Keeping it all in the family

After shooting to fame in the 1980s, The Walters Family band plays on with a dinner theatre on their rural property.

The story of the Walters family is a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n' roll, a little bit folky with a healthy dose of gumption.

It's the story of three siblings with innate musical talent who formed an act and took it across the country, eventually dragging their parents onto the stage with them.

And it's the story of a family that has taken their 40 years' experience on the stage and opened their own stage – a summer dinner theatre that attracts musical acts from across Canada and the United States.

As they cosy around the kitchen island for an interview in their 200-year-old farmhouse near Bright, Ont., it's clear this family has worked so long and so well together they practically complete each other's sentences.

Darren, Kimberly and Bradley Walters were introduced to musical instruments at a young age thanks to their grandfather, Walters Family band members Kimberly and her brother, Darren, flank mom, Shirley. Kimberly’s son, Schyler, left, has been added to the lineup, and her brother, Bradley, is also still in the band.

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Family Live,” recorded in the CKCO studio TV show in the 1980s – “The Walters Family started touring. They too picked it up quickly and The bass, and dad – Garry – played the drums. mom and dad to play, and we became The band,” Kimberly says. “So Darren taught anyway, we figured they should join the we needed a drum and a bass player. Since specialty and they began to make a name for themselves. Eventually we got bigger bookings and eventually when they started, and they were adorable. Country and gospel was their repertoire that was on the mark. They worked hard. Their audiences loved them. “We toured all over the world and it was fantastic. But it was also really hard. We were on the road so much that after a while we missed our home base. So we decided to open a theatre here instead,” Kimberly said. “When we get artists who don’t otherwise play in this area. It’s constant work to find new shows and shows that will fit in our-sized theatre. But now when we call the house. They get comfortable and they want to come back. It’s pretty great when they do.”

Much to the family’s delight, audiences keep coming back too. “Some people come for every act we have. A lot will bring visitors if they have them. And some will come for one show, love it, and come back for the rest of the season. It snowballs and that’s what we like,” Darren says. “We don’t have a huge advertising budget so word of mouth really matters.”

“We just discovered we’re not normal,” Darren says, chuckling. “But we get to see this farmhouse and barn. They must wonder what they got themselves into,”

Meadows says it’s not just the calibre of entertainment or quality of meal that keeps the performers are all available to talk after the shows. Where else can you do that? Meadows asks. “I live so close. Why didn’t I go sooner? It’s crazy that we don’t know what’s in our own backyard.”

Although Garry Walters and George Matheson have both passed away, their presence is still felt by the family and that motivates them to bring new and interesting shows to their theatre. “We always wanted to stay in the music industry,” Kimberly says. “This is a way to stay and sustain all of us. And we have so many ideas to evolve things here.”

“We just discovered we’re not normal,” Shirley jokes. “Apparently not all families are like ours.”

Theatre season is June to October but it takes the whole year to book the acts and deal with promotion, ticket sales and the other details. Indeed, some of the acts are booking two years ahead. But winter is also when the family can squeeze in some of their separate, personal interests. Brad, for example, runs a travel business, Bradley Walters Journeys, and is often out of the country on cruises and guiding tours. He was in Costa Rica the day the family was interviewed for this story.
Darren has a recording studio at the back of the farmhouse where performers can book recording time. He also produces other shows, “so I’m on the road a lot,” he says. Darren is also a Canadian fiddle champion and occasionally plays with other groups, although not as much as in the past.

The youngest member of the family band is Kimberly’s son, Schyler Lambert. The 15-year-old plays violin, guitar, piano and sings. As a member of the family, he also pulls his weight with other aspects of running the theatre.

And he has appeared with his mother on a YTV reality show called “Driving Me Crazy,” in which Kimberly taught him to drive. “I love everything in the entertainment business,” Schyler says. “And I have the opportunity to see how to do everything. It’s what I know and it’s what I love.”

“Were curious to see the path he takes,” his mother says. “It’s up to him though, as it was for us.”

The 2017 theatre season was 75 per cent sold by January, which is a solid position for an independent theatre. The Walters Family was to open the season in June with its own brand of music and entertainment. They will also do a gospel show in September.

Among the other acts this season: The Toronto All-Star Big Band and tribute concerts to Elvis Presley, Abba, Patsy Cline, Don Messer, Michael Bublé and bands from the 1950s and 1960s.

The theatre usually runs matinees during the week and evening shows on weekends, although the schedule changes depending on the performer. The theatre seats 160 people at tables of eight, so it’s entirely likely you’ll be seated with people you don’t know, adding to the communal feel of the place.

It’s a tough business and every season is a gamble. Darren noted most theatres are either city-owned or not-for-profit, “so we have to look at every dollar to make this work. We can’t afford to have a bad show.”

For more information about Walters Theatre, visit walterstheatre.com.