

# BILL and SUE-ON HILLMAN: A 50-YEAR MUSICAL ODYSSEY

*50 Years on the Road with Bill and Sue-On Hillman*

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*Presents*

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## Leaving Home

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The summer of '61 closed the first chapter of this musical odyssey. With a suitcase of clothes, box of books . . . and guitar, I moved into Brandon College Men's Residence to start work on a Bachelor of Science degree. I remember that my first record album purchases I made down at Brandon Musical and P.A. Kennedy didn't impress many of the guys in the dorm: Don Reno & Red Smiley bluegrass, Bob Dylan, Hank Snow with Anita Carter, The Staple Singers, Elvis Presley Gospel Album, Frank Sinatra and Dinah Washington. For me though, it was a sort of musical rebirth. My first performance in the city was during Brandon College Freshie Parade down Rosser Avenue in September 1961. While crammed onto a float, dressed in old farm clothes and beanies, we tried to sing while I strummed my guitar. Within a year, however, I was playing guitar on a daily live TV show and was the proud owner of a new Gretsch guitar.

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*There are only two kinds of music: "Blues...and Zippity-do-dah" ~ Emmylou Harris*

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Over the past 50 years we've enjoyed playing a wide variety of styles and genres: rock 'n' roll, country, big band, folk, western, old time, rock, bluegrass, pop, gospel, country rock, originals, cajun . . . and every combination of the above. . . but we keep returning to the music that forms the bedrock of so many of the music styles we enjoy . . . *the Blues*.

My first influences, when I started to learn guitar and songs back in the '50s, were largely blues-based, although I didn't realize it at the time. I grew up on a farm on the Canadian prairies -- not exactly the heart of black blues culture. I didn't have access to the records or airplay of the blues greats, but the music on the records I played day and night owed a great deal to . . . *the Blues*.

My big influence was Elvis and his fellow Sun Records artists out of Memphis. A few of the obvious blues titles in Elvis's repertoire include: *That's All Right Mama*, *Good Rockin' Tonight*, *Milkcow Blues Boogie*, *Baby Let's Play House*, *Mystery Train*, *I Got a Woman*, *Heartbreak Hotel*, *Money Honey*, *My Baby Left Me*, *Tutti Frutti*. *Shake Rattle and Roll*, *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, *Hound Dog*, *Long Tall Sally*, *Mean Woman Blues*, *One Night of Sin*, *Blue Christmas*, *Trouble*, *Reconsider Baby*, *What'd I Say*, *Hi-Heeled Sneakers* . . . these and many more of their songs were . . . *the Blues*.

Elvis's success launched the birth of a music form that would change the world: rock & roll. This "new" music form was really just a fusion of blues, country and gospel. Indeed the main criticisms of this new R&R music were actually of the elements that make a good blues song or performance: simple chord structure and words, repetitive lyrics and hooks, heavy backbeat, "muh babee dun me wrong" themes, racy lyrics full of double entendres, slurred southern accents, slang and bad grammar, over-reliance on distorted guitars and pounding pianos, singer-penned lyrics, gospel/blues screams, suggestive body movements, gospel choruses. . . all characteristics that every blues aficionado looks for in . . . *the Blues*.

My music listening marathons, guitar practice sessions and record-buying frenzy now branched out to encompass a wildly eclectic mix of performers -- but the fuel that propelled most of the music created by these artists was . . . *the Blues*:

Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Bill Haley and the Comets, all the Rock-a-Billy guys, a whole parade of one-hit-wonders, Lonnie Donegan and his Skiffle Group, Louis Armstrong, Paul Whiteman, Jimmie Rodgers, Dinah Washington, Ray Charles, Mahalia Jackson, the Staples Family, Lonnie Mack, Bob Dylan and many of the artists from the folk craze. When the British Invasion with The Stones, Beatles, Animals, et al arrived it started to dawn on general audiences . . . and myself . . . that the driving force behind so much of the popular music we had been listening to since the mid-'50s was . . . *the Blues*.

Largely unrecognized old blues singers, many of whom had spent a lifetime living a hand-to-mouth existence on the road or playing dingy juke joints, came out of relative obscurity or retirement to receive long overdue recognition, and, in some cases, to salvage some of the royalty payments that had been denied them for so many years. The world had finally recognized an important roots music. . . *the Blues*.

