, and more – of awe and maybe regret as order unravels...and of hope. Some of us try to make sense of everything through philosophy or religion. Some really don't think beyond the personal. In the end, nature wins one way or another. Is this a requiem or a song of hope? Time will tell.

Musically, the band and I eagerly opened up to possibilities to tell the story. Do you hear Larry's hawk call? Staples created a haunting arrangement

of woodwinds and Larry's bass is as alone as the protagonist seems. Burton's hand drumming reduces us to our beginnings and ends with the essence of heartbeat. I learned to play wine glasses and collected winter's sounds from Sandy Lake, Bedford. The otherworldly deep groans of the lake as its ice sheet melts in the spring are barely audible behind the tinkle of chips of lake ice dropped onto the frozen surface from cold fingers.

## 9. Autumn Wind

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Arsenault, and Robinson*

This song was on my first album, and I truly like that version. It was written when I was a young woman, never thinking that I would inherit my family's heritage farm, or even wanting to. After several twists of fate, here I am, experiencing a profound connection to the soil and its history as crops are again growing there. Musically, I wanted to explore what else we could do with different instrumentation and a different creative process. We took out the rhythm completely for the first  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the song. Its all atmosphere, with each artist connecting with the song and each other. It is as it came out, alive and beautiful, with master bass, piano, and drum artists playing one take, live off the floor.

## 10. A Song for Mississippi John Hurt

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Ferguson, and Robinson*

Long before I thought I was a songwriter, a friend was cleaning out her vinyl album collection and gave me The Immortal Mississippi John Hurt. I listened and listened to his Monday Morning Blues and was drawn in as I had seldom been before, as if I had been there in another life. Such is the gift of Mississippi John Hurt.

I almost didn't play this tribute song for the guys. I was afraid I couldn't do it justice, knowing the feel I wanted but joking that a skinny white girl trying to sing a song like this just wouldn't fit. But suddenly the thoughts were flying. Larry suggested adding that snare drum for an entire verse and a resonating bass drum. He took some ribbing as usual, and Burton's skills made it shine. John Campbelljohn understood what we were trying to do right away. He expressed deep appreciation for Mississippi John Hurt's "real" county blues – of friends passing the time making music together in front of the general store on a dusty street. He played authentic Mississippi John Hurt chords in two tracks, on two guitars: one to hold it down and the other to let it fly. Perfect one-takes. This July the song was named a top-ten finalist in the Blues category of the World Songwriting Awards.

## 11. Gamecock and His Hen

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Arsenault, Staples, and Robinson*

Where do songs come from? I don't know the answer to that. This one came to me in my sleep. The gamecock and hen with glistening feathers showed me what they could do. I rolled over and wrote it down in the dark.

I've been inside two casinos, both times out of curiosity, just walking through to see what it's like. I prefer the movie versions! So, to finish this well, I had to do some research (online). Mitchell on bari sax is our hero, and Danny Martin on his antique trombone – likely from the speakeasy days – is the gambler so full of himself. Did we have fun!?

## 12. Stories and Wine (When We're Together)

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Staples, and Robinson*

Some friendships defy description. The richness from being known deeply and loved, from sharing good and bad times, from lives intertwined, is immeasurable.

Lyrics available at [www.robinsong.ca](http://www.robinsong.ca)



## Bonus Track

### 13. Delay is Not an Option

*arranged by Bjornson, Burton, Staples, and Robinson*

This bonus track stands apart from the rest of the album, but we in the band decided it needed to be included. It is not comforting. Its genesis was a heated conversation in Canada's Parliament, where the prime minister of the time was insisting Canada should delay helping Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland. An MP responded strongly that this is a humanitarian emergency and that "Delay is not an option." It is a song for all times, unfortunately, about the disenfranchised in endless wars, of inhumanity, and of the humanity of ordinary people. It is borderline contemporary classical. One take, live off the floor.





