

# 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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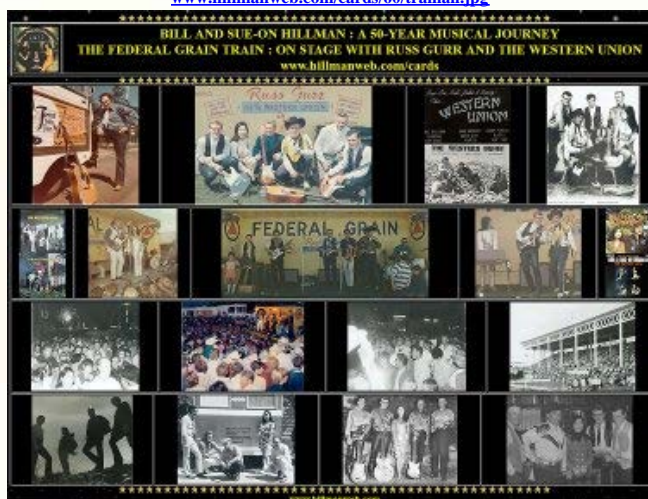



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In the mid-'60s, the Federal Grain Company were looking for a way to exhibit their products and services at Western Canada fairs and exhibitions. The performing, emceeing, and songwriting abilities of Russ Gurr were brought to their attention and they offered him a series of summer contracts. Since our band, The Western Union, had done numerous shows with Russ over the years he call on us to be a part of the touring troupe that came to be known as The Federal Grain Train.

The summer shows that followed evolved into full-fledged Western Canadian tours in which we spent many summers travelling to fairs and exhibitions, large and small, in a convoy consisting of two motor homes, an instrument truck, station wagon, and a stage on wheels. Russ had designed a combination outdoor stage and parade float on a flat bed trailer which served us well.

Our routine was pretty much the same for each venue. We arrived in the city/town the night before their fair or event, and were met by the local Federal Grain agents who opened their homes to us and treated us royally with barbecues and warm hospitality. We also worked closely with the local fairboards and media for which we did TV / Radio / Newspaper interviews. Then, just before dark, we loaded

instruments onto our stage and prepared to capture the fair crowd as they exited the grandstand.

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### **Notorious Parade Saboteurs**

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For the opening day parades during our summer tours, the local agent would pull our float which consisted of a flat bed trailer, covered with artificial turf and signage. Our sound system was powered by a gas generator and we performed standing, non-stop during the entire parade, some of which lasted almost two hours.

The hazards on these routes were many: blazing hot sun, wind, cold, rain, hail, sudden unbalancing starts and stops, hills, potholes, runaway horses, mosquitoes, float "hitchhikers," inebriated drivers and spectators, lost kids, laryngitis, broken guitar strings, and fatigue. For the first few years we took turns singing different songs at the mic, but then Russ wrote and recorded a theme song: "The Federal Grain Train," for his first record album. After that, Russ sang the same song, non-stop, during the entire parade. We all had short vocal and instrumental parts in the song, but his performances of this song must have set some sort of Guinness record for length and endurance.

We were loud. Sometimes innocent parade marshalls positioned other floats with live music, marching bands, or horseback riders in front or behind our float. We always warned them that our PA horns were very loud to which they usually scoffed: "No worries. . . it's a 50-piece marching band." Trying to compete with Russ's booming voice and our amplified instruments deafened the other bands and made the horses very skittish. A safe perimeter always opened up soon after the procession started to move.

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### **Federal Grain Train Stage**

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After our ubiquitous parades at summer fairs and exhibitions across Western Canada we would find our reserved spot on the fairgrounds, usually close to the grandstand where we would catch the crowd as they exited the afternoon or evening grandstand shows.

This portable stage was an engineering marvel. Painted wooden sides, top and back, all of which were hinged so that they could be collapsed flat onto a low bed. When collapsed it served as a float on which we stood and performed for countless hours in the parades. When we raised the yellow hinged panels, they displayed, in large letters: FEDERAL GRAIN TRAIN along with the names of Russ and the Western Union band members: "Bill and Sue-On Hillman" to the left and "Barry Forman, Jake Kroeger and John Skinner" to the right. Large horn speakers were attached to the upper sides, augmented by our Shure speaker columns. The floor was covered with artificial turf and fringe, and along the front we positioned our lighting system.

In transit the flatbed was pulled by Jake Kroeger's pickup truck, which also transported most of the instruments. Our main motor home in which the band slept and ate also served as our office and a dressing room at showtime.

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### **Show Prep**

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Upon completing the fair parades we jacked up the four corners of our trailer for stability, and raised the hinged back, sides and top of our stage. The sound system was fed through large speaker horns and columns on each side of the stage and the



lighting system consisted of colour foot and side lights.

Usually we would do just one show... just after sunset. Barry would open with a fiddle tune, and then Jake and I would follow with a few numbers before we introduced Sue-On. As the crowd grew, we heightened anticipation by telling tall stories about "wild man" Russ.

Meanwhile, back in the motorhome dressing room, Russ was preparing his vocal cords by subjecting them to a series of throat sprays and warm-up exercises wound to a fever-pitch by the frantic rhythms emanating from his vintage Martin flat-top guitar. Russ was a leading proponent of the dying art of yodelling, a skill requiring the voice to be in top condition, and he always took his craft seriously.

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### **Bringing on the "Wild Man"**

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Finally, satisfied that the gathering fair crowd could wait no longer for this man of mystery, we would plunge into the opening riffs of the Federal Grain Theme, which would bring a primed and ready Russ onto the stage. From that moment on Russ led the audience on a wild ride of highs and lows. For all their hokiness and rough edges, the shows were amazingly popular. The chemistry seemed to be just right for a carnie and fair setting.

Our show developed into a love-hate relationship with the various midways, though. Invariably, most of the crowd that came out of the evening grandstand shows ended up in our audience -- fascinated by the crazy and sometimes off-the-wall energy of our shows. Meanwhile, the carnie people grouched and fumed as they waited for the late-night "rubes" to arrive so that they could separate them from their money for the various rides, shows and games along the midway.

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### **Really Big Shews. . . and Midway Battles**

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In the early days we performed a number of free shows through the afternoon followed by a finale after dark. We soon noticed, however, that the afternoon shows under the hot sun drew relatively small crowds, while the evening shows were monsters since most of the fairgoers came later in the day. A number of other acts hired to play through the day on the grounds, both local and imported professional, faced a similar problem. After explaining the situation to the Federal Grain company they agreed to let us try concentrating all our efforts on one evening show under the lights.

We set up outside the Grandstand gates and caught the Grandstand crowds coming out -- massive crowds were captured by our music and stage lights under the cool night skies. From then on it was a battle with the midway managers who angrily awaited the delayed arrival of the rubes. We would open with Barry's fiddle, followed by songs by Jake and myself, while John Skinner or Kerry Morris set up a beat on drums. When the crowd was warmed up we would bring on Sue-On for her numbers. Finally, the master showman himself, Russ Gurr, would come bounding on stage. After the show we chatted with the fans, signed autographs and sold photos and albums off the front of the stage.

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### **On Stage with Dief . . . Hail to the Chief**

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For six weeks every summer each show held surprises. During one of our Prince

Albert shows in 1971, former Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker -- a PA native -- was escorted through the crowd to our stage. A musician buddy, Jack Dawes, sent a photo of me pulling the old gentleman up onto our stage. Sadly this gem of a pictures has gone missing.

