

Following Her Heart



Class of '09 | Suzie Brown G'09 realized she was at a crossroads in her life during a bout of severe anxiety. Stress was nothing new for the cardiologist, who was then working on her master's degree in translational research at Penn, but this was different.

"I went through a week of extreme anxiety because I was supposed be submitting a grant proposal for a five-year career-development grant," she recalls. "I realized that if I got that grant I would feel like I was in jail."

So Brown did the only thing she felt she could do—cut back on her cardiology work so she could pursue a career in music.

"I decided that I couldn't in good faith continue doing medicine full-time when I found something that made me this happy," she says.

Following her heart to bring her two worlds together has paid off. The 38-year-old Brown performs at venues up and down the East Coast and is working on her third folk-music album. She also continues to work part-time as a cardiologist, specializing in heart failure at Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia.

Brown, who was born in Montreal and later moved with her family to Boston, comes by her unusual blend of talents honestly. Not only are both her parents doctors, but her father and brother play guitar.

She first performed publicly with an a capella group when she was a senior at Dartmouth College.

"I've always had a capella envy," Brown says. "But I was petrified, just shaking like a leaf."

She worked through her stage fright over the next few years while in Harvard Medical School at talent nights and open-mic nights around Boston. Brown also sang with a cover band of Harvard-affiliated doctors, mostly orthopedic surgeons, called "Rod the Longbone." By then, Brown explains, "I loved singing so much, and I had so few opportunities to sing in public that I actually wanted to do it."

She didn't write her first song until the summer of 2008. By then she had moved to Philadelphia to complete her cardiology fellowship at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, and was pursuing her master's degree at Penn.

"It was a heartache song," she says. "I just had no way to express myself in my day-to-day life as a doctor."

That song, "You Can Lie," can be heard on *Heartstrings*, her second album, which was released in 2011. But she actually made her debut in 2009 with a five-song album called *Side Streets*.

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With no real training, Brown learned the basic guitar chords from her brother, Eric. "I made myself figure out songs by ear," she explains. "It helped me understand chord progressions and what fits together. And I'm a sucker for melody.

"I think in some ways I was informally studying songwriting for a long time," she adds. "I would just learn every note on every song of albums that I loved. I think subconsciously I was taking notes."

Brown, who describes her music as "Folk Americana," quickly found her feet in the music world, appearing at local Philadelphia venues and opening for Lyle Lovett in 2009 at the city's Kimmel Center. Reviewers have called Brown's sound "bluesy, folky, achy, [and] sweet-voiced" and often compare her voice to Patsy Cline's.

Brown is recording her next album in Nashville with Oliver Wood, a producer and singer/songwriter as well as one half of the Wood Brothers. She had never met Wood when she emailed to ask him to work with her, but she knew the Wood Brothers' "raw, live-sounding, emotional music" and wanted the same for her album.

After Wood responded positively, Brown sent him 20 demos. A total of 10 songs will make it to the album.

To help pay for the recording process, Brown launched a crowd-funding campaign through PledgeMusic, a "direct-to-fan platform" that helps musicians raise money for projects and gives fans an opportunity to participate in the music-making process. For example, a \$10 pledge gets you a download of the new CD; \$250 buys a songwriting lesson with Brown herself; and for \$2,000, Brown will sing in your living room. (For more information, visit www.suziebrownsongs.com.)

A co-producer on the new album is Brown's husband of less than two years, fellow singer-songwriter Scot Sax. Brown met Sax, a Grammy award-winner, while working on *Heartstrings*.

"It was crazy," says Brown. "We had been in the same city for six years and never met. And then we met three times in 24 hours."

They were engaged six months later, and now live in a three-story home in the Philadelphia suburbs, with the third floor housing Sax's music studio. The two are usually so busy that in their free time they enjoy just being home together, says Brown.

Although Brown could make her life less hectic by putting aside her medical career to concentrate on music full-time, that's not likely to happen anytime soon. She has hefty med-school loans to repay, and besides, "for me music isn't really about making money," she says. "Now I can write songs because that is what's on my mind and that's what I'm feeling, and I can take gigs that are actually good for my career and not ones that pay.

"I think if I had to make money playing music, it would take some of the joy out of it," she adds. Besides, "I love being a doctor, I really do. It's an important part of me and I don't think I could ever give it up."

—Samantha Drake GGS'06