



Tom Kovacs with Jan, Thorntin and Malcolm Macdonald on the patio of Erin's Bistro Riviere. Sundays are Thorntin's day off but when Tom is performing Thorntin kicks back along with the rest of us, enjoying the show with his mom and grandfather.

ARTIST TO WATCH

Thomas Kovacs

by Yevgenia Casale

About a year ago an email popped into my inbox from Belfountain Inn owner and head chef Thorntin Macdonald. It was about as excited as an email can get. He was over the moon at the prospect of presenting Thomas Kovacs (pronounced ko-va-t-ch) as a special musical guest.

That got my attention. It usually takes something pretty special to get the normally low-key restaurateur quite so animated. I immediately put a call in to Tom and asked to do a story about him. I had to know more about this guy.

It took us a few months to coordinate our schedules. In the mean time, I started noticing Tom promoted as the headliner at some of Caledon's favourite dining establishments.

Kovacs was thrilled to have Caledon Spectrum profile him but with a caveat: first I had to witness one of his shows. He was right to insist. Some things you just have to experience in person.

"What's a couple of hours?" I thought, taking the opportunity to head off to Erin. Thorntin owns Bistro Riviere as well as the Belfountain Inn so we knew that at the very least the food would be amazing. Well, it wasn't just a couple of hours but the meal was terrific; the sangria was delectable and the show was pure joy: so much fun!

Afterwards Tom sat down with me so that we could get to know each other before our official interview. We had decided to film it live at the SouthFields Village Farmers' Market the following Thursday so this was supposed to be a casual preinterview meeting. Before either one of us knew it, three hours had gone by.

He's just that easy to talk to.

"In April 1980 I realized that music was my strength," he started off. "I was sharing an apartment with two other actors and just

finished doing a couple of movies." Having earned a decent amount of money off those two films Tom holed up in his room and completely immersed himself in his music. He began to hear things he wasn't aware of before such as the "careful enunciation of each syllable." His eureka moment occurred when Tom realized he had to turn the guitar around and play left-handed because it felt more "personal, immediate, and exciting. It felt like I was creating a beat instead of following one."

For the next fifteen years Tom held down an assortment of mundane jobs to support his music. Once he got to his 30's Kovacs decided that he needed to "get a real job" so he landed working night shifts as a security guard. That's where he discovered that he had an aptitude for computers. He taught himself how to programme at the lobby desk workstation, completed a six-month course at York University and from there walked into a thirteen year stint in the Information Technology department at Canadian Tire.

Despite the obvious creative elements, a full-time musician is very much a small business owner. Tom credits his years at Canadian Tire with giving him invaluable IT skills, insights into running a business and learning how to connect with people: Tom manages his own website, promotion and business affairs.

As an entertainer his professionalism is one of the first things to come through in any of his performances. Kovacs is so comfortable in his own skin that nothing seems to faze him. He engages with the audience in a fantastically intimate way and brings people out through conversation.

If they want to join him, they do, if they want to just listen they do. The driving force appears to be his desire to deliver a memorable and positive interplay for the audience.

Remarkably one of the biggest lessons he took away from Canadian Tire was how to stay calm and maximize audience participation without letting it get out of control. “I learned not to take playful teasing seriously,” says Kovacs. In the corporate world Tom met a “different caliber of people” than what he was used to as a night security guard.

They loved to have fun and push buttons and in walked Tom with, “a chest full of buttons to press.” They used to have a field day with Kovacs, pretending there were sudden system emergencies and then laughing themselves silly at his reaction on discovery of the prank. “After two years, I got bored with my own reactions so I started to joke back with them instead.”

Some months later a co-worker approached him and said “you’re no fun anymore. We can’t get a rise out of you.” As Tom puts it, he “felt a delicious sense of having grown up. I had my phase of playing a victim and eventually stopped getting any value out of it. I got bored of my own pattern.”

Knowing when to break a pattern that is no longer working is another of Tom’s many talents. In late 2009, after yet another night of not getting a chance to work on his music, Tom came to work and stared at his reflection on the still blank computer monitor, thinking: “if you stay at this desk until you retire, you might as well kiss your music goodbye.” But quitting Canadian Tire meant walking away from a stable income.

Before committing to such a big decision he revealed his thoughts to a manager at the company. The manager described how his mother loved music, paintings and literature but was forced to hold an office job that she hated, ultimately regretting that she never pursued her own artistic expression. He also spoke with an associate vice-president, who happened to have suffered a heart attack the previous summer and reminded Tom that “you never know when your time may come.” They both had the same message for Kovacs: “do what you gotta do.”

Four years earlier, Tom had taken a Humber College summer songwriting workshop with Andy Kim. Kim had written the monster hits *Sugar, Sugar* and *Rock Me Gently*. Something Kim said had always stayed at the back of Tom’s mind and now came rushing to the forefront, fueling his courage to let go and follow through: “don’t have a safety net because you will use it.”

By the time Tom was ready to become a full-time musician he had half a century behind him. Not quite retirement age and not exactly innocent with youth. What surprised him was the amount of younger female attention he began to receive. It was not something he experienced while sitting behind a desk as a programmer. But, “when you watch somebody on stage looking into the audience and thinking about who they will take to bed that night instead of about the performance the show suffers. I didn’t want to become that cliché,” explained Kovacs.

Tom had also reached a point in his life when he was finally ready to find “draw in his life partner.” He realized that if he succumbed to the temptations that are so readily available as a performer on the road, it would affect his ability to attract the woman he really wanted.

When they met, he realized instinctively that Cara was the one. She came along at just the right moment in his life. She is a beautiful, confident single mom. According to Tom, she is the

embodiment of everything he was looking for. “We share the same weirdness, the same off-the-wall humour,” he laughed. “She has this amazing sense of fun and we share a real emotional connection.”

Cara came to watch the show that afternoon, as well. Though she didn’t stay for our conversation the wicked twinkle in her eye betrayed their mutual attraction. The way she tells it, she was the one who actively pursued Tom. But regardless of who was the hunter, it is the adventure that matters to Kovacs.

For the past twelve years Tom has also had a steady gig as a musician with Adventure Canada. Each year he flies up to the Arctic and spends ten days aboard a 100 passenger luxury cruise ship, witnessing the Northwest Passage and the west coast of Greenland. National Geographic put Adventure Canada on their list of Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth so it’s a pretty big deal. Like an Empire Club of Canada luncheon, those trips give Tom a unique opportunity to spend time with some remarkable people. Only in his case, he gets to hang out with them for almost a fortnight rather than just over lunch.

When it comes to Tom Kovacs, the conversation can go on and on and I intend on doing just that. In the mean time, check out that live interview and performance which we taped at the SouthFields Village farmers’ market. It’s on our website (caledonspectrum.com). Of course there really isn’t anything like being in the audience at one of his shows. Luckily he posts his performance schedule online (thomaskovacs.com). .CS

Kovacs, fielding audience requests over a Sunday lunch performance.

