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CHOWING DOWN ON INSECTS

Entrepreneurs are promoting cricket meal as a high-protein alternative to red meat and poultry. See page 24.

Ladies and Gentlemen... The Pursuit of Happiness!

With the name already in mind before the band even assembled, St. Albert singer/songwriter Moe Berg knew he was shooting for the stars

BY SCOTT HAYES
 Staff Writer

The first time I heard The Pursuit of Happiness was 1988 when the band exploded onto the music scene with their incredibly punchy single *I'm an Adult Now* off the album *Love Junk*. It was a major moment of musical mastery: a mind-bogglingly awesome half-sung/half-spoken word performance with jaded lyrical greatness combined with such a frenetic grungy arrangement in just three pieces. It was impossible to not bow down to it.

It was crazy how much I listened to that tape, maybe not catching every word but as sure as H-E-double-hockeysticks the songs lingered in my head, from those first fireblasting chords of track one *Hard to Laugh* straight through to the upbeat sounding – yet way downbeat reading – track 13 called *Down on Him*. It probably took me another five years before I really figured out what he was saying there and what it all meant.

Who was this guy? I'd never heard anything like it before. Lead singer/songwriter Moe Berg had the whole package: the brain for writing this stuff up, that distinct look and voice, and he had the musical chops that would no doubt show him the way up the charts too. TPOH had the sound that I needed and I wasn't alone. I had just spent the previous five years listening to Bryan Adams and Phil Collins, maybe some Dire Straits for my prog-rock fix. Yeah, I had no clue what good prog-rock was, or what any good music was, but something inside me needed something better, something that showed me the power of words.

Obviously, I needed an edge. When TPOH came into my life, things started to change dramatically for me both personally and intellectually.

"Thanks, Moe, whoever you are, wherever you are," 14-year-old Scott said. "It's nice to know that there's someone, some musician out there who gets me."

It turned out that Moe Berg came from my neighbourhood, three blocks from my house. Of course, he was long gone before I moved in. He had been on tour leaving his sneakermarks all over the world. I've been chasing this story ever since, just as he was chasing that everlasting dream of being a rock god.

Stages of growth

The Modern Minds had their fleeting moment in the sun, but then, so did Icarus and look how things turned out for him. Singer/songwriter/guitarist Moe Berg, drummer Kim Upright and Bob Drysdale didn't suffer from the same kind of Ancient Greek hubris but they too got too close to the stars, and too soon. Maybe they just needed to moult off their waxy feathers and find some different ones. The trio had a good run, even if it was just a sprint. That run lasted them all but a year and a half. 'Edmonton's best known underground band' was done.

While Bob went off to Berkeley (and later the bassist for punk rock act Rock'n'Roll Bitches) and Kim went on to be a founding member of Jr. Gone Wild among other occupations, Moe found his way east ... eventually. He paid his dues first with bands Troc '59 and Facecrime: writing, and never stopping. That practice was starting to produce major hit material. The seeds were being sown whether he realized it or not.

"All through this time I was really learning how to write," he offered. "Right at the end of the facecrime era is when I started writing *Sb's so Young* and *I'm an Adult Now*, some of the stuff that would eventually end up on the first (TPOH) album."

Berg's dedication to his craft meant his success was assured. Upright suggested that perhaps his former bandmate really started learning how to write when he himself was so young. That's all Moe ever did, he said, and he just kept honing his craft and never stopped.

Berg would become an "incredible



Love Junk was the first record by The Pursuit of Happiness, featuring St. Albert singer/songwriter Moe Berg. The album catapulted the band to fame and got them touring the world, with help from music mega-producer Todd Rundgren.

songwriter," Upright said, because of that insatiable artistic drive.

"Very, very early on, it became really obvious that he was prolific as a writer, not just a great writer."

Former *Edmonton Journal* music writer Alan Kellogg held the consensus there, but went one further. He said that it wasn't just Berg's prolific nature – his ability to constantly be putting new lyrics on paper. He had a gift for coming up with great tunes as well as great words. He had lightning in his pen.

"I've always thought he had just an amazing spark. He was very much his own man, even down to how you could hear some tracks, studio tracks ... to this very day, you could pretty well identify Moe just by the minor chords that he uses. He's an original, a true original. That was important."

Sure, Moe had some magic there with those early bands but Edmonton was not really the scene to make it big. Maybe he never quite found his footing in Vancouver either, the next step up on the ladder. So Toronto it was. If you're gonna aim, aim high, right?

But first, he picked up a copy of *NOW* magazine to get a sense of all of the bands that were in TO. 'If you want to make it big in music, you have to immerse yourself in the scene' was the idea.

But wow, there were so many gigs. He couldn't believe that there would be so much happening in just one week.

Hang on, Moe. Double-check that schedule.

"I was told, 'No, they're all happening tonight.' There were more gigs happening in one night than there would be happening in one month in Edmonton," he said, still with awe in his voice. "I said, 'I think I've found the place I need to be.' A few months later I quit my job at Tops Food Market (on Whyte Avenue) and came out to Toronto."

"I remember playing a show just by myself on an acoustic guitar at Scandals (which used to be attached to the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Edmonton). I played a lot of those songs. When I got to Toronto, I did that. I played at open mikes. Realistically, this was when I first thought that these were good songs. Even though I'd been writing songs my whole life and been in all these bands in Edmonton ... I finally thought that those were songs that were good enough to do this for real," he reminisced.