Russ gave the appropriate introductions and the two carried on with witty patter. Russ then sang a song he had written in tribute for Dief: "*Hail to Prince Albert.*" Russ had been a major PC force in Manitoba in the '50s so they had much in common. Although we lost the shot of Dief and me on stage, we do still have the photos we took while at the Diefenbaker home.

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### Where Were You When? . . . The First Men On The Moon

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The July 21 afternoon of our 1969 summer tour saw us glued to our little Sony portable TV. NASA's Apollo 11 space mission had touched down on the moon the day before and now the world was about to witness man's first steps on Earth's only natural satellite.

Since we weren't scheduled to do a show till that evening we were looking forward to the television coverage of the historic event. Unfortunately, our coach was parked on the North Battleford, Saskatchewan fairgrounds where TV reception was dismal. We moved the set to every part of the vehicle and impatiently adjusted the rabbit ears antenna

Finally, we picked up images of a ghost in a snowstorm, but the audio came in loud and clear. We settled back to watch this world-shattering event unfold. Seeing US astronaut Neil Armstrong finally utter the words: "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind" as he stepped onto this alien world was incredibly exciting. Considering the hazards of space travel and the state of technology and computers in the '60s, this was a major achievement.

We put on a well-received show that night, but the wonder of the scientific achievement of safely rocketing through space from the earth to the moon, to make a successful landing on the lunar surface, really eclipsed whatever success we had on stage.

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### Fireworks On Stage . . .

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Many of the exhibitions we appeared at ended each evening with fireworks and since we were set up near the Grandstand grounds, cinders from the explosions above us often fell on our heads. Many of the professional grandstand performers would make guest spots on our stage -- usually during the bombardment of flack from above. It all added to the excitement.

The task of assisting our guests up to stage level often fell to me. One night while giving a buxom showgirl an assist my guitar caught in her wig. It was attached by elastic to her real hair and as I pulled back she was reaching wildly to loosen the hair from my guitar so that it could snap back into place. I expected even more fireworks that night but she was a great sport about it.

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### Centennial Spirit

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Back in the early '60s, while attending Brandon College, I was working with a multitude of rock, country and jazz bands and even found time on nights free to play behind Lenny Fairchuck's fiddle down at the Brandon Legion. Len spent his early years in Elphinstone, 10 miles from my hometown, Strathclair. He later left for Hollywood where he worked on the set of the popular Bonanza television show starring Canada's Lorne Green. (Back in WWII Green had read the CBC national news - much of the news was often so bad that he had the nickname "The Voice of Doom.")

I didn't see Lenny again until Canada Centennial Year 1967, when he returned with many boxes of records. He had saved his money to record an album and 45s of original songs in a Los Angeles studio with top LA session musicians, including Glen Cambell on guitar. Most of the songs had a Centennial theme and to do his bit during the celebrations he had a stage built on the back of his camper, from which he mimed and sang to the recordings.

We played many fairs that year and noticed that he set up shop at some of them where he entertained the passing fair-goers. Audience response was disappointing and we heard that he later moved his one-man show to a street just off Winnipeg's Portage Avenue. Unfortunately the Winnipeg police had little Centennial spirit and ticketed him for not having a performance license.

A few years later we swapped records for old times sake. We eventually lost touch, but I often watched his televised Western Hour show which featured many First Nation acts and included our old buddy Wayne Link on Linkon steel guitar in the backup band.

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### Happy Birthday Manitoba

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Manitoba celebrated its 100th anniversary as a province in 1970. In years previous, our summer tours found us playing large fairs and exhibitions all the way across to BC, but this year saw us working much closer to home. We played and paraded in almost every town -- large and small -- which was served by a Federal Grain elevator. Many of the smaller burgs we had never heard of . . . but the crowds were all enthusiastic and friendly.

We had the occasional off-day in which we played arena dances, political events and special celebrations. In fact, Russ was invited to sing and yodel for Queen Elizabeth during her Manitoba Centennial visit. One celebration took us to a location in the Brandon Hills. We had run into Lenny Fairchuck during the Canadian Centennial and now Len had organized a celebration event south of Brandon for which he needed another feature act and stage. This seemed a natural event for us since Russ's Blue Hills of Brandon song was one of the most popular songs off his first album. We set up the stage, the people came, we picked and grinned, a good time was had by all -- a very special year for Mantobans.



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## Offstage Jams. . .

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Grandstand and Midway performers often gathered in our motor home after the fairgrounds closed for the night. These were colorful and entertaining folks from all over the US. Most of the carnies were from the deep south and Florida, while the majority of the grandstand acts were from California. Veteran ex-vaudeville performers had great tales about working with the Marx Brothers and other show biz greats. Comedian and man-of-many-voices Bill Fraser, who had been the original voice of Popeye in the cartoons, kept us in stitches with his routines and road tales. Bill had been in show business most of his life and had worked with a multitude of celebrities.

Most of the grandstand performers had performed on the Ed Sullivan show or had travelled with the Bob Hope troop shows through SE Asia and all over the world: singers, dancers, showgirls, comedians, acrobats, jugglers, ventriloquists, musicians. Everyone brought food and beer and there was always an abundance of guitars to keep the sing-alongs going. Feature banjo player, Georgette Twain often showed up with her tenor banjo and some of the Southerners even added distinctive bluegrass harmonies. Those without instruments pounded out rhythms on make-shift percussion instruments. Later in the '70s Sue-On, Barry and I were hired by Cindy and Charlie of Bardine Productions to headline these grandstand shows south of the border.

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## Legacies of the Bardine Productions

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During our summer tours we developed friendships with many grandstand entertainers and carnie people. Our closest and longest lasting friendship was with David and Sheila McClellan from Hayward, California. David was feature singer and emcee with the Bardine Productions grandstand shows, and his wife Sheila worked as wardrobe mistress.

We had many great times with David and Sheila, both during the tours and for years following. David played a small size Martin acoustic which he put to good use during our after-show jams and get-togethers. Some time later, they and their two kids visited us in Manitoba and we reciprocated this visit numerous times during our California trips. We even caught David's act at Ghirardelli Square at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf where his repertoire of Broadway show tunes delighted the audience.

Our introduction to home video systems was through David. During a 1978 visit to their California home we watched Rocky I on a then-very-new cable service -- HBO. The most exciting surprise though, was when he brought out his new VHS VCR and camera. Our six-month-old son Ja-On was with us and we drove back to Canada with a tape of the first video home movie of our family. I had to get one of those -- even though the system cost thousands and the 4-hour tapes were almost 40 dollars each at that time.

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## Escape to Verboten Sin City

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On a free afternoon during our exhibition tour in Alberta, we and our friends, David and Sheila, were invited to a Hutterite colony. Our Low German-speaking hosts treated us royally. We were allowed to sit together, but I noticed that the colony's men and women were segregated at long tables set up on opposite sides of

the dining hall. We were served a simple but delicious meal . . . fresh bread, vegetables, meats, pies and wine -- all produced at the colony.

After the meal they displayed some of the women's handiwork -- duvets, embroideries, etc.-- all of which they would gladly sell. Since they were fascinated with our being touring singers they put on a show featuring some of their favourite songs -- fine voices, but very sad country songs all sung in a very wailing and haunting style. We left some albums with them to show our appreciation and drove away in time for our evening shows.