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### Guitar for Hire

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The Brandon College courses kept getting in the way during my first years at Brandon College. Guitar 101 "courses" became ever more demanding of my time and kept taking precedence over my formal Bachelor of Science courses: physics, chemistry, English, Mahalia and geography.

For a farm kid the chance to meet with so many musicians on campus was far more interesting and rewarding than cracking textbooks. My marks suffered, but I was soon picking with country and folk groups, the College band, the Flamingo Combo, Blue Angels, the Shadows/Dovermen rock band . . . and I was even moonlighting with other groups around town. Lenny Fairchuck, a fiddler, originally from Elphinstone, often picked me up on Saturday nights to back him at a downtown Legion. I was hungry for it all.

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## Swingin' Flamingos, Bulls, and Beatles

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When I was contacted by trumpeter Murray Bateman who was forming a sit-down, chart-reading band, I looked forward to the challenge of learning more chords. The band was *The Flamingo Combo* and Murray wrote out instrumental arrangements for recent and traditional pop hits. Joining us were Cyril Stott on sax, Audrey Lintott on piano, and Barry Norris on drums. Barry soon left the drums behind to enter the world of high finance. I later would coax Cyril to join our rock band -- the Dovernmen -- for a stint. Many years later, Cyril's daughter Amanda would do well on the music scene.

In the following year when Barry Forman and I were looking for a singer for our CKX television noon show I was surprised to learn that Audrey was also a fine singer and she became a regular for one season of shows. We played the *Combo* gigs while sitting at music stands which held our charts. Most of our gigs were at Park CC and other community centres around town. Many of our songs featured Murray's trumpet playing jazz numbers and pop hits by the Tijuana Brass (*The Lonely Bull*) and Bert Kaempfert (*Wonderland By Night*, *Swingin' Safari*, etc.).

Little did we know that around this time over in Hamburg, Bert Kaempfert was recording singer Tony Sheridan backed by a struggling young English band putting their sound on wax for the first time -- The Beatles.

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### Down By The Riverside

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Each summer weekend, back in the early '60s, the Riverside Dance Hall in the valley south of Brandon drew large crowds of teenagers. Our trio, The Blue Angels, was led by drummer Doug Brolund. Rhythm player, Ken Blair, sang a couple songs, but we were mainly a guitar instrumental band.

I was on a constant search for new material from the popular groups of the day: Ventures, Fireballs, Shadows, String-a-longs, Chet Atkins, Al Bruno and a host of country pickers. This was before the invasion of The Beatles on the pop scene and most groups played instrumentals for their gigs. PA systems were small and primitive -- in fact for much of time we plugged a primitive mic into my Harmony guitar amp.

Today, 50 years later, the building looks much smaller and now serves as a storehouse for farm equipment. The only

audience is made up of stray cows and the wildlife that parades across the valley.

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### **The Fab Moptops**

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My heavy load of playing 4-hours of guitar instrumentals in our Blue Angels trio was eased considerably with the addition of an English musician who had taken a physiotherapist position at Brandon's Assiniboine Hospital.

Alan Jones, blinded at a very young age during one of the WWII bombing raids, was a talented keyboardist who doubled on sax. Alan expanded our repertoire considerably. I was excited to hear all the latest news and records from England that were sent over by his brother Keith from Northern England.

Soon we were hearing about an unusual group that was taking the UK by storm -- four weird long-haired guys with the silly name: The Beatles. It wasn't long before Al, who already had been sharing Shadows and Cliff Richard records with me, was adding Beatles records to the mix. I was surprised to recognize many of their songs as being a recent addition to the repertoire of Chad Allan and the Reflections who often drove over from Winnipeg to play the Brandon Roller Rink. I never guessed that ten years later my future wife and I . . . and Alan. . . would be playing in Beatles country ourselves.

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### **The New Country Gentlemen**

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In the early '60s Barry Forman and I were Brandon University classmates. Barry and the original Country Gentlemen band had a falling out. Barry still had some TV, dance, Co-Op Neighbour Night and Exhibition bookings to fulfill, so we teamed up and used a number of different sidemen for awhile.

