

# SCENE

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## WHISKY AND WINE

'Tis the season to celebrate with special alcoholic beverages from whisky to wine. See page 28.



KEVIN HILLIARD/Photo

Above: Moe and Chris Murphy of Sloan are just half of the new supergroup called The TransCanada Highwaymen. They, along with former Barenaked Ladies frontman Steven Page and Odds' Craig Northey, will be touring the country playing all their hits starting in April.

Right: The music never stopped for Moe Berg, even while The Pursuit of Happiness is on semi-permanent hiatus.



*A fond look at the continuing legacy of Moe Berg and TPOH*

# The Happine

BY SCOTT HAYES  
 Staff Writer

Moe Berg and The Pursuit of Happiness had five albums and 15 singles including *I'm an Adult Now*. That hit blazed right out of the gate, rising up to the #6 spot on Billboard's Alternative Songs chart. The album *Love Junk* stayed on that chart for almost six months as they toured Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

They got big enough to feel that extra pressure to get even bigger, and so with Moe being as prolific as ever, they really started cranking out the tunes. Mega-producer Todd Rundgren kept on with the sophomore effort *One Sided Story* where the band got singles *Two Girls in One* and *New Language* out for play.

The material was always good but *I'm an Adult Now* was really the hottest that they would get. It was like that first crackling spark flying out of the fire pit, a sexy red glowing ember shooting a radiant arc up into the dark night.

Probably the last time that you heard

of something hot from them was in the early to mid-'90s. They had harder-edged fare like *I Should Know* and *She's the Devil* (from their last studio album, 1996's *The Wonderful World of...*), *Kalendar* or the folksy *Gretzky Rocks* (from 1995's *Where's the Bone*) or even the deliciously double entendre-filled *Cigarette Dangles* off of *The Downward Road* (1993). I remember that song getting more radio play because it was under three minutes and DJs often needed quick CanCon. Smart, Moe. Smart and savvy. You were always great that way, with your zippy lines and rhythms that never went under the speed limit, always over when possible.

Two greatest hits albums would follow, both with great titles: *Sex and Food* (2000), and *When We Ruled* (2005).

As far as I'm concerned, TPOH still rules and it's about more than praising the hometown fella who made good. It's about more than how they were 'the' band for that time and that place. It's about music that spoke to me for

whatever reason. It had a big role in shaping who I became: a writer.

## The history continues

Maybe you haven't really heard of them for a long time, but they're still together, still out there, never giving up the stage for good. Edmonton's Renee Suchy has been there since the *Where's the Bone* years, back when they were going through backup singers left, right and centre, and they just weren't sure if she would last either.

To her, getting that gig was like winning the lottery. She was a hotel lounge singer at the time but the self-avowed "superfan" had found her nirvana, getting to tour with her dream group.

"It was really great. I'd never been to Australia before and I'd never sung with one of the greatest Canadian rock bands. So, it was a little rock 'n' roll fantasy odyssey experience," she regaled.

Johnny Sinclair agrees. He was there right at the very beginning, and the

lineup changed him out before Suchy came on board. While he and original backup singer Leslie Stanwyck went on to form Universal Honey (another great power pop act), Sinclair never lost his love for TPOH. In fact, he never even lost his love for Moe's early, early bands from way back in Edmonton.

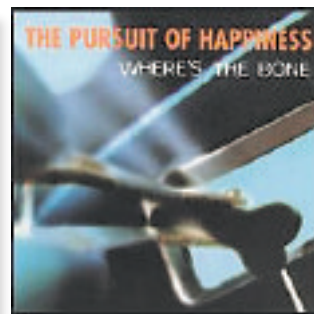
"I loved his band. I thought he was great. I thought that he had a real presence and his songs were clever and smart. His lyrics were in particular very good: a keen sense of rhyming and making the point," he offered.

When he found out that Moe was moving to Toronto and was looking for a bass player after facecrime wound down, Sinclair got wound right up.

"I just wanted to be a part of it. I thought, 'Wow, this would be great.' I knew how good he was. To be a part of that in Toronto would be awesome."

He signed up and toured Europe, helping them open for Duran Duran and the Eurythmics.

