

# Rock's New Wrinkle: How local musicians thrive (up to and past) 55



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*The idols are getting old. Angus Young isn't as young as he used to be. The lead guitarist of AC/DC will be 61 in March.*

*And he's the baby of the rock legend family. Bruce Springsteen? Not*

*exactly a spring chicken. At 66, he would qualify for Old Age Security.*

*But they're not acting old. The Rolling Stones toured this summer. Mick Jagger celebrated his 72nd birthday in July.*

*Roger Daltrey can identify. He'll be 72 when The Who plays Saskatoon in May. And at 67, Alice Cooper will open for Motley Crue in December at SaskTel Centre.*

*"I don't think there's an age limit on music," says Jay Semko, 55, who's been performing since elementary school.*

*Shaun Verreault used to be Saskatoon's blues guitar wonderkid. Now he's the father of a three-year-old. Home for him is Vancouver, but he's still playing, still challenging himself.*

*"It's not what I do," Verreault says of music. "On many levels, it's who I am."*

*In conversations with established (some might say "middle-aged") musicians with Saskatoon connections, it's clear that music isn't something you dive into in your 20s and then abandon when the first grey hair appears.*

*They adapt, persist, transform. They start new bands, they start families, they find other things in music to keep themselves working and interested. They change. And they stay the same.*

*A theory: Maybe rock's new wrinkle isn't about age but the ability to stay plugged in.*

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A school gym was Jay Semko's first music venue.

At age 11, his band The Sandstone Masons played the dance at

Greystone Heights School.

"We didn't have enough songs to play a whole dance so we just played for about half an hour," he laughs.

They were demoted for their next gig — they played in the hallway while kids filed in for assembly. Singer-songwriter Jay Semko's new album, *Sending Love*, reflects his long-standing fascination with love songs.



Singer-songwriter Jay Semko's new album, *Sending Love*, reflects his long-standing fascination with love songs.

Semko went on to record a dozen albums with bandmates Bryan Potvin, Merl Bryck and Don Schmid in the Northern Pikes. The sold a million records and got eight Juno nominations. The band was inducted into the western Canadian Music Hall of Fame in 2012.

Paired down to a three-piece — Semko, Potvin and Schmid — the Pikes still do shows every few months across the country.

"When the Pikes first started, we were a high-energy, post-new-wave rock band. You adapt accordingly," Semko says.

"It's enough to feel good and to get the rock out of your system."

But Semko has done much more in music. He's released nine solo albums, composed music for TV and film and now, as a member of

ACTRA, does voice-overs for commercials and documentaries.

His songwriting these days has a new wrinkle, too — it's evolved from rock to roots and country.

"Mostly now it's just me and the acoustic guitar — singer/songwriter (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToMZM3h9y4Q>) things. I kind of like that because people really listen and you can tell the story behind the song."

Shaun Verreault's career arc is not unlike Semko's. He traces his start in music practically to childhood. He was 15 or 16 when Gord Pendleton asked him to play in his band.

"Getting paid a bit of dough to bring my gear somewhere and play in front of people — that's how I got bit."

What the Northern Pikes did in the 1980s, Wide Mouth Mason did in the 1990s — Juno nominations, gold records. That band also endures — with original drummer Safwan Javed and Big Sugar's Gordie Johnson who replaced original bassist Earl Pereira. But again, the soundtrack doesn't end there — Verreault writes and records solo songs and albums, leaning toward acoustic. He writes songs with and for other musicians and he does public speaking.

"All those things have sprung from learning how to play the instrument and learning how to sing and learning how to be a musical person."

Forget about growing out of it or being too old to do it. There's no separating Verreault, 41, from music.



Shaun Verreault (centre) with bandmates Safwan Javed (left) and Gordie Johnson in Wide Mouth Mason.

He compares it to learning a language. At first it's new but after years you start thinking in it. In fact, he and his daughter Layla sing everything to each other, improvising melodies.

"I tend to think of a lot of things musically and spread it out into what it needs to be after that."

Age is a number but it isn't really part of the equation.

"It's inspirational to see the old rock bands that continue on," says Semko. "I've seen the Stones a number of times now and I'm a big fan. I saw McCartney a number of years ago and he had more energy than most musicians that are 20. His endurance was phenomenal and he sounded great."

