

Russell deCarle headlines new concert series



By Brock Weir

As musician Russell deCarle gets older, he's less afraid to take chances.

A King City native and a founding member of the acclaimed Canadian country band Prairie Oyster, he recalls breaking into a cold sweat early in his career in the off chance he forgot a lyric or chord. If that happened back then, he said he felt like he wanted to crawl under a rock.

Now, as he forges ahead with his solo career, exploring different styles and indeed himself, he takes these things in his stride.

"I push myself more now," he says. "You're not afraid to experiment on stage. Things are looser and so much more fun."

deCarle brings this sense of fun to the Aurora Cultural Centre next month in the inaugural concert of a new series hosted by John Sheard of CBC's The Vinyl Café.

When deCarle takes to the stage with Sheard, along with Dennis Pendith, it will be something of a homecoming on many fronts.

"We have known each other for about 30 years," says Mr. deCarle. "John was working with a band called the Cuban Fence Climbers back then and I was working with the early version of Prairie Oyster and we became great friends."

The blocks of his musical foundation were formed just a few years prior growing up in King with Keith Glass. Playing music together since their teens, it is an interest which has continued to grow over the decades. He always loved to sing and play the guitar, but it took him a considerable amount of time to realise music was actually what he wanted to do with his life.

"I never consciously set out to be a musician," he says. "I didn't have any grandiose plans to be an entertainer. I was a pretty shy kid, quite frankly, and it took me a while to get out of that."

Once he did, though, it was hard to get the genie back in the bottle.

"Keith and I started going on the road when we were about 19 and it has been a pretty amazing trip. We have been pretty successful and managed to make a pretty good life for ourselves in music and I think that is due to the fact we did something a little bit different."

Evidently that difference resonated with Canadian audiences. That "pretty amazing trip" took these 19 year old men around the

world, garnering multiple gold and platinum albums, a string of number one Canadian singles, multiple Juno and Canadian Country Music Awards, and legions of fans worldwide.

In recent years, however, deCarle has focused on his music away from Prairie Oyster. As a teen, he was influenced particularly by radio. Compared to today's offering on the Top 40, he says in his youth music on the radio was far less homogenized than it is today. Then, the sounds of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin could be heard alongside the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and even Buck Owens and Patsy Cline.

It should come as no surprise these artists conspired to make a very eclectic artist in their impressionable listener.

In that time, he has relished the opportunity to explore styles away from the country sound.

"Most musicians don't put labels on it," he says of his musical style. "Labels are more of an industry thing. For most musicians a song is a song. My favourite country singer of all time would be Ray Charles. His approach to country music was really amazing - it's all soul."

Looking at his solo output thus far, however, he describes it as "more of a torchy-bluesy affair", particularly on his first solo album launched three years ago called *Under the Big, Big Sky*. That too was a collaboration with Sheard.

"[As a solo artist] I don't have to run a gauntlet to get a song played in the band," he says. "A band is a democracy and I think we were fortunate in having a very long run with the band - over 30 years - and incredible success doing what we wanted to do. Doing my own thing, the difference is that it is absolutely my eye. I get to present it how I want to present it."

"Most of my musical life, I have been very satisfied being in the band, but now I must admit I am really having a ball doing my own thing and playing with different people."

When deCarle takes the stage at the Cultural Centre on October 4, it will be the first of the three-concert "Great Reunion" series, bringing together Sheard on the piano, Pendrith on the bass, and a musical guest at each performance.

There, they will play a significantly more intimate venue than some of the ones previously enjoyed by Prairie Oyster and from that perspective, deCarle is looking forward to that intimate connection with the crowd.

"I love doing this kind of stuff because there is a whole generation of people who have never really experienced such an intimate setting and I think there is a huge call for it now because people our age aren't going out to hear music in bars anymore!" he says. "In these intimate settings, I can see people are blown away and they get to interact with artists."

"Today, my measure of success is I still get to do this. The awards are nice, but the measure is I still get to play and I am enjoying it more than I ever have - and I think I'm being more creative than I ever have."