

<http://www.ottawaathome.ca/article-383817-The-Rockcliffe-rocker.html>

Jeans, t-shirt, bare feet, guitar draped across his body as he lounges on a couch, fingers dancing over the strings. Gerry Wall seems worlds away, lost in his cocoon of music.

It's the look that seems to fit him best, though he'll admit to having to wear a suit once a month. He'll even admit to having a PhD in Economics, though it's unlikely he'd ever ask anyone to address him as Dr. Wall.

There's certainly no hint of formality as the other two members of the Gerry Wall Trio, Nigel Troop and John Witherspoon, wander in for a practice session on a summery Monday evening. Soon, the microphone stands are in place, the guitars are strumming, the amp is tuned up and the music is playing. Feet are tapping. One set is bare, one in old socks, while the third feet tap time in well-worn Birkenstocks.



From left to right: John Witherspoon, Gerry Wall and Nigel Troop practicing their tunes during a mid-week rehearsal. Photo by Etienne Ranger.

Not your typical garage band. No piercings. No tattoos. Just a little grey hair, some balding.

The “studio” is a cozy, glass-leaded, window-lined sunroom nestled at the back of a sprawling and very formal Rockcliffe home. A little bit of escape – an hour to lose themselves in their love of music – before returning to other life commitments: work; a son’s birthday dinner; preparations to send kids off to university.

They probably wouldn’t appreciate the comment, but they’re just three middle-aged guys having fun – and churning out some pretty decent music while they’re at it. After playing at a charity event for the Ottawa Heart Institute a few years ago, they started playing actual “paying” gigs at easy-listening venues like the Elmdale Tavern and the New Edinburgh Pub.

“We practice because we want to play it well and when we play it well, we want to play it for people,” explains John.

With four CDs to his credit (performed with a coterie of performers and back-up musicians), Gerry is the “musical brains” behind the operation. He, along with his brother-in-law and friend Graham Knight, has written both the lyrics and the music for all the albums’ songs.

It’s hard to actually pin a label on the sound. Gerry calls it Canadiana with an emphasis on the lyrical.

“It’s got elements of Americana, folk, roots, jazz, country,” he laughs. With his warm voice and pop and country-tinged melodies, it’s catchy, easy listening. Pretty impressive stuff for a guy who never had a formal music lesson in his life.

"I was a child of the late '60s," he shrugs. "My sister had a guitar and I'd sneak it out of her room. Then I finally found a bass guitar in a pawn shop and put down a \$5 deposit hoping my Mom would lend me the rest." She did. And he never looked back. (He owns 12 guitars now.)

Growing up in Saskatoon, he'd often spend Saturday nights in the public library finding music to listen to that he wouldn't otherwise get a chance to hear. It was a group from Moose Jaw playing at his high school dance (they were called the Mozart Group) that finally kick-started his desire to become a musician.

"They were playing 'Chain, Chain, Chain' as I walked into the gym and I can still hear the soaring falsetto harmonies and cavernous Motown groove," he recalls. "They were Prairie boys playing music that would turn heads in any club any place in the world. That's the first time I said 'hey, I want to do that.'"

He played in a high school band and even did a little touring. It didn't lead to fame. It led to the very sober realization that life on the road wasn't something that appealed to him or his bank account.

The guitar still rarely left his hand. But academia led him to study English literature before "just getting into" economics. With a PhD from the University of Toronto under his belt, he held a variety of positions in the private and public sectors before founding Wall Communications, an economic research and analysis company.

While his real job allows him the tools (financing) with which to pursue his passion (and support his family, wife Karen and 18-year-old son Kyle who has just started university in Guelph), you almost wonder if any of his clients ever get a few sheets of lyrics tucked into their reports by mistake.

Says Karen lovingly, "Sometimes I don't know which part of his personality I am dealing with, extreme intellect, absent-minded professor or Jimi Hendrix. But it does keep life interesting."

He is never without pen and paper in case a lyric or a melody pops into his head.

"Sometimes it's the words first, sometimes the melody comes first. Sometimes they come together. But you don't just turn on the tap. So when it does come, I dedicate myself to the moment," he laughs. He's modest, but he'll also freely admit that he's lucky. Not everyone has his gift of music.

Not that he's expecting to hit the charts anytime soon. He loves Ottawa for its great collection of festivals, like Jazz Fest, Bluesfest and Folkfest. And sure, he admits he'd love to play at one of those venues one day.

But, is that what all this is leading to? Who knows.

"Gerry is a talented musician who puts his own music out there for all to enjoy," says John of his band mate. "I like it and I'm enjoying the ride."

"As long as the music keeps coming to me, I'll keep doing it," smiles Gerry. "I just love writing and recording. And that makes me a happy guy." — Written by Andrea Douglas