One of our first line-ups featured singer Audrey Lintott, who worked with my other band, The Flamingo Combo, and well-known Brandon keyboardist, Larry Clark, who played drums. A few years later Larry would be enlisted to play piano, organ and vibes on our 2nd, 3rd and 4th [albums](#).

My TV debut was on the live CKX-TV noon show where I was slated to play rhythm guitar. One of the other musicians had some problems and without warning I was suddenly called on to take over for a solo number. My folks back home who happened to be watching were thrown into a shock, since I hadn't told them I'd be on air.

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### **CKX-TV: Live On Air**

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Our CKX-TV noon and weekly evening shows were live and some of them were nerve-wracking events. The money from these gigs was not great, but it did help to pay my college tuition and living expenses. I was given permission from Professor John Tyman to skip his noon geography classes in time to run over to the television studio for a quick rehearsal.

Ann Smith, who worked evenings with her husband Fred at the roller rink, also worked at CKX-TV as a graphics artist. Her office was a tiny room at the back of the studio complex. She took a lunch break during noon hours so we would squeeze in among her art layouts with our instruments for our rushed rehearsals before showtime. These "rehearsals" were done quietly and unplugged because the live news/weather/sports were being broadcast across the studio.

One not-so-memorable flub happened when my amp quit in the middle of a song. I turned around and gave it a kick. . . and forgetting that my mic was on, gave an "Oh shit!" There was no five-second delay to allow for bleep-outs in those days, so the curse went out over the airwaves.

Our announcers for these early shows included numerous guys who went on to very successful careers with the CBC and other large market stations -- including Keith Cummings, Ernie Nairn and Lorne Ball.

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### **MTS to MTS . . . and 3Ms**

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The college marks suffered, but I needed the gig money mainly to support my addictions - no not booze, drugs and cigs - I stayed away from those temptations. Three of my lifelong addictions have been the three M's: music, movies and mags/books.

Main tuition costs were covered by other more menial jobs I worked at through the summer -- supplemented with what my parents could spare. Through high school and first year college I painted houses, barns and elevators for minimum wage (\$1/hr). Then came a higher paying job working for the MTS (Manitoba Telephone System) digging holes by hand with a long spoon and bar for telephone poles -- in the middle of sloughs, through bush and into the rocky land of the Little Saskatchewan River Valley.

Then, thanks to my earlier painting experience, I hit the money big time at CJATC Rivers airforce base -- \$2.25/hr -- painting PMQs, hangars, and huge oil tanks. I was very familiar with this base since during my eight years as an Air Cadet in Strathclair's 317 Squadron, we had been bussed to the base many times to use the facilities and for flights in Bell choppers, Dakotas and Flying Boxcars. This fit in well with my music. I stayed in the barracks for much of the week jamming with some of the guys on base. But when I had gigs in Brandon I could take the military shuttle bus into the city.

The next paying job was teaching high school on permit for \$190 per month. . . where I became associated with an MTS of a different sort: the Manitoba Teachers Society. Thanks to the ongoing music gigs on weekends and during summer holidays there was still a bit of money left over for my 3M obsessions.

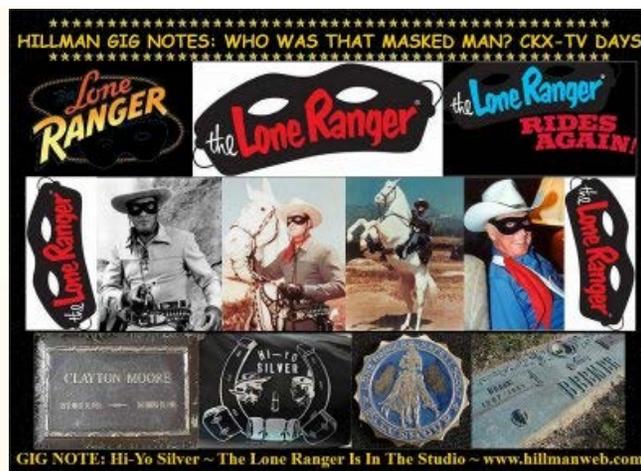
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### **WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN?**

*Hi-Yo Silver ~ The Lone Ranger Is In The Studio*

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[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/roots/loneall.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/roots/loneall.jpg)



Around the time we were doing CKX-TV noon shows in the early '60s we never really knew who might show up in the studio for interviews. One day we had just finished our live show and in walked The Lone Ranger! He was sponsored by a local car company and was making personal appearances. Holding to the tradition that The Lone Ranger is never seen without his mask or disguise he made a grand entrance, sans horse Silver, but in full costume, with mask, hat and guns.

