

The Indie Collaborative ... How It All Began

By Eileen Sherman and Grant Maloy Smith

Eileen: It was summer 2014 when I submitted my album, PERFECT PICTURE, in the musical theater category for a Grammy Award. I am a lyricist and playwright and collaborate with my sister Gail. We work with some great Broadway folks in NYC. One day I received a Facebook notice from NARAS member Michael Lazarus. Michael had just added my name to a private page, called FYC. I had never met this wonderful man, and I never heard of FYC, but in less than five minutes, I understood I just gained admission to the most extraordinary and eclectic community of talented singer/songwriters and musicians in the world! It was like winning "Willie Wonka's Golden Ticket!" Of course, I was in the throws of the campaign "frenzy," and originally, I set out to meet everyone I possibly could via Facebook. However, every night, I got so involved in a fascinating online conversation, I often forgot time and mission. (Yup, here I was most mornings at 4a.m. still typing and chatting with a new music pal half way around the globe. Needless to say, PERFECT PICTURE never saw the "light of day," come Round II. I didn't get a Grammy nomination, but what I won that fall was quite the prize

Grant: *During the Summer of 2014 I traveled around much of the USA with a friend and fantastic musician, Ricky Kej. We had met at the Grammys early that year, and decided to visit as many chapters of the Recording Academy as we could that Summer. Ricky lives in India, so we picked the weeks he'd be back, and I handled the logistics. We started at the NY Chapter, attending their Grammy FutureNOW event, then went to the same event in Philadelphia, then we went to the Nashville "Block Party," which is a truly special annual Grammy event. We ended up in Chicago at a "Behind the Glass" event that the Chicago chapter held with Steve Lillywhite. We had a few days in between these events, so we filled them with meeting the friends that we shared in those cities.*

Eileen: The first round ballots were mailed, and my adrenaline was still pumping. I wanted to meet everyone face to face, and actually, I did get to say "hello," to a few Indies at their gigs in NYC. But I needed more!! I wanted to know, first hand, about everyone's newest projects, and I wanted them to know about mine. An idea started to brew. First, however, I required a "partner in crime."

Grant: *Because Ricky knew many people that I didn't, and vice versa, we ended up introducing each others' friends to each other. Next we went westward to San Francisco and Los Angeles, meeting each others' friends and attending music related events. It was a whirlwind, and loads of fun, but a question was whispering in the back of my brain: "how can we do more of these get-togethers with our fellow indies?"*

Eileen: It was just about then, that indie singer/songwriter Jody Quine was completing a US tour and would be in NYC for a couple days. She and her friend and indie rocker, Christina Gaudet, invited me for drinks at the Marriott Marquis in midtown New York....my neck of the woods. We had chatted on Facebook, but this was my chance to get to know these gals better. Afterward, more great Indies joined us, but first it was just "the girls." Conversation turned to news

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about our amazing group as well as many professional frustrations. I suggested we needed a more formal mechanism for everyone to get together and support one another. It's then I asked about this Indie fellow named Grant Maloy Smith who made me laugh every time I jumped back on the FYC page. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him! Jody assured me Grant was the "real deal," and he was the perfect guy to approach with my idea.

Grant: Based on the fun and success of my trip with Ricky, his musical partner Wouter Kellerman wanted to continue visiting friends around the USA in conjunction with musical events. So a few months after wrapping up my first trip with Ricky, I set up a trip for Wouter and me, starting in Houston. Once again we had many great times with each others' friends, and connected it with music and performances around Texas, Florida, Georgia, Washington DC, and so on. Wouter then continued on without me to Nashville and out west. He's a brilliant, classically trained flautist who thrills audiences with his playing and his vibrant personality. He was scheduled to play Carnegie Hall that October, so everything was leading up to that. Wouter and I often joked that our job was to come to your town, introduce the musicians to each other, then leave. Fast forward to the after-party, and I was hooked on the idea of making our indie meet-ups more of a structured thing.