Moe kept doing those open mike shows, sniffing around for musicians, he said. Thankfully, he wasn't quite alone. Troc '59 drummer Dave Gilby went



Courtesy of Moe Berg

Above: Moe Berg and his band facecrime (with Blaine Vanstone, centre, and Dave Gilby, right, who ended up in Toronto as the drummer for TPOH. This was the last Edmonton band that Moe was in before he jumped to the big city and the big time.

Courtesy of Chrysalis Records

Left: Love Junk was made by The Pursuit of Happiness (featuring Kris Abbott, Dave Gilby, Moe Berg, Johnny Sinclair, and Leslie Stanwyck), produced by Todd Rundgren and published by Chrysalis Records in 1988.

out east too and the two were soon together again. Others would have to be vetted. Familiarity helped.

"Most of the others were transplanted Western Canadians who had met somewhere along their travels touring Western Canada back in the day. They turned out to be the original line-up of The Pursuit of Happiness. We just started playing shows and grinding it out in Toronto along with the thousands of other bands."

The birth of Happiness

As you might have expected, the band name took a turn from that age-old phrase out of the American Constitution, that everyone is guaranteed to the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

"It's easy to make too much of your band name. I always thought, 'Aerosmith? What kind of name is that?' But once it's your name, it's your name. People will just associate the band with that and you don't really have to overthink it," Berg continued. "I always thought that it was a rock 'n' roll idea: the pursuit of happiness. Trying to find something that you love and that has meaning to you. It just seemed like a cool name."

He thought it was so cool that he came up with it before the group was even formed. That way, there wouldn't be any arguments and voting over the issue.

"I'll just say, 'Do you want to join my band? It's called The Pursuit of Happiness,'" he recalled. "Then we didn't have that agonizing time that you have in bands when you all fight over what the band name's going to be and everybody wants it to be their idea."

TPOH started with Moe and Gilby, plus Johnny Sinclair on bass and backing vocalists Tamara and Natasha Amabile, the sisters who were soon replaced with Kris Abbott on guitar who also did the backing vocals along with Leslie Stanwyck. The year was 1985. Time to find out what it meant to be

an adult on the big stage.

Striking the iron ... and the vinyl

The TPOHmates along with some other creative friends built up the video for *I'm an Adult Now* and took it to MuchMusic. Back in the day, that was the national channel that was a milestone marker for new and established bands to offer their new singles in video format. Getting play there was an indicator of 'making it.'

True to form, Berg was reserved about the prospect.

"We had no expectations for it. Maybe they'd play it on City Limits on Sunday nights... We got a call the next day saying they liked the video. 'Not only are we going to put it on City Limits, we're going to put it into rotation.' That was the day my life changed."

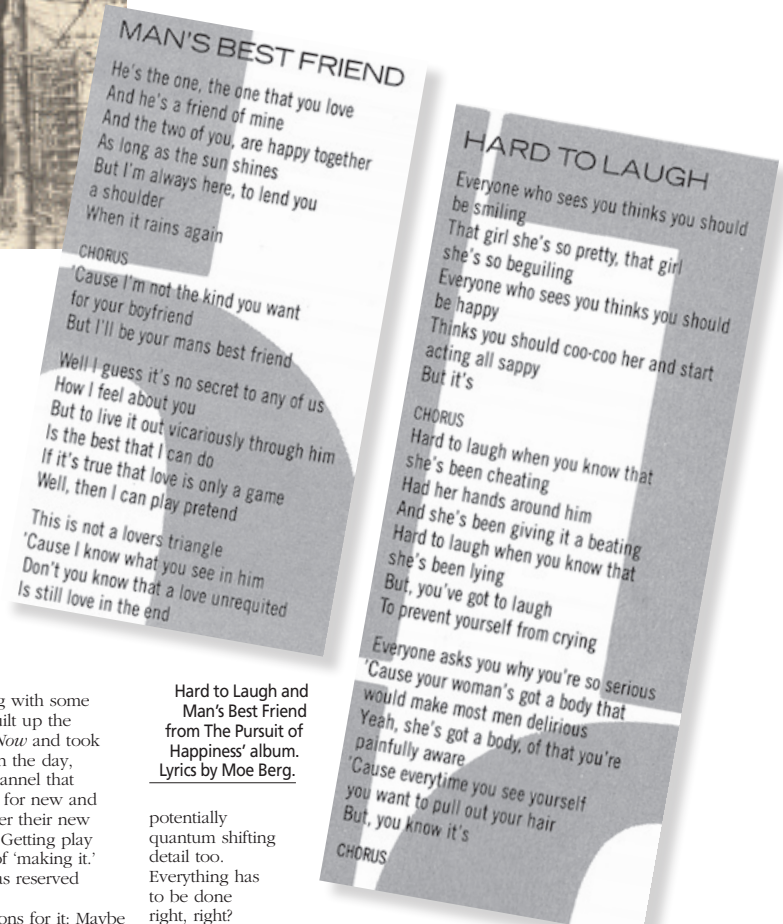
Because of the strength of the songwriting, the musicianship, and that incredibly low budget video, TPOH had crested that penultimate tidal wave that allows surfers to coast on their boards like kings and queens of the universe. They went on to get Juno nominations for Most Promising Group and Best Video. Though they won neither, they had still broken through the barrier. They had inched their way up. Every accomplishment, however, brings new problems.

"Instead of me calling people and begging them for a gig, we'