

## DAN FRECHETTE HISTORY

Written by John Kendle - Edited by Dan Frechette

Dan Frechette is a musical force. The Winnipeg-based singer/songwriter is a wealth of musical knowledge and experience. He's written more than 1,300 songs. He's been signed to a major songwriting contract and he's busked on street corners and in subways all over North America and Europe. He's toured with a First Nations rock band, played solo at several folk festivals and he's the man who penned well-known songs for The Duhks and Dervish, among others.

Of his debut album *Lucky Day*, Greg Quill of the *Toronto Star* writes, "...an album that will surely find an exalted place in the canon," and the exalted folk music periodical *Sing Out!* describes Dan as, "one of the most talented singer/songwriters heard in a long time."

Dan Frechette's music journey is now gaining notice. Frechette's fascination with music began early. When he was four or five, he recalls, he sat for hours in his room playing his uncle's Johnny Horton, Buck Owens and Chubby Checker records over and over and over again. "I had a cheap-looking Fisher Price record player," Frechette says. "I used to put North to Alaska from Johnny Horton on 45 r.p.m when I was four years old so he sang up in my key."

Frechette grew up on the working-class side of Pinawa, Manitoba, 60 miles east of Winnipeg. The big city's oldies station was all he could pick up on the radio, so young Dan schooled himself in the hit sounds of the '60s and '70s and read voraciously about the era. "I had the Rolling Stone book, *The Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, and I must have read it 50 times by the time I was eight or nine," he says. "I knew what chart position *Just Like a Woman* (by Bob Dylan) was in 1966, all that kind of thing."

By the time he was 11, Frechette had filled scrapbooks with lyrics to the songs he heard on the radio — "songs like *One Tin Soldier* or *Lay Lady Lay*." — making his own words up when he couldn't make them out. His teachers noticed his poetic talents and pushed him to keep writing. At about this time, Frechette had acquired his first guitar and began exploring his Beatles influences.

"On VCR I recorded those Beatles documentaries that were on TV in the late '80s and I memorized them word for word," he says. "My songwriting was influenced by mimicking the Beatles' song structures. For instance, they'd start a lot of their songs with the chorus — and when I was 13 or 14 I wrote songs that began with the chorus. I was writing around their models."

When a next-door neighbour loaned Frechette a few of Bob Dylan's albums, the 13-year-old's eyes were opened wide. "The first time I heard *Desolation Row* I was completely blown away. I thought it was the most amazing saga I had ever listened to," Frechette says. "It changed my whole life, hearing that song. It had an apocalyptic madness and I'd listen to it and I wouldn't always understand what he said but I understood the way he said it. Now it reminds me of the stuff that Kerouac or Ginsberg

wrote, it's like a Beat poem.

"I've never heard a song that affected me so much. When I was 14 or 15, nobody understood me because I was going on and on about Desolation Row of Visions of Joanna or whatever.

Naturally, that's around the time somebody older asks 'Have you ever heard much Neil Young?'" Frechette says. "And around then I discovered Woody Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty, too."

By this time, young Dan was heavily immersed in his music. He wore a black hat "like Stevie Ray Vaughan's," grew his hair out and began writing his own material in earnest and jamming with other musicians at his high school, Pinawa Secondary. His songs gained some notoriety locally and he began attracting attention from music biz types in Winnipeg — and beyond.

At 17, Frechette found himself in the unlikely position — for a high-school kid — of being offered a development deal by EMI Music Publishing, who loved the unadorned lyricism and melodies of his early material. After shuffling back and forth between Pinawa and the EMI studios in Toronto, Frechette moved to Toronto at 19 to write fulltime for the company. EMI insisted he find a band and a pop/rock image for himself. Although he released an album, under the unlikely moniker Post '76, he was soured on the music business by the experience.

"I'd be playing the songs on my 12-string acoustic," he explains. "then the producer would bring me into the studio and I'd sit there and play my song and then afterwards they'd put it through some crazy tube amp thing and add big drums and distorted guitars and turn it into some sort of heavy rock song. I was upset I was misled. The people at EMI loved everything I wrote it seemed 'til they signed me and then after that hardly anything I came up with mattered to them. I could write in any style but the odd pop style songs I wrote that they would be excited about really weren't my thing. It was a real shaping process for me, for sure."

Fed up with being asked to write No. 1 hits for other people, Frechette left his Toronto apartment and moved back to Manitoba, this time to Winnipeg, where he found likeminded friends and began playing solo gigs around town. He worked intermittently at various day jobs, but soon found he could earn more money in less time busking in the city streets and in its underground walkway system. At the time he helped put together the roots/rock band named Motel 75 with Scott Nolan, Grant Siemens, Sky Onosson, Mike Webster, and Joanna Miller.

By early 2001, the band project had fizzled, as so many do, so Frechette lit out for warmer climes in the midst of a harsh Manitoba winter. Armed with a \$10 dollar 1940's blues guitar he found at a thrift store and a rechargeable amplifier, he busked his way from Arizona through California and up the Pacific Coast, honing his chops, become ever-more street savvy and, most importantly, opening himself up to all sorts of musical

experiences.

“I played funk music in San Francisco at the corner of Mission and Fifth Avenue,” he smiles. “I was playing the guitar and this guy started breakdancing in front of me. People were saying, ‘Man! You got it!’ And then this guy came along with a miniature drumkit he had in his backpack and we started to jam — and right away we had 40 or 50 people dancing to us playing Cissy Strut by the Meters. That was one of my best memories, done on a \$10 guitar with a broken G-string tuning peg!”

A year later, Frechette made a similar trek through Europe. He busked his way through Germany, Ireland and the U.K., averaging 45 Pounds an hour near Trafalgar Square in London. These usical rambles, he believes, helped cleanse him of his EMI sojourn. “I started thinking in my own terms about songs, what a song should do,” Frechette says. “To me, songs are powerful, they should have a meaning and they should last a long time. I had to imagine a thousand people on a hilltop singing the lyrics that I was writing. So, I started listening back to myself more critically, with a ‘This is crap’ attitude. Busking also really helped me with that — helping me see my songs from a very cold perspective.”

With self-examination came self-assurance and focus. Frechette also began focusing on his craft by reading books about songwriting and by writing little stories that he wanted to tell. His songs, he knew, were getting stronger, and he began writing the material that characterizes — and became — Lucky Day, A Quick Walk With Me and Hitting The Hard Road Straight.

Now, with his albums earning plaudits, praise and airplay across North America, Frechette is poised and ready to share his songs on tour — and he means it when he says ‘share.’ “If I was playing guitar by myself in my room, just sitting there alone, I’d get bored quickly because something would be missing,” he says. “The people in front of me would be missing and so would the interaction. The feeling that I get when I hear something that moves me is ‘man, I wish that musician was next to me so I could tell him/her how that affected me — so I could share the feeling. “To share and to have something be shared, musically, is the ultimate.”