

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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China Lady

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Sue-On was born in southern China, but her family lost everything there during the Communist Revolution. At age two she was smuggled out of China with a neighbour family and lived with her grandmother in Hong Kong until the her mother and siblings were able to follow.

Eventually, at age 10, she and her mother were allowed to join her father in a small prairie town in Canada, where he and his father had owned restaurants for many years. She mastered English and adapted to the new culture while working in her family's restaurant.

After we married she joined me in performing on stage -- singing, and playing drums and keyboards. She then completed University (BA, B.Ed) and worked as a high school teacher, as well as spending time as a Field Supervisor for the University of Manitoba and Brandon University -- all this while maintaining a frenetic performing schedule and raising three kids.

When we took over the long-established Choy family restaurant -- SOO's in Brandon -- she added the role of restaurant manager and entrepreneur to her slate of accomplishments. We sold the restaurant after ten years and Sue-On resumed her role as an educator. This time she worked as an English for Academic Purposes instructor at Brandon University -- teaching international students from all over the world. Not the least of her achievements has been her ability to put up with my idiosyncrasies through all these years.

Storms Never Last

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/sue-on/sueon2all.jpg

My dad and mom owned a Marshall Wells Hardware store in nearby Newdale that I helped work at during breaks from Brandon College. Down Main Street a ways was the Paris Cafe -- a popular Chinese restaurant



run by Soo and Jade Choy. Their son, Kenny, and I attended Strathclair Collegiate together, while Kenny's younger sister, Sue-On and my sister Bonnie were classmates.

Sue-On and I had often exchanged small talk and she had faithfully watched the TV shows that I was appearing on. She let my sister know that she would love to get to know me better -- so one weekend, while her parents were working their usual long hours in the restaurant, she managed to leave work early and we drove to nearby Minnedosa together for a movie: (Sue-On Remembers it as *McHales Navy* -- I remember it as Jack Lemmon's *Under the Yum Tree* in Shoal Lake).

This was the start of a 2-year-long courtship. I even came back to Strathclair to work as a teacher just to be near her. Our relationship was very innocent and O so bitter sweet. We just wanted to be together to share our dreams about life, careers, travel, and music. . . and the future.

Eventually, we asked her parents for permission to date. Fireworks! Fifty years ago such mixed relationships were frowned upon in traditional Chinese culture. In the winter of '65-'66 Sue-On's parents decided that it would be best for her to continue her schooling in Winnipeg, where she could be more fully immersed in Chinese culture and hopefully meet more people of her own race. Here she was enrolled in Miles McIntyre High School, lived with relatives and paid for her keep by working long hours during nights and weekends at the New Canton Restaurant in Chinatown.

Undaunted by this imposed separation we kept in touch with daily letters, weekend visits, and nightly telephone calls and weekend trips into Winnipeg whenever I could find free time around the band's bookings. During this time she even managed to visit relatives in Brandon one weekend and we went to see the Guess Who and Neil Diamond at the old Brandon Arena. She also managed to get out to Winnipeg community club dances occasionally and we saw one of Chad Allan's last appearances with the Guess Who at the Pink Panther. Somehow we managed to get together -- even braving the infamous 1966 blizzard.

June 3 . . . At Last . . . The Journey Begins

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/60/weddingall.jpg



Sue-On's school year and work stint in Winnipeg was over at the end of June 1966. But she came back home to an impossible and very unhappy situation. On her 18th birthday -- June 3 -- she left home and moved in with my family. She came with me to our dance and fair gigs and we worked together through the day as painters.

We saved enough money over the summer from gigs and from painting houses and schools to pay for our wedding and honeymoon. With only a week remaining before the beginning of my fall teaching year we had a small wedding on August 29th, with my family, a few friends and bandmates attending. We loaded a tent and camping supplies into our old Rambler station wagon and headed west to Banff for our honeymoon.

We returned just in time for me to start classes. Sue-On had taken classical piano lessons and had sung in a choir -- a fantastic voice -- so it seemed natural that we start rehearsing an act. We wanted nothing to keep us apart. We bought a Hohner electric piano on which I showed her how to chord (the drums came later) and soon we had enough songs to break in our new act in local pubs: Hamiota, Minnedosa, Shoal Lake, Strathclair, and eventually, the big city: Brandon. We were on our way.

Television Remotes

Sue-On's initiation into the television production process was sort of a long distance experience. I had worked a variety of live radio and television shows with the Country Gentlemen since 1962. Technology at CKX Studios gradually advanced. They eventually were able to record TV shows on tape, utilizing a giant machine that covered most of a wall, so they were able to time-shift our shows. Our shows could then be seen at a later date in glorious black and white. In many ways this was a welcome change as performing daily live shows in those days could be quite stressful. We started to tape our daily noon show during evenings.

During the time of Sue-On's enforced stay in Winnipeg not even this important TV taping routine could separate the young lovers. Nothing got in the way of our nightly calls. I taped CKX-TV shows on week nights and the studio guys and my bandmates were very patient when she would call in the middle of taping. I'd rush up to the control deck to take the calls while everyone took a break on the floor. Although the band and television crew occasionally grumbled, they were remarkably

tolerant and understanding -- one of many examples of how friends made our 2 1/2 year courtship possible.

