

ENTERTAINMENT

A true Canadian patriot

by Peter J. Cullen
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It would be virtually impossible to make mention of Tom Cochrane without associating him with the inspirational tune, 'Life Is a Highway'. After all, it is the song that thrust his name and distinctive vocals into millions of homes throughout the seven continents while also propelling him to a hero-like status in his homeland.

But there is more to Tom Cochrane than just conjuring up universal metaphors.

The man sports an illustrious history, both inside and outside the field of music; he possesses a great love of the outdoors; he loves Canada; and he undoubtedly receives

After the oft-mentioned 'Life is a Highway' helped him sweep the 1992 Juno Awards and take the Top Ten by storm in virtually every country world-wide, the remainder of *Mad Mad World* failed to register outside Cochrane's home and native land. Amazing follow-up tunes such as 'No Regrets' and 'Sinking Like a Sunset' – although claiming #1 positions in Canada – could not attract the attention of those still singing along to Cochrane's first single. However, the notion of being regarded for only that one song in some regions has not depressed Cochrane whatsoever. "If I didn't like the song it would be a tremendous thorn in my side," he stated, "but I love the song and it's written from the right place, so I mean it doesn't bother me

"There's a real strong element of support for Canadian music, and then there's people that snub their nose at it."

recognition for more than just one hit single. In fact, Cochrane has created over 70 songs that have secured world-wide air play, and he should certainly add to that number with his latest album, *Ragged Ass Road*.

A moody, dark, yet occasionally optimistic CD, *Ragged Ass Road* chronicles Cochrane's recent hardships and draws a vivid contrast between itself and 1991's buoyant breakthrough predecessor, *Mad Mad World*, which reached Diamond status (one million copies sold) in Canada last year. What the records commonly share, though, is their consistency of quality and abundance of intriguing tracks – two traits that Cochrane has mastered over the past 20-plus years in the industry.

"I think the song writing formula – for me – is just to be as honest as I can," Cochrane said in a recent phone interview. "[Popularity] comes as a result of just doing good work and trying to be as honest in your work as you can be and not really get caught up in all the rest of it. And that's how I've really conducted myself and my career ... I've always tried to write and produce records where there's no filler, so I've put a lot of integrity into the work."

Stressing the importance he places on his song writing, Cochrane pointedly stated, "I'm a songwriter and I believe that songs make the act, songs make the music and on top of that, the singer makes the music."

That honesty he speaks of clearly shines through on *Ragged Ass Road*, which Cochrane co-produced. He bears his inner-emotions on songs such as 'Just Scream', one of his most impassioned songs ever, and 'I Wish You Well', which recounts dark days and comprehending the pain – both pieces being somewhat on a personal level for Cochrane. "There's some pretty moody stuff on the new record," he said, describing its feel, "but I think it's mixed with positive stuff. Some people say, 'Well, gee, 'I Wish You Well' is kind of a backhanded, sort of cynical statement,' but it's not. It's a positive song, but in its own way. Sort of in a different way than 'Life Is a Highway'."

that much. There's always going to be that element where people are gonna really respond to one song or another song, but that's just the nature of pop music ... For a lot of people it's introduced them to what I've done as well as what Red Rider's done. It becomes an entree to that legacy."

The mention of Red Rider soon had Cochrane reminiscing of the band that assisted him in constructing his current career. Radio classics such as 'The Boy Inside the Man', 'Big League' and 'Victory Day' stand as the precursor to his '90s success. After yielding eight albums and charting numerous hit singles, he firmly decided to strive for the upper echelon by himself. But with such promising potential, why would Cochrane want to pursue the risk of going solo?

