



# Her Only Light: The Songs of Connie Converse

with special guest Sara Coral

Friday, May 19, 2023, 8:30pm  
Constellation Chicago

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## Songs by Sara Coral

Hard For To Love (traditional)  
Sheep and Rabbits  
Nothing Gold Can Stay (R. Frost)  
Michigan  
At Night

Fooled Me Twice  
Bitter Medicine  
Artist of Evasion  
Flowers in Winter  
Winnemac (inspired by Sarah Louise)

Sara Coral, banjo and guitar  
Bill Harris, drums  
John Huber, guitar  
Emily Nott, voice  
Aaron Smith, bass  
Jeremy Ward, cello

Sara Coral is a Chicago-based singer and banjo player. Her songs are inspired by her background in choral singing and her love of traditional American string band music, with a focus on creating connection with listeners and exploring themes of resilience and self-compassion within the folk genre. Sara plays with the bands Glass Mountain and Mulefoot, and is a regular collaborator with Chicago songwriters Jess McIntosh (Joybird) and Emily Nott. Her debut solo album, *At Night*, was released in 2021.

## Her Only Light: The Songs of Connie Converse

The Rainmaker  
Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town  
Talkin' Like You  
Vanity of Vanities  
Father Neptune

I Have Considered the Lilies  
Cassandra's Entrance  
The Age of Noon  
She Hears of Old Wars  
She Devises a Lullaby

Ronnie Kuller, arranger and composer  
Emmy Bean, vocalist  
Michael Tran, clarinets  
Gordon Daole-Wellman, clarinet  
Diana Ortiz, violin  
Nina Karakos, viola  
Allie Chambers, cello  
Eleanor Kirk, harp

Artwork and poster design by Lizi Breit  
Costume design and fabrication by Sarah Thompson Johansen

Her Only Light is a new staged performance of the music of Connie Converse, one of the great lost musical voices of the 20th century. "Lost" in the figurative sense, as an ahead-of-her-time composer who never got a recording contract; but also lost in the literal sense, when — at the age of 50 — she wrote goodbye notes to friends and family and vanished, never to be heard from again. Connie's life story and her disappearance from human society are the backdrop against which the audience is invited to explore her art songs, including excerpts from her mysterious and breathtaking Cassandra Cycle. In conjuring the voice of Connie Converse through these works, we invite audiences to acknowledge our shared grief, disconnection, and the radical possibilities of collective dreaming and remembrance. This is the first public performance of this still-evolving project.

5th Wave Collective is a Chicago-based classical music ensemble dedicated to performing and promoting music by womxn and gender-nonconforming composers. Demonstrating their commitment to composers throughout classical music's history, the Collective performs repertoire by composers such as Teresa Carreño, Clara Schumann, Florence Price, Augusta Read Thomas, and Aftab Darvishi. With a roster of over 110 musicians, 5th Wave curates concerts with configurations ranging from solo instruments

to symphony orchestra, and performs in venues across Chicago, including recital halls, art galleries, community centers and restaurants. The Collective has performed works by 116 composers since its founding in 2018, and has gained recognition outside of Chicago with an invited performance at the Boulanger Initiative's Women Composer's Festival in 2019.

Emmy Bean is a singer, performer, and interdisciplinary artist. Her work combines improvisation, conversation, folk tunes, narrative, poetic inquiry, political urgency and embodied expression. She writes songs and performs both as a soloist and with the trio 80 Foots. She has been seen in Facility Theater's Little Match Girl Passion and Theater Oobleck's Baudelaire in a Box. She has collaborated with Stacy Rene Erenberg, Erica Mott, Naima Lowe, Opera-Matic, the Neo-Futurists, Beyond This Point, and ~Nois saxophone quartet. Her solo show You're His Child has been seen at the Pivot Arts Festival and Rhino Fest here in Chicago. She holds a masters degree in Interdisciplinary Art from Columbia College Chicago.