Taping our shows had a negative side, however. The station found that they could cut costs by showing the same shows over and over, until we became so frustrated and embarrassed by endless reruns that we just stopped doing the daily show and concentrated on longer weekly evening shows.

Birth of the Western Union



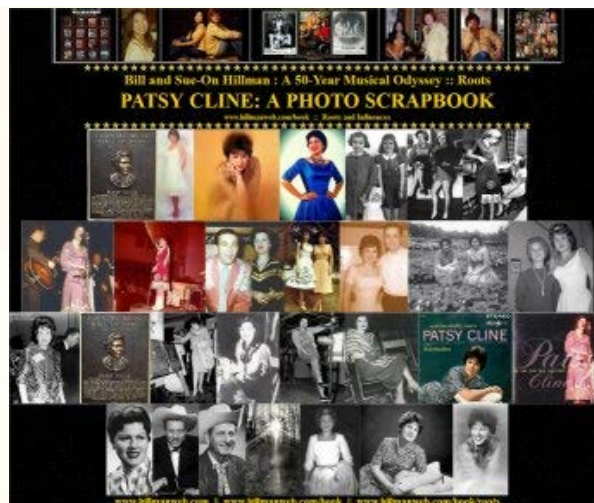
Remarkably, within two years, Sue-On was actually on that same CKX-TV set -- and had become the featured singer with our band, which by then I had renamed The Western Union -- a name actually inspired by a Zane Grey novel. In the early shows Sue-On made use of a Hohner keyboard which we had added to the band -- she made good use of her years of piano lessons -- combined with whatever knowledge of chording by ear that I could pass on to her.

Later when we trimmed our numbers down to a trio again to fit on some of the pub stages, we had more need of a backbeat to cut through the crowd noise. By this time we had visited the old Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville where they were finally allowing an abbreviated stand-up drum kit. So, with this as inspiration it was back to the wholesale catalogues from which we ordered a snare, stand, high hat and a variety of Zildjian cymbals. We then listened to what drummers appeared to be doing on record and... Shazam... we now had what was probably the world's only Chinese girl, singing stand-up drummer in a country band.

The early shows were fun to do and opened up quite a few other doors for us at the time. More and more, we were able to move from doing pub dates and on to the larger audiences found in arenas, halls, military bases, Winnipeg venues and summer tours. CKX started to put more time and money into the shows so that there was a marked improvement in the sets, production, announcing, guests, and promotion.

The Nashville / Hong Kong / Manitoba Connection

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/roots/patsyall.jpg



During my teen years I regularly tuned in to WSM radio from Nashville to listen to the Saturday Night Grand Ole Opry. Our big old Westinghouse radio usually brought this far-off station in fairly well, but occasionally I'd have to sit out in our '49 Meteor or '60 Pontiac for better reception from our car radio. Sometimes dial surfing would even bring in the Louisiana Hayride where Elvis had been so popular in his early days. It was a thrill many years later to visit and explore both Opry houses and the Shreveport Auditorium and to try to visualize the entertainers who had worked these stages in another time.

Even though I was obsessed with early rock 'n' roll, I was just as inspired by the singers and musicians from these live country shows. One standout singer on the Opry was Patsy Cline. One morning while sitting in an English class at Brandon College a classmate whispered that CKX had just reported news of a tragic plane crash that had taken Patsy's life along with fellow Opry stars Hawkshaw Hawkins and "Cowboy" Copas. Ironically, it was while sitting in a University of Manitoba summer school class a year later that I learned of a similar plane crash killed Jim Reeves.

After Sue-On and I married in 1966, I introduced her to Cline songs such as *Crazy*, *I Fall To Pieces*, and *Faded Love* (country music wasn't well known in Hong Kong where Sue-On had grown up). Sue-On even recorded her version of [Sweet Dreams](#) for our second album. One of the first songs I had learned for stage was Copas' *Alabam*, which had some neat country guitar runs. A few decades later we heard inside stories of the plane crash when we worked for almost a week with Hawkshaw Hawkins' widow, Jean Shepard, at the [Boggy Creek Music Festival](#).

[Tape That Funky Music Farmboy](#)

We bought the Philips portable cassette recorder when it came out and taped many of our early bar shows in the late '60s. Until then I had used a reel-to-reel recorder for taping our music, TV broadcasts and off-air songs. The cassette system was much smaller and easier to use and we also taped a number of live concerts.

We later took this portable recorder with us on our 1974 summer tour playing American grandstand shows at exhibitions, State and County Fairs, and rodeos across the North Western States. Critics of the new system claimed that the quality would never be good enough for recording music. We taped some of our live outdoor shows while on tour . . . listening to the results I have to agree with the critics. . . improvements in sound quality were soon made however, and cassettes experienced a real boom throughout the '70s and '80s.