At that time two actors were making a career of commercials and personal appearances as The Lone Ranger. The most famous was Clayton Moore, who played western hero on the '50s TV series and two movies. The other was Brace Beemer who had starred in the earlier radio series. I don't know if it was Moore or Beemer, but he certainly had the voice and charisma as he sat close to a mic behind a desk for an on-air interview. So here is where my memory is a bit fuzzy - Moore or Beemer - after all he was a masked man and he stayed in character.

I had been a longtime fan of the LR radio and TV shows, comics, books, movies, etc. so I was a bit shell-shocked at the time. Who was that masked man?

A funny Lone Ranger story on Letterman: [www.hillmanweb.com/book/gigs/LoneRangerStory.flv](http://www.hillmanweb.com/book/gigs/LoneRangerStory.flv)

**RADIO SHOW: Finger of Death:** [www.erbzine.com/otr/lr\\_451008.mp3](http://www.erbzine.com/otr/lr_451008.mp3)

### **First Contact - Russ and the Holey Martin**

While attending Brandon College in the early '60s, much of my time, when not gigging with various groups, was spent playing guitar in my rented basement room across the street from the men's residence. My landlord, who had noticed my obsession with music and guitars, mentioned that he had known singer Russ Gurr since Russ was a kid back in the Arrow River/Crandall district. He thought it was time for us to meet, so he invited Russ over to his house one afternoon. This was the start of a long friendship and musical relationship with this early Brandon television celebrity.

Soon after this, Barry Forman and I were hired to play the Rothman's Booth at the first or second Morris Stampede. We enlisted singer Russ Gurr to appear as our featured singer at these shows. We also invited CKX announcer Lorne Ball to come along. We had worked with him many times at the studio for our live shows. Lorne looked really dapper in a tailored western-style suit. He had emceed a show a while back headlined by Opry singer Skeeter Davis and western movie star and singer Rex Allen. Both singers were riding high with recent hit records: Skeeter with "End of the World" and Rex with "Don't Go Near the Indians." Lorne did all right with that gig. He dated Skeeter and Rex

had lent him one of his suits for the show. For some reason Rex hadn't asked for it back and Lorne got some pretty good use out of it while waiting to hear again from the suit's owner.

Lorne emceed our show, warming the crowd up with some pretty funny routines. Barry and I played some fiddle and guitar instrumentals and then brought Russ on to do some songs. Russ, of course, had his trusty Martin flat top guitar and sang some good Hank Snow songs. Russ was a wild rhythm guitar player and had almost worn a hole through the Martin's top, just below the pick guard. We were with him a few years later when he finally managed to break through, making a signature hole in the instrument -- a feat that Willie Nelson also achieved around the same time on his guitar, "Trigger."

The Morris gig was noteworthy in that we met the guys in the Eternals band who were also playing on the grounds. The Paley and Hildebrand brothers in that band would play an important role in our recording careers a few years later.

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### **Riding the Hurleyville Taxi at the Austin Threshermens Reunion**

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Our country band played the Austin Threshermen's Reunion numerous times. The '65 show was memorable as we were driven to our stage in the Hurleyville Taxi -- a fringed surrey pulled by two gigantic boars in harness. Much of our show was spent warding off smoke and cinders from the passing parade of vintage steam engines which travelled the racetrack between our stage and the grandstand.

Our show on the Thresherman's stage, which we performed between parades of old steamers, stooking contests, and rodeo activity, was filmed by the National Film Board of Canada. We signed release contracts and forgot about it until we received word a year and a half later that a segment of the film was to be shown non-stop at Expo 67.

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### **From Austin '65 to Expo '67**

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Russ Gurr was very involved with the fledgling Austin Thresherman's Reunion, and needed a back-up band and feature performers for shows in front of the event's new grandstand. Russ remembered how well he, Barry, and I had worked together a few years back and gave us a call.

