

Bill Henderson performing  
with Chilliwack.  
Photo: Daniel Bloch

# The Lang Run

BY JOHN THOMSON

“Lonesome Mary” kicks off the Chilliwack road show these days. The iconic BC band continues to thrill boomers and millennials alike with 20 to 25 engagements a year (primarily at fairs and festivals) belting out hits such as “Lonesome Mary,” “I Believe” and “Crazy Talk.” And, of course, their signature tune, “My Girl (Gone, Gone, Gone)” written by lead singer Bill Henderson and band member Brian “Too Loud” McLeod in the belly of McLeod’s boat. The opening bars are legendary.

*Gone, gone, gone, she’s been gone so long.  
She’s been gone, gone, gone so long.*

“We got to Pender Harbour. Every night we’d stop and play,” says Bill about that eventful night in 1981. “We’re sitting there and Brian’s got the chord that opens the song and we built it from there. We probably worked out most of the verses on the boat. I took it home and created the vocal stuff that has the modulation in the middle.”

*Ever since she left me I sure feel all alone.  
A little misunderstanding, I can’t get her on the telephone.*

“My Girl” went on to peak at number 22 on the Billboard chart but Bill wasn’t satisfied. “I wasn’t happy with the lyrics and the melody,” he says “but it was our best hit.”

And that’s the thing about Bill Henderson; he’s not what you’d expect from a rock legend. As a shy and retiring youngster, he sought solace in the harmony of nature, in the trees, the rocks and

especially the water. He would spend hours on the wharf in Yellowpoint, BC where he grew up, staring at the waves, alone in his own thoughts. “It soothed me,” he says. Who knew that he’d be up on the stage years later, rocking it out in front of thousands of adoring fans? Not him.

“I didn’t start out wanting to be a rock star. I didn’t plan it,” he says. “The thing that music did for me was that it solved my inner turmoil and that was a very, very intense experience for me from a little kid onwards. I was extremely uncomfortable. Whatever it was, my gut was flat and hard for a long, long time because I was just plain tense all the time. It’s great to have a hit but, when I play, I want to have a transcendent experience. That’s why I’m in music. And what was the music transcending? It was transcending whatever the turmoil was all about.”

*My girl, she was the world to me. She’s gone away across the sea.  
My girl is just a memory.  
She’s been gone so long away  
Gone, gone, gone, she’s been gone so long.  
She’s been gone, gone, gone so long.*

Credit pop singer Howie Vickers and The Collectors with giving birth to Chilliwack. Back in the 1960s, The Collectors, originally called the C-FUN Classics, played cover tunes at high school dances and events. The band also had a weekend gig at a downtown Vancouver nightclub. The Collectors played rhythm and blues. Bill, who at this point, was studying theory, composition and instrumentation at UBC’s School of Music, liked jazz. The Collectors’ saxophone player, Claire Lawrence, brought the two together.

# Snapshot

with Bill Henderson

If you were to meet your 20-year-old self, what advice would you give him?

*"When I was at Yellowpoint, I was down on the wharf every day. The water soothed me and the advice I'd give that 20-year old is learn how to get back that connection with this beautiful planet."*

Who or what has influenced you the most? And why?

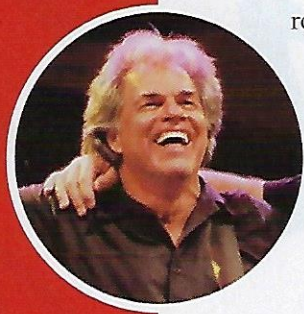
*"A guy named Martin Bartlett who was in the music program at UBC like I was. He was a new music composer, all this wild and crazy stuff, and he had this really deep commitment to music."*

What does courage mean to you?

*"Courage means moving into your fear when you're afraid. Work with it and do something that you're afraid of."*

What does success mean to you?

*"Success means doing something that makes you feel really good. It depends on what you're after; if you're after money, you're going to be a success after you've made a certain amount of money. For me, it was some kind of connection with dead centre. It's been about finding the centre for me."*



"We had to change guitar players so Bill Henderson, who had not played rock and roll guitar at all up to that point, came in and joined the band," says Lawrence. "We started writing songs almost right away."

"Bill hadn't played a lot of rock and roll," says Vickers "but he had a fresh, open mind musically and he had a technical background, too. It was him and Claire bringing that experience and knowledge to what we were doing." (Lawrence had also attended UBC's music program, although he and Bill had never met on campus).

