

Jeans 'n Classics frontman little-known local star

March 12, 2011 — By Bill Brady

LONDON — Perhaps it's the proximity of Toronto that intimidates. Do Torontonians know about the good life west of Mississauga?

While TO has become the liveliest theatre and arts centre in Canada, I never miss an opportunity to tell anyone who will listen that the Forest City is part of the crown jewels in our country, too.

Southwestern Ontario has reared an impressive number of stars from Hume Cronyn to Rachel McAdams and a great many more.

I think many area residents are unaware of just how talented and highly regarded some of our residents and home-grown talent are. I feel great pleasure and pride when I read or hear about one of our own being recognized internationally even when many Londoners don't know of their prominence.

You may not know who this Londoner is or why he and his colleagues are in such demand here and in the U.S., but if you are an Orchestra London supporter or someone who celebrates the gifted musicians of our community, you will know and appreciate the brilliance of his work and the joy he continues to bring to audiences everywhere.

Peter Brennan is a London and Canadian treasure who has done it all. Born in Britain, he came to Canada with his parents in 1957. An accomplished guitarist and percussionist, Brennan opted to leave his formal music studies and find his way into the Canadian arts scene and that meant life on the road. An early highlight was travelling to Germany to work as a guitarist in Andrew Lloyd Webber's hit musical *Cats*.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Brennan travelled across North America and the Caribbean. He earned a record deal and released a solo album.

As a producer, he arranged and produced an extensive number of albums by Canadian artists and accumulated a large portfolio of commercial work. He has produced albums that have hit Top 10 charts as far away as the United Kingdom and has earned several producer grants and awards along with being a judge for Canada's Juno Awards.

He has provided arrangements for several commercial ventures and for the 2002 World Youth Day.

I began to hear about this talented musician when he started to recruit gifted performers from Southwestern Ontario to join him performing rock music in combination with a full orchestra.

They were committed to building a diverse, younger, sustainable audience for orchestras across Canada, the United States and Europe.

The goal of enticing young people, who seldom if ever attend a symphonic performance, was not new; Pop concerts tended to help.



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Under the Jeans 'n Classics name, Brennan has delighted audiences of all ages with rock music performed by big orchestras and his eclectic ensemble. Tunes such as Stairway to Heaven, the Led Zeppelin hit, had never sounded quite like this before.

I wondered how serious classical musicians responded to what must have been a major departure.

“There were a few symphony players who seemed reluctant”, Brennan said. “They seemed intimidated by us and at first we were sure intimidated by them.”

The ensuing years have been good for Jeans 'n Classics brand; they've done it all - from the Beatles, Queen and Motown. They sell out in most venues.

“They come to hear ABBA or the music of U2 and we hope they come back for a classical concert,” Brennan said. “We're flattered when orchestra members tell us that we are an absolute joy to work with. It doesn't get better than that.”

Brennan and his colleagues have concert dates in Calgary, Halifax, Tucson, Green Bay, Cedar Rapids, Dayton and Denver. Their bookings with major North American orchestras run well into 2012.

The Jeans 'n Classics band plays 80 concert dates a season in arenas, elegant concert halls and outdoor venues such as their favourite: a garden setting in Ft. Worth. There, surrounded by semi-tropical plants and accompanied by cicadas, they show Texas what Southern Ontario has spawned.

I asked Brennan, who seems not to age, how long he wants to live this exhausting life. “I'm going to keep doing what I love; I'm too old to rock and far too young to die.”

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