One of the highlights of our Austin appearances was in 1965 when a National Film Board of Canada film crew filmed our stage performances. We were delighted to learn some time later that much of the footage was incorporated into the film presentation featured in the Labyrinth pavilion at Montreal's Expo '67. One of Russ's songs -- *The Thresherman's Ball* -- was also used in the official Labyrinth record album. The show's producers even took Russ's melody and gave it a great arrangement for a full orchestra to use as one of their main themes throughout the production.

The crowds for that Expo Labyrinth pavilion were massive. Sue-On and I stood in the queue for a long time -- certainly worth the wait -- to see our footage on the huge, multi-image, wrap-around screen. By 1967 there had been major changes to the band. Since Sue-On was now a member of the band, the old name -- Country Gentlemen -- had to go. Our re-named band, The Western Union, now also included Sue-On and myself, fiddler Barry Forman, singer Jake Kroeger, drummer John Skinner, and later Kerry Morris.

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### Kennedy Assassination: Where Was I?

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Our CKX-TV Friday Noon Show on November 22, 1963 was interrupted by an important news bulletin. US President John F. Kennedy was reported shot while appearing in a motorcade in Dallas Texas. He had been rushed to hospital. We were all shocked, but resumed our show.

At 1 pm we rushed to the teletype room to read the news reports as they came in over the wire. The news was not good -- half an hour later the White House Press Secretary announced that the President was dead. I spent the rest of the day in the College dorm TV room watching the emotional television reports.




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### 50 Years Later: JFK's Air Force One and Dealey Plaza

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Fifty years later, Sue-On and I had cause to recall the events of that fateful day of November 22, 1963. Returning from a gig in the southern States we stopped at the Wright-Patterson Air Force base in Dayton to photograph the thousands of aircraft and artifacts on display at the USAF Museum. The gigantic "hangars" at this birthplace of aviation contain a multitude of galleries representing all phases of aviation and space flight. One of the most interesting attractions is the Presidential Gallery which showcases the various aircraft used by US presidents through the years. The most popular

aircraft is the Air Force One which flew JFK on his final flights to and from Dallas in November of 1963.

Not wanting to transport Kennedy's coffin down in the cargo area the Secret Service agents sawed at cabin entrance so that the casket could be angled through the door to the cabin area. We took photos of the repaired cut as we entered and walked through the aircraft. Among the other photos we took is the area in which Johnson was sworn in as the new president, as well as the cockpit, conference areas, galley, communication centre, and the seat where widowed Jackie had sat across from her late husband's casket during the flight back to Washington, DC. An incredible and very important page from 20th Century history.

A year after the Air Force One visit we spent an afternoon in Dallas touring the Sixth Floor Museum area at Dealey Plaza. It was an eerie feeling staring through the window from which Oswald fired those infamous shots. After viewing the historic exhibition which chronicles Kennedy's life, times, assassination and legacy, we descended to the street to stand on an "X" that marks the spot where the first bullet hit the president. We also explored the controversial "grassy knoll."

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### **Before MTV There Was . . .**

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In the summer of 1963 -- years before MTV -- Barry Forman and I made a video. A CKX film crew joined us at the Rivers dam on a hot summer day. The camera recorded us as Barry, with an old fiddle, and I, with a cheap old guitar, walked into the lake behind the dam.

We kept playing as the water got deeper and deeper, until it was over our heads and all that was visible to the camera were our floating instruments and two hats. The video/film was played many times on CKX-TV, but this was before the VCR era and we've never been able to find the film -- a funny moment lost forever.

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### **The Two-Man New Year's Eve Band**

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Barry Forman and I played an unusual New Year's Eve Dance in the early '60s in Plumas. . . or maybe it was Neepawa -- memories get foggy. Our regular sidemen weren't available so Barry and I played the entire four-hour dance as a duo.

This was before I started to sing on stage and before Barry learned bass. Fiddle tunes and guitar instrumentals all night. . . Barry backed the guitar stuff on accordion and also played a few accordion solos. The crowd was obviously there to party and were eager to celebrate the arrival of the new year, so the two-man band seemed to carry it off.

