

MAHONEY: Hamilton transplant making it up as she goes along

Jeff Mahoney

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Sue Upton is a six-year transplant in Hamilton.

There are Toronto transplants and then there is Sue Upton.

Of course, we love our émigrés from that city with the big, pointy thing sticking up in the middle of it. They drive up our real estate values, bring their friends, tell the world about us (we won't talk about Rob Ford if they won't mention our stadium, the morass of city hall, etc.).

Some Toronto transplants, however, seem more "Hamilton" than others. Sue, one of Canada's top makeup artists, bills herself, with a cluck of modest laughter, as a "double Gemini (Award) loser."

You lose? Embrace it. Losing builds character, thickens plots.

Sue has character, and story, with afterburners. You can see it in the creativity of her makeup work with clients like Tom Hanks, Martin Short, Metallica, Brian Mulroney, the Spice Girls, Desmond Tutu, Bill Gates and Alanis Morissette.

She was also wig master for the Rockettes.

You can see the character and the story in her painting, which she has returned to recently, and in her curriculum vitae, including her midstream paddle-change decision to chuck the whole Toronto thing (six years ago) for a place on Ferguson Avenue North.

For Sue, living here means getting up, depending on the job she's doing, at 4 in the morning to commute to a studio or a location in Toronto, for an early start. Right now she's doing makeup for the Royal Canadian Air Farce's New Year's Eve special.

As she points out, though, it can easily take longer to get to downtown Toronto from other parts of Toronto than it does from Hamilton.

She also commutes to Stratford at times, where she helps create the most compelling King Lear and Prosperos for the festival.

Living in Hamilton has also meant being (despite the pull of Toronto) a truly active part of the current here.

"There's such a cool vibe," she says.

She's part of the revitalization of Ferguson North, right up to the waterfront. She and her husband, renowned composer/producer Tim Tickner, bought the house, an old grocery store that Binbrook-born rap/alternative rock star Kazzler used to live in.

Sue and Tim are woven into other aspects of local life, through their association with forceful Hamilton interest-bringers such as the renowned Ian Thomas. (Sue did the beautiful cover art — boy lassoing a cloud — for Ian's 2012 release *Little Dreams*.)

She seems to find herself near the encouraging roots of various area projects, such as the Gasworks, new home to the Living Rock ministry for street-involved youth and Astrid Hepner's Hamilton Music Collective. Sue met Astrid when working makeup for the *Portraits of Sound* photo shoots that famous New York City jazz photographer Jimmy Katz did here in 2008, a project organized by Astrid.

Sue's recent paintings are featured in the Gasworks' first art show, on now, along with paintings by deejay Avery Tanner.

Hamilton might be as rooted as Sue has ever been.

"I grew up an army brat," she says. "I went to 13 schools growing up. Put me down as no fixed address. It's almost a perfect scenario (preparation) for TV production (work)."

Sue always had a gift for art and went to art school, in Ottawa, but got sidetracked by a remarkable occurrence in 1984. She was working part-time for a production company and was assigned to prepare a proposal that they do the papal visit to Ottawa that year.

The company won the job. She handled much of the staging for Pope John Paul II's big outdoor Mass there. She was 20 at the time.

As Sue got deeper into production work, she met makeup artists and felt drawn to their work. The rest you already know.

In recent years, though, Sue has heard the knell of her old muse and been painting up a storm. The works are strong, smartly rendered and richly expressive, brimming as she is with character, suggestions of narrative and playful, sometimes surreal surprise.

A large face and hand taking a selfie; Picasso on Picasso; man and tree in storm; fireworks.

With Sue you never know what to expect.

A bit like Hamilton that way. In the very best sense.

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Sue Upton at the Gasworks

What: Sue Upton's paintings

Where: The Gasworks Inc., 141 Park St. N., Hamilton

When: Friday, 7 p.m.