Ronnie Kuller is a composer, arranger, pianist and accordionist who has performed with the Lyric Opera, the Joffrey Ballet, the Chicago Philharmonic, and Mister Tom Musick, and whose compositions have been performed at Ear Taxi Festival and recorded onto wax cylinder at Edison National Historical Park. She lives in Chicago with her wonderful husband Patrick and amazing daughter Sylvie.

## PROGRAM NOTE

By David Isaacson

In 1967, Connie Converse's friend Peter Cooper made a short film based on her song "Playboy of the Western World," featuring a new, fully orchestrated version of the tune. Connie wrote to him that "It is a treat in itself to hear my music elaborated on and 'done up' professionally." That is the treat that Ronnie, Emmy, and the 5th Wave Collective present to us this evening: "doing up" a smattering of Connie's songs in a manner that celebrates her work and expands her legacy.

I first heard Ronnie playing songs by Connie Converse in a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2014. I was delighted to encounter Ronnie's lovely, thoughtful renderings in part because Converse had been a family friend when I was a kid in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Connie was part of the circle of peace activists that my parents also inhabited. My mom would even occasionally join Connie in a casual ensemble of women who met to play music for their own enjoyment (Connie on piano, my mom on her Sears-Roebuck snare drum)... but she had no idea that Connie had devoted most of the 1950s to writing and performing music, developing a small but devoted following who would gather in New York living rooms to hear her play, and even making an appearance on a young Walter Cronkite's "The Morning Show."

It was not until 2009, with the album release of Connie's rediscovered songs for solo guitar and voice, that my mom learned of Connie's history and artistry. Three of the songs on that album are part of the program tonight: "Talkin' Like You," "Father Neptune," and "I Have Considered the Lilies," written from 1951 to 1954.

The rest of the songs in the program date from 1956-58, when Connie — ever ambitious in her pursuits — was writing songs in a new idiom, composed at the piano and intended to be performed by small ensembles.

The brilliance of Converse's lyrics, the contemporary feel of her music, and her intriguing life story have engendered no small amount of interest over the last decade. Even Suzzy Roche and Lucy Wainwright Roche have covered Connie Converse! And Julia Bullock! Just this month, Howard Fishman's 576-page biography has been released (and is the source of much of this program note). In March, there was Catherine Lacey's novel "Biography of X," which imagines a fictional Connie Converse who lived into her 80s.

It is in the context of all this adulation and speculation that Ronnie and Emmy approach this work. Knowing them, I believe that they and Connie are *simpatico*

artists, with congruent sensitivities and sensibilities. They have been able to finally give this music — much of which was never recorded in Connie's lifetime — the investigation and manifestation it deserves. Emmy has told me that her goal is to both honor the music and honor Connie's personal wish (as stated in the letter reproduced in this program) "to let me go, please." Connie herself might have appreciated this paradox. In her song "Trouble," she wrote wittily: "Ever since we met the world's been upside down/And if you don't stop troubling me you'll drive me out of town/But if you go away/ As trouble ought to do/ Where will I find another soul to tell my trouble to?"

An excerpt from Connie's draft of a letter sent to her friends and family right before her disappearance, a week before her 50th birthday.

To anyone who ever asks, if I'm long unheard from:

This is the thin-hard sublayer under all the parting messages I'm likely to have sent: Let me go, let me be if I can, let me not be if I can't...

To survive it all, I expect I must drift back down through the other half to the twentieth twentieth, which I already know pretty well, to the hundredth hundredth, which I only read and heard about. I might survive there quite a few years - - who knows? But you understand I have to do it by myself, with no benign umbrella. Human society fascinates me and awes me and fills me with grief and joy; I just can't find my place to plug into it.

So let me go, please; and please accept my thanks to those happy times that each of you has given me over the years; and please know that I would've preferred to give you more than I ever did or could - - I am in everyone's debt.