When we reached the end of the long lane leading to the highway we were flagged down by a young man who asked for a ride into the fairgrounds -- he was drawn to the bright lights and the verboten off-colony excitement. We picked him up and chatted with him all the way into sin city.

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### **Nightmares and Axe Murderers**

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Sue-On cooked many of the band's meals in our motor home. One day, on a set-up day between Exhibitions, Sue-On had a break from the kitchen duties. The Carnies had visited us many times and had been asking us to join them more often on the Midway. So we spent the day eating greasy midway food and taking endless free rides on the Ferris Wheel, Tilt-A-Whirl, Dodge-Em cars, roller coaster, etc. We finally returned to our coach where Sue-On and I read the latest Creepy and Eerie horror magazines that I had bought earlier.

We hit the sack early -- worn out. On this particular tour, Sue-On and I slept in a double bed at the back of the bus, while the guys were in bunks stretching to the front of the motor home. Partway through the night, Sue-On had a nightmare and started screaming in terror. The rest of the van were startled out of their sleep -- sure that we were being attacked by an axe murderer. Sue-On promptly drifted back to sleep. The guys in the front were looking for flashlights -- and nursing bruised heads -- and whispering in low voices: "What was that?" "What the hell?" "Are you guys all right?" Russ had a serious case of heartburn and prowled the bus looking for Tums. For a long time after I could hear them murmuring and tossing and turning. Sue-On missed all the fun. . . she was fast asleep. I was the only one who saw anything amusing in this calamity.

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### **In a Real Offstage Jam. . .**

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One of the guys travelling with our troupe got very friendly with one of the Midway tent strippers - Gerri. This precipitated a scary event one afternoon. The showgirl's American boyfriend barged into our motorhome waving a gun and demanding to see the guy who was making moves on his girl.

When we convinced him that we didn't know where the couple were, he eventually hid the gun in his jacket and left with a string of threats and curses. Being from Canada we weren't used to such a wild display of handguns. . . shook us up for awhile.

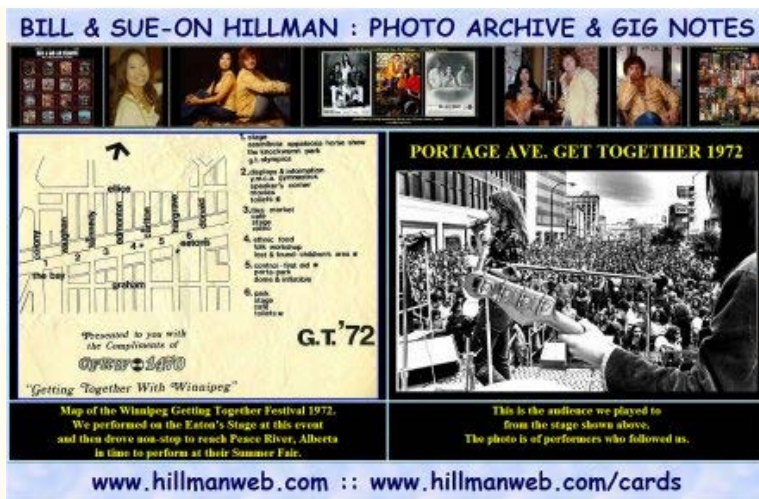
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### **The Day We Closed Down Portage Avenue**

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[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/gt1972.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/gt1972.jpg)





While touring Saskatchewan our main Western Union group was asked to perform at Getting Together 72 on Portage Ave. We had two days off after which we were to be in Peace River, Alberta. We bravely agreed to do it and while Russ and some of the crew headed northwest, we drove east to Winnipeg where we set up on a stage on Portage Avenue in front of Eaton's Department Store.

This event probably evolved into what later became Folklorama. All traffic was blocked off from Portage Avenue and looking down the street there was a packed, standing-only crowd for as far as we could see. We did a hot show, packed in a hurry, and headed for Peace River -- over 1,000 miles away.

Barry Forman, Kerry Morris, Sue-On and I all took turns driving through the night. As what so often happens, when Sue-On took the wheel a torrent of rain descended. This coincided with the beginning of road construction. We slept while Sue-On guided the slip-slidin' vehicle through a quagmire. Driving all afternoon and all night we made it in time to appear in their parade the next day.

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### Peace River Ghost Grounds and Uneasy Riders

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We arrived at Peace River, Alberta from an all-night, non-stop drive in time to help the gang set up our parade float. The fairgrounds are across the river valley overlooking the townsite. In the morning light we were amazed to see that the normally impressive waters of the Peace River were absent -- only a dry riverbed was visible. Later we learned that the recently built Bennett dam project was holding back the waters.

We also had expected to see a beehive of activity on the fairgrounds, but there was no one around. No one but Chuck, that is, a wandering local steel player and a very interesting person. Chuck had toured with Ray Price and with Loretta Lynn in her early years the North West before she moved to Nashville. We invited him to join us on the flatbed float so he set up his steel in front of the drums. We rushed to set up our amps, changed into our costumes. . . and waited.

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### Parade of Errors

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The Federal Grain rep finally showed up in the company station wagon which had been assigned to pull our float along the parade route in the town across the valley. We paused in our treacherous drive down the steep coulee road to pick up a bedraggled woman pushing a baby carriage. Our rather tipsy and erratic driver carried on -- careening downhill and across the narrow bridge -- and we eventually

joined up with the main parade already in progress on Main Street.

Our wild driver came close to turning our Peace River debut into a slapstick comedy. We struggled to maintain our balance while playing and singing continuous and endless verses of "We're the Federal Grain Train." We stumbled, the drums toppled, the wobbly mics tried to knock our teeth out. . . and all the while the woman and the baby carriage holding the crying infant were in danger of rolling off.

While fighting to keep his balance on his teetering stool and to keep his pedal steel upright during the driver's sudden stops and starts, Chuck somehow managed to add a few steel licks to our songs. The baby buggy woman liked the excitement of the cheering spectators so much that she didn't want to get off, so she stayed precariously perched on our jostling float along the whole parade route.

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### **Swamp Romp in the Prairie**

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Our first Federal Grain Train visit to Grand Prairie in Peace River country was rained out for quite a few days. While on the road that summer Sue-On and I had been sleeping in our own tent trailer. The downpour made it impossible for us to reach or use our trailer and we stayed downtown in the hotel. The band sat out the downpour in the hotel pub for a few days. When rain stopped the fairgrounds were a quagmire and our stage and vehicles had to be towed in through the mud by tractors.

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### **Star of the Show Kidnapped!**

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Our second tour of Peace River country was under sunny skies and was full of action-packed adventure. During our appearance at Dawson Creek, Russ thought that a good way to spark media interest was to stage a fake kidnapping. . . of Sue-On. My protective instincts kicked in and I wanted no part of this fiasco, so I watched it all unfold as a spectator.

Following an afternoon show Russ enlisted some local cowboys to ride in and grab Sue-On. The whole gang then rode off with her as "captive." This strange caper shocked the crowd and got some media buzz -- it even worried the local constabulary for awhile.

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### **ET Go Home**

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During our summer tours we met interesting people at every show. During one of our Dawson Creek shows we noticed two guys intently watching us from the side of the stage. After the show we chatted with them. One of them was a teenager who was excited about making a career as a singer. We recognized him a few years later as Roy Forbes, who took on the stage name Bim.