"It was pretty much the rock 'n' roll kid's dream," he noted. "I think back,





# ss of Pursuit

we had so much fun. We had so many laughs. I miss those guys."

## Survival of The Modern Minds

After The Minds broke up, Kim Upright became a founding member of Jr. Gone Wild with Mike McDonald, both of whom later reteamed for A Bunch of Marys. That band played LB's four years ago. Upright still incredible on the same drum kit he had from his teenage days. While the music is now mostly in the background, he's still in town and operates a digital media company aptly called Modern Made Media.

A few years ago, he used his graphic arts and techno smarts to start themodernminds.ca to compile all of his notes and love for the band that launched his career, along with Moe and Bob Drysdale.

"The long story is that when I was putting together that website, going back to reminisce and all that, listening to

whatever archival material ... I just went, 'holy shit, were we ever a good band.'"

A very interesting side note here is that the band found themselves with a nice little resurgence in popularity after Japanese company BASE Records reissued a CD of their music. The album was mostly demo singles along with *Theresa's World*, complete with liner notes in Japanese.

"This was 30 years after the fact, which was kind of hilarious when you think about it," Berg said.

Before the band broke up, Drysdale just didn't care for the turmoil and fighting between the others. He left to study music at Berkeley before returning to Canada and playing bass for the Rock and Roll Bitches. They had one album (re-released by Ugly Pop Records in 2012, still complete with cover art by Kim Upright) before they too were done. When Moe was in Troc '59, Bob filled in when they needed him there too. And then he stopped getting on stage, preferring to avoid the spotlight and all of the heat and chaos that it

entailed altogether.

He was an otherwise introverted polymath creative type, and passed away far too soon in 2003. He had a varied career throughout the arts including working in Roy Leadbetter's Sculptcast Foundry, and painting. Some of his works can be found in the city's collection and on the walls of the Surgeon hospital, his family said.

His greatest public legacy was his contribution to the music world though. His brother Van said that Bob was really proud of his work with The Modern Minds, even if he didn't let it restrict his artistic explorations.

"He'd call it 'high energized rock 'n' roll' and not call it punk," he laughed. "At the same time that he was doing that, he'd play the upright bass with a group of older gentlemen who did weddings and polka music. It was the direct opposite of what he was doing the other nights." Bob still composed, however, but kept that to himself.

Van shared an anecdote about how Bob's "frenzied, energetic" playing with

the Minds led him to put a cowboy boot through the stage floor. Perhaps, 'Quiet' Bob that everyone knew was assuming a persona to become 'Frenzied' Bob. His family misses one while the punk world misses the other.

## And what about Moe?

You never know who you might bump into some day. Moe was recently in Edmonton to co-host a CJSR show for a retrospective. He still has a lot of strong ties to the capital area too, including his cousin Rob Berg, a popular and long-time radio host with K-97.

And while it's true that TPOH never disbanded, they only take the rare gig here and there.

"We've never officially broken up. We sort of decided to go on hiatus which stretched into forever," Berg explained, adding that they took some gigs in the early '90s using the name Monteforte. It was a joke cover band just to have something to do when TPOH was on one of its extended breaks.

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Last December was the last gig and that was in Toronto. Suchy said there was a secret set at the Calgary Stampede a few years before that.

In the meantime, Moe has been busy. In 1997, he put out his own solo album called *Summer's Over* and played the Edmonton Folk Fest, just him on stage strumming his guitar for songs like *Butterknife Dull* and *Vodka*. He's written book reviews for the *Edmonton Journal* and *The Globe and Mail* among others, and he maintains a blog at [www.moeberg.ca](http://www.moeberg.ca) too. If you ever doubted his verbosity or wordsmithery, look there to dispel all such untoward notions.

He also published a book of short stories in 2000. *The Green Room* featured nearly 20 urban tales of what life is like for a young man in the city. As you might expect, it has many of the same themes that he would explore in his music: romance, regret, and the delusions of the young. His writing quality never wavered but perhaps he was born to pen lyrics that could be sung out instead of merely read on the page. The stories screamed for a soundtrack.