"Both of us had heard the wildest stuff you can imagine from the classical composers and we brought that into rock, Lawrence continues. "Most rock players didn't have access to that music because they had grown up learning how to play Duane Eddy. They just didn't have access to the music that we did."

"It was ground breaking," says Bill, who was now sharing lead vocals with Vickers.

Signed by Warner Brothers, The Collectors produced one album and five singles, building a reputation for innovation and originality. But in 1969 Vickers left the band to pursue a solo career in commercial music. The quintet became a quartet and Bill assumed the role of leader.

"I just stepped aside," says Vickers "and they changed their name. Chilliwack initially was The Collectors minus me."

*She was weeping and a-wailing  
You know she does it every day  
I said Mary, Mary, Mary  
How can you live that way?*

"Lonesome Mary" in 1971 was quite big for us. It definitely put us on the map," continues Bill. "There was tremendous momentum from The Collectors and Chilliwack rode out on that momentum and started creating new stuff as well."

A stream of releases followed, "Fly at Night," "Arms of Mary," "California Girls," "Whatcha Gonna Do," and others. The '70s and '80s were a busy time for the band – 12 albums in 24 years – live shows and a swing through the States appearing on the TV programs *American Bandstand* and *Solid Gold*.

"Once we got going, it was not about [the money]. It was about the excitement of the music and the exploration and the new

sounds," says Bill. "It wasn't until 1976, 10 years after we formed the band that we started making any appreciable amount of money – and we're not talking about a lot of money, we're talking about not going to the Sally Ann to buy clothes for our kids."

Bill was now a bona fide rock star, but the singer/songwriter was finding it increasingly difficult to feed the machine.

"A lot of bands were being trained by record companies to create stuff that sounds the same from song to song. I wasn't into that. It wasn't because I didn't want to; I couldn't. I could write cookie-cutter stuff, but songs that actually grabbed people's attention, those sprang out of me and they would happen when I would sit and play my guitar. And those ones I would pursue. I couldn't control what style came out and whatever emerged, emerged."

He admits distractions hindered the band's international reach.

"We could have gotten farther in our career, if we had managed to get songs all focused in the same direction. That would have been much easier for a record company to market. I wasn't focused properly. I wasn't focused on how do we get to No. 1, what should we wear, what are the colours, how do we promote this, what should the album cover look like? My focus was not there. My heart and soul was not there."

Chilliwack released its last new album in 1984. Bill put Chilliwack on hiatus in 1987 and moved onto other projects, joining the folk-rock band UHF with Shari Ulrich and Roy Forbes, performing solo and getting involved, politically, with the Songwriters Association of Canada, the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and SOCAN, a non-profit organization representing the publishing rights of artists and publishers.

Bill served with SOCAN for 24 years, speaking up for artists and making sure their interests were represented at the negotiating table. In 2014, he received a SOCAN Special Achievement Award for his advocacy work. In May 2016, he received an Order of Canada. Worthwhile projects all but as early as 1995, the boy was getting restless.

"Frankly, I was starting to miss the bass and drums. I wanted to hear the THUMP." Bill put a new band together in 1997. In 2010, he included old pals Howie Vickers and Claire Lawrence in a commemorative 40th anniversary concert at River Rock Theatre. There was a lot of THUMP, indeed.

Today, Bill tours with his brother Ed, long-time drummer Jerry Adolph and bass player Gord Maxwell.

“When you go to a Chilliwack concert, most people say, ‘I didn’t know that was a Chilliwack song’ or ‘I didn’t know that was Chilliwack,’” says Claire Lawrence. “They have so many songs that are recognizable.”

“We give them most of the old hits,” says Bill, plus new material, too. “It’s such a release to say okay, ‘we’re playing the past now.’ This band has many pasts. I can move around from genre to genre and I don’t care,” he says, thankful for the freedom that comes with longevity. “We threw ourselves into our music and we got basically high with it. That’s always been my focus, so I’m not apologetic to the industry anymore that I didn’t play their game. But I managed to survive and I’m happy. I’m real happy.”

