

Singer-songwriter risks security to follow his heart

TRACEY COVEART The Standard

At 50, singer-songwriter Thomas Kovacs was happily employed as a programmer at Canadian Tire's Yonge and Eglinton head office in Toronto. Then he had an epiphany.

It was October 2009. "I was sitting at my desk after another unsuccessful night of songwriting and I thought, 'I can do this until I'm retired and the music is gone or I can do it while I still have the energy, enthusiasm and voice.'"

He left Canadian Tire on excellent terms in January 2010 and has never looked back.

It wasn't the first time Thomas, a recent houseguest of Port Perry's Bill Lishman, who now resides in Sauble Beach, dropped everything to pursue his love of music.

"I discovered my passion for music when I was 20. I had made a mess-load of money acting in Hog Wild and Pick Up Summer. I rented a cheap apartment in Montreal with two other actors and spent six months living like a hermit. I listened to a lot of music."

A guitar player, it was when Thomas realized he needed to play left-handed, not right, in the early 80s, that the light went off.

"It was inspiring. From that moment on I realized that music was what I wanted to do."

He retaught himself how to play and he studied the mechanics of singing.

In 1981 he had one of the lead roles in the cult classic *My Bloody Valentine*, "but I just felt that music was more my strength."

Over the next few years, he held a variety of jobs: dishwasher, pinball cashier, grocery clerk, security guard, decorative lamp assembler - all to pay the bills while he honed his musical skills.

Then, in 1990, while studying Jazz Vocals at Humber College, he auditioned as the lead singer for a new band.

It was a performance that would change his life.

In March of 1991, several months after joining Sister Moon as the lead vocalist and rhythm/acoustic guitarist, Thomas flew to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf to perform for US troops during Operation Desert Storm.

The band played the 200-person bar on the Cunard Princess, docked in the port city of Manama, every night for the next five months.

"It was a floating hotel where soldiers would go for three days of rest and relaxation," said Thomas.

There were 900 unarmed soldiers onboard - and gas masks in case of a scud missile attack.



Thomas Kovacs

"The guy booking the acts for the ship was a Canadian. He used to get all his showbands from Humber. This time he needed a rock band."

Sister Moon had never played together before. They sequestered themselves in one of the bandmate's basements and learned 50 songs in a week before they caught their flight to the Middle East.

The soldiers were not allowed to drink alcohol in Saudi Arabia, so the ship's bar was their favourite haunt on the Cunard Princess.

"Within several days," said Thomas, "it became very obvious to the entertainment director that we had never played together before. He told us to get people out on the dance floor or go home. We were stunned."

But motivated.

"There was no way we were going home. We organized set lists, cut down the time between songs to mere seconds and learned how to play for an audience. We were given a four-day trial - and we passed with flying colours.

The experience, said Thomas, "had a tremendous influence on my development as a stage performer."

He stayed on the Cunard Princess until September. Then he and Sister Moon's lead guitarist hitchhiked across Europe for several months.

"I had to give my voice a rest. I paid out of pocket to see an ear, nose and throat specialist. I had three steroid shots for nodes on my vocal chords, but he told me

they would heal with time."

He odd-jobbed once he returned to Canada, eventually landing a five-year stint as the weekly house performer at Kiwi Kick, a bar/restaurant in the trendy High Park area of Toronto, and building on the skills he had learned in the Persian Gulf.

Eventually, "I reached an age where I wanted to find a more substantial source of income. I took a sixth month course at York University and got a job as a programmer/analyst at Canadian Tire. It was 1997. I was 38 years old."

He worked there for 12 years, but all the while, "music was tugging at my heartstrings. I loved my job. The people were fantastic; the work was stimulating and rewarding," recalled Thomas, who was gigging once a month to rave reviews at the Arbour Restaurant in Nobleton. "But it was now or never. I decided to make a go of it."

His work at Canadian Tire helped Thomas to take care of the business side of being a musician. He put together a promotional kit and aggressively sought work.

"The plan was to get enough gigs to earn a income and not lean so heavily on my life savings."

In 2001, Thomas was invited to be the musician aboard an Adventure Canada cruise. His flight landed in Iceland six hours before the 911 tragedy. Since then, he has been the musician on 11 Adven-

ture Canada cruises. He has seen the Arctic Circle, the Northwest Passage, Nunavut, Baja California and the Galapagos Islands and worked alongside such esteemed guest speakers as Margaret Atwood and Farley Mowat.

Captain Matthew Swan "is crazy in a really great way. I had this 'serious-minded artist' bent and he taught me the importance of having fun with the audience. I would watch all these passengers come onboard the ship burdened with their day-to-day cares and by the third or fourth day they'd be clustered around the GPS as we crossed the equator, looking like schoolchildren and bubbling over with joy. I learned a lot from that."

As always, he put that education to good use. Thomas has a set list of 250 of 'your favourite hits from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s' in just about every conceivable musical styling - and he's booked solidly until Labour Day Weekend and beyond.

"I hand out my song list before every show. It's a great way to connect with your audience. People browse the set list and make requests. It helps to get them involved in the performance."

Thomas has quickly become the darling of Salvatore's Trattoria and Cafe in Port Perry, where he packs the house whenever he's in town, and he's sure to be a hit in Uxbridge with his first gig coming up later this month.

An engaging performer, Thomas wins fans with his wonderful voice, his effortless playing and his wicked sense of humour. (He won the Toastmasters District 60 Humorous Speech Contest in 2009 about his adventures in the Persian Gulf, beating out 3,000 other speakers.) He is a real "crowd pleaser," said Norma Hill, owner/manager of The Scruffy Duck Restaurant in Schomberg and "his ability to relate and communicate with any crowd is second to none," said his old boss, Ray Mondolo, the owner/manager of the Arbour Restaurant.

"It's an amazing feeling to receive high praise for something I love to do," said Thomas, who is thrilled with the way things are going now that he is following his heart. "It was one thing to receive praise from my manager at Canadian Tire for being a great programmer. But on a deeper level, it's extremely gratifying to hear people praise me for my singing."

To catch up with Thomas, e-mail tom@thomaskovacs.com, call 416-459-0349 or log onto www.thomaskovacs.com. You can see him live at Salvatore's in Port Perry on July 15, July 29, Aug. 5 and Aug. 12 at 8 p.m. and on New Year's Eve. His debut in Uxbridge is on July 14 at Boston Pizza. One word of advice ... make a reservation or you won't get a table!