Even if he wasn't making actual music, he always revolved around that universe. He took a page from Todd Rundgren and has become a music producer for such bands as The Monoxides, Jennifer Foster, The Grace Babies, Claudia's Cage, Robin Black and the Intergalactic Rock Stars, and The Clinks.

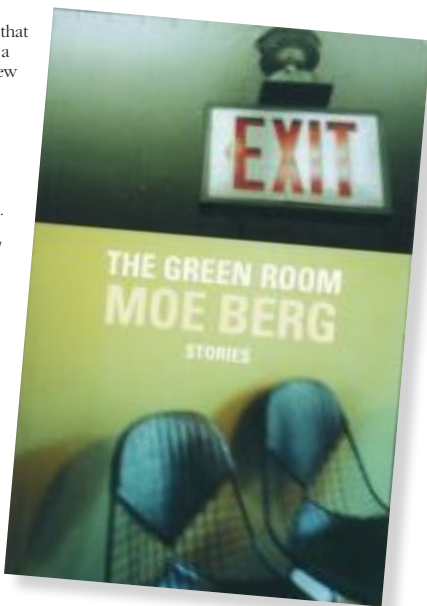
"I was very disenchanted with the music business," he noted. "I just channeled a lot of my energy into writing stories – something I always wanted to do but I was always writing music. Once things slowed down with music, I started working as a producer and I had some time to write a book. That was something I was able to get off my chest."

In 2009, he co-hosted a show called Master Tracks on the Aux channel. It followed the recording process of emerging bands as they strove to record one song in one day. He's also been a professor teaching music production for the Music Industry Arts Program at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario. It's known worldwide as a unique centre for this kind of instruction.

But music isn't just his bread and butter. It's the very blood in his veins. The kid from Grandin, my friends, has been getting back on stage as of late.

## Ladies and Gentlemen ... The Trans-Canada Highwaymen!

Next year, Moe will be zig-zagging the Great White North as part of supergroup The Trans-Canada Highwaymen along with Sloan's Chris Murphy, Steven Page (ex-lead singer of the Barenaked Ladies), and Craig Northey (Odds). They're being guided along by theatrical director and producer Jim Millan, the fellow behind the most recent Kids in the Hall reunion tour.



Millan said, "I had the idea of putting Moe and Chris Murphy and Craig Northey together as a group people would die to see. Craig was on the road with Steven and they all jumped on the idea."

In a recent FYI Music News article, reporter Kerry Doole quoted Northey saying that Moe was a driving force in the project. Perhaps that's putting it mildly.

"If Moe Berg wants to rock, you don't get in his way, you just say, 'let's go.'"

They've had a gig or two in Ontario to find their sea legs but the great news is that a tour is already in the booking phase and it's set to kick off in April. Fingers are surely crossed across the Western provinces for a date or two where Moe first stomped on campus stages and hotel rock room fold-up platforms.

My fingers are crossed.

## Last words

In St. Albert, there isn't a Moe Berg Amphitheatre, a statue or even a plaque to pay tribute for time immemorial to this musical hero still adored by many. Nevertheless, he stands as a major figure. He's a rock god who crafted his own legend out of sheer will and the pure love of music and writing. Before he even started *The Pursuit of Happiness*, he had written hundreds and hundreds of songs, by his count. "I wrote songs my whole life," he said. He wasn't hyperbolizing.

He recalled those nerdy early years scribbling notes that he thought would make good lyrics. He listened to the music that inspired him, and in turn, he inspired others.

"I guess all that to some degree shaped my songs. Part of it was also my influences: Lou Reed, Pete Townshend, Iggy Pop, Joni Mitchell ... people like that. The music you listen to influences your work. A lot of people take words from other people's songs. I tried never to do that. There was a certain kind of attitude about life, or relationships, things that I found intriguing from listening to that music. That shaped how I did it as well," he said.

Furthermore, he is still out there now, still making music, helping make musicians ...

and he's still rockin'.