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### **A Young Rich Little: Live On Our Show**

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Over the years we performed numerous times at the Provincial Exhibition in Brandon. In the Summer of 1964 of we did a series of live shows for CKX television and radio from one of the large historic buildings on the fair grounds. A series of guests appeared with us -- singers, fiddlers, dancers, and colourful people off the midway.

One memorable guest was a young comedian/impressionist from Ottawa who was just starting his career as a grandstand performer -- Rich Little. He was on our show to promote the evening grandstand show. He soon went on to better things.

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### **Dovermen "Waltz Kings"**

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In the mid-'60s our Dovermen rock band was hired to play a school dance at the Oak River High School. We played the rock 'n' roll hits of the day. . . the kids were jumping. . . but the school principal was not happy. "Play some Glenn Miller, play some waltzes, play some old time music. . ." "But we're a R&R band for teenagers." He eventually phoned our Winnipeg agent without getting much satisfaction. We finished the gig and took the money and ran.

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### **Shock Attack at CFB Shilo Teen Club**

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Our rock band was booked into the CFB Shilo Teen Club in the fall of '65, but our driver didn't have proper insurance documents for his vehicle. We were stopped at the main gate and the soldier on duty wouldn't allow our vehicle to enter the base. We had no choice but to ferry the equipment past the gate with the aid of local teens who commandeered a variety of vehicles to come to our rescue from inside the base.

This was the first time I had used a borrowed new Beatles-style Vox guitar amp and my new Maestro Fuzz-tone effects pedal. A shocking new sound for the teen dancers -- and a shocking amp situation for me as the unit dangerously overheated. Even more shocking were the military radio broadcasts and police bulletins that were picked up somehow and amplified by the amp -- much to the bewilderment of the dancers.

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### **Frigid Car Shows**

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We were hired regularly by dealers for car shows that featured the new models. They were always held in the fall during October and November. And most of them were held outdoors on car lots. I have vivid memories of trying to find shelter from biting winds and trying to play guitar with frozen fingers. . . or gloves. Of course now, all these shows are set up in luxurious indoor showrooms.

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### **Brandon Roller Rink**

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Our rock band worked as the house band at the Brandon Roller Rink which held regular teen dances. A real perk was getting to meet and listen to the series of popular bands that were booked from the US: Johnny and Dorsey Burnette (Elvis' buddies), Conway Twitty (when he was a rocker, before becoming a major C/W act), black blues acts, Jimmy Gilmore and the Fireballs (Sugar Shack) . . . and the Ventures (Walk, Don't Run).

I had the pleasure of seeing and chatting with the Ventures 50 years later at a Winnipeg Casino. Nokie Edwards and Don Wilson are still going strong and touring worldwide.

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### **The Fireballs**

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It was common practice for visiting celebrities to make appearances on CKX-TV. Since we spent much time at the studio I met many of these guests and some of these meetings left a lasting impression. It had been quite a thrill to see the Lone Ranger walk through the door -- in full costume, mask and all, impressing everyone with his booming voice.

But even more exciting was the appearance of the Fireballs group. They came to the studio to plug their evening show and dance at the Roller Rink. The whole band was there, including lead guitarist George Tomsco and singer Jimmy Gilmer. At that time we knew them as a guitar instrumental group, but they would soon have major top ten vocal hits:

### ***Sugar Shack and Bottle of Wine*, sung by Gilmer.**

Their recordings had been done at the Norman Petty Studios in Clovis New Mexico -- the same studio where Buddy Holly and many others had recorded hits. (Sue-On and I finally had a chance to visit the studio in 2012.) I had learned many of their guitar instrumentals such as *Torquay* and *Bulldog* so it was an exciting day -- first chatting with them in the studio and then seeing their show that night.

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### **Winnipeg Beach and the Ghosts of Bands Past**

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Our early-'60s gig in the old pavilion at Winnipeg Beach on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg was like a step back into yesteryear. For six decades Winnipeg Beach had been one of the most popular summer retreats for Winnipeggers. A special train ran from the city to this beach resort and the beach was teeming with city folks seeking to escape their pre-air conditioned homes.

The once majestic wooden roller coaster was still there, but in a state of decay. By the time we played the pavilion there wasn't much of the old allure left, although the huge wooden building seemed to shout out strains of music from the hundreds of popular bands that had played there over the past decades. I'm glad we had a chance to play there, even if it was at the tail end of the glory years.