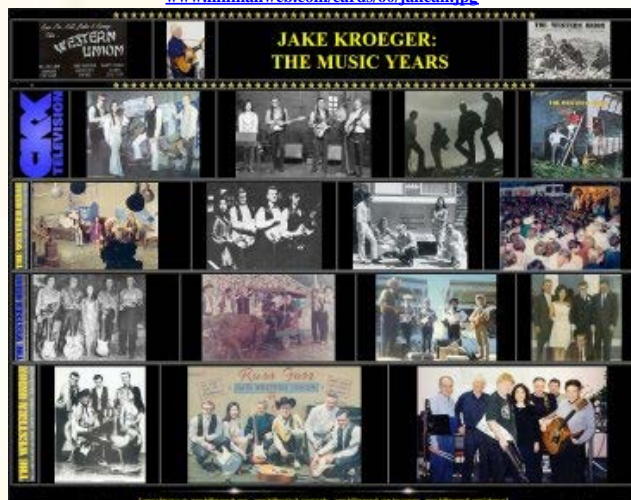
Ridin' the Grain Train

1966 marked our first summer tour for the Federal Grain Company, who over the next seven years would supply us with a motor home and send us across Western Canada where we would perform in parades and midway grounds on our large portable stage.

These first summer gigs were memorable because it was the first time that Sue-On and I appeared on stage together. We performed at summer fairs: Dauphin Fair and Rodeo, Austin Threshermen's Reunion, Brandon Provincial Exhibition and many dance dates. Although Sue-On didn't perform that summer, she was by my side on the parade floats and on the stage shows -- she was starting to catch the show biz bug. At the end of August we married and started to work on a duo singing act. She would soon have star billing.

Western Union and the Third Man Theme Begins

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/60/jakeall.jpg



For most of our music years we have worked as a trio. What started out as *The Country Gentlemen* morphed into *The Western Union* after Sue-On and I married. Barry Forman needed to devote more time to his fledgling Ford dealership and John Skinner had a farm and aging parents who demanded more of his time, so both took a break from music.

Jake Kroeger then became the first of a series of "Third Men" who worked with us through the years. We developed our new Western Union trio act by performing in beverage rooms in SW Manitoba. Jake, from his church background, had developed fine solo and harmony vocals and played an excellent rhythm guitar.

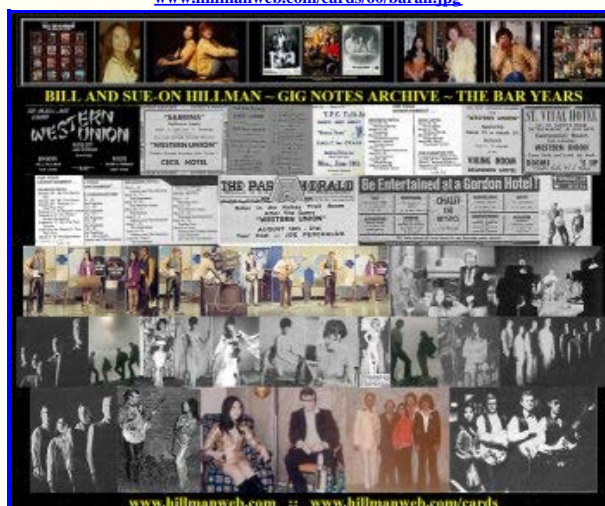
After a few months Barry re-joined the group. By this time Sue-On was also playing stand-up drums, but John Skinner added a full drum kit to some of our gigs, including some of our TV shows and our Federal Grain summer tours with Russ Gurr. This freed Sue-On to add keyboards to some of the songs. More importantly, it allowed her to join me at the front of the stage for our vocals and to showcase her exciting stage presence.

Jake was with us for many a mile in the late '60s and early '70s for our pub, dance, western tour and TV gigs -- a fine performer and a real plus to any band. He also sang three numbers on each of our first two albums. When he sold his farm to go full time into the plumbing and backhoe business, it became increasingly difficult to

take time off for music. Barry then became Third Man No. 2.

Songbird of the North

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/60/barall.jpg



For some time before we moved into Brandon to finish our university degrees we had been driving in to play the beverage room in the Cecil Hotel on 10th Street. Our move to the city coincided with all the city's hotel beverage rooms decision to hire bands... and strippers. We have the distinction of being the first Brandon band to supply live musical accompaniment for exotic dancers. At that time most of the girls were imported from fairly classy clubs in Europe, and tourist towns like Vegas -- some were quite well educated and all were entertaining.

A popular stripper at the Cecil Hotel Beverage Room was called Frenchie. In 1969 her act consisted of bathing in a transparent plexiglass tub that we had to maneuver onto our stage during each of our breaks. The splashing water was an occupational hazard. She had recently had silicone injections into her breasts, but things had gone wrong as one hung far below the other. She swore she was only going to perform long enough to earn money marry her devout Mormon boyfriend. The most popular song in her act was Neil Young's *Cinnamon Girl* during which she invited a few lucky guys up to scrub her back.

Management was impressed with Sue-On's vocals and one night billed her on a poster alongside the stripper ad, as "The Songbird of the North" Sue-On was so embarrassed by this that she made them take down all the posters.

