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Marketplace

## Life is a highway, again

Tom Cochrane can't wait to hit the road in support of new album

Lynn Mitges, The Vancouver Province

Published: Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Tom Cochrane's in a good place.

His first album in six years, *No Stranger*, is out today. He's fresh from a summer in which his 1991 anthemic hit, *Life is a Highway*, was enjoying its second run in the Top 10 chart, at the hands of Rascal Flatts in the movie *Cars*. And whereas touring used to be like running an obstacle course, now he can't wait to hit the road.

"Now I feel more like I did when I was 17 or 18 and starting out in coffeehouses – that wide-eyed optimist," he says from his home in Oakville, Ont.

Cochrane is pattering around his house on his first day off in months – the day after he finished putting down all the tracks for the album he produced himself.

"I did it all myself in terms of production, with a little bit of assistance from my buddy Bill Bell," he says. "But it was a lot of work. I don't know if I would ever produce something on my own again."

Cochrane is proud of the results. "The record is probably the rawest thing I've ever done," he says. "It's got a lot of rough edges, and I think people are going to love that."

Cochrane says a few songs on the album are difficult for him to listen to because he left them so bare.

After a few decades, Cochrane says the urge to mask things, to apply makeup to camouflage the insecurities of youth, has lessened. When the rawness surfaces, he acknowledges it. "Sometimes you try to redo things or do things a certain way and you realize quickly that it just saps the life out of the songs – they're not honest anymore."

All it took was a few decades. And about a million miles.

Cochrane laughs as he tells stories of his early years as a "wide-eyed and naive" songwriter.

"You get onstage and you get hit with your first beer bottle, somebody's screaming for an Aerosmith song and you're up there with your acoustic guitar and you're booked into a strip club with a one-armed stripper – that's your wakeup call."

Cochrane said he couldn't get back to driving cab fast enough after those gigs.

But like the old saying goes, good things come to those who dodge beer bottles. Almost a dozen albums later, Cochrane's deft hand with lyrics, and his addictive riffs, have given him a devoted audience.

"You know, when you start out, you have the sense that music can change a lot of things, that music is a really powerful force," says Cochrane. "And then finally you get to a point where people want to hear those songs, they want to come to the show and the songs like *Good Times* become sort of concert standards – and I enjoy performing again."

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Singer and song-writing legend Tom Cochrane's new album, *No Stranger*, is his first release in six years.

Photograph by: Peter J. Thompson, The National Post

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No Stranger is partly a rite of passage. Cochrane says a few cuts depict growth, temptation and purging: While You Are Young, Rough and Tumble, and the tremulous Deep Breath.

Then there are his story songs -- pure allegories that explore the human condition. Cochrane's study of people is one of his trademarks. The disarmingly catchy Life is a Highway is rooted in his horrific experiences on his first trip to Africa in the '90s.

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"That song was a pep talk to myself. I think I was going through a bit of post-traumatic stress disorder at the time. It was a bit overwhelming -- right down to the fact that for the first time in my life, I saw somebody dying right in front of me. And seeing them die of starvation was even worse."

Cochrane says his exploration comes from a different place, so he's not sure if he'd ever write a pure protest song.

"My concern is more the politics of the human soul and how particular experiences relate to that -- and there are no real rules for that.

"There are a couple of spots that, if you know what I went through with my dad with Parkinson's or my trips to Africa, you're going to be able to pinpoint that, sure."

Cochrane is also well known for his work with World Vision, a Christian development agency that helps impoverished children around the world, but he describes it as a Pandora's Box. "I never did any of that for any attention. But almost before you know it, you're getting attention. It's almost embarrassing."

Cochrane says it's tough to walk the line between being a celebrity and a regular guy who tries to make a difference, but whose life has been indelibly marked.

"You try not to think about it because if you do, it eventually appeals to your ego, to be honest about it. You've got to be careful of that because you start to lose yourself."


He explains that part of the reason for doing this record is to get back to what he is: A songwriter, first and foremost.

"It's that muse that comes down and greets you -- and it's magic.

"Call it instinct, it's that urge to purge, to paint. That's why I started making records. Music is like a well that we draw from when we're dying of thirst."



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