Elizabeth (Connie) Converse

## SONG TEXTS

All lyrics by Elizabeth "Connie" Converse unless otherwise specified

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### The Rainmaker

(the refrain has been adapted from a quatrain by an unknown English poet of the 16th century)

I'm going over Sugar Hill to help them do the  
haying  
Some old crow is calling after me, but what can he  
be saying?  
Morning words and morning birds and sunshine in  
the lane  
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain  
down can rain?

I'm going over Sugar Hill to do the raking after  
All the hay we've made until today should reach the  
highest rafter.  
Not a haze for seven days, the sky as bright as pain.  
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain  
down can rain?

Men must be so early up and off to work together –  
I'm going over Sugar Hill and railing at the weather.  
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain  
down can rain?  
Then should my love be in my arms and I in my bed  
again –  
West wind, when wilt thou blow that the small rain  
down can rain?

### Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town (text by e.e. cummings)

anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn't he danced his did

Women and men (both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

children guessed (but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

one day anyone died I guess  
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side  
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)  
summer autumn winter spring  
reaped their sowing and went their came  
sun moon stars rain

## Talkin' Like You

In between two tall mountains  
There's a place they call Lonesome  
Don't know why they call it Lonesome,  
I'm never lonesome when I go there.

See that bird sitting on my windowsill?  
Well, he's saying whippoorwill all the night  
through.  
See that brook running by my kitchen door?  
Well, it couldn't talk no more if it was you.

Up that tree there's sort of a squirrel thing  
Sounds just like we did when we were quarreling  
In the yard I keep a pig or two  
They drop in for dinner like you used to do.

I don't stand in the need of company  
With everything I see talkin' like you.

Up that tree there's sort of a squirrel thing  
Sounds just like we did when we were  
quarreling.  
You may think you left me all alone,  
But I can hear you talk without a telephone.

I don't stand in the need of company  
With everything I see talkin' like you.

See that bird sitting on my windowsill?  
Well, he's saying whip-poor-will all the night  
through,  
Just whip-poor-will all the night through.

In between two tall mountains  
there's a place they call Lonesome.  
Don't see why they call it Lonesome;  
I'm never lonesome, now I live there.

## Vanity of Vanities

When I came into Tombstone,  
There was a man there could change copper  
into gold  
With a brown bucket full of cloudy water  
And a magic ten-penny nail.

"This will take a while," says he.  
"Put your pennies in the pail;  
Find yourself some scenery."

I don't know just where I went to  
And I stayed longer than I meant to  
Walking in the crystal air,  
As I dreamed of fortune rare.

When I came back to Tombstone,  
There was a man there could preach sinners into  
heaven,  
With a frock coat that had a velvet collar  
And a tongue I'd heard once before.  
"Never mind your gold," says he,  
"Gold is a vanity, barred from eternity  
By the needle's eye, you know."

So when I came out of Tombstone,  
I was heaven-bound, and qualified to go.

## Father Neptune

When my man goes to sea,  
He steps so high and free  
I think I know as I watch him go  
That he has no need for me, for me.

And when my man comes home,  
And waits a while to roam,  
I think I see when he looks at me  
That he's dreaming of the foam, the foam.

I'm not a pious Christian, and I do not go to  
mass,  
But I pray to Father Neptune to let him safely  
pass.  
I sing to the god with the three-pronged rod  
And the whiskers wild and free  
That I've got a man with a beard and a tan  
And a passion for the sea.

He rides through the foam  
And the cold and the warm  
And he loves to risk his neck  
And I'd like to know when he goes below  
That it's just below the deck.

Oh Neptune, Father Neptune  
I'll tell you fair and true  
That if you should lose my sailor  
I'll sing no more to you.  
When he's home from sea he is half with me,  
And he's gone when I close the door  
And it's still his creed that he has no need  
For a wife except on shore.

I know it's a boat that keeps him afloat  
But I'd like to think it's me,  
And if it were not for this  
I would sink to the depths of the sea.