China Cuties

Video jukeboxes were installed in a bar we played regularly around 1967. This was an interesting concept. Patrons would insert their quarters and choose a video to watch on a small screen. A giant leap from the old turn-of-the-century Mutoscopes with their cranks and flip cards, but a few years before the debut of MTV videos. The visiting producer of the videos was impressed with Sue-On . . . wanted to book her to appear with her Chinese Cuties troupe for a series of Exhibition shows and the creation of song and dance videos to be filmed in the States -- New York and Hollywood. When we showed reluctance she said I could come along too. . . perhaps do vids for kids as "Uncle Willie" or something. We didn't bite.

The video jukeboxes were an intriguing phenomenon at the time but had limited distribution and weren't a financial success. They were a short-lived experiment and

we never learned the fate of the China Cuties. . . not sure if we missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime chance to hit the big time in American Show Biz :) A few years later, though, Sue-On and I did a series of successful Exhibition tours in USA, Canada and England -- we did it OUR way!

Viking Strippers

The elaborate stage for the unique Brandon Inn beverage room/pub/bar was built like a Viking Ship. In 1967, our newly-formed Western Union band had the experience of introducing and providing "bump and grind" music for the first stripper to appear in Brandon - Desiree from Europe. This was around the time that Sue-On added a stand-up drum kit to our stage act and it was quite an experience learning heavy stripper beats. These early lessons stayed with her and she still has one of the heaviest drum backbeats I know of . . . a joy to work with.

Dancer Desiree's erotic moves and peelings down to pasties and G-string sent the crowd wild and this marked the beginning of a long line of exotic dancers that we backed between our regular music sets. All this was an entertaining way to work our way through college. Our routine was the same for most days. Classes through the day. Supper. Study and work on assignments for next day's classes. Rush to one of the pubs where our equipment stayed set up for a week. Play our music, but having to stay on stage during our breaks to back the strippers. Hit the sack around 2 am and up in time for 8:30 classes next morning.

Once a week this routine was altered when we had to find time to tape our weekly TV show at the CKX-Studios. In spite of this strange schedule we both managed to earn our degrees -- and I was even awarded a Silver Medal and the first B.Sc. that the newly accredited Brandon University offered in geography.

Sweatin' with Thumbelina and Trans

By Fall 1969 we were working our way through college by a rotating schedule in which we appeared in every Brandon bar for a week at a time. Almost every hotel now featured a stripper along with the band. It seemed that each girl tried to outdo the others with a more outrageous act.

One unusual performer was a 300 pound gal called Thumbelina. The night before one of our shows she had overflowed the water in her bathtub in the hotel room above the stage. The ceiling tiles above the stage were all soggy and darkened and the water had dripped onto the stage carpeting. She had trouble finding room on our small Beaubier Hotel stage which resulted in our amps and instruments being knocked over.

Thumbelina was BIG, but she also had a very nice blues voice. She did a couple numbers with us between her acts. Since she sweated profusely, she would constantly cover herself with baby powder which got onto our instruments and costumes. . . and "muddied" the still-wet stage carpeting. She also "did a number" on Jake Kroeger's (our rhythm guitar player) beautiful new white leather sport jacket when she sat on the chair where it had been draped. It was coated with sweat and talcum powder.

Another unusual dancer was a transvestite. . . strange seeing an exotic dancer with no waist or hips. . . and with a prominent adam's apple.

A "Drop Dead" Act

By 1970 the Beaubier bar started to bring in Winnipeg bands occasionally, including one featuring Randy Bachman's brother, Gary, on bass. But since we were the only act featuring a Chinese girl singer/drummer and a fiddle, we were very popular.

The audience would send constant rounds of drinks and tips. One night, after leaving a generous \$20 tip for Sue-On on the stage, an elderly customer went to the washroom and had a heart attack. We continued to play while the ambulance drivers wheeled the poor man past us on a stretcher.

Stripper Can't Get It Off

After Sue-On and I had both earned our B.Ed degrees at Brandon University we returned home to Strathclair to teach. Sue-On commuted daily to Birtle Collegiate for a few years where she taught high school courses. We attended one of their grad ceremonies, but there was time to kill between the supper and dance so we went to the local pub for a beer and coke (Sue-On doesn't drink).

An "exotic dancer" provided the entertainment. When we had worked with such dancers a few years back in Brandon most were experienced performers brought in from other countries. The trend now was to use local, more inexperienced talent. The girl stepped hesitatingly to the one-foot-high little stage in a corner of the small beverage room. She was dressed in what was obviously an ill-fitting, home-made costume and she carried a small portable record player, which she set up at the rear of the stage. She had trouble placing the right record on the turntable and even more trouble placing the needle on record -- she was very nervous.

The music finally started and she went into her "exotic dance." But she had a great deal of trouble removing her clothes . . . the zippers stuck, and she eventually had to sit down on the edge of stage to remove her boots which also seemed stuck. When she resumed her awkward self-conscious dance, the jiggling stage caused the record needle to jump. The audience made up of old-timer barroom regulars got into the music and dance, however, and started to stomp and whoop.

One old guy seated close to the stage, obviously a fiddle fan, played along with the music by stretching out his left arm while fingering and bowing an imaginary fiddle. The dancer thought he was making obscene gestures and told the management repeatedly to make him stop. The fiddling got even wilder. The dancer finally burst into tears and ran off the stage screaming all the way back to her room - clutching the few clothes that she had managed to remove during her abbreviated act.