The other visitor introduced himself as a disc jockey at the local radio station. When I told the DJ that I had a passion for collecting old radio shows from the '30s-'50s his ears perked up. He said that there were hundreds of OTR 16" ET (electrical transcription) discs in the crawl space under his radio station. They were thinking of throwing them out, but if I came around to the station during his early morning show I could take all I wanted.

At that time we were touring in a Volkswagon Westfalia camper. Soon all available

floor space in our VW was crammed with my new treasures. Poor Sue-On had to put up with working around this heap for the rest of the tour. When we finally reached home I had to track down some large-platter Gates turntables to play them.

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### **Are You Bored Yet?**

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Although our actual stage shows became fairly routine we never really knew what to expect when we arrived at the many fairs and exhibitions across the prairies. But we could always count on the local Federal Grain agents to treat us royally. Most invited us into their homes for homecooked meals or treated us to elaborate barbecues. There were usually requests, however, for us to make special appearances at service club luncheons, radio and TV stations, personal care homes, business openings, telethons, and even to move our equipment over to halls or auditoriums to play for dances after our main stage shows.

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### **"You guys set me up!"**

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During our summer Exhibition tours we developed a great camaraderie with the grandstand performers. They were a great mix of young and veteran entertainers from all over the world: musicians, singers, comedians, dancers, acrobats, magicians, variety acts, etc. They all had great show biz tales to share and we got to know many of them really well.

Stu, a very funny ventriloquist, we knew to be gay after he'd had a tiff with a local flower arranger on the tour and he'd tried unsuccessfully to invite members of our crew to his trailer for after-show drinks and visits. Life on the road sometimes runs on practical jokes. Our buddy Kerry Morris joined our crew as drummer mid-tour and we passed on word that Stu had invited him to his party one night. Naively wanting to please he went alone, but soon stomped back, "You guys set me up!"

Step two in the initiation was to let Kerry hear some of our quiet discussions saying that the beautiful assistant of the comedy pickpocket artist was a transvestite (she wasn't) and that she had undergone major female enhancement surgery. After a few days of putting up with his curious gazing we let her in on the joke and it was her turn to retort, "You guys set him up!" Kerry passed his initiation with flying colours.

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### **The RCMP Chorus Line**

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We had a good relationship with all the local law enforcers on our tours: RCMP, Sheriffs, Bobbies. The young RCMP officers especially were good sports. . . and shots. Late one night after the grandstand had been vacated we joined the off-duty guys who were having target practice with their handguns in the closed-in area under the stands. The area was teeming with rats, which proved to be excellent moving targets in spotlights. This was obviously in the days before every round of munitions had to be accounted for.

We then piled into cruisers with lights flashing and headed for a party at a house in the country. Next morning we were awakened by a chorus of "We're the Federal Grain Train." It was the guys we had partied with the night before trying to shake us out of our slumber by singing as they drove around our bus.

A few hours later we saw our buddies on crowd control for our fair parade down



main street. They looked very official standing at the intersections in their uniforms and dark glasses, but we were pleased to see them give us a sly grin and knowing nod as we passed by.

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### **RCMP Musical Ride**

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We have great respect for the RCMP. . . in fact, a number of my students and relatives have become Mounties. The Musical Ride appeared at many of the exhibitions we worked -- always an exciting event and we got to know many of them well. The Ride has a long tradition going all the way back to the North West Mounted Police days, and they have represented Canada all over the world. This troop of thirty-two riders in scarlet tunics on highly trained horses performed a variety of intricate maneuvers and cavalry drills choreographed to music.

In fact, a recording engineer for one of our albums, Colin Bennett, had worked as musical director for the RCMP Musical Ride and Band before moving to Century 21 Recording Studios. We especially enjoyed spending time in the horse barns where we were always impressed by the amount of time that cowboys and Mounties devoted to the care, training and grooming of their mounts.

A special treat was our tour of the RCMP training facility in Regina. A few years after our Western Canada tours Sue-On was appointed by the Commissioner to serve as a founding member on the Commanding Officer's Advisory Committee on Cultural Diversity. . . a position she held for 13 years and which even involved being picked up by the RCMP aircraft to be a guest at their graduation ceremonies in Regina.

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### **Derailed**

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We met a great many great carnies and grandstand show entertainers and revelled in their tales of life on the road and their fascinating stories about show business greats with whom they had worked. We've since regularly seen many of these performers in Las Vegas and on television and we have formed lasting friendships with some of them. Anecdotes from these tours abound.

All good things have to end, and the end of this unique entertainment experience came about when the Federal Grain Company was taken over by Pool Elevators in the early '70s. To my knowledge, no band has ever done gigs quite like this, and we were all disappointed to learn of the events which brought an end to the tours. This did free Sue-On and I, however, to do a multitude of other special gigs, including tours of the US and England.

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### **Farmers by the Bus Load**

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After years of summer tours we all felt a bit let down when the Federal Grain Train was derailed. Russ soon picked up another contract, however. This time our tour was sponsored by the Elanco chemical company. They put on demonstrations of their farm chemical products all across the prairies.

Our job involved setting up our stage out in the country, close to a Treflan chemicals treated demonstration field. The company would bus in hundreds of farmers from all the surrounding communities and Russ and our band would perform a show for the gathering crowd. The farmers would then be bussed out to view the various grain fields treated with Treflan.

When they returned we would perform another show while they were served a complimentary pork barbeque. Russ was a natural for this job as he could relate to farmers. He and his sons maintained a very large grain operation in the Brandon area and when not performing Russ could usually be found on a tractor or doing farm maintenance -- jobs he did well into his 80s.

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## SUMMER TOURS CHANGE DIRECTION

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### In the Jailhouse Now

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After the Federal Grain tours, Sue-On and I with Barry and Kerry were hired by Oregon's Bardine Productions to headline grandstand shows. We successfully auditioned before American fairboard committees to headline American shows. Our first year, however, was for appearances in Canada.

While in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, where we appeared as Exhibition Grandstand headliners, we were invited to perform an afternoon show in Prince Albert Penitentiary -- a maximum security facility for serious offenders. But we had a disappointing call from the Warden the day before our appearance. There had just been an attempted prison break and the Pen was in lock-down. Apparently an inmate had somehow hidden under the engine hood of the Warden's vehicle as a means of getting through the gate. He wasn't successful. He was discovered after the Warden heard his screams of pain. He was seriously burned by the heat from the engine. On the morning of our planned appearance the authorities relented and we went ahead with the show.

We passed through a number of clanging barred gates -- reminiscent of the opening of the old "Get Smart" TV show. After setting up our equipment on the stage in the large auditorium, the cons were filed in. It all seemed very familiar as we were quite acquainted with Johnny Cash's Live at San Quentin show. My opening number drew thunderous applause -- I was quite thrilled at being so appreciated, until I realized I was being upstaged by Sue-On's dance moves behind me. Our buddy Kerry Morris had taken over the drums which allowed Sue-On to come up front and work the crowd.

