

Harlequin brings 'the soundtrack of our lives' to Ribfest

By Brock Weir

It has been over 40 years since singer and guitarist George Belanger jumped at an opportunity to join a fledgling band and, over that time, he and Harlequin have criss-crossed North America, building up a staggering fan base.

Some musicians itch for a change after four decades on the road, but each fan encounter fuels the passions which lie deep within the classic Winnipeg band.

'I got stopped by a guy who had seen us a few years back who was coming to see our show and he was just thrilled to death,' says Mr. Belanger ahead a sound check this past weekend in British Columbia where the band headlined a medical marijuana festival.

'He told me, 'You are the soundtrack of my life,' and it is quite uplifting to hear people talk to you like that.'

Uplifting is a common thread in Mr. Belanger's life tapestry.

As a youngster, he was groomed for the priesthood, serving as an altar boy before dipping a toe into the seminary.

'It was very noble calling,' he says, noting his initial goal was missionary work and helping people. 'Church was my first stage. As an altar boy, you were kind of the centre of attention and the priest was the real rock star. He did great things for the people, uplifted them, and helped them, but then I discovered music was very much the same thing.'

He was raised with the sounds of Ray Charles, Nat King Cole and the Mills Brothers, firm favourites of his fathers, bouncing off the walls of his home. He saw how happy these performers made his father and, when Belanger himself saw bands like the Beatles on TV, he experienced a similar high.

'Once I found music, I discovered it was almost the same [as church],' he recalls.

After seeing his first live concert, he got on the bus and told his friend that that was what he was going to do.

'One thing led to another and here I am at my age still doing it ? it's crazy,' he says. 'When I went up on stage, people would tell me, 'I was having a really shitty day and you guys took me out of it for an hour and a half there and I really appreciate it.' I thought, that's a pretty good calling and I'll stick with this one ? and I don't have to be celibate, either!'

One of his first musical gigs was with a band called Next, which had secured a recording contract with Warner Brothers Canada, but an opportunity with an up-and-coming band in need of a singer-songwriter soon presented itself.

The band in question was looking for someone not only to write the songs, but someone to sing them.

He was told he could fly out to Toronto to audition and seized the chance, but shortly after arrival he was actually whisked off to Kirkland Lake.

'They were playing this typical small-town big ole' hotel,' Mr. Belanger recalls. 'It was the fall, and there was hockey going on. We sat down in one of those crummy rooms and [founding member bassist] Ralph James and I realised he was focused like a bullet. He had a plan and really had a charm about him and I knew he was going somewhere. Right then and there I thought I would hitch my wagon to this guy because in other bands I was always the leader, the frontman who had to do everything and I suffered from migraines. Just being the singer/songwriter sounded great.'

They had their first rehearsal in that big ole' hotel and in the middle of their set, a hunter, dressed in head to toe camouflage gear walked in, parked himself in front of the hockey game on TV, but was distracted by the band. As luck would have it, this apparently everyday hunter was actually an agent with ties to the likes of John Lennon and Aerosmith, and the rest was a road paved with hits, accolades, and fans.

'People want to hear the soundtrack of their lives,' says Mr. Belanger of the concert experience. 'There are seven or eight songs in our repertoire that they have to hear and if you don't play them there will be a riot! You play those songs, intersperse them with new stuff, change a few things around here and there, but we try to give them what they want. It works to our mutual benefit because we get a lot out of it and so do they ? that is how we roll.'

'I am hoping they show up in droves and ready to rock because we still have a lot of energy, we still love to play, and we like to meet the people we met many years ago. We've been getting emails saying, 'We're so excited you're coming to Aurora. We haven't seen you since you were playing high schools.' Now these people are in their fifties and they are recalling their high school days. It is pretty thrilling to believe they still remember, still care, and still want to see you. I've got the best job in the world.'

Harlequin headlines next week's Aurora Ribfest along with David Wilcox. Harlequin will take the stage Friday, August 25 at 9 p.m., with Wilcox following the next evening at the same time. Admission is free, age of majority past 8 p.m. Ribfest will take place August 25 ? 27 at Machell Park. (2A Aurora Heights Drive, Aurora).