We sneaked out and returned to the school's grad dance where the audience and proceedings were much more sedate. . . but not nearly as much fun.

Long Distance Drive to Memphis

1966 marked the beginning of a 10-year-run of summer tours across western Canada and the US. After these summer tours and before I had to return to my high school teaching duties in the fall, we would head south on road trips. Gas was cheap and we saved on hotel rooms by spending most nights sleeping in our station wagon or van.

Most of our stops were show business related: Las Vegas, Hollywood, and Tennessee. The first trip to Tennessee was one of the highlights. We stopped at the Country Store and Casey Jones Museum in Jackson on our way to Memphis. There wasn't much to see at Elvis' Graceland in those years, but we came away with good photos from outside the gates as well as a few rocks plucked off his stone fence. We drove by Sun Records which wasn't open to the public at that time and on to explore the blues joints along Beale Street before heading to Nashville.

Music Row, Music City

In Nashville we walked Music Row, visited the first Country Music Hall of Fame, and stopped at Tootsies and other bars and music stores on Broadway. Saturday night at the Grand Ole Opry in the Ryman Auditorium was a thrill. I remember seeing the regulars plus the Ragin' Cajun Doug Kershaw and a young girl new to the stage whom Loretta Lynn introduced as her little sister - Crystal Gayle.

The Southern nights were hot and the pews in this one-time church were hard, so hawkers roamed the aisles selling fans and cushions. After midnight we squeezed into the Ernest Tubb Record Shop on Broadway where they pushed away the record bins so that crowds could gather around the small stage to see the Midnight Jamboree, the second longest running live radio show.

Back to Tennessee

During our Nashville visits we pushed and plugged songs and records and came close to success with numerous "almost-made-it deals" -- a very common situation in the world of show business. The publishers and record companies along music row were mostly set up in what had originally been residential houses.

Our act was a bit of a curiosity and there were numerous nibbles. Some of the record execs and artists excitedly played acetates of their latest recording projects and some offered us songs to record. We even visited Chet Atkins in his RCA office. He was fascinated, but didn't think Nashville and the American South were ready for a Chinese drummer/girl singer in a mixed marriage yet.

Later, after I had returned home to resume teaching, our school secretary received a flurry of calls from a record company with offices adjacent to the RCA building. They were interested in putting our material on tapes to be sold at truck stops across America. The deal looked promising -- they represented other artists such as Rosemary Clooney -- but somehow we just never finalized a deal. This was the first of many opportunities that we just couldn't follow up on as long as I was dedicated to a "day job" up in Canada. Hard decisions.

Opryland and Southern Belles

On a later trip to Nashville we visited the luxurious new Grand Ole Opry complex next to the Opryland theme park . . . just down the road from Choys Restaurant where so many of the Opry stars hung out. The Chinese kitchen staff all peeked out and came to our table to talk to Sue-On as soon as they heard her speak in Toisanese.

As we found all across the continent and England at that time, most of the Chinese restaurants were manned by Chinese from Sue-On's part of Southern China. In fact, for many years Sue-On served as a Toisonese/Cantonese interpreter for a

Phoenix company translating conversations via long distance 3-way phone calls.

During one of our visits to the South we were travelling with our six-month-old first-born, Ja-On. At this time many American troops were returning from Viet Nam with Asian wives. While walking through Opryland and exploring Andrew Jackson's historic Hermitage grounds we were often approached by women wanting to see what a child of such a mixed marriage would look like. The usher girls at the Opry House also fawned over the young 'un and even offered to look after him and led us to front row seats in the Opry so we could enjoy the show. Famous Southern hospitality.

Guess Who Wants to Jam?

www.hillmanweb.com/book/gigs/shilogw.jpg



In the fall of 1968, The Guess Who from Winnipeg joined us in CFB Shilo's Jr. Ranks Club after a CBC-TV taping produced by Dan Wood at the base's General Strange Hall. The band was accompanied by some of the other guests from the TV show, including singer Juliette and magician, Bob Downey.

We jammed into the wee hours. Burton Cummings played Sue-On's Hohner keyboard. Randy Bachman blew a speaker in my Fender Twin that night. They were excited about plans to fly to NYC the next week to record a ballad for their first release under new management and personnel change.

They weren't too happy about doing a ballad called "These Eyes" for their first major release. They wanted to debut with a rocker. "These Eyes," however, went on to become a mega hit and the band went on to super stardom.

THE PAS FESTIVAL TRAP

Our first visit to The Pas was for the Trappers Festival with its parades, Fur Queen judging, talent shows, fish derby, and King Trapper contests with the log throw, tea boiling, canoe pack, etc. We did some bar stunts, afternoon shows and played for some stompin' dances.

In the wee hours after the dances the window of our hotel room gave us a grand view of the ongoing fights in the street below. The bar had an international clientele made up largely of European workers brought over to construct and maintain the Churchill Falls pulp and paper mill.

This went over so well that the New Avenue Hotel hired us to come back the next year to play over the 1971/1972 Christmas/New Year week. We fulfilled this contract under great personal hardship. My beloved grandmother Katie Campbell died Christmas day and my family delayed Nannie's funeral to enable us to fulfill our contract at the Hotel.

