

Letter carrier by day, Neil Young by night ? Larry Cariou strikes a chord



By Brock Weir

Aurora's Larry Cariou might be a Canada Post letter carrier by day, but when the Harvest Moon comes up, things start to get interesting.

He was a Winnipeg high school student when he first noticed his singing voice set him apart from everybody else ? well, almost everybody. He and his friends had just taken up the guitar and had started to master the tunes of folk artists like Bob Dylan, but when he stepped up to the mic to take on a Neil Young ballad, people began to sit up and take notice.

His natural voice, he said, was ?Neil Young-ish?, and although he says his early days in his band were ?terrible, really?, they soon began to hit their stride.

Mr. Cariou is the lead singer of ?The Neil Young'uns?, a Neil Young cover band which has been gaining momentum on the Canadian music scene, playing festivals from coast to coast.

?I don't think I was the biggest Neil Young fan back in the day,? he says. ?I heard Heart of Gold and Old Man on the radio, they were fine, but that wasn't really my style of music. I don't know what I was into, but my taste has changed over the years. Once I discovered I could do his voice though and people would say, ?Holy sh--! Do you ever sound like him!?, then it became kind of fun!?

After settling on their catchy name, Mr. Cariou says the reception to what they were doing was terrific. Admittedly, however, some of their earliest gigs were playing in front of ?pretty biased? audiences, but the enthusiasm continued playing some of the more audience-diverse venues like Toronto's Cadillac Lounge.

?We started learning about 10 songs, and now we're up to about 135,? he says. ?We like to call ourselves ?The Neil Young Jukebox', so if you are a big fan and ask us to play a tune, we can usually play it for you. At every show, ultimately someone asks us for a song we don't play. The guy has thousands of songs and a lot of them are just so good. There is just so much material that is cool to mine. If we were a Boston tribute band where they had two albums, there is only so much you can do.

?We love playing everything and it is almost the more obscure the better!?

Mr. Cariou may have come by his musical leanings honestly. His uncle, Len Cariou, for instance, made a splash on Broadway, earning his first Tony award nomination starring alongside Lauren Bacall in ?Applause?, Stephen Sondheim's ?A Little Night Music?, and ultimately taking the trophy home originating the role of Sweeney Todd, alongside Angela Lansbury.

Even if it runs in the blood, however, he doesn't cite this as any influence in striking into the music business on his own. He's a front

man, he says, who just happens to be surrounded by very talented individuals. He also points out with a deliberate degree of irony that the group played their first gig on February 3, the anniversary of the plane crash which killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and The Big Bopper, "the day the music died."

Evidently, however, February 3 was not their personal Waterloo as Neil Young has become aware of what they do and doesn't seem to mind in the least.

"The music spans generations," says Mr. Cariou of Neil Young's playlist. "We get people, parents, grandparents and kids, come in three generations of Neil Young fans have come in at many times. His writing is spectacular and he is in one of the top five rock, folk, and even country writers ever. He is up there with Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie.

"Not everybody loves his voice, and that can be a turnoff for people, but if you don't like folk, or you don't even like heavy rock, he runs the gamut of everything from heavy ballads, to country, to almost a punk style. That generation from Seattle, your Kurt Cobains and Pearl Jams bow at the altar of Neil and it seems like every new generation just discovers how good he is and that is the appeal. It's quality."