Having a few years under your belt — a studded belt, of course — has advantages. One of them is perspective. You stress less, appreciate life more.

If he could go back and give a piece of advice to his 20-year-old self, Semko says it would be to enjoy every moment as it comes.

"I've had some ups and downs. I've dealt with depression and I've dealt with substance abuse, in particular alcohol. But I've been clean and sober for a number of years and it's almost like a new life for me. All of sudden you go, wow, I really appreciate the fact that I'm here and I'm able to do this.

"Every time I get a chance to play live I feel like the luckiest guy in the world."

## **LESLIE AND JOHNNY**

It's Saturday night in Saskatoon and Leslie Stanwyck, 51, and Johnnie Sinclair, 53, are getting ready to play with their bandmates Brent



Leslie Stanwyck and Johnny Sinclair moved to Saskatoon for a quieter life but continue to play in bands.

Carlin and Wayne Pearson in Undercover Pirates.

There are about a dozen people at Piggies Pub and Grill, a tidy, friendly little Idylwyld Drive bar in Mayfair. There are some fans there, to be sure, but you suspect the others have no idea what Stanwyck and Sinclair have done in music.

Talk about under cover. Once upon a time, they were kind of a big deal. As members of The Pursuit of Happiness (<https://www.google.ca/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=the+pursuit+of+happiness+l%27m+an+adult+now+site:youtube.com>), they toured Europe with the Eurythmics and recorded the albums *Love Junk* (1988) and *One-Sided Story* (1990) with famed producer Todd Rundgren.

When, as Sinclair says, “the wheels came off,” they formed their own band, releasing seven albums as Universal Honey (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFY6BrvafYA>).

“Our first label tour was 21 dates opening for Duran Duran in America,” Sinclair recalls.

“One year, we did 250 dates and 100 of them were opening for the Goo Goo Dolls.”

It was just as Johnny Rzeznik and the band were catching on. The shows were getting bigger and other bands were clamouring to replace Universal Honey as the warm-up act.

"Every day, Johnny's manager would come to him and say, 'look, this band wants to come on the tour.' And he would say 'no, we have an opening act, it's Universal Honey,'" Sinclair relates.

"They stood by us. That was awesome," says Stanwyck.

Toronto's rat race finally got to them and it was her idea to move to Saskatoon when their son was ready to start school.

The homecoming was literal for Sinclair; they moved into his childhood home.

"I've only ever lived in one house in Saskatoon," he says.

Conservatory-trained Stanwyck grew up in Toronto, daughter of jazz trumpet player Al Stanwyck, who spent four years in Paul Anka's band and can be heard on the original Hockey Night in Canada theme song.

Sinclair and Stanwyck made eye contact when she auditioned for *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

"Nine months later, we were living together, nine years later, we were married, nine years after that we had a little boy and five years after that we moved back to Saskatoon," says Sinclair.

They won't get rich playing cover songs but Sinclair has fun every day working at Krazy Kileys and the couple are involved in the network marketing business related to skin care called NuCerity International.

## **BACK UNDER COVER**

At Piggies, Undercover Pirates do Go Your Own Way by Fleetwood Mac — Carlin's guitar solo is spot-on — then Lucinda Williams' Can't Let Go and Steve Earle's Feel Alright. They're sharp.

During a pause between songs, the waitress brings over shooters. Stanwyck takes a sip. Sinclair downs his.

In addition to knockout vocals — Stanwyck's voice bears comparison to Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders — Stanwyck has already played acoustic guitar, harmonica and banjo by the midway point of the first 50-minute set.

The music continues with covers of Raspberry Beret and Semi-Charmed Life, Did You Stand By Me and another Fleetwood Mac, Say You Love Me.

It turns out the band has its own superfan — an uninhibited pensioner named Ernie in a bluejean shirt who brings his own square of plywood and gets his white cowboy boots tap dancing in time to the music. The fans know Ernie. They cheer him on.



A Saturday night at Piggies, one of three bars Undercover Pirates frequents.

Undercover Pirates aim to play once a month in a circuit that includes Piggies, Somewhere Else in Avalon and Crackers in the north end.