On completion of contract, during which we had played to a packed house each night, the crooked beverage room manager refused to pay us because his feuding partner had hired us. Only time in 50 years when we weren't paid for a gig.

Rock 'n' Roll Bagpipes - Command Performance

Throughout the '60s to '80s we regularly played all the mess clubs at the nearby military base, CFB Shilo: Jr. Ranks, Sgts/WO, Officers, etc. Since we were quite popular at base functions we were hired as the first band to open the new expanded Junior Ranks Club.

Camp Commander, Colonel Matheson came in with his bagpipes and we did a whole set of songs featuring rock and roll bagpipes. After the show, while taking out equipment, the overactive new glass door sprang back on me and the long Shure Vocal Master speaker columns I was carrying shattered the glass. Interesting way to Christen the fancy new club.

Rockin' With the German Army: G.A.T.E.S. and Panzers

In 1974 our performances at CFB Shilo increased even more. From 1974 through 2000 Germany trained over 140,000 soldiers in Shilo under the direction of the German Army Training Establishment Shilo (G.A.T.E.S.) and these troops proved to be a loyal audience.

We played a number of special occasion stags where Sue-On, as the only female among many hundreds of hard-drinking German troops, proved to be a real attraction. She even had a number of offers from guys who wanted to buy her stage clothes. We also played a number of Oktoberfest shindigs and even weddings. Many of the troops married local girls -- possibly with thoughts of returning to Canada after their military stints which many of them did.

The visiting Germans had a great interest in Canadian history and quite a number of Indian girls were taken back to Germany. Furs and pelts were also much in demand. We found the German customs to be very fascinating and especially popular was the German food and beer that was flown over in great quantities for their parties.

Tommy Hunter TV Show Cast: Our Turn to Entertain

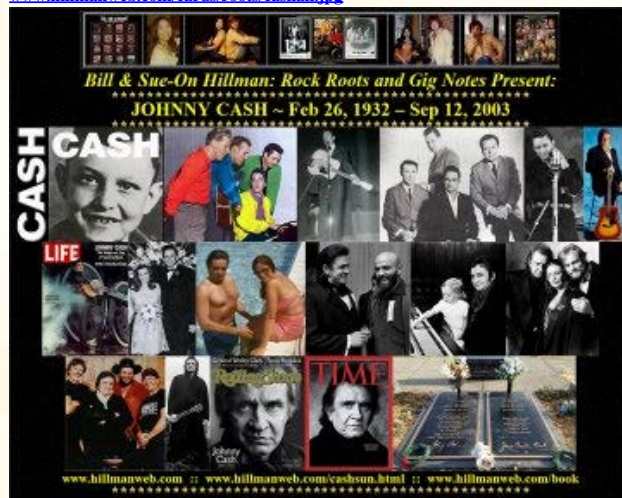
We were one of the last acts to play the huge stately Prince Edward Hotel Ballroom before this grand old hotel was demolished. The two most memorable gigs involved us being hired by a local service club to perform late-night, after-show celebration and unwind shows and dances for famous performers who had played the arena earlier in the evening.

The first was for the entire cast of the Tommy Hunter TV Show -- his supporting acts from his TV show (Debbie Lori Kaye, Rhythm Pals, etc.) and the backup musicians and road crew. Years later we also had a great time backing two of the

show's regulars, Al Cherney and Johnny Thorson, for many arena shows.

Entertaining the Johnny Cash Show: Johnny's On the Wagon

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/roots/cashall.jpg



Our first Prince Eddie gig went so well that we were hired again when the Johnny Cash Show came to town. It was a thrill to meet and play for the Carter Family, Carl Perkins, The Statler Brothers, etc.

I was looking forward to another meeting with Luther Perkins, who had given me one of my first guitar lessons about 10 years before. Luther, along with bassist, Marshall Grant, had been with Johnny from the start back in Memphis and gave the

Tennessee Two (later Tennessee Three when drummer W. S. "Fluke" Holland was added) their distinctive "boom-chicka-boom" sound. Sadly, Luther had died in a house fire a few months before and had been replaced by young Bob Wootton, who did a quite amazing effort at imitating Luther's palm-muting guitar style. He knew the intros, breaks and extros to all of John R's hits.

The event was even more memorable because Johnny and June had been recently married back in March. Johnny had actually proposed to her onstage at a show in London, Ontario. We performed for the crowd made up of the Johnny Cash show performers and specially invited Brandonites. Everyone waited expectantly for the two stars to appear. Johnny finally appeared with June reluctantly in tow. Johnny made a few thank you remarks and then June dragged him back toward their room. With June's help he was on the wagon after his many years of self-destructive road life -- she led him from temptation that night. Sue-On and I quickly took our break and rushed out to the hallway where we met up with the famous duo and spent some time making small talk with them.