The show went well -- our vocals and Barry's fiddle had our captive audience stomping and applauding for well over an hour. In appreciation the cons presented us with hand-tooled leather wallets from their shop. as well as with framed and

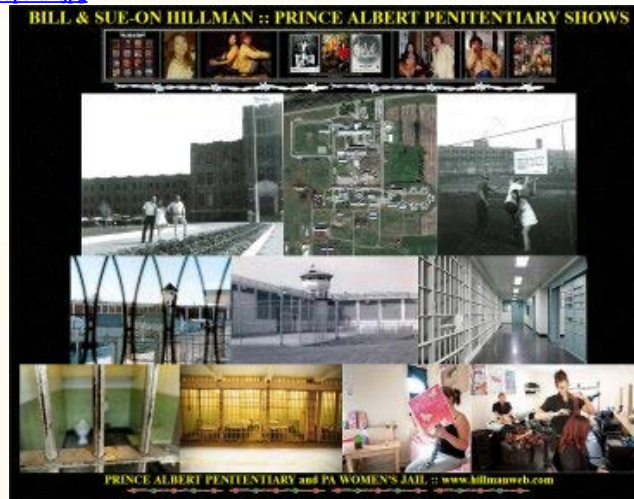
numbered Honourary PA Convict Certificates. Mementoes we still proudly display among our show biz memorabilia from the past.

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## The Ladies Go Barless Here

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On the day after our PA Pen show we asked to make a return visit to the PA Women's Prison. We had done a show here a few years before with the Federal Grain Train troupe.

No slamming of barred gates here. . . curtains, TVs, soft furniture, and pin-ups on the walls were the order of the day.

We didn't do a show this time as most of the inmates were downtown on a supervised shopping trip -- but a few of the inmates led us on a tour of the facility and we had some peeks into the prisoners' temporarily vacant rooms . . . ah. . . cells.

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## Prison Break

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We have played at a few penitentiaries and jails over the years and they've always been very unusual experiences. Our Christmas show at the old Brandon jail was no exception. After security checks we set up on a rather crude stage in what I assume was the mess room, while the inmates sat on benches gathered very close to the stage.

The show started well, but suddenly there was a flurry of excitement from one of the inmates in the front row: "That's my teacher. . . that's my teacher!" I looked down and recognized the man as having been in one of my high school classes a few years back. I remembered that he used to smuggle booze into the class in an aspirin bottle. He had been a very troubled youth and had been taken in by a good family. One day, while he was off his medication, he stole a hacksaw to saw off a shotgun and used a cow for target practice with it. He then stole a farm truck and drove 30 miles to a small late-night restaurant, which he held up at gunpoint.

I was so proud. . . well. . . The rest of the band stood aghast. Unbelievably, sometime after this he escaped prison and found his way back to Strathclair where he tied up and held two seniors hostage at knifepoint. I sure learn 'em good.

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## America and the UK Beckon

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We did the Treflan demonstrations for couple summers, but when Sue-On, Barry and I were offered a chance to perform as the feature act in front of American State and County Fair grandstands, we were lured back to the lights and excitement of carnie life and the big stage.

Following this, Sue-On and I did three tours of workingman clubs in England's North East and became very heavily involved in recording our own albums. Ontario's Family Brown and Whiskey Jack took over the Treflan gigs. Unfortunately, in recent years we had the pleasure of working with Russ on only a few occasions. Although Russ was about 30 years older than we "young whipper-snappers", he was a man full of unbounded energy, creativity, tolerance and show biz sense and there was never any sense of a generation gap between us.

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★  
**USA & CANADA GRANDSTAND TOURS**  
★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

And the Winners Are . . .



Bardine Productions of Portland, Oregon booked all the Grandstand acts on our Federal Grain circuit. We weren't actually part of the Grandstand shows, until the Federal Grain company was purchased by Pool. Cindy and Charlie Bardine were impressed with our Western Union trio band so they hired us to headline a series of shows in Western Canada. This went over so well that they invited the three of us to audition for the US Exhibition and Rodeo Circuit.

Sue-On, Barry and I drove to Lethbridge for the auditions before the many American Exhibition representatives. Competition was stiff and we were up against many Grand Ole Opry performers and other name acts. They were impressed, however, by our Chinese girl singer/drummer, electric old time and wah-wah fiddle and bass, guitar instrumentals, and show vocals.

The Bardines sold us as *Sue-On and The Western Union from Canada*. They were former vaudeville performers and coached us on stage movements, intros and extros, patter, and in little tricks to encourage multiple encores. We suggested that we bring other musicians along with us to augment the act, but they liked the idea of staying with the winning versatile trio from their neighbour country to the North.

**Grandstanders**

Our first summer of Grandstand shows for Bardine Productions at Western Canada Fairs and Exhibitions was a blast. Kerry Morris who had been playing drums on our Federal Grain and Treflan tours joined us part time. Since the Bardines had hired us as a trio we opened with Sue-On on drums and for the second half of the show Kerry took the sticks so that Sue-On could join Barry and me at the front of the stage. For the show's many opening acts Kerry played with the stage orchestra set up on stage right. He did a super job reading all the music charts behind the horn section and providing all the extros, intros and percussion stings for the variety acts.

The Bardine shows entertained crowds with much more variety entertainment than is offered on today's stages: singers, Hollywood show girls, magic acts, stand-up comedy, ventriloquists, etc. The shows were emceed by singer David McClellan of San Francisco. David and his wife, Sheila, who was the show's wardrobe mistress, became our close friends and we have fond memories of the many jam sessions and the snacks that Sheila prepared in their camper.

The Bardines realized that more and more Exhibition boards were looking to hire music acts. This, and our popularity in Canada were the reasons they encouraged us to attend a fair board convention where we auditioned for the next year's NW USA circuit. Despite stiff competition from many acts out of Nashville we were successful and Cindy sold us as a trio: *Sue-On and the Western Union*. We alternated as headliners with American country acts Jeannie C. Riley ("Harper Valley PTA") and Charlie Louvin of the legendary Louvin Brothers.

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### Name Dropping

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We hired local drummers to join us for the last half of each show which gave Sue-On a chance to strut her stuff with a hand mic. Since we were only a trio we had to work hard to win over these huge grandstand crowds: flamboyant costumes, actions, make-up, and up-tempo numbers interspersed with amusing patter. The other Nashville acts had larger bands and some well-known hits to draw upon, but our shows went over really well. We were amused to see that Jeanny C.'s band had a full-time harp (harmonica) player - popular session musician Terry McMillan.

The USA tour was an exciting whirlwind which wound down in Missoula, Montana. We took advantage of free days between shows to explore Glacier Park, Yellowstone and the Spokane World's Fair. We even visited with Buck Owens and his

Buckaroos backstage after a show one night. His famous sideman, Don Rich, had died just a few weeks back and they were still adapting to his loss.

The American show lineup featured most of the entertainers we had met on the Canadian circuit over the previous years. We were constantly enthralled by the tales they shared from working overseas shows with Bob Hope, the old vaudeville circuit, Ed Sullivan, Hollywood, etc. Bill Fraser, the "Man of Many Voices," had even done the original voice of Popeye. We've had the chance to re-meet most of these entertainers in Vegas and California over the years.