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"Some of the nicest people I've met in the music industry. The first time I saw TPOH was at Sunfest in Gimli, Manitoba. A friend and I had traveled over from the UK, and they were better than I'd ever hoped they could be. After the show we were invited back to meet the band and as we were chatting, Bob the tour manager came with their tickets for catering. He says to Dave Gilby, 'Dave, here's your meal ticket,' to which Dave replied, 'I always thought Moe was my meal ticket.' They were so kind they even gave us a lift in their bus back to Winnipeg. In June 2003, I came to Toronto for their reunion shows. They played at the Pride Festival in a car park and were responsible for the best three- to four-minute of live music I have ever seen."

– ROB WINDER, fan

"For me, [Bob] was one of the greatest instrumentalists and performers I've ever seen. Dangerous (in a good way) and exciting on stage – really something to have witnessed. I heard him for the first time with Moe and Kim when they were called the News. I was 16 or 17 at the time and had never heard anything like these guys before. To me and my friends ... they were like the Beatles or something – a band with everything going: amazing songs, power and energy, brilliant playing."

– GEORGE WALL, formerly of Rock and Roll Bitches with Bob Drysdale

"Looking at the bigger picture, I think TPOH is a small but significant chapter in the history of power-pop and indie music, and a precursor to what Weezer established on a larger stage: the loud voice of the introvert geek in rock. That's now become a huge influence on pop/rock music as a whole. Personally, TPOH meant lyrics, chord changes, harmonies and a very distinct voice (singing, speaking and writing) I could connect to. I was fortunate to learn they were made by people I could connect to as well, which did not have to happen. They became a gateway to my discovery of the power of community."

– VALERIE HUNTER, co-administrator of

'The Pursuit of Happiness – TPOH' Facebook and administrator of Incompletely Conspicuous at [www.tpoh.net](http://www.tpoh.net), the band's unofficial website

"I was a superfan of TPOH before I joined them. I'd been to several of their gigs when they came through Edmonton over the years. I thought 'if I could have any gig in the whole big wide world, and I know this is über-cheesy, it would be to sing with that band. That that actually happened is still mind-blowing to me. True story.'"

– RENEE SUCHY, current TPOH backup singer

"Slowly but surely, one of the things that really impacted us is that we really gravitated to *The Who*. It made sense for the most part. The music was simple. For all intents and purposes, it was a trio. It was challenging enough. Bob was trying to emulate John Entwistle. I'm trying to emulate Keith Moon ... he'd always been my guy. Certainly, Moe, to me, had a lot of Pete Townshend in him. The way he played his guitar – his Rickenbacker – all that stuff. We were good at that. It felt good."

– KIM UPRIGHT, on being in *The Modern Minds* with Moe Berg, late 70s/early 80s

"The band did a reunion show in 2014 that I found out about too late, but I will keep my eyes open for another one. If they ever do reform, I will be the first in the ticket line."

– BRIAN ZINGER (a.k.a. Boppin), music blogger at [nauticaizinger.wordpress.com](http://nauticaizinger.wordpress.com)

"I'm pretty sure I was the only TPOH fan in rural West Wales in the early '90s! I snagged onto them through magazine review and never looked back. As a hard rocker then I wasn't used to being served up such playful, intelligent and occasionally unflinching lyrics, I was hooked forever after the first listen to 'I'm An Adult Now – nobody ever voiced these sentiments before in a rock song! And the music was great, especially with the female voices contrasting and complementing Moe's. More importantly, they rocked. TPOH also gets massive 1537 bonus points for being the only band that I can think of to use the word 'efficacious' in a song (New Language) – I had to look it up."

"I wooed my then-girlfriend, now-wife, by putting 'All I Want' on a mix tape for her – hey, it worked! Thanks Moe."

– JOE STOREY, (a.k.a. 1537) music blogger at [www.jatstorey.com](http://www.jatstorey.com)

"On *Summer's Over*, *The Pursuit of Happiness* frontman continues to follow the same path he has travelled for a decade with TPOH. That is, personal, dead-on observations on sexual confusion, sexual inadequacy and, er, sex. 'Prisoner of lust, erratic and erotic/makes me clumsy, clueless and heteropsychotic,' he sneers in *Here's the Story*. Damn, but the boy can write!"

– SHAWN OHLER, in his review of Moe's solo album *Summer's Over* as published in the *Edmonton Journal*