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### **Go-Go West Young Men**

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Fred Smith, owner of the Brandon Roller Rink, became our manager and got us some unusual bookings. He went with us on a tour of Saskatchewan. In the hours before the gig he drove around the towns blaring out promo announcements for the evening shindigs through a giant speaker horn mounted on the roof of his station wagon.

Meanwhile, we were doing phone and in-person studio interviews with the jocks on the local radio stations. By the time we bounced on stage in our Beatle suits many of the teens were convinced that some sort of super group had blown into town. It was around this time that our Brandon manager tried to sell us on the "crazy" idea of putting dancing girls wearing short skirts on stage with us. The Go-Go Girl phenomenon was about to be born.

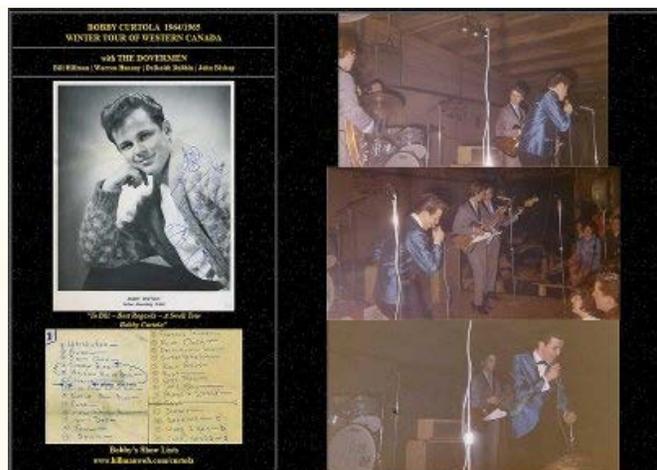
Later we toured as backing band for Bobby Curtola in '64/'65 across the prairies. One of the highlights was returning to the Roller Rink partway through the tour to play the New Year's Dance there. . . a nice "homecoming."

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### **Curtola Mania I**

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[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/60/curtolaall.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/60/curtolaall.jpg)



A highlight of our rock days in the mid-'60s was our tour as back-up band for Canadian teen idol, Bobby Curtola. We started this a few weeks after our Dovermen performance at Winnipeg Auditorium where we opened for the CKY Fall Festival of Stars with headliners The Everly Brothers and Roger Miller. We had seen the crowd go wild for the Everlys and now on the Curtola tour we experienced more shades of Elvis/Beatles mania as teens packed every venue we played.

The girls pushed in a frenzy against the stage trying to touch their idol and later to get autographs. This winter tour took us into Saskatchewan -- the Regina Armoury packed in the largest crowd there -- and east to Portage La Prairie. The most exciting date was in our home base at the Brandon Roller Rink -- on New Year's Eve. Bobby was about our age and was a super guy to work with.

Bobby's manager, Marie Martel, ran the shows with an iron hand so things never really got out of control. Bobby had sung some of the first Coca-Cola singing commercials (he is in their Hall of Fame), so Coke sponsored the shows and made sure there were always huge cases of Coke backstage. This was back in the days when ODing on coke had a slightly different meaning than it does today.

I saved the set lists from these tours, written in Bobby's hand, and they are featured on our Curtola Webpages. I had a reunion with Bobby 40 years later and those shows are also described on our [Curtola Webpages](#) and later in this saga.

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### Stolen Gretsch Guitar: So Long Nashville

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In 1965 I did a freelance gig with a Brandon band that played a dance in McCreary. We were invited to a party after the dance and left our instruments in a station wagon parked on the street for an hour. On our way back to Brandon we stopped at Neepawa to drop off the bass player.

It was then we discovered that our guitars and stage clothes had all been stolen. I had lost my treasured Gretsch Nashville guitar, plus my bell-bottom trousers and suede vest. It was a sad trip back to Brandon College.

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### Oak River Dance Gardens

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For many years people came from all over the WestMan area to summer dances held at the Oak River arena. We

played there shortly after my Gretsch guitar had been stolen. Since I did all the lead work, bandmate Jake Kroeger offered his Fender Stratocaster, but I couldn't get used to the feel of it so ended up using my old faithful Sears Silvertone all night.