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### Las Vegas Blizzard

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A popular act on the grandstand show was Stu, the Ventriloquist. A year after the USA tour we took Sue-On's parents to the Hacienda Hotel in Las Vegas. The feature act was a topless ice show on the showroom's stage. We were seated at a table next to the stage. When the curtain opened, the MC stepped to the front of the stage about a metre from our table. It was Stu, a somewhat unusual choice to host a show featuring a dozen buxom, topless show girls on ice skates. Stu had made it well known on our tours that he was gay. This was the first of many surprising events during the show. Seated within arm's reach of a bevy of speeding, swirling, jumping naked skaters with bouncing breasts and bare bottoms was something new for Sue-On's parents, but they took it all in stride. Her dad maintained a stoic face, while her mom exclaimed a few *oy yahs*. Because we were so close to the ice we were constantly sprayed with a blizzard of ice flakes and bombarded with loud music from the nearby PA speakers. I'm sure many stranger things have happened in Vegas but this is one story that hasn't stayed in Vegas.

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### Montana. . . We'll Sing Your Song. . .

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The 1974 summer grandstand tour of western USA was a thrill. Cultural differences between our two countries were probably more pronounced in those days. The stages in front of the outdoor grandstands were gigantic so we exaggerated all movements. We were quite a distance from the grandstand audience so we relied on heavy make-up to highlight our features -- Sue-On actually wore three pairs of false eyelashes.

We opened our shows with a footstompin' old time fiddle number. Sue-On did her vocals while playing drums for the first half of our show. If there was a local drummer available in the house band he was invited to take over the sticks to allow Sue-On to come to the front with me where we could interact and she could dance around a bit.

For audience interaction we played up some of the novel cultural differences between our two countries and emphasized our Canadian backgrounds. We even tried to convince some of our audiences that we were the hottest act in Canada. Cassette recorders were fairly new in those days and it was quite a novelty to tape some of those shows off the PA. We still have some cassette recordings of those old shows.

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### MONTANA

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*A song from Album No. 7 ~ Recorded by Bill and Sue-On in Newcastle, England.*

*Written by Bill Hillman in Missoula, Montana during our 1974 tour of the NW USA*

*Rolling down the highway -- we're southern bound -- Wind from the bus blows the sweet grass 'round -- Kalispell, Missoula and their rodeos -- Play a little fiddle and a dosey doe*

*Dancing and prancing -- the ponies a-flying -- Cowboys cussing and their ladies a-crying -- Pick a little tune, a jig and a song -- Montana crowd wanna sing along*

*Chorus: -- Montana -- Your song goes on -- Echoing through the sky -- Montana -- I'll sing your song -- Till the day I die*

*I see phantoms and shadows on the far horizon -- Stories of the redman and herds of bison -- Railroad, wagon, trader and miner -- Lawman, outlaws, and old moonshiners*

*Shaken outa my dreams by the tires a-whining -- Just another sound of the Old West dying -- Can't live the past but I'll sing it in song -- Kindle old times as we roll along*

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### **The Perfect Storm**

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Fighting the elements during outdoor shows can be incredibly frustrating: wind, hot sun, rain, hail, dust, mosquitoes, power failures, midway noise, etc. One of the drummers who sat in with us took the job very seriously. He looked at Sue-On's road-wearied drum kit and decided to use his own brand new shiny kit which he set up beside Sue-On's.

This particular day was a good example of the perfect storm. By the end of the show his drums been doused with driving rain mixed in with dust and dirt and smoke from the nearby rodeo grounds and stock yards . . . and later baked by the hot sun. Cymbal stands and some of his percussion instruments had been toppled over many times by wind gusts. After the show the kid's shiny kit didn't look much different from Sue-On's old workhorse Ludwigs.

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### **A Wet Day in Harper Valley**

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On our US Grandstand Tour, Sue-On and the Western Union were billed with Hee Haw's Archie Campbell, Charlie Louvin of the legendary Louvin Brothers, and Jeannie C. Riley, who was riding high with her hit cross-over song, "Harper Valley PTA." Jeannie's band was made up of hot Nashville musicians, and we thought it unusual that she would carry a full-time blues harp player.

Terry McMillan wore a bandolier containing a multitude of mouth harps, which allowed him to play along with all the songs on the Riley set list. Over the years we were fascinated to see his name associated with a long line of artists and bands. He had done session work with nearly every name artist who recorded in Nashville: Chet Atkins, Merle Haggard, Garth Brooks, Dolly Parton, Neil Young, Johnny Cash . . . endless . . . he even had toured with Eddie Raven who we worked with on a Manitoba Music Awards Show in Winnipeg.

We had one funny episode with the Riley band. On one of the rainy days the band was reluctant to unload their equipment from their tour bus and tried to pressure us to set up and they would use our equipment. We stalled. Eventually the show for that day was called off. We all stayed dry and played another day.

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**. . . and they call the dog, Mariah**

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One of our guest drummers, Craig Edland, was son of a politician who recently had to make plans to move to the State Capitol, Helena, Montana. They had a huge white dog that they couldn't take with them so they asked if we wanted to adopt a one-year-old, purebred Great Pyrenees called Mariah of the Plains.

This took us by surprise as we'd never heard of this breed. But at one of the exhibition booths we happened to notice a picture of a Pyr in a canine poster -- love at first sight. This was near the end of our tour, so before long we were headed north with a huge furry beast lying on the floor of our Econoline motorhome.

All was fine until we reached the border crossing late at night. The crossing was closed till next morning so we made up our bed and tried to sleep in the border parking lot. Mya was in heat and panted all night -- constantly shaking and rocking the van. We were glad to see the sunrise since the panting and shaking had kept us awake all night.



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**Album 4 at the Crossroads**

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Album No. 4 was a way of collecting all of our cover songs - 18 titles - from the previous albums, all tied up in a nice promotional package (we included no songs from album no. 1 and the next album would feature all our original songs.)

1974/1975 presented us with a major career decision: go on the road full time and put everything into a music career . . . or stick with our secure roots in Maple Grove and continue on with careers as high school teachers and weekend /

summertime musicians. NOTE: *Bill retired from 30 years of high school teaching -- in the same school -- in 1997, to move on to work as a professor at the Faculty of Education in Brandon University. Sue-On also taught high school for a number of years before also teaching at BU for over a decade.)*

The design of No. 4 set the mold for the look of most of our future albums. We put an airbrushed black border around four studio photos, used the logo of our newly-formed record/production company, and displayed many candid photos in a filmstrip along the side of the back cover liner notes and credits. The candid photos

on the cover give some indication of what a busy year 1974 had been. After many summer tours with Russ Gurr's Federal Grain Train show, followed by a year of exhibition shows for Treflan Chemicals, we were invited by Bardine Productions of the USA to audition for the NW USA Grandstand circuit. We did well, beating out many Nashville acts and the Bardines took over management of our American appearances. Through them we also obtained William Morris Agency representation.

We immediately told the Bardines that we planned to increase the size of the band to come up with a bigger show, but they returned with a flurry of personal letters insisting that the act stay as a trio. Among the reasons they cited was the problem of obtaining work visas and clearances with the American Musicians Union, as well as the danger of bringing in a different act than that seen by the Fair Boards who had booked us. We then had to prove to the Unions that we were offering an act that was totally unique and different from anything American bands could offer. A singing Chinese girl drummer and recording / television performer seemed to fit the bill and we got our visas.

Cindy and Charlie Bardine were show business veterans who had worked the closing days of vaudeville and who had been immersed in all facets of show business throughout the 20th Century. They took us under their wing and offered invaluable show biz advice. Everything from stage entrances/exits and how to milk applause and encores, to costumes, and to surviving on the road as a family unit . . . and how to depend on and look to your mate for support and friendship in the crazy and often stressful and lonely life "on the road." (*Album Notes Excerpt*)

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### Album 5: Let's Do It ALL!