## PIRATES AHOY

About four years ago, Cracker's manager Cam Zoller started getting phone messages from Johnny. Johnny was looking to play there. Johnny wanted his call returned. Who the heck was Johnny?

"As soon as I heard it was Johnny Sinclair from The Pursuit of Happiness, I was star-struck," says Zoller.

He praises the couple's musicianship and their demeanour.



"Oh I love them. What's not to love? They're so personable. Johnny's a funny guy. Leslie is a sweetheart."

They're also good for business.

"It's one of our top bands. The place is packed when they play here," says Zoller.

A musician himself, Zoller fronts the cover band Paradise Road. At a recent Federation of Labour convention gig, he found himself up on stage thinking "Geez. I've got, like, no hair. Am I acting too young for my age? And then I think, screw it, this is too much fun."

Is he inspired by the legends who are still doing it?

"Are you kidding? My idol is Alice Cooper. Talk about wrinkles," he laughs.

The rules just don't seem to apply to the rock gods. You couldn't imagine your own 70-year-old father up on stage, Zoller points out — "who'd hold him up?" — but the legends get away with it.

"You just see what inside of them, not outside of them."

What Sinclair and Stanwyck have done is invented a third chapter in their musical story. Newly back in Saskatoon, Sinclair reconnected with childhood friend Carlin.

They've known each other since Grade Seven at Holliston School.

"It was just one of those things where you move away for 27 years and pick up the phone and say 'hey, I'm back,' and you're still friends."

Then they added veteran drummer Pearson who came highly recommended.

"Wayne is married to a girl we went to high school with. So we're a

pretty tight little unit here,” Sinclair says.

Suddenly, there was a band again. The couple never considered life without performing.

“It would suck,” Stanwyck laughs. We’ll always be doing it, I think.”

What doesn’t matter is what a lot of kids get into music for in the first place — fame and fortune. A sellout at Crackers is 60 people.

“I can honestly say if there’s two people at the bar when we’re playing, if they’re just enjoying it, digging it, that’s awesome,” says Stanwyck.

“We’ve seen a lot, and I think right now it’s mostly making connections with people and just enjoying that.”

Adds Sinclair: “It’s great. We get a babysitter, we get to go out, have a few pops, play some tunes, do what we love doing. Your friends come to see you. They’re older, their kids are maybe out of the house and they’ve got more time. And it’s always a good night. I’ve seen so many people I haven’t seen in forever.”

## TUCKER LANE



Leslie Stanwyck in the viewfinder of a Bamboo Shoots video camera at the Bassment.

Doing covers is a strategic move, too. It keeps their musical chops up. Stanwyck and Sinclair have played their own songs long enough to want to keep that going, too. With age comes wisdom and part of that wisdom is an open mind. After several years as Undercover Pirates, they formed the Tucker Lane to do

originals. And in a move that would have shocked their pop-rock younger selves, they've made inroads into country music, of all things.

"I think at one point I probably would have been mortified at country," Stanwyck admits. "Now I look back and think 'how silly,' because there's great music in all areas."

They released Tucker Lane's debut album *West of Minnesota, North of North Dakota* last year.

"Feels good, people are liking it," says Sinclair.

But it's not like it used to be when you had major label backing. You do all your own marketing, promotion and bookkeeping — a fact Stanwyck isn't crazy about.

"For me, personally, I would rather have a label doing all that crap. I just want to be able to play music. I don't want to be thinking business-like. I just want to create."

On the other hand, there's no longer that pressure to do a label's bidding.

"We're going at our own pace," Sinclair says of the album. "It's on iTunes, it's on streaming services. We have physical copies of it. If somebody picks it up tomorrow in Halifax, it's a brand new record to



Tucker Lane: Brent Carlin, Leslie Stanwyck, Johnny Sinclair, Wayne Pearson. Back cover of the album *West of Minnesota, North of North Dakota*.

them.”

They lived their rock ‘n’ roll dream. They settled down and started a family. They realigned their musical expectations. And, through it all, continued to find a way to do what they love. If those are wrinkles, everyone should have them.

“What never changes is that we’re standing on stage playing songs,” says Stanwyck. “That’s what we do.”

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