



A Musical Life

By Jennifer Blyth

Karel Roessingh in his Highlands studio. Photo: Ken Sakamoto

While Karel Roessingh could not have predicted the course of his musical career, a habit of embracing the “interesting things that came along” has made for a fascinating journey.

Looking back at Karel Roessingh’s career, it might be easy to think it’s all been by careful design.

Not at all, says the Highlands musician, producer and composer.

Born in Holland, Roessingh grew up in Calgary, and while music was always a part of the family home, it wasn’t until later he considered it a career option.

While his father played amateur viola and his older siblings picked up the guitar, Roessingh began tickling the ivories at age seven. He later explored the possibilities of percussion and guitar in junior high school, but it was the piano that had captured his heart.

Reflecting on that relationship from his Highlands studio, cosy with a piano, memorabilia and the computer equipment requisite for today’s musician, “the piano is something you can play on your own and play to make a living. It just gives me great joy.”

As a member of the Calgary Youth Orchestra, Roessingh’s taste for the professional life was whetted with a graduation year trip to the United Kingdom, an experience further fuelled when a teacher linked him with a band in need of a piano player. A crash course in the life of a travelling musician, at 17, “we were playing six nights a week,” he recalls. “I have to say, I didn’t take to travelling through small towns in the Prairies in wintertime very well.”

After a few years on the road, learning the trade and growing as a musician with his fellow bandmates, Roessingh travelled to Berklee jazz college in Boston, a hot-bed for some of the world’s best musicians – Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis and Charlie Mingus all played in clubs there, along with many others.

“If you wanted to go out every night, you could hear the best in the world. I look back now and these were historic people,” Roessingh reflects.

He later moved west to study music and math education at the University of Victoria. “I realized that (life on the road) wasn’t the life I was going to be living so if I was going to be a musician, I had better get serious,” Roessingh says.

Coming to the Island after growing up on the Prairies, the climate and setting sold him on the move. “I decided to stay because it was just so beautiful.”

While a nice place to live, Victoria in the ‘70s wasn’t always easy for a musician trying to make a living, but a few gigs and some

teaching helped pay the bills until a Battle of the Bands contest won Roessingh’s group, Zipper, a stint at a local studio – and introduced the musician to the world of producing and composing for TV and film.

While jazz had captured his ear in those early days, Roessingh had always been partial to folk and pop music as well, an eclectic interest that would serve

him well in the evolution of his career. “There were a lot of ‘60s pop hits that I just loved and I learned to play by ear,” he says. “There really isn’t a lot of music I don’t like.”

Working in TV, where he could be asked to write music designed for any variety of theme, era and audience, that eclectic interest was particularly useful. “I remember, when I was a teenager saying to my fellow musicians that I’d love to be able to perform any kind of gig, and it’s kind of worked out that way.”

His writing partner through many of those busy studio years was Ken Williams; the two had met during a stint in the local rock band, Wizard, and by happy accident would later become Highlands neighbours and fellow municipal councillors.

“We had so much work, Ken and I had to do shifts,” Roessingh remembers.



None of this was planned or expected, really; it’s just that interesting opportunities always came along.”



Performing in the Empress Tea Lobby. Photo: Ken Sakamoto

His remarkable range is evident in his many credits – from various themes for Chek TV to the film *In the Company of Men*, winner of the Filmmakers' Trophy at the 1997 Sundance Festival, and an official selection for the 1997 Cannes Film Festival. He has also co-composed for several internationally televised series, including *Good to Go* for the CHUM Network, *Police Academy – the series* (Fox Network in the US, and networks in 90 countries), *Undersea Explorer* (Outdoor Living Network) and *Safari – Ocean Adventures* (on Discovery Canada, NHK Japan and others).

While today Roessingh enjoys the simplicity of composing, “I wasn’t a composer until I was forced into it,” he says. “When I started it was difficult; now, I go to sleep and wake up with tunes in my head.”

That music was something he could make a career never entered his mind as a student. “In high school it wasn’t even considered a career choice,” he recalls. Even today, “people don’t get that you can make a decent living in music.”

The growth and evolution of technology has been instrumental in allowing musicians to work virtually anywhere. While production used to be concentrated in major centres, “with technology today it doesn’t matter where you are; you can do production anywhere.”

That phenomenal shift has had much more of an impact than simply the location of a studio. Before computers, tracks were recorded onto 2”-wide tape and “if you wanted to edit, you had to get out the razor blade and cut the tape,” Roessingh recalls.

For a musician, that studio work is very different from performing. “You spend your days in a sound-proof bunker, basically. There’s no audience, so the only feedback you get is the royalty cheques,” Roessingh says with a laugh.

As a performer, though, it’s tough to beat playing for an audience.

He remembers walking into the newly opened Herald Street Caffe back in the 1980s, sitting down at their piano and asking for a chance to play. “They said, ‘When can you start? You’re booked every night!’”

Since then, he has led bands for Howie Mandel, Rich Little (and his lesser-known brother Fred), Bob Newhart and Ted Knight; he’s played with the Victoria Symphony, Moody Blues, the Powder Blues Band, Jan Arden, The Shirelles and Leslie Gore, and opened for the Temptations (with vocalist April Gislason) and legendary jazz guitarist John Pizzarelli, and been featured with the Palm Court Orchestra.

In the late 1980s, Roessingh also started laying down his own tracks, recording his first CD in 1988. Around the same time, he and his wife, Brenda, an artist, also moved to their home, nestled into the Highlands forest. A setting perfect for the creative process, the two enjoy side-by-side studios above the garage. “I live here because I love it here. This place in the Highlands was just a fluke opportunity and we very quickly fell in love with it,” Roessingh says.

Moving to the rural property in 1989 (“this is the longest I’ve lived anywhere,” he says), Roessingh became involved with the community association, actively following the region’s path to incorporation, spurred on by the Highlands’ first mayor, Bob McMinn. A member of the new municipality’s inaugural council, Roessingh served first as a councillor, then sat two terms as mayor from 1999 to 2005. He returned as a councillor in 2008 and also chairs the Greater Victoria Public Library Board. “I just care about the community and have a wish to protect it. We’re concerned about its future.”

With close to two decades in public life, “I love it. I love getting to know the community and taking part in the discussion. It’s important work and I enjoy going and being part of policy making.”

While Roessingh hadn’t planned for public service, his music career had prepared him well. “You communicate through music,” he explains. Working with individuals and groups, for clients and in front of audiences, the skills are complementary.

Other interests include serving on the board of Metchosin International Summer School for the Arts, and as a founding director of the Island Bio-Diesel Co-operative which promotes the use of converted waste fats from restaurants to operate vehicles; both Roessingh’s and his wife’s older model Mercedes run on the clean-burning fuel.

Today you can see Karel Roessingh performing in the Fairmont Empress Hotel’s Tea Lobby and at concerts and festivals around Canada. He’s also still enjoying studio work – most recently producing Valdy’s latest album before the two hit the summer festival circuit. “It was tremendous fun. Victoria is uniquely rich in music and in opportunities to play.”

So, what’s on the horizon?

“I never think ahead that far,” he reflects. “None of this was planned or expected, really; it’s just that interesting opportunities always came along – you just have to be ready for them.” ^{WS}



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