In more recent times we've seen Bob Wootton and his new Tennessee Three band a number of times. Bob does a fine job on Johnny's vocals and is accompanied by his wife and daughters. The first time his group appeared in Brandon there was the added plus of seeing the legendary WS "Fluke" Holland on drums. Holland had gotten his start with Carl Perkins playing "Blue Suede Shoes," etc., was in on the famous Million Dollar Quartet session at Memphis' Sun Studio, and had been part of Johnny's Tennessee Three band until the singer's death. They were great guys to chat with and our Website features the photos of the three of us that buddy Bill Stadnyk had taken one night.

Folk Harmony Roots

Our show numbers have always been divided into three groups: individual solos and duets. Sue-On has a remarkable ear for harmony so our repertoire has always included songs by The Everly Brothers, Simon and Garfunkel, and especially Ian and Sylvia.

Sue-On on drums has always provided our sound with a wickedly heavy backbeat

so many of the "folkish" songs have taken on a country rock feel. Even our first albums show evidence of this with our versions of *Silver Threads and Golden Needles* and Ian and Sylvia's *You Were On My Mind*. It was quite a thrill seeing their show at Westman Auditorium and meeting with them after the show in Brandon's Suburban Night Club. Years later we were fortunate to see both performers when they worked as solo performers.

The amazing Everly Brothers whose harmonies have had such a major influence on pop music were a very early influence. Meeting and opening for them in 1965 was a great thrill as I described in chapter 10 of these gig notes. We've covered many of their songs over the years, including our recorded version of *Let It Be Me*.

Three Lashes Across the Eyes

While teaching at Birtle Collegiate, Sue-On did the make-up for the young performers in their school drama productions. She even formed and coached a make-up team for the Strathclair Drama Club's annual productions. This was not surprising since she had done her own stage make-up for many years.

Since we had played a wide variety of gigs she was quite adept at applying many different styles ranging from a light touch for small venues, to heavier emphasis for television, to very heavy stage make-up for huge grandstand shows. From a long distance and under bright stage lights the faces and features of performers become washed out unless heavy make-up is applied. For some of the big gigs she even wore three pairs of eyelashes.

Channeling Stompin' Tom

One of Sue-On's extra-curricular duties as a high school teacher at Birtle Collegiate was to direct the Glee Club. Her show biz experience and knowledge of harmony and rhythm served her well in this role of musical director. During rehearsals for a '50s-style music concert she often stomped out the beats to emphasize the rhythm of the songs.

On one particularly animated session, one of her colleagues sneaked in to the stage area and placed a board under her stomping foot, a la Stomping Tom Connors. The prank sent Sue-On and the whole group into paroxysms of laughter, which brought about the end of that day's rehearsals.

She Can Sing. . . But Can She Drive?

Noticing the popularity of our TV shows and Sue-On's natural on-camera presence, a local car dealership asked her to do a television commercial extolling the advanced features of their latest sporty compact model. Around this time Japanese car companies were making many inroads into the Canadian auto market. The car company thought that hiring an Asian to promote their North American product would provide a neat way of minimizing the impact of the Japanese invasion.

The first part of the car commercial featured Sue-On in the studio going through the usual moves of opening doors and pointing out features. The commercial then cut to an exterior shot taken on the Grand Valley road. Now, Sue-On was driving the vehicle and leading a whole convoy of similar models. She led this stream of shiny new cars around the highway curves while waving to the cameras. I couldn't help thinking that if she had suddenly hit the brakes the resulting multi-car pile-up

would have made for a spectacular television event :)

Uncle Smokey

At one time Brandon jazz musicians met, visited and jammed in a house they maintained for that purpose. One of the musicians we met there played an important part in our early years. Larry Clark had a regular job playing organ at the Suburban supper club on Victoria Avenue. Somehow, when Barry and I were looking for musicians for the first year of our CKX-TV Noon shows, Larry picked up sticks and became our drummer.

Some time later when he had moved on to become a lecturer at Brandon University we had occasion to jam a bit and came to realize what a remarkable musician he was on keyboards and vibes. When it came time to do our second and third albums we asked Larry to join us. He played three instruments: Yamaha organ, piano and vibes -- and wrote arrangements, which multi-track recording made possible to integrate into our basic guitar, bass and drums sound.

A few years later, Larry changed professions and moved to the wilds of Eastern Manitoba, where he became a forest ranger. It was during this time that he wrote and recorded solo albums of Campfire Songs by Uncle Smokey. In the '90s Sue-On, the kids and I had some great visits with Larry and his wife Linda in their cabin and the kids had a wonderful time playing in the woods, streams . . . and bomb shelter in the backyard -- a leftover from the Red scare days of the '50s.

The most exciting attraction, though, was the giant forest lookout tower where Larry put in long hours scanning the horizon for distant forest fires. Even in this lofty perch, music was never far away as he had a guitar and small keyboard in ready reach. A great place to get away from it all . . . and write songs. I couldn't resist making an inspection and surprised him one day when I, accompanied with our young son, Ja-On, climbed to the top of this towering tower to check out the 360 view of the forest, to better see him at work . . . and to hear Uncle Smokey's latest ditties.

A Touch of China

Stories Carved in Antique Camphor and Teak Wood



I've always had an appreciation for all things Chinese and Asian . . . heck, even my wife was made in China. I guess it started with my dad's tales of Hong Kong, which he shared when he returned from serving on the RCN ship, HMCS Prince Robert in WWII.