## I Have Considered the Lilies

I have considered the lilies;  
They never toil, they only bloom,  
They never feel chilly or tired or silly  
And they don't need much room.

I have considered the lilies;  
I have considered how they grow,  
Tell me, tell me how to be a lily If you know.

Oh, lilies toil not, neither do they spin.  
I'm gonna take my working papers  
And turn them in,  
I'm handing over my pencil and pen,  
I won't be needing my broom again,  
I'll bloom by day, I'll bloom by night,  
And blooming will be my delight.

Bright tiger lilies, still water lilies  
See how they all dilly-dally;  
Look at the daylily, lemon lily, callalily;  
And the lovely little lilies of the valley.

Oh, lilies toil not, neither do they spin  
I'm gonna take my working papers  
And turn them in.  
To be more splendid than Solomon  
I'll walk around wearing the morning sun  
The sun by day, the moon by night  
And blooming will be my delight.

It would be fun, but I'm afraid that I would freeze.  
King Solomon was not arrayed like one of these.  
So, lilies, I can't afford to dilly-dally;  
I've got to work for my cotton, work for my denim,  
Linen and damask and challis  
Not like the daylily, lemon lily, callalily  
Or the lovely little lilies of the valley.

I have considered the lilies;  
I have considered how they grow.  
Tell me, tell me how to be a lily  
If you know.



## THE CASSANDRA CYCLE

### Cassandra's Entrance

Here she comes, wearing her web of days,  
Gone past the gossamer;  
Over the meadow fly the bees,  
To bud and blossom her.  
Yet she is never content with spring  
And must refashion it  
That robins wait for words to sing;  
That truth be passionate;  
That time and promises be one,  
Giving eternity no mention;  
That rogues do business in the sun,  
Though sweet deceit be their intention;  
That every gossamer be spun  
From filaments of comprehension...  
She is the husbandman's despair  
These many seasons;  
Bright she may blossom, but she will bear  
Nothing but reasons.

### The Age of Noon

When they were weary walking they sat down on  
stone  
She and a little boy, in the woods alone;  
And so began talking of the things they knew –  
Vague and particular, sad and amusing, false and  
true ...  
Their noise was questioned by a thrush,  
But they were deaf, and would not hush  
Such chatter as descends and climbs  
The slope between their separate times.  
And then along the forest path  
The noontime swept in radiant wrath;  
Sounding the cricket drum and fife,  
It slew them with the heat of life.  
A dragonfly stitched up their words  
And they were still as nesting birds;  
The doleful, deft and decorous air  
Arranged their clothing and their hair;  
Down from the highest springe of spruce  
The sun shook golden circles loose  
To seal their eyes from all concerns  
And light the little wicks of ferns.  
Then, blind to all but green and gold,  
They heard the crumbling of the mold;  
They heard a caterpillar pass,  
And beetles roaring in the grass;  
The humming blood beneath the skin  
Was louder than their words had been;  
Their ages were reduced to one –  
One crossing of meridian...  
The afternoon around them burned the pines  
and firs,  
But to his separate age the child returned, and  
she to hers,  
And so began talking of the things they knew–  
Vague and particular, sad and amusing, false and  
true.

## She Hears of Old Wars

Beyond them,  
Beyond them lay the lakes of shadow  
Where the sun was drowned;  
And pausing,  
And pausing in a perilous meadow,  
They set their tents all around.  
Dark horses flew among them  
With wings like knives;  
They roused the sleepers up where sleep had  
flung them  
And seized their lives –  
Swept them from the perilous meadow,  
Plunged them in the lakes of shadow –  
And brought word home to their wives.  
... We found them,  
We found their campfires dry for lighting  
Under ancient thorns;  
And pausing,  
And pausing in the smoke of our fighting  
We heard the sound of their horns.

