



Jeans 'n Classics returns to London roots with new orchestra and new venue

Rock of stages

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With guitarist Peter Brennan at the helm, Jeans 'n Classics has morphed from a one-off show to a full-time international career. The classic rock show, with orchestra, returns to London for four shows this season. (CRAIG GLOVER The London Free Press)

It was supposed to be a one-off — a single show featuring rock musicians playing along with orchestra to the songs of Elton John, Billy Joel and others.

More than 20 years later, Jeans 'n Classics is an international phenomenon, criss-crossing North America annually with occasional forays into Europe.

And on Sept. 29, they're back in London for the first show of a new season with a new orchestra at a new venue.

They'll deliver that unique fusion of classic rock and symphony fare that has delighted audiences with performances of the classic works of The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Michael Jackson, Elton John, U2, ABC, Supertramp, Sting and The Police, The Eagles, The Beach Boys, Led Zeppelin and just about every major artist known to rock.

Even disco for cryin' out loud!

Since that first show in the spring of 1991 with Orchestra London, founder Peter Brennan has written scores for more than 40 different shows. His partners, including singers and musicians from across southern Ontario, often deliver three concerts every weekend, with teams often on

opposite coasts.

And to put an end to any confusion, Jeans 'n Classics hasn't stopped; they only parted company with Orchestra London, which has headed in a new direction with its Red Hot Weekends series to collaborate with such artists as Barenaked Ladies, Chantal Kreviazuk and Alex Cuba.

The orchestra for the new Jeans 'n Classics show is a collection of players from across the region, some of whom have played with Jeans 'n Classics for years, others new to London.

"We've got a dream brass section that is just wonderful and led by Paul Stevenson on trumpet, and a young, vibrant string and woodwind section," said Brennan.

"I'm really excited about these (orchestra) players because they love rock 'n' roll and are as happy playing Led Zeppelin as they are Mozart, and that's nice because you know they are there for you."

Another change is the venue. Instead of Centennial Hall, the concerts will be held at the London Convention Centre — all table seats with enhanced lighting and big screens for video.

"It will be quite posh with table service and good wine," Brennan said.

The first show will feature 65 people on stage.

That includes a 25-member choir — Vocal Fusion, directed by Mark Payne — and five featured singers — Kathryn Rose, Rique Franks, Jean Meilleur, Neil Donell, and Gavin Hope.

It also includes a 31-piece orchestra.

John Regan will host and play keyboards, Brennan will be on guitar, Mitch Tyler on bass, and Paul DeLong on drums.

Jeff Christmas is conducting.

It's called Handstands — The Very Best of Jeans 'n Classics.

"It started off as songs that people really, really reacted to over the years," said Brennan.

"Then it morphed and we decided to add some new stuff written for specific singers. It will feature everything from Tears for Fears to James Taylor to Etta James to Lady Gaga to Peter Gabriel. Some we've done before and some that are brand new. It will be an interesting show. I think it's going to be a hoot."

It's the start of a four-concert season, presented by Rose in My Book, which raises money for breast cancer research. The organization and Jeans 'n Classics have teamed up with a goal of raising 1 million over the next five years.

In the early days, Brennan never knew that Jeans 'n' Classics could become a full-time gig. Then there was a concert in the spring of 1996, which he scored and performed with Larry Gowan (known as Gowan with the hits Criminal Minds and Moonlight Desires and now a

member of Styx).

“I thought, 'If I can write a show that a couple of thousand people scream for and it sounds great and the person it is written for, Lawrence Gowan — an awesome performer, writer and singer — is over-the-top happy, then the sky is perhaps the limit,' ” Brennan recalled.

“We had, perhaps, begun to arrive at least.”

To put the group’s growth into perspective, Jeans ’n Classics is already booked to perform 84 shows between now and next June.

Brennan said about 5% of their work is in Europe and he’s still hoping to make further inroads into that market, as well as Australia.

Gowan was one highlight of Brennan’s Jeans ’n Classics career. Working with Roger Hodgson of Supertramp was another, and putting together a show for the band ABC for a performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London, England, in April 2009 was “amazing.”

“It was an amazing venue, 5,000 people, and I remember before the show standing back and taking it all in as the technicians prepared the stage,” Brennan said.

“And in the dressing room were all these photos of performers from the ’20s and ’30s (and) the Beatles . . . the whole vibe was magnificent.”

Initially, Brennan wasn’t supposed to perform, just attend the rehearsals. But circumstances changed when he arrived and found himself on stage for all but about four songs: “It was all very magical, very special.”

Although there are performers out there putting on shows with orchestras, very few follow the Jeans ’n Classic format where the scores are written to ensure the orchestra members are challenged and the integrity of the songs protected.

“You have to try to protect the integrity of the songs, yet bring integrity to the new face you’re putting on it,” Brennan explained.

“The audiences have been intrigued by this concept and they’ve really embraced it. That means their ears and minds are wide open to try something new, but still familiar.”

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CHRONOLOGY

Spring 1991: Brennan writes the scores for a special show with Orchestra London featuring the music of Elton John and Billy Joel.

February 1995: Having performed several times with Orchestra London, Jeans ’n Classics performs for the first time outside of London, a show in Calgary.

Spring 1996: A show featuring Gowan (Lawrence Gowan, now playing with Styx), who had several hits including A Criminal Mind and Moonlight Desires, drew rave reviews and a “eureka” moment when Brennan thought Jeans ’n Classics might evolve into a full-time concern.

October 1998: First show in the United States performed in Chattanooga, Tenn., doing a Beatles show, which was sold out.

July 2004: Brennan collaborates with Roger Hodgson of Supertramp fame for a show at the London Convention Centre, one that continues to be presented in Europe.

April 2009: Brennan performs with the BBC Orchestra at Royal Albert Hall in a show written for the '80s new wave band, ABC.

October 2011: Orchestra London and Jeans ’n Classics announce the 2011-12 season would be their last together.

January 2012: A Rose in My Book, fundraising group for breast cancer research, announces it will partner with Jeans ’n Classics Inc. with the hope of raising \$1 million over five years, with concerts at London Convention Centre.

The Jeans ’n Classics season

Sept, 29: Handstands — The Very Best of Jeans ’n Classics, featuring songs from a variety of artists, from Tears for Fears to James Taylor, Etta James, Lady Gaga and Peter Gabriel, with a few new tunes thrown in.

Dec. 22: The annual Jeans ’n Classics Christmas.

Feb. 9: One Vision — An Evening of the Music of Queen, when Michael Shotton teams up with the orchestra and choir to pay homage to Freddie Mercury and Queen.

May 4: The Age of Innocence — Like a jukebox of songs from the early to mid-'60s.