Eileen: I messaged Grant and told him I wanted to be sure to meet him during Grammy Weekend. We did not connect until the morning of the big day. So there we were in our "red-carpet best," and I began to pitch him my idea. I don't think I completed two full sentences when Grant blurted out, "I'm in." Conveniently, he was scheduled to be in New York, in March, to play at the legendary Bitter End. I told him, I would be there, front row, center! (Of course, he was sensational. Grant always is!). The next morning I scheduled an appointment for us at the Drama League in Tribeca. (Of course, I chose a theater space ... that's my world.) However, I suspected Indies might question the validity of a Broadway organization playing host to a musicians' event, so before we went any further, I needed Grant's blessing.

Grant: When Eileen showed me the space, I actually loved it. It is well kept up and beautiful looking on the inside. Seeing the League's official "step and repeat" banner inspired me to design one for our group - if only we could figure out a name for it. Eileen and I sat on the couch in the reception area of the Drama League, and together we created and named "The Indie Collaborative," and started planning our first ever event, to be held right there on June 8, 2015.

Eileen: With some months of networking on Facebook and among our local friends, we packed the house in June. The event was a huge success, and we saw that the space was even too small for the number of people who wanted to participate. And something happened neither of us had predicted: throughout the night, folks were taking pictures like crazy and instantly posting them on Facebook. The event went viral within our private Facebook groups. We were still saying good-bye to the last, few stragglers, and Grant was already getting requests to

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bring this event to Indies around the country. Within the week, we scheduled our September evening in "LA" and chose both the 2016 and 2017 destinations.

Grant: *The private Indie Collaborative group on Facebook grew from 100 to 1000 members... and is now approaching 2000. Our mission of helping indies to find each other and form collaborations and friendships is really working. From the very beginning we saw lyricists find a composer to write with, or an artist to find a producer that they jelled with, and so on. There are fabulous stories of new collaborations all the time. It is no exaggeration to say that folks enter a room as strangers and leave as colleagues. One thing we were careful about from the beginning was to put up a firewall between the Indie Collaborative and NARAS (aka "The Recording Academy" or the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences), the fine organization that many of us belong to, which awards the Grammys® each year. We love NARAS and don't want to do anything that might seem like impropriety, so we don't hold any indie collaborative events during the months when Grammy voting is open. We adhere not just to the letter, but to the spirit of the rules of the Recording Academy.*

Eileen: Our collective body consistently serves as a referral agency, a cheering squad, and the perfect music resource center. What's even better, the only requirement to join the gang is to be a professional in the music industry. Right from the beginning we decided that there would be no requirement that any Indie Collaborative member also be a member of NARAS or any other organization. We are connected by our status as indie musicians, and not by any outside organization. Talent, passion, and persistence are each member's basic credentials. There is no hierarchy or preferred art form; only mutual respect. We are individually and collectively shining stars in this special Indie Collaborative Universe.

Grant: *Our second event was on September 1, 2015 in Los Angeles. We got a bigger space and we really needed it, since the turn-out was huge. We did a third one on GrammyEve, which was Valentines Day of 2016. The venue was tiny, so we could only allow 49 people in the building, but it showed us that we needed to make this an annual event, so we plan to do it every GrammyEve in LA, and a week before in New York City. Then throughout the rest of the year to visit other hot spots - wherever indies are found in numbers, we will get there. Each time we do an event we learn from it, and get better at it. As long as any one shows up, we'll keep doing them.*

Eileen: We only charge \$20 to attend or perform at our events, and this is barely enough to break even. But we are not trying to make a profit: that's not our goal at all.

Grant: *I'm not too crazy about showcase events that charge musicians a ton of money to participate, and promise them exposure to industry insiders. In my experience, most of those just make money from musicians for the organizers, and the only people that you are exposed to are other musicians who paid big*

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bucks to play. The Indie Collaborative is the farthest thing from that. We charge \$20 just to cover renting the hall and bringing the snacks and water. We lose money at each one, but we do it for love.

Eileen: It's just so much fun to spark collaborations. Let's go, Indies! The sky's the limit!