

Terry Brennan



Singer-songwriter Terry Brennan might just be the busiest musician on Vancouver Island **Terry Brennan performs between 60 and 70 times a year, including shows Friday at Evedar's Bistro in Langford and Sunday at Norway House.**

Photograph by: ADRIAN LAM, Timescolonist.com

There are plenty of Vancouver Island residents who play music full-time. However, singer-songwriter Terry Brennan is in a class by himself when it comes to the variety of venues in which he plays.

He has performed in at least 15 restaurants, rec halls, legions, bars, cafés and bistros during the past few years — keep in mind, this was just a cursory look at his tour history — and he's constantly on the lookout for new places to play. Brennan performs on Friday in Langford at Evedar's Bistro (2829 Peatt Rd.) and Sunday in Victoria at Norway House (1110 Hillside Ave.), concerts that present prime examples of his flexibility as an artist. Brennan, 62, does about 60 or 70 shows a year, which is considerable for an artist who rarely strays from Vancouver Island. Though he has been active on stage and in the studio for the better part of 30 years, the native of Kirkland Lake, Ont., who was raised in Toronto, didn't see an increase in activity until he moved to Victoria from Vancouver five years ago.

Brennan credits his wife with the booking bonanza. "She says, 'You should go into that place where you had a friend . . . ' so I'd go and

talk to the people," Brennan said. "That's how it happens."

It seems simple enough. But at the same time, talent also has a part to play. Brennan gigs wouldn't be as ever-present as they are if he didn't sound as good as he does; he also happens to be a likable guy, which never hurts. Not only that, in addition to his song-writing talent and aw-shucks demeanour, he's got another intangible: a life story torn straight from the pages of Kesey, Mowat or Kerouac. Brennan was happy to tell me a little bit about his wild past, which saw him plant roots in the Yukon, California and Mexico for periods of time. But he was equally proud to discuss his evolution as a songwriter and eventual resurrection as a husband, parent and person. "I'm able to keep my health up — I've given up all my nasty old ways — so I'm a lucky guy," Brennan said with a humility that permeated our chat. "I've found a home after a million years of being basically alone."

Brennan dropped out of high school at 16 for a job in forestry. Shortly thereafter, he began singing in and around Yorkville, an area of downtown Toronto that doubled as the epicentre of folk music in Canada during the late 1960s. Brennan was there to see it all unfold, playing on off-nights during the week when local talent was encouraged to get up and jam for two or three songs.

He eventually caught performances by every Canadian folkie of merit, in addition to stateside greats such as Phil Ochs and Tom Rush. "Back in those days it was really college oriented," he said of Yorkville. "They had coffeehouses and acts like Gordon Lightfoot, Ian and Sylvia, Joni Mitchell, Simon and Garfunkel. That was my school back in those days." Brennan, then still a teenager, moved west in 1967, picking up work on farms and ranches, "whatever I could get at that age." At the close of the '60s, he had made a home for himself in Lake Louise and Banff in the Alberta Rockies, and spent the entirety of the "crazy, druggy, acid-ridden '70s" working in restaurants, bars or hotels.

"In Banff, if you're not in the service industry, you're not working.

"I've done everything in the restaurant industry from managing and bartending to dishwashing. And I suffered the consequences mentally, spiritually. They were some crazy years." Brennan has fond memories of managing the Grizzly House, a Banff hot spot that hosted everything from theatre to open-mike nights.

"I got to hone my skills as a master of ceremonies and also play there, so it was a good training ground for that."

Brennan found himself in Mexico in 1977, in the port of Escondido, to be specific, a notorious party place long before it became the tourist destination it is today.

Brennan laughed often when talking about his Mexico sojourn. "We'd watch boats come in and see guys come down from the mountaintop with big, huge bales of pot and chop it up on the beach."

Not long after, he moved to the Yukon. Brennan spent a year and a half in the frozen tundra — nearly every day of which was some kind of adventure, from surviving an attempt on his life ("I went out with the wrong woman who didn't tell me about her husband") to work at an asbestos mine, which required him to drive a 58-tonne truck.

"I've been shot at and missed, and sh-t at and hit up there," he said. "The stories are too interesting to even relate. There's no law and a whole lot of justice."

He started performing with more focus and regularity after moving to Calgary in 1980, first with guitar god Gaye Delorme and later, following a move to Vancouver, with members of Skywalk, a popular jazz-fusion combo.

The money back then was good, "better than it is now," Brennan remembered, so he was eventually able to put together a few albums. His debut, *Storms and Dreams*, arrived in 1990 with support from members of Chilliwack. His rhythm-and-roots style came into focus around this time, which made him stand out from the hard-edged pack. "I play with more of a groove and more of a feel, a broader Americana understanding," he said.

He has made more records since (2004's *Roads* featured backing by guitarist Rick Baker of Doug and the Slugs, and members of what is now Colin James's backing band) but Brennan has reconciled himself to the realities of making music a paying career. He does well enough, but being paid to play music isn't the prime motivator. Whether he's solo or with his band, the colourful character is dedicated to feeding his muse for as long as he possibly can.

"We had a full three-hour rehearsal the other night, just sitting and enjoying music," Brennan said. "It's great to meet young guys that aren't into anything other than playing really beautifully and enjoying each other's musical company. A lot of young guys can't relate musically — myself included, when I was 25."

Times, they are-a-changin'.

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