## She Devises a Lullaby

This is the center of the world's dark circle –  
A dark, slow circle spun by the loving stars ...  
Like myself, all things adore you;  
Close your eyes – I will keep watch for you;  
Sleep...In the world's dark circle,  
The dark, slow circle...  
Do not listen to the screaming train –  
It will run down after a mile or two;  
Do not worry, the moon is on a chain –  
It can only smile at you;  
In cities where tigers creep  
They've put away the tigers –  
Sleep ... in the world's dark circle,  
The dark, slow circle...  
Now all thunder muffles up its riot;  
Broken levees keep their flood;  
Now all armies stand apart in quiet;  
Deadly wounds hold back their blood –  
Of all things I, at least, adore you;  
Close your eyes, I will keep watch for you –  
In the center of the world's dark circle,  
The cold, slow circle  
Spun by the stars.

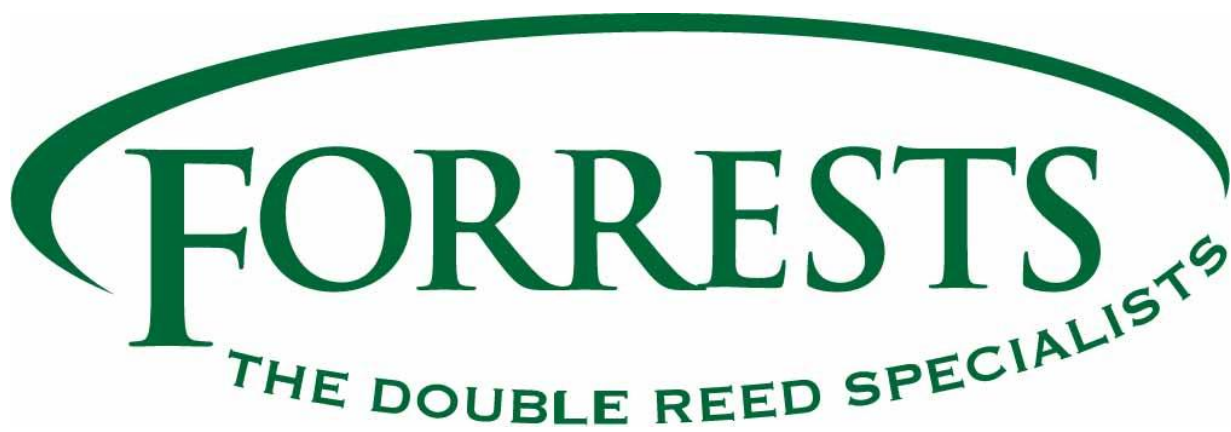
## The Spinner in the Bone

... Such is the way of her speech, and so her tongue  
Reels out her webs and riddles for the young –  
Whose patience ceases where her sense begins.  
But still beneath the bone she sits and spins –  
Within the bone shell, dim by day and night,  
Where her two eyes let in her only light  
And her ears sing entangled histories.  
When she was young, the way she wore her gowns  
Ruined the cloth of all her hand-me-downs;  
Where she would rest, the roughness wore it  
through;  
Where she would run, the brambles always grew;  
Nor would she mend – she kept her scissors sharp  
Snipping at life and teasing out the warp  
In puzzled filaments and mysteries...  
The little difference of peas and pods,  
The odds of wagers made by men with gods,  
The lives of women bound in silken covers,  
Eccentric orbits run by careless lovers,  
The postulates a child's remark discloses  
The elementary particles of roses ...  
These she kept spinning, spinning, under the bone,  
Within the dim shell where she sat alone  
The while she walked in endless companies.  
Such is her way of speech, nor will the young  
Fathom the webs and riddles of her tongue;  
So in a devious way the curse is kept.  
Yet she has never ceased, not while she slept,  
Nor while she paced the lawless squares of chance –  
Even as young lust moved her bones to dance –  
Still she kept spinning, spinning, under the bone,  
Within the bone shell, dim by day and night,  
Where her two eyes let in in her only light  
And her ears sang entangled histories.

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