It was actually a thrill being on the stage where I had seen Marty Robbins perform a while back. His lead guitarist was sick so Marty played lead all night. He even sat informally on the front of the stage for a few numbers. Around that time a number of name bands came in, including The Trashmen.

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### **Gretsch Recovered**

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While attending a THEM (of Van Morrison and "Gloria" fame) concert at Clear Lake's Danceland I heard via the grapevine that Randy Bachman had recognized my Gretsch guitar in a Main Street, Winnipeg pawn shop. Earlier Randy had asked me to order the same model guitar through my dad's wholesale catalogue. He eventually found a source closer to Winnipeg, but we had crossed paths quite a few times up till now since Chad Allan and the Reflections had often come to play at Brandon Roller Rink. I also had hung around with them in Winnipeg while attending U of M Summer School.

We contacted the RCMP who confiscated the instrument and tracked down the guy who had dealt with the pawn shop. Searching his home in Amaranth they found the remains of my bell bottoms in his stove, but salvaged my suede vest intact. Six months later Sue-On and I were called over to the McCreary RCMP detachment to ID and to pick up my rescued Gretsch Nashville. A great day.

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### **Riding the Gold Coach**

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I attended summer school at the University of Manitoba in the summer of '64. One of my courses was Atomic Physics and coincidentally Guess Who founder, Chad Allan was also taking the course. He mentioned that he, Randy Bachman and Jim Kale were playing downtown every night in the Gold Coach Lounge at the Town and Country nightclub. Garry Peterson wasn't allowed to play with them in the lounge because he was underage, but for some reason he was given permission to play in the house band upstairs in the main dinner theatre.

From then on, too many of my nights were spent in the T&C lounge -- time that obviously would have been better spent studying physics and calculus. The music was great and I remember guitar genius Lenny Breau sitting in one night. The audience in this small intimate room was almost as entertaining as the band: brawling Winnipeg Blue Bomber football players, ladies of the night with their sugar daddies, media personalities and radio DJs, musicians, groupies, young and old, rich and poor.

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### **Tiny Rickenbackers**

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[www.billmanweb.com/cards/gigs/guessall.jpg](http://www.billmanweb.com/cards/gigs/guessall.jpg)



During the Reflections (Guess Who) band breaks at the Town and Country lounge I would often make reconnaissance treks over to the nearby Marlborough Hotel lounge to check out the size of the crowd that rival bands such as the Shondells and the Squires, had drawn. I'd listen to a few songs by these groups -- and then rush back with my report to the guys and to catch the rest of the shows. For a while, the Squires featured another Gretsch player -- a singer with an unusual voice. The guitar player with the unusual voice was actually Neil Young, who later moved to Toronto and on to California where I hear he did quite well.

During this summer I was invited over to Chad's parents' house a number of times -- a few times to study physics together, which didn't work out too well as we spent most of our time discussing music. One night after the lounge closed, Chad and Randy shared the excitement of showing off their new Rickenbacker guitars that had arrived from the States earlier that day. They were a tad disappointed, however, in the instruments . . . and perhaps a little embarrassed.

The guitars were supposed to be the same models as the Beatles used, but in the hands of hardy Canucks they appeared to be 3/4 size guitars . . . much smaller than what they had expected. Randy obviously felt more comfortable with his big 6120 Gretsch. In fact, he eventually went on to amass one of the world's largest collections of Gretsch guitars. A collection that now is now on display at the Gretsch headquarters in the US.



NEXT: [Sue-On Arrives On Stage](#)

## *Gig Notes II: Swinging '60s* SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Related features with expanded notes and photos  
that we've created on our main site:

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[College Years: 1961-1965](#)

[John Tyman's Cultures in Context](#)

[CJATC Rivers Air Force Base](#)  
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[United States Air Force Museum](#)  
[Bobby Curtola](#)  
[Chad Allan and Early Guess Who](#)

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1. [Roots Years](#)
2. [The Swinging Sixties](#)
3. [Sue-On Arrives On Stage](#)
4. [Prairie and USA Tours](#)
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**BILL and SUE-ON HILLMAN: A 50-YEAR MUSICAL ODYSSEY**



**BOOK COVER**

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