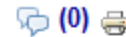


## Rocker with a conscience



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FRANK PEEBLES Citizen staff

Life is a Highway is one of the most infectious rock songs ever penned. It goes well alongside crunchy anthems like Lunatic Fringe and Boy Inside the Man, successful on charts all around the world for Tom Cochrane and Red Rider.

It is not well known, however, that Cochrane wrote the song not for the Disney-Pixar film Cars (feature version by Rascal Flatts) but as part of his emotional debriefing after one of many trips he's taken to the Third World to help the world's most powerless people.

Cochrane certainly enjoys heading up to cottage country near Parry Sound, Ont., where he has a place to enjoy rural life with his family. That's where they spent Christmas. He also has no trouble getting out on the road and ripping another strip across the Canadian rock 'n' roll psyche, but there is no erasing the things he has seen and smelled and felt in places like Sri Lanka, Mozambique, Mauritania and other nations in the grips of war and famine and colonization. He and the non-governmental relief agency World Vision have a long history working together in those sensitive, stricken areas.

Cochrane told The Citizen that he was like a lot of westerners on his first World Vision trip: skeptical that the aid money was helping anyone who really needed it, stuck on generic images of emaciated black bodies that were so over played they became dehumanizing. That all changed when he got there and got his hands in the same dirt.

"Mozambique was a really strong story," he said. "The first time we went there there was a protracted civil war, we were shot at, there was death and destruction, it was unbelievable. The first time I ever saw someone die in front of me of starvation it was horrendous. The little girl looked up at me, Louisa - and I speak of her in The Party's Not Over on the new album - as if to say 'How could you let this happen to my mother?' and her mother died right in front of us and it was heartbreaking.

"We were isolated in this little area where we were surrounded by insurgents that were at that time supported by South Africa. Then a few years later that war was over, ironically enough it coincided with the end of apartheid and South African elections, and we went back in there and we saw a lot of wonderful things. We saw a lot of villages back on their feet, places that had been emptied out because of the fighting. We saw refugee villages that were empty, which was wonderful to see ... Things do get better.

"You have to remember, and Stephen Lewis points this out, a lot of people aren't aware of this: poverty was not always a way of life in Africa. A substantial amount of it is our fault. We raped that continent for riches and bounty and colonization ... The poverty that we know there now started in the 1950s. Prior to that the tribes could live off their land. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't perfect and there was fighting sometimes, but the whole extreme poverty thing got started in the '50s and we were a big cause of that."



Tom Cochrane

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World Vision is a message Cochrane takes with him everywhere now, in conversation and in his music. He has always been renowned as a songwriter who injected powerful imagery and world views into his classic rock language, and it has worked at the box office time and again with his long list of hits in Canada and elsewhere, so if people have an ear to hear his stories of tragedy and how to help, that is available but if you just want to pump your fist and yell out some Canadianna arena rock, that's OK too.

Cochrane comes back to Prince George on Sunday night at CN Centre for the biggest pre-New Year's Eve party this side of Dick Clark. With him will be his old mates, Red Rider, the band he formed back in the '70s with acclaimed guitar player Kenny Greer and bassist Jeff Jones. They were here together a couple of years ago for a similar show at CN Centre and Cochrane said there is something inspiring for him to play with these two guys, after several years apart.

"I probably enjoy playing now more than ever, over the last four or five years we've been playing together," Cochrane said. "Prior to that I enjoyed it as well and I think the Mad Mad World and Ragged Ass Road bands were great bands, but Kenny and I have got just a certain unspoken artistic telepathy we engage in. There's always real magic when we play together. Jonesy as well; Jeff on bass brings a lot of positive energy to the proceedings. On drums we've got Gary Craig (known for his percussion with Bruce Cockburn and tight timings with Anne Murray) and to me there are two or three drummers that are the best in Canada and Gary is one of them. He is more than just a drummer, he's a conceptualist."

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