

Breakthrough artist to usher in Hoedown Showdown champ

By Brock Weir

For nearly 20 years, Tim Hicks made his living playing his music five or six nights a week through steady gigs in smaller venues in and around the GTA and Niagara Region.

It wasn't exactly the big time but, as his wife reminded him, he was doing what he loved for a living and how many people can boast that?

Still, he says, there was something he felt was missing from the big picture.

"She said I should be thankful for that," says Hicks. "She was right, as usual, and as soon as I let go of all that pressure and expectation on myself, and disappointment, the phone rang and I was headed to Nashville."

The last three years have been something of a watershed for Hicks as he prepares to headline the finals of the Hoedown Showdown under the big Hoedown tent on Friday, September 12, as the prelude to the main event on the Saturday night.

After plugging away at his passion for 17 years, he was nominated as Rising Star in the 2013 Canadian Country Music Association Awards, followed up by Juno nominations for Breakthrough Artist of the Year and Country Album of the Year and, most recently, he racked up four further CCMA Awards, including Album of the Year and Songwriter of the Year.

He has come a long way since he first found a love of music accompanying his great-grandmother's church music as they both played the organ in her parlour.

When he takes the stage in Aurora next month, he will headline an event showcasing local up and coming country talent, something he says will provide invaluable experience for future stars of all ages.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for a young artist or a young band to come and show their stuff and get an opportunity to play with a big band like Lonestar," says Mr. Hicks of the chance the winner will have to perform with the Hoedown headliner on the following night. "I wish there was something like that around when I was up and coming. Maybe we would have got someplace a little bit sooner."

When asked what it feels like to be on hand to usher in new artists, he jokes that he doesn't feel like he is "qualified" to do that, but he has certainly put in his dues. From those early days playing church hymns, his parents saw a spark in their young son and enrolled him in the Ontario Conservatory of Music.

From the time he was seven, he was in a band which he thought was "just the coolest thing in the world" - a feeling he still carries with him today. Early teachers saw he had an affinity for voice, and helped him hone in on that, including being able to handle singing and playing the piano at the same time. Although there was a streak at the school towards classical music, that really did not hold his attention and his teachers steered him towards what he describes as his "natural tendencies."

"I played all kinds of music when I was coming up," he explains. "Music was my living for 17 years so you have to take every gig that comes your way - especially if you are growing up in Niagara Falls, there are no honky-tonks to go and play country music in."

As he was growing up, his parents filled the house with the sounds of The Beatles and Simon & Garfunkel, and as Tim became more interested in music, he found himself gravitating towards their underlying country tendencies.

"That means good songs, good singing, harmony, which has sort of become a lost art aside from country, and just good playing. It took me a really long time to realise the thing I liked about the Beatles was they were playing Johnny Cash, Eddie Cochran, and all those bands. They were just playing it and filtering it through their English upbringing."

Fast forward over a decade and a half, Hicks and his band were playing a regular house gig in Toronto when they happened to be spotted by a couple of songwriters. Evidently taken with Hicks' voice and the band's sound, the songwriters approached them after the show looking for a collaboration. They later wrote a few tunes and one of the writers took a demo to Nashville, where it caught the ear of Ron Kitchener of RGK. And, it turns out, the two songwriters who found him were Casey Marshall and Neil Sanderson from Three Days Grace.

Before he knew it, it was a blustery January and he and his wife wrapped up their five week old son, loaded up the van and headed to Nashville.

'We took off like a couple of kooky people chasing a silly dream,' he says. 'Everyone thought we were crazy - crazy for taking the baby out of the house that soon, crazy for even wanting to try, but we didn't care.'

After they collaborated on his first album, successes kept rolling in. Awards and nominations are one thing, but after his first single, 'Get By' was released he felt he had finally made it. While on the Boys of Fall tour in 2012 he and a fellow artist were driving from Hamilton to Ottawa for their next gig when his phone began 'exploding' with messages from Twitter.

'It was the first time people were talking about my performance, talking about my songs, and looking for interaction from me. It was kind of emotional because I thought, 'Finally, I am getting through to people after all these years!' This was a moment where I felt good and that we were on the right track.

'[The Hoedown Showdown] will be fantastic. I always encourage young people, young artists or artists in general when they ask on Twitter or Facebook to put away your webcam, get off YouTube and get out and play in front of people. The Hoedown is offering that exactly.'