

Stephen Fearing // Bio 2022

Roots troubadour. Songwriting storyteller. Master guitarist.

That description may not cascade off the tongue. But there is simply no better way to sum up the astonishing career of Canadian-born, Irish-reared musician and performer Stephen Fearing. His work as a solo artist, producer, and co-founder of roots-rock combo Blackie and the Rodeo Kings and of indie-folk duo Fearing & White has achieved the acclaim, accolades, and longevity Wikipedia pages were made to chronicle.

Tallying Fearing's achievements *is* a massive task. But it's a thrilling one. Some milestones at a glance: 10 solo studio albums plus one compilation, one live record and another forthcoming; 11 studio albums with Blackie, two with fellow Irishman Andy White.

Nine JUNO Award nominations overall and two wins, for Best Roots & Traditional Album: Group for Blackie's 2000 release *Kings of Love* and Roots & Traditional Album of the Year: Solo for Fearing's 2006's *Yellowjacket*. Oh yes, and 2017's *Every Soul's a Sailor* was awarded the 2017 Worldwide Album of the Year by Blues & Roots Radio with Fearing also named 2017 Contemporary Singer of the Year at the Canadian Folk Music Awards.

Then there is the list of celebrated contemporaries — Bruce Cockburn, Margo Timmins, Rose Cousins, Richard Thompson, Shawn Colvin, and Sarah McLachlan — Fearing has collaborated with in-studio across the decades, plus multiple others — Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris, Nick Lowe, City and Colour, Keb' Mo', Cockburn again — he has shared stages with at venues across the planet.

Legendary Canadian singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn holds a special place in Fearing's highlight reel. It was while supporting Cockburn on tour in 1991 that Fearing played Toronto's famed Massey Hall for the very first time, a performance Cockburn himself introduced.

"That was pretty special," Fearing confirms. "And it was around that time I met Colin Linden," the renowned Nashville-based musician, producer, and alum of The Band with whom Fearing and fellow songwriter Tom Wilson formed the long-standing combo Blackie and the Rodeo Kings in 1996.

Though intended as a one-off to honour late folk songwriting legend Willie P. Bennett, Blackie and the Rodeo Kings connected powerfully with audiences and critics. Two-plus decades later, the trio along with ace rhythm section John Dymond and Gary Craig, continue to thrill fans with their wildly accomplished and multihued music. The band is a key — and very cherished — chapter in Fearing's career.

"Blackie is a huge part of my life and 25 years later, I am still blown away by those guys," he says. Fun fact: Fearing's much-lauded *Every Soul's a Sailor* was recorded in Toronto at Canterbury Sound with Blackie bassist Dymond and bassist Craig and co-produced by David Travers Smith.

Fearing continues: "I feel very blessed. In addition to Blackie, I got to work with [renowned music executive and artist manager] Bernie Finkelstein for 14 years. I really have had some great stuff come my way."

Stephen Fearing was born in 1963 in Vancouver, British Columbia and grew up in Dublin, Ireland where his schoolmates included future members of U2. To say that music was in Fearing's blood is a genuine understatement. Father John was a music teacher, organist, and concert pianist. "He taught band, and from time to time, I still run into Vancouver musicians who remember my father teaching them."

Mother Shirley was a trained soprano who sacrificed a professional music career to raise her family, an unfortunately common practice in her era. Fearing's grandparents too, were also highly musical. "And Catherine Hayes" — a world-famous, Victorian-era Irish soprano known as the Swan of Erin with a Wikipedia page of her own — "was my great, great, great aunt," Fearing says. "Music goes back generations."

In 1981, Fearing left Ireland and relocated to Minneapolis, immersing himself in the music scene, learning the fundamentals of songwriting and performing, while washing dishes to pay the bills. "That's really when I became a songwriter," he says.

"I ended up playing four sets a night in clubs and restaurants, learning a huge repertoire of music. Along the way, it seemed that I should be writing my own stuff, which led to me comparing myself to what I had been playing: Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Gordon Lightfoot. I was riding a Greyhound bus across America, forcing myself to write songs. It went from there."

By 1984, Fearing was back in Vancouver, determined to become a professional musician, a pursuit kicked off in earnest in 1986 with a self-titled album issued on cassette. In 1988 he released *Out to Sea*. That was followed in 1991 by *Blue Line*, which was cut in the UK. With that album came another career highlight... and another career breakthrough.

"I was signed very briefly to the Rough Trade label in the UK and *Blue Line* came out on their New Roots imprint. They organized a show with me opening for (Irish folk stars) Donal Lunny and Christy Moore at the Windmill Theatre in London.

"I was terrified," Fearing chuckles. "The theatre was filled with Irish people living in London, who are a very particular group. Sinéad O'Connor was backstage because she and Donal Lunny were an item at that time. But *Blue Line* ended up rerecorded for True North Records (owned by the beforementioned Finkelstein) and that became my first proper North American release."

Multiple other releases followed and with each, near-universal critical praise, and widespread touring with appearances at festivals and theatres across Canada, the US, the UK, and Europe, including marquee events like the Reading Festival and WOMAD.

Indeed, it was while performing at the Winnipeg Folk Festival in 1998 that Fearing met Andy White and a fast friendship formed. "In some ways, working with Andy closed the circle on my Irish roots and experience. Even though he grew up in the North of Ireland and I grew up in Dublin, our main connection was the Beatles. That felt like going back into history for us."

Along the way, Fearing has also done what might be termed extra-curricular work, writing, and producing for others, notably, Suzie Vinnick's 2008 JUNO-nominated album, *Happy Here* and leading various songwriting workshops. He has also amassed a lid-flipping collection (for music nerds, anyway) of rare, vintage, and highly coveted guitars.

Still, Fearing's musical artistry and growth is best viewed through the lens of his many solo albums, which are as quietly dazzling as they are fully realized. Take, for instance, 2018's *The Secret of Climbing*, only available on vinyl and made in conjunction with prestige British gear company REGA, which commissioned the album to demonstrate the excellence of their speakers and turntables.

"It was made using minimal gear," Fearing says, adding that he may issue it digitally in future. "The idea was to make an acoustic album with zero studio gadgetry: no overdubs, no edits. The result is an extremely intimate-sounding recording. I joke that it sounds like I'm in your front room about to raid your fridge."

Then there is 2019's towering *The Unconquerable Past* which had the misfortune of having its touring and promotion scuttled by the onset of the pandemic. "That album was recorded in Winnipeg with Scott Nolan (William Prince, Mary Gauthier, Watermelon Slim) alongside some great local players. I'm proud of it though sadly, few have heard it. I hope that might change eventually."

Fearing — now based in Victoria, BC — enters 2022 on a tear. *O Glory*, Blackie and the Rodeo Kings' 11th studio album, is pending. Plans are afoot to record the abovementioned second live record with celebrated Danish-American backing band The Sentimentals in Copenhagen.

"Plus, I have in my back pocket a live set from the Mule Spinner in Hamilton that I recorded with (late, great producer/engineer) Bob Lanois, so I will release that as side one and the Denmark sessions as side two of a live record.

"But I need to go on the road. It's hard to write songs while living in captivity, as Colin Linden would put it," Fearing laughs, referring to COVID-induced restrictions. "Getting on stage is the fun part, especially when the adrenaline kicks in. People want to escape and be taken on a journey.

"I build my shows so they do just that."

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