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Discovering a Disappeared Artist in a Musical Drama

Howard Fishman's new musical drama, 'A Star Has Burnt My Eye,' takes inspiration from Connie Converse's life and music.

By **JIM FUSILLI**

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Brooklyn, N.Y.

When singer and composer Connie Converse vanished in 1974, she had no reason to expect that her songs would be heard. But they, and her mysterious life, serve as the subjects of Howard Fishman's new musical drama "A Star Has Burnt My Eye," which begins its sold-out, four-show run on Nov. 9 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. If Mr. Fishman does little to solve the mystery of Converse, he gives her music a lovely moment in the spotlight while telling us, obliquely, about his own peripatetic career.



Howard Fishman PHOTO: MARTINA MCCLURE

Until 2004, Elizabeth Eaton Converse was all but unknown. An excellent student who had won a scholarship to Mount Holyoke, Converse dropped out of college and moved to New York with an eye on a career in music. A singer-songwriter in the mid-1950s, decades before the term came into use, Converse created idiosyncratic compositions that blended folk, art songs and the era's show tune-influenced pop. Her metaphoric, naturalistic themes spoke, though not without abundant cleverness and sly humor, of loneliness and love out of reach. Self-taught, she was an innovative guitarist, employing jazz chords and phrasings. One can imagine today's folk-minded singers like Rhiannon Giddens, Beth Orton and Teddy Thompson doing

justice to her tunes. Mr. Fishman said an eccentric artist like Will Oldham, who also performs as Bonnie “Prince” Billy, shares with Converse an “edgy outsidersness.”

Accompanied by her guitar, Converse recorded her songs only in informal settings, one of which was the home of her friend Gene Deitch, an Academy Award-winning animator. In 1954, Mr. Deitch arranged for her to perform on “The Morning Show” on CBS with host Walter Cronkite. It may have been her only public performance.

In '61, Converse left New York and moved to Ann Arbor, Mich., where she became managing editor of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. After a friend-funded trip to England where she worked on her music, Converse returned downhearted and seemingly adrift. In 1974, she packed her possessions in her car, drove away and was never heard from again. In a letter written before she vanished, the 50-year-old Converse stated: “I just can’t find my place to plug into it.”

Thirty years later, Mr. Deitch brought one of her recordings to David Garland, who played it on his WNYC radio program “Spinning on Air.” The interest it generated led to the release in 2009 of “How Sad, How Lovely,” an album that features Converse in those informal settings. As her wry, wistful story songs unfold, she emerges as uniquely talented in her time.

Enter Mr. Fishman, a 46-year-old singer, guitarist and composer of minor acclaim but major talent. Fascinated by Converse, he contacted her brother and sister-in-law in Ann Arbor and began to learn all he could about her; now, in addition to writing “A Star Has Burnt My Eye,” he is at work on a Converse biography that he’s begun to shop to publishers. How the Converse story ends remains unknown: She was never found after her disappearance and is presumed long deceased.

“A Star Has Burnt My Eye” contains more than a hint of Mr. Fishman’s autobiography. In 2010, Mr. Fishman, whose music incorporates blues, country, folk and early New Orleans-style jazz, released three markedly different albums that showcased his versatility. “It was ‘go big or go home,’” he told me when we spoke by phone last week. “I thought it was time to get some attention or do something else.”

When he was booked to play Joe’s Pub in Manhattan in 2011, Mr. Fishman decided to forgo his own material and dedicate the evening to Converse’s music. Narrating her story between songs, he called his performance “a documentary concert.” It led to “A Star Has Burnt My Eye,” in which Henry Adler, a Fishman-like musician who is scheduled to perform at a New York club, decides to play only Converse compositions. With a major critic planning to attend, the singer’s agent tries to dissuade him from self-sabotage.

I was invited to a stumble-through in a BAM rehearsal space in mid-October. Set in Henry Adler’s apartment, surrounded by Converse memorabilia, Mr. Fishman and three singer-musicians— Charlotte Mundy, Jean Rohe and Nicholas Webber—play Converse’s songs, stopping only when interrupted by off-putting phone calls. When an obtuse DJ interviews Adler, the scene reveals how painful it can be for artists like Converse—and Mr. Fishman—to be obscure and working outside the norms of their times.

As performed by the troupe, Converse’s music is deeply affecting: Their tender readings reveal that she may have foreshadowed her own psychological demise. For his part, Mr. Fishman sings and plays with skill and sensitivity, revealing the harmonic integrity and curious nature of her compositions. In something more pronounced than subtext, “A

Star Has Burnt My Eye” seems to ask whether such artists as Converse and Mr. Fishman can ever expect to find a place to plug into.

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