*We’re gonna take back this country, we’re gonna take back this land.*

*We’re gonna bring back democracy and build Canada again.*

*Haven’t we had enough? Haven’t we had our fill? Hasn’t it been too long living on corporate time feeding the bottom line?*

“They’re a little taken back,” Bill says of his latest tune, “Take Back This Land,” the closing number in his current show. The song is a slam against consumption and materialism written in 2015, just before the last federal election, inspired, he says “by the need for change at the highest political level. Was I angry for 10 years and that led to it? Sure, but I feel the song is deeper than that. I’m not talking about a person; I’m talking about how we live our lives. It’s about this place and these

people. Democracy is really a way of saying we’re all in this together. Look at this beautiful place. Do we want to ruin it?”

Bill co-wrote the song with his wife of 49 years, May, and credits her with the “clearer, saner parts.” “She’s the opposite of me,” he says. They met at UBC and now reside on Salt Spring Island, close to the water, of course. His adult children, Saffron, leads a band called The Ticket and, Camille, teaches singing. They often appear with their Dad as backup singers.

“I’m not motivated by picking up girls anymore,” he laughs. “I’m not interested in doing anything but writing for myself and for the band.” And that includes reflecting on what’s happening on Salt Spring and in the rest of the world.

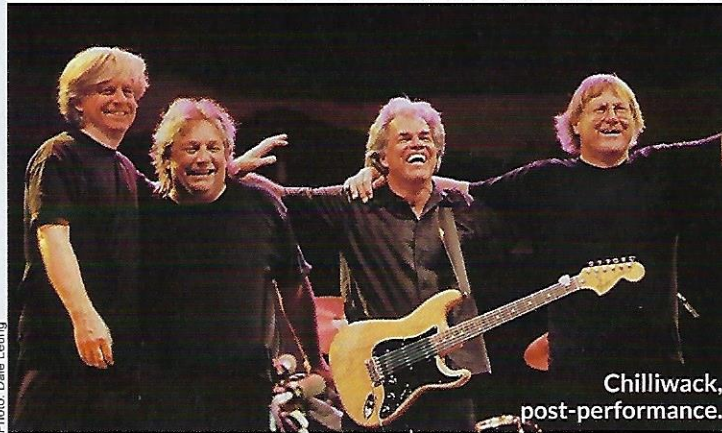


Photo: Dale Leung

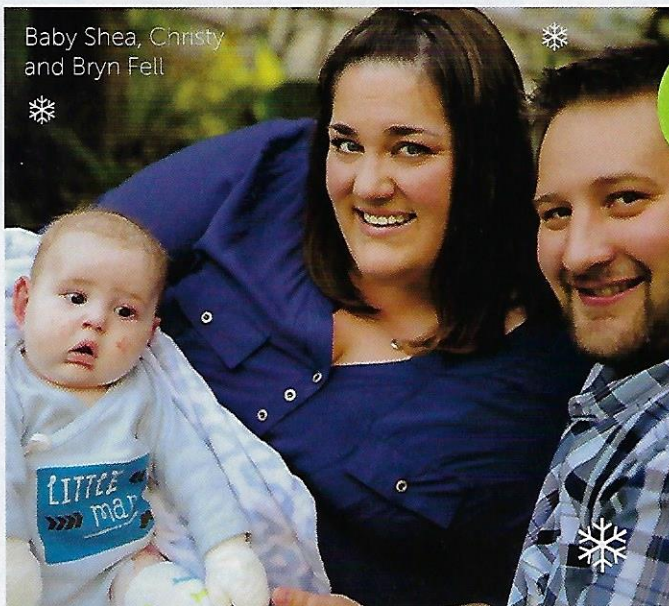
Chilliwack, post-performance.

*Yet we know where we're goin', we know what to do. We will stand together because our love is strong; it's gonna carry us on. We're gonna take back this country, we're gonna take back this land. We're gonna bring back democracy and build Canada again.*

Chilliwack carries on, in spirit and in the flesh. Bill has reunited with Claire Lawrence to mentor First Nations vocalist Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson, and the Chilliwack road show rolls on. He admits it’s a slog sometimes – “if I drive over three hours, I don’t play” – but he remains passionate and committed. Music centres him.

“The last thing I’ll do will be the show. I do love it.”

“I applaud Bill for what he continues to do out there. It’s just phenomenal,” says his pal Howie Vickers. “Bill is still bloody amazing and Claire, as well. Just having the energy and the desire, that’s truly an amazing thing. The Eagles song, “The Long Run”; that says it all. I’m very proud of them.” *SL*



Baby Shea, Christy and Bryn Fell



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