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We had written four songs for Album No. 3 which we released on a jacketed EP. The reviews from trade papers and radio stations were encouraging enough that I kept at it. We did four more originals for another EP which got good play on

CBC radio. In fact, my Grandmother Jane Hillman, who lived in Elrose, Saskatchewan, was quite surprised, and I guess a little proud, to hear us on CBK Regina. By now we had eight originals to which we soon added six more to release as an all-original album.

This album differed considerably from our previous efforts in that we used no sidemen -- Sue-On, Barry and myself did all the instruments, with a little help on keyboards from Kevin Pahl who was about to replace Barry in the group. I lived and breathed this album for many months and was involved in all stages of its development: words and music to all songs, arrangements, production, all guitars, half the lead vocals, back-up and harmony vocals, photography, album design,



pressing and mastering decisions, promotion, etc. Whew!... got that outa my system. From this album on, Sue-On and I were fully involved in all our albums -- mainly because in those early days of Independent record production there really wasn't anyone to turn to who could offer much in the way of professional advice, so we had to learn as we went along.

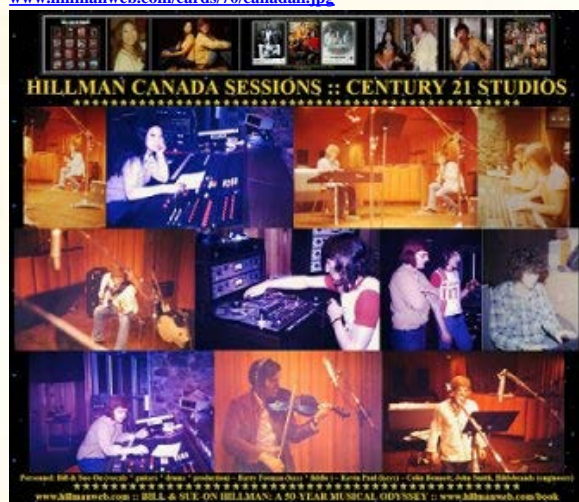
The finished albums arrived from Toronto the same day we left for Nashville on one of our summer holiday driving marathons. We had been on Nashville's music row before but we had never had a product to flog. This time we got into all the studio and publishing offices on the row: Chet Atkin's office at RCA, Columbia, Tree, Billy Crash Craddock, Pete Drake, etc. Most were very polite and listened to cuts from the album and many of them showed off their own latest, soon-to-be released records. There were nibbles, words of advice, apologies, address exchanges, etc. Most companies showed some interest -- Chet liked our duet harmonies -- but the concept of a Chinese girl singer and her redhaired husband from Canada obviously didn't fit into the formula of Nashville and America's Southland. Some of the music execs suggested that the album wasn't country enough for the Nashville market. We never guessed that in a year we would be taking the same album around to studios, publishers and promoters in London, England where we would be told that the album was a little *too* country for their market.

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### Apologies to the Silver Beetle at Century's End

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Our '75/'76 sessions at Winnipeg's Century 21 Studios marked the last recording we did in Canada. All later sessions were done in London, Newcastle, and Pity Me (Durham), England. Some of our *Prairie Saga* concept album came out of those sessions. Our recording engineer for most of these sessions was John Smith who had recently moved to Winnipeg from London where he had worked at Abbey Road Studios with George Martin and the Beatles. He has a credit on the Beatles' *White Album*.

On one of the sessions we were having trouble with some of my vocals -- my "s"es were too pronounced in the recording. John said they had the same problem with some of John Lennon's vocals back at Abbey Road and they solved the problem with a special mic. . . a mic which he had managed to bring with him to Canada. He proudly brought out this rare, rather antique looking square mic and placed it in the mic holder in front of me. I felt very honoured.

He returned to the console and I heard his "tape's rolling" signal in the cans. In my intimidated state I stepped to the mic -- and stepped on the mic cable. I saw John's shocked look behind the glass. My clumsiness had yanked the cable out of his precious John Lennon mic. The cable lay on the floor with the broken wires exposed. We had to work around the "s"es in a different way for the rest of the session. Neither of the Johns could have been very happy about this : )

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### Session Buddies

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Through the years Sue-On and I have taken pride in being involved in every facet of our recording projects: songwriting, playing most of the instruments, album design, photography, supervision of pressings and promotion, etc. In our *Prairie Saga* album, however, we were joined by regulars: Barry Forman (bass and fiddle), and Kevin Pahl (keys).

Two Century session drummers worked on a few of the tracks. Gord Osland had just flown in from LA where he had done a preliminary session for Burton Cummings. He did a great job on the Indian beat for our *Massacre*. Mark LaFrance joined us on another day and did flawless rhythms. He was soon to form the Crowcuss group and in later years has become a regular in the Bachman-Turner band (Randy Bachman and Fred Turner). . . a successor to BTO.

We also called on longtime musician friend Alan Jones to add some organ parts. Alan was a bit surprised when we suggested that he try to eke some '60s combo organ sounds out of the studio's big Hammond B3. We thought it would provide the right Asian atmosphere for our *China Lady* song.

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### Toronto . . . or Bust!

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As a result of our successful tour of US exhibitions and rodeos our American agents had some big plans for us. They signed us with the William Morris Agency, who secured a tentative appearance at Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition. The news was released to the media, which resulted in some good newspaper articles and TV mentions that were picked up all over. This turned out to be a bit of an embarrassment because it was around this time that Barry left the group to turn all his attention to his blossoming car dealerships -- Forman Motors -- and it was too late to work up a new act.

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### Flight of the Condor

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Not long after our US tour, I was invited to fly to Toronto to discuss a recording contract with Condor Records. Seated beside me on the flight was fiddler Brian Sklar and a few seats back was well-known singer Blake Emmons. The two of them going to a similar meeting at Condor -- quite a coincidence.

The meeting went pretty well and I returned home with a contract to look over. Regretfully it was full of words like "in perpetuity," "exclusive," etc. which would have signed over too much of our work to their recording/publishing rights. At that time we were quite possessive of our song rights and guarding our future, so we reluctantly passed on the deal.

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### Wanna Play the Grey Cup?

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Another Toronto disappointment arose out of a phone call a few days before Grey Cup weekend when we were invited to play for a pre-game show. We had promised a close friend to play for her wedding that weekend, we had a newborn baby, and it would have been difficult to get time off from teaching. I made a choice which I've regretted ever since. We declined.

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### Hogtown Adventures

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In 1976 I was invited to Toronto to go over details on a record deal. Sue-On took over my high school teaching duties while I flew to Hogtown on this business trip. I took advantage of the time between meetings to visit music sites I had heard so much about: Yorkville, recording and media studios, and various record companies. One of the most memorable meetings was with Dallas Harms whose *Paper Rosie* had been a major hit for Gene Watson.

One night I rushed back to my hotel to phone Sue-On to tell her to watch Peter Gzowski's new late night TV show: *90 Minutes Live* in which I had made my network TV appearance. Well, anyway . . . the cameras flashed by me as sat with the audience in the front row of an earlier taping with Melba Moore as headliner.

