

"I Was Ron Dann For A Day!"

By Chuck Micallef

The other morning I found a newspaper article on the floor dating way back to my college days. It was a write up about a Concert that I performed in the concourse of the college. How did that get there I wondered? Then I read the line-up of the band members and sat down to write.

In the late part of 1979 I was embarking on a path of Musical Education. Up to that point I had only busked music, learning everything by ear with no concept of how music took its form and how to break it down.

I had wandered from job to job always wanting to take on a music career but never getting to first base. So I decided that it was time to take a disciplined path and got accepted onto the Humber College Music Programme. Being a music course that revolved around Jazz, it certainly seemed like an unusual environment for a Country Folk Singer/Songwriter such as myself. But after a while I found that I wasn't the only one there into Country Music.

As I walked through the halls one day, I happened to see this fellow dismantling an instrument and putting it into its case before stowing it away in his locker. Frankly I was a little stunned. I couldn't help myself; I casually walked up to him and asked, "Is that a pedal steel?" He looked at me with a grin that once seen is always remembered, and he simply said, "Yes." At that point, as I was putting together a band for my Student Concert, I asked if he would be interested in playing and so it was agreed that he would.

A chance meeting developed into a great Friendship over the years but I still remember that first five-minute conversation when I met Ron Dann.

The day of the performance arrived and as everyone had rehearsed a number of times over the weeks, we had a pretty good time playing for the student body. At the end of it all, the bass player David Antonacci invited me outside to partake in the favourite pastime of most college students as a celebration. On my return, a lone figure was sitting stage side. That's when Ron taught me my first lesson of being a bandleader: You must always take care of business. The music department had lent us a keyboard but when the keyboard player had sat down before the concert, she found that she did not have the correct patch cable for that particular model. Enter keyboard number two. So here after all the crowd had disappeared along with all the sidemen, bar one, I am faced with a responsibility that I was not even aware of. Both keyboards had to be transported up two long flights of stairs back to the Music Department. Ron gave me a hand and I was very grateful.

I decided to put together a demo tape and asked Ron for his help and expertise. He gathered together a bass player and drummer, my choice for guitar was Anthony Vanderburgh and off we went to Wellesley Street Studios with music charts in hand. That was the first of many sessions that I shared with Ron. At the start of the session Ron pulled out a small reel of tape, "Don't let me forget to dub this onto cassette."

Our three-hour session went by all too quickly. Everyone happy with the tracks packed up and left. Ron being the last to go I suddenly remembered the tape. "Did you get the dub done?" I asked. He looked at me with an expression that said a thousand thank yous, asked the taxi driver to wait, then got the job done. Although Ron is known for his wit and charm, sometimes he was a fellow of very few words when he wanted to make a poignant point. I enjoy the memory of that moment because for once I felt like I was given something back.

I was 23 years old then, but looking back on those days I realise how backward I was maturity wise and how patient and understanding Ron was. He never missed an opportunity to build up my low self-esteem and always found ways to help me develop musically and personally. Never condescending, always quick with a joke when the situation got too heavy or embarrassing. And in those days I was always Mr Sensitive with a capital "S". If I felt an atmosphere within a group of people I always thought it was my fault. Ron told me that people were caught up in their own lives and the dark cloud was most often something that they were going through and had nothing to do with me. He said "Chuck, don't sweat the small stuff." And when I was deep in thought over that little pearl of wisdom he said with his indelible grin "Chuck, its all small stuff." Then we laughed.

We had numerous occasions of sharing Grand Marnier together. (That's a bottle not a glass) And then there were the Round Sound Studio Recording Sessions, with some of the top session players in Toronto.

"You pay scale, you can be sitting along side Red Shea!" Ron had told me once. It was during those sessions that I met Bob Federer, another master musician. The three of us had some incredible times in the studio together listening to music and Ron bouncing a number of one-liners of the walls.

There was this time that I dropped off some music charts and Ron introduced me to John Allan Cameron. That memory sticks out in my mind because the following Sunday I received a phone call.

"Charles? Ron Dann. I've got a pass to Mariposa are you free today?" Yes I was. So down to Ron's I go to pick up the pass...it was his. Getting to the Festival gate I flash the pass and the security guard politely asked me to pull over. Coming to the car window he asked, "Are you Ron Dann?" I answered, "yes" with the best smile I could muster. He left me sitting there for five minutes, which seemed like an hour, then to my surprise he returned to my car and I was waved on.

This was an All Access Pass with Ron Dann's name on it.

It was 1988 and Mariposa Folk Festival was in full swing. John Prine was performing that night. I had been a devout fan of John Prine for 16 years at that point in time. I nervously but with resolve made my way to the backstage gate. When I got back stage I mulled around a bit, then low and behold, I bumped into John Allan Cameron.

While we were chatting I mentioned to him that John Prine had been a hero of mine since I first heard his debut album and asked John Allan if he would do me the honour

of introducing us. As luck would have it, Mr. Prine was walking close by. John Allan asked me to stand where I was and he approached him with my request. My eyes were fixed on Mr. Prine as he was looking at the ground listening to John Allan. Lifting his head he looked over at me, then with his characteristic smile, John Prine came walking over to shake my hand. It was a short conversation but one that I'll remember for along time. It was a really great moment meeting the guy who had inspired me for so many years. Thinking back, I can now see that Ron Dann had a quiet hand in all of this.

On the phone the next day I excitedly related everything that had happened. I told Ron about the security guard asking me if I was Ron Dann. Ron asked, "What did you say?"

"I simply said yes," says I.

Ron laughed and said "Good for you!"