

Highway goes on and on Tom Cochrane introduces new tunes while anthem keeps rollin'

Mike Devlin
Times Colonist

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PREVIEW

Who: Tom Cochrane and Red Rider

Where: Royal Theatre

When: Sunday, 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$41.75 and \$49.75

Note: Cochrane and Red Rider also perform Monday in Nanaimo at the Port Theatre. The show is sold out.

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In 1993, Tom Cochrane was given an award celebrating Life Is a Highway as one of the three most-played songs on U.S. radio that year. A decade-and-a-half later, the song is still getting spins.

Artists are lucky if they have one good hit in a career, Cochrane says. He has been blessed with a half-dozen, but none bigger than the Grammy-nominated track that won him single of the year in 1992 at the Junos.

The tune was re-introduced to audiences last year via country-pop act Rascal Flatts, who tackled the song for use in the smash animated film, Cars. "We gave them permission and forgot all about it, because they held the movie back for about a year and a half," Cochrane says.

"They released it last May and the song caught everybody by surprise. Life Is a Highway took on a life of its own."

Again.

The 53-year-old native of Lynn Lake, Man., still plays the song at his concerts -- gladly, he adds -- in addition to other hits from his days with Red Rider. But nothing gets a reaction like the song that is currently putting "some tanks of gas in the tour bus."

"As a singer-songwriter, if you can make people feel a little less alone in the world, at the end of the day you've done your job," he says.



CREDIT: Handout

Tom Cochrane enjoyed success with Life Is a Highway in the early 1990s. The animated film Cars gave it a new life last spring.

"I think a song like Life Is a Highway does that. I'll always be proud of it. I'll never stop playing it. I like to be able to inspire people and have them walk out of my shows singing those anthems and feeling that buzz. That's important for me."

Cochrane is touring across Canada behind his latest solo effort, *No Stranger*, which is drawing some of his best reviews since 1995's *Ragged Ass Road* (named after a stretch of highway near Yellowknife).

The recording features three of his former Red Rider mates, two of whom (bassist Jeff Jones and keyboardist-guitarist Ken Greer) are on the road with Cochrane.

It's easier now than it was, he admits, and a heck of a lot more fun to play Red Rider classics like *Lunatic Fringe*, *White Hot*, *Boy Inside the Man* and *Big League*. "We're probably closer friends now than we ever were," he says of Greer, with whom he had a falling out in the early 1990s.

"We've purged ourselves of the testosterone-laden days when we were like bulls butting heads. When you're younger that tends to be the case. I explored that in the lyrics to *Boy Inside the Man*, 'When I turned 25, we were hungry, we had drive.' You go through different phases and I think we've mellowed a wee bit and we're now really good friends. We've buried most of the hatchets."

Greer, Jones and Red Rider keyboardist John Webster, who is not on the tour, played big roles on *No Stranger*. It was a heartfelt project, Cochrane admits, flush with songs about death, war and mortality, so it was nice to have his old friends by his side for the intensely personal album, which Cochrane produced and engineered himself.

There's no big, stadium-filling hit on the record, but Cochrane says fans are connecting with the songs during the current tour, which stops Sunday at the Royal Theatre.

"I realize people are always going to have a soft spot for certain Tom Cochrane and Red Rider songs, so I don't think you can force it with a record like *No Stranger*. There's an organic life that a record like that takes on, and I don't think you can hype it. Let's face it. I'm not a Canadian Idol winner. A record like this people have to discover a little bit."

Once they dive in, most will find Cochrane's love of hockey and affinity for social commentary hasn't ebbed a bit.

He remains involved with World Vision Canada, and his harrowing trip to Rwanda with the charity in December finds its way on to *No Stranger*. The flip side of the experience is his friendship with professional hockey player Ryan Smyth, who until recently played for the Edmonton Oilers.

The two are close friends, and though the liner notes to *No Stranger* show the song, *Rough and Tumble*, is dedicated to Regan Smith, it is in fact Smyth who inspired the tune. "I relate to the way he conducts his life," Cochrane says of the gritty player.

"With him, it's more than just hockey. What makes him special is his courage and commitment. He puts it all out on the ice."

Cochrane leaves it all on the stage, which is why he remains a huge concert draw. Plenty of dates on his current tour are sold out, which never fails to impress Cochrane.

"It fits like a slipper," he says of his relationship with Canada. "It's my country, I'm a cultural nationalist, so I feel right at home all over the country."

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