He brought back many souvenirs: carved ornaments, vases, field glasses, swords, silks, photos, etc. Of special interest were the photos of the Chinese musical entertainment troupes that entertained the ship's crew while docked at Kowloon.

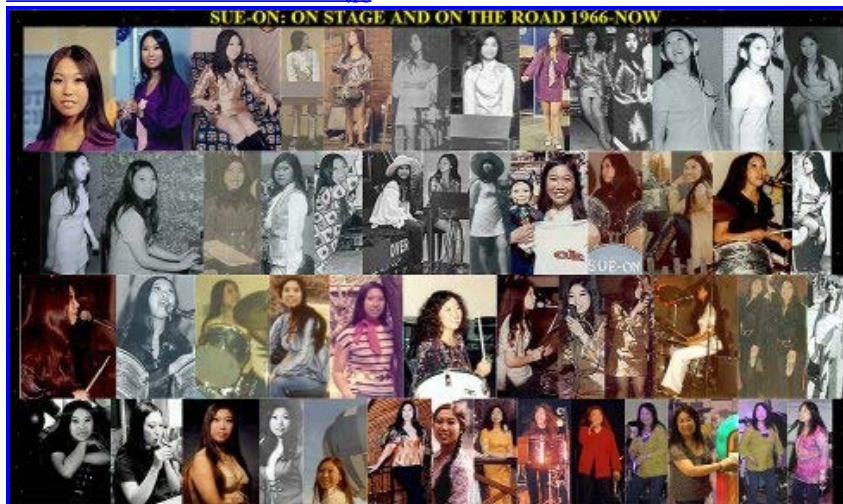
Chinese restaurants with their exotic food and culture were a mainstay on the prairies where I was raised and some of my classmates were Chinese. In fact, Sue-On's brother, Kenny, and I became friends and classmates after he immigrated from Hong Kong.

After Sue-On and I were married she shared much of her Asian heritage and prepared amazing exotic dishes. We often ate Chinese on the road and we even introduced Asian touches into our costumes and music. Our music has taken us across North America, England, Europe and the Far East. It is not surprising then, that we amassed quite a collection of Asian music, art, ornaments, food and furniture from these travels.

Our homes are filled with a fascinating mix of books, videos, plants, music and instruments against a backdrop of influences from our Scottish/English and Chinese cultures -- much of which we have brought home from our music tours. We are especially proud of our collection of unusual musical instruments and carved wooden furniture pieces which we have found in Asia. We've shared photos of these hand-carved treasures on our main Website and in our photo archive.

MY PRINCESS by Bill Hillman

www.hillmanweb.com/cards/sue-on/sueon4all.jpg



She was two years old when her mother pressed her into the arms of a fleeing neighbour woman who had wrangled a pass to Hong Kong. With her mother detained by the newly-empowered Communist Government in Canton, and her

father in the far-away land of the gold mountain, the world suddenly became a terrifying and lonely place to this toddler. Even after her mother finally managed to join her in Hong Kong, it would be eight more confusing years until the family could be reunited in Canada.

It was an alien, hostile land which greeted the little girl and her mother after the days-long airplane journey: huge cars, bewildering mobs of "go bays" who all looked and sounded alike -- greasy, smelly foods -- miles of endless highways stretching across a flat and barren countryside of ice and snow... a cold and a wind which hurt her face, her ears, her hands and which, for some reason, tied her stomach into knots... and an endless trip across this land to another new home -- a house and restaurant in a place with an unpronounceable name: Newdale.

She had ranked above all the other girls in the Catholic School back in her warm Hong Kong, but here she found herself pushed in with little six-year-old girls... and boys -- everyone in the school stared, snickered, and talked that strange babble behind her back -- and no one could understand anything she tried to say or do.

For the next seven years every waking moment outside of school hours would be spent working in the restaurant -- The Paris Cafe (her grandfather had named it many years before). All the drama of her little world -- family life, social life, homework, relaxation -- and her indoctrination into this "O so foreign" rural farm community -- would play against a backdrop of high wooden booths, counters and stools, magazine and grocery displays, and a "Specializing in Chinese and Canadian Dishes" kitchen. The work was hard and long -- there was endless preparation of food, shelves to be stocked, orders to be served from 7 am to 11 PM, and a daily supply of water to be dragged from the town well.

She fell in love at 15 with a local musician and they married when she turned 18. She and her husband attended university and performed nightly in Brandon nightspots for enough years to garner five university degrees and to become high school teachers and university profs. She travelled and performed across two continents, bore three glorious children, and excelled in cooking, gardening, crafts, karate, music, motherhood, and as a person. To this list of accomplishments she added the role of restaurateur, as she and her husband owned and managed SOO'S -- a 265-seat restaurant in downtown Brandon for 10 years. Following the sale of the restaurant in 2002 she took a teaching position at Brandon University.

This little-smuggled-waif-turned-beautiful-woman is the most amazing person and musician I have ever met. She is an inspiration and a source of wonder to all who have been touched by her aura. . . . I have been touched. ... I married her...



NEXT: [Prairie and USA Tours](#)

Gig Notes III: Sue-On Arrives On Stage SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

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