Exploring Yonge Street's attractions took me to a wealth of music-related sites. Myles and Lenny who had a recent hit with their wild electric fiddle-driven song "Can You Give it All to Me" put on an entertaining show in one of the clubs.

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### Sam's the Man ~ RPM's the Mag

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While roaming Toronto's Yonge Street I made a long-overdue visit to the legendary Sam the Record Man shop. This huge store - a mecca for music affianados -- held a special surprise. My visit coincided with the release of RPM magazine reviews of two of our albums -- a real thrill since the mags were on prominent display near the entrance.

The coincidence was too great for me to pass up the chance to share the pages with owner Sam Sniderman who was tending shop. This was a bit of an ice-breaker, but I'm afraid that Sam seemed only mildly impressed. Nevertheless these reviews, which followed a few previous ones were very encouraging since RPM was the major national music magazine out of Toronto:

\* **BILL AND SUE-ON HILLMAN: The Western Union ~ Maple Grove MGS-1004**  
Fifteen cuts of contemporary, country standards. "Union" leaders Bill and Sue-On go well doing things their way. Arranged and produced by Bill -- a healthy product of years of experience with folk, rock, country and MOR styles. Total prairie production at Winnipeg's Century 21 Studios.

\* **BILL AND SUE-ON HILLMAN: 14 Original Songs ~ Maple Grove - MGS-1005**  
Written and arranged and produced by Bill, "14 Songs" is the best use of their original sound yet. Sincere duets covering almost all of the standard themes of contemporary country with cuts for any broadcast style.

\* **BILL AND SUE-ON HILLMAN: The Hillman Express ~ Maple Grove MGS-1006**

Clever lyrics by Bill Hillman puts him in a class by himself. Most of the production was done at Winnipeg's Century 21 studio, however one standout is *Down Down*



*Down*, which was produced at Gooseberry sound Studios in London, England, where they also cut *Farther Away*, *Shelter*, and *Walkin' Wreck*. Nice blend of vocals and instrument backup. Looing for a contemporary country song? Read some of the verses on the jacket.

**\* FREE SPIRIT ~ MGS 2001**

Variety of country, rock and country-rock sounds of a new 6-member group of Bill and Sue-On Hillman. Pianist Al Jones produces with assistance from the experienced Bill Hillman for the strongest LP involving Hillmans to date. Voice of Terry Fleetwood capably leads most cuts, all of which are written by band members. Tracked at Winnipeg's Century 21.

[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/special.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/special.jpg)



## THE FREE SPIRIT RECORDING PROJECT

### I. 15 Year Evolution

[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/freespiritall.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/freespiritall.jpg)



The Jones-Blair-Hillman association goes all the way back to the early '60s when Al first came to Canada to work as a physiotherapist in Brandon. Ken Blair and I were working in an instrumental trio in which my guitar was the only lead instrument -- 4-hour dance jobs featuring nothing but the popular guitar instrumentals of the day. We were thrilled when Alan agreed to join the group and add sax, piano and organ to our sound. I was even more excited when Alan offered to contact his brother, Keith, in

England and have him send over guitar albums by the Shadows. I was already a great fan of Lonnie Donegan, skiffle and trad bands, Cliff Richard, and all the other giants of the British music scene whose records were rather difficult to obtain in Canada. This series of events added tremendously to our band's repertoire.

Eventually the band dissolved, Sue-On and I married in 1966, and we went on to other musical pursuits. Alan, Ken and I drifted apart . . . until almost 10 years later when Al contacted me. He played some of the songs he had written and asked if

Sue-On and I would like to join him in a recording project. He also enlisted the aid of Ken Blair and two other fine musicians with whom he had played with back in England -- Terry Fleetwood and Ian Hunter. At the time, Sue-On and I were spending much of our free time, while off the road and away from our teaching duties, working at a multitude of recording sessions in Winnipeg's Century 21 Studios. This looked like another challenging venture so, within weeks we were again back in the studio. The two studio engineers were John Hildebrand, co-owner of the studio, and Colin Bennett, who had previously been musical arranger, etc. for the RCMP Musical Ride band.

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## II. The Session: 24 Tracks to ER

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Songs on the album were recorded and mixed over a period of five days. Sue-On was partly responsible for one memorable all-night session. She had spent most of the day sick in bed with a bad cold, but gamely made it to the session to do back-up vocals. She held up fairly well, but as the session dragged on into the night, she started to experience sharp pains in her chest and had difficulty in breathing. The three physiotherapists in the group correctly diagnosed the problem as pleurisy -- and tightened a belt around her chest to ease the pain so she could finish the background vocals. She could only sing two sustained notes at a time, but thanks to overdubbing we strung it all together. When the pain became too severe I took her to the hospital for treatment.

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## III. 6 Spirits Come Together

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This was one of our few recording projects in which Sue-On didn't play drums. The drum work was ably handled by Ian Hunter, who also did a great job doubling on sax. The songs are performed in quite a variety of styles -- many of them showing the influence of the guys' British roots -- and they have stood up amazingly well and are still great fun to listen to. I look back with awe at Al's unique songwriting and keyboard work, Ken's bass work which met the challenge of such an eclectic musical mix, and Terry's quite incredible vocal and piano style.

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## IV. Free Spirits Take Flight

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The album cover was designed in keeping with the "Free Spirit" theme. The photo was taken at Brandon Airport with all of us gathered around Ken Gowler's famous bi-plane with plenty of open blue sky in the background. The bi-plane from the cover went on permanent display for a few years, hanging from the terminal ceiling at Winnipeg International Airport. Kevin Pahl, our keyboard player in our other band, was one of the few pilots who flew it before it was "dry docked" and had recommended using it in the cover photo. Fittingly, since Sue-On and I were in the middle of yet another project that day we made it to the photo shoot thanks to Kevin's father, Howard, who flew us into Brandon on that afternoon.

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## V. From Bi-plane to 747

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Soon after the release of this album, Alan returned to England for a visit with family. While over there, he approached an agent and interested him in booking us for a '76 tour of England. We did a series of 30 nights in halls and clubs with Sue-On on drums, Kevin Pahl on electric piano and keyboard bass, myself on guitar, with Alan joining in on organ in the clubs which had one available. At the end of the tour we recorded five songs for Hillman Album No.6 in a London Soho studio.

Sue-On and I returned to England again in '77 and '79 for more tours and recording projects, but by this time Alan's professional career in health care had taken him to Victoria, BC.

Sadly, Alan Jones passed away in 2014.



NEXT: 5. [England Tours: 1976-1979](#)

## *Gig Notes IV: Prairie and USA Tours* SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

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

[BILL and SUE-ON HILLMAN ECLECTIC STUDIO](#)

[www.hillmanweb.com](http://www.hillmanweb.com)

[Federal Grain Train Prairie Tours: 1966-1973](#)

[Grandstand Show Tours of USA](#)

[The Great Grandstand Days](#)

[Hillman Album No. 4: On Stage](#)

[Hillman Album No. 5: 14 Originals](#)

[The Free Spirit Album](#)

[Forman Fiddle Album 1](#)

[Forman Fiddle Album 2](#)

[Albums 4 and 5: Century 21 Session Photos](#)

[Special Recording Sessions: Free Spirit and Forman Fiddles](#)

## **GIG NOTES CONTENTS**

[www.hillmanweb.com/book/gigs](http://www.hillmanweb.com/book/gigs)

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





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