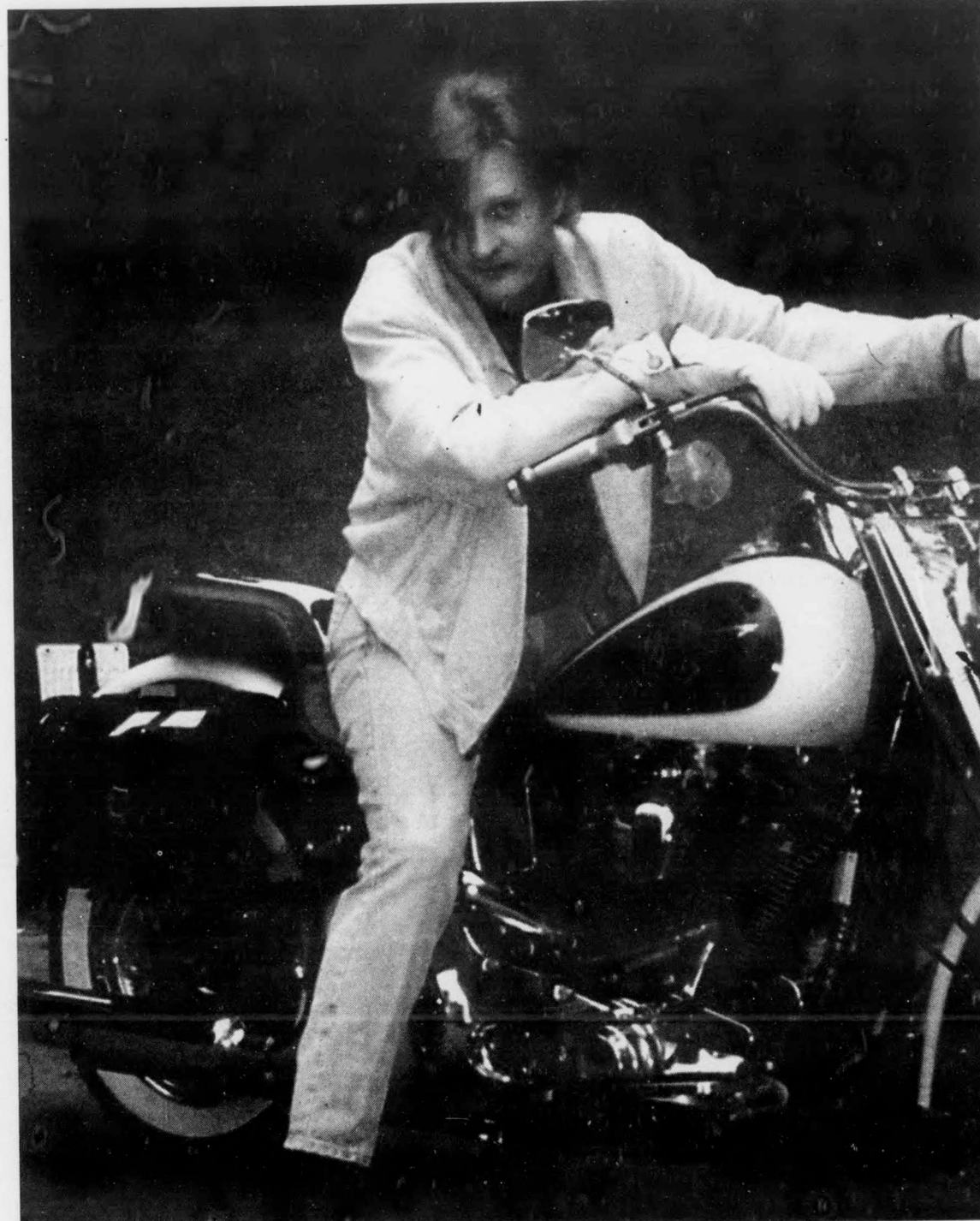
"Well, I think it got to a point with Ken [Greer, lead guitarist] where we were talking about putting steel guitar in everything just because that was our signature sound, even though a song might not have suited it. That was one reason."

Pausing to think, he summarized the break-up by saying, "I guess we came to a kind of creative crossroads and where he went one way, I went the other. I remember bringing him a couple of songs I was writing for *Mad Mad World*, and Kenny didn't like the songs

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or think they were appropriate for us to do, and I said, 'Well, y'know, I do,' and I realized we kind of reached a creative impasse so it was best to go our separate ways."

Throughout that Red Rider saga, Cochrane became notorious for his gutsy, self-narrative style of writing and his talented trait of reaching fans on an emotional level. In addition, he also totes the image of the true Canuck wherever his journeys take him. And he refuses to shed it, attributing his favouritism for the maple leaf to his humble origins. "I think that my dad kind of instilled in me a



Seated atop his Harley, Tom Cochrane revs up for his long race down the *Ragged Ass Road*.

real respect for the country, and for the heritage of the country. He was a bush pilot and I kind of look at those guys as being the last pioneers. I was born in a little town called Lynn Lake, Manitoba, and I think that a lot of those values are kind of instilled in me as a kid. They weren't the kind of things that you get preached to about – they're just sort of things that you pick up on, you see and you absorb. So I really think that that's a big part of it. It's my heritage, and even though I left

that snub their nose at it. It's never ceased to amaze me, but I think that that's a dying breed now."

However, Cochrane can certainly assume his share of the credit for lessening the stigma against his contemporaries. His willingness to herald the wonders of the nation throughout his career has increased the respect for Canadian music. "I don't think you have to go farther than the Tragically Hip to see a band that is basically only a force in

its own country ... I think they're a great band. They're a world class band. But the fact is that they don't shy away from Canadian references in their work ... I'm proud of that, I'm proud of the contributions that I've made to that and to making people able to not be embarrassed."

"There was a time when I was a teenager growing up where the whole 'maple leaf' format was just an embarrassment," Cochrane said in reference to the southern sojourns of Joni Mitchell, Robbie Robertson and Leonard Cohen, an artist who has influenced Cochrane immensely throughout his career. "But I think those times have changed now. Canadians are willing to say, 'Look, it's ours and we're proud of it and we know that it can stand up to any music being

made anywhere else in the world.' I think that's a product of cultural maturity."

Aside from music, Cochrane also stresses a love of literature. The poetic works of Pablo Neruda and Sylvia Plath have inspired several of Cochrane's songs. In fact, it was the form of poetry that eventually led him to create lyrics. "I started writing poetry when I was 12 ... It's always been kind of a love of mine, but I think poetry at its best has a musical element even if it's not put to music. There's something in the rhythm, something in the spirit it conveys. So I think that when you have the luxury of being able to put it to music it really brings the poetry to life."

With such a diverse background and an extremely profound knowledge of music and its resources, Cochrane could stay in the music world long after he decides to forego the packed arenas and far-flung hotels. But that event will certainly not occur any time soon. "This definitely won't be my last record ... I'd like to get into serious writing down the line – write some books and do some play writing – but that's tremendously demanding so it's something I'll look at in the distant future. But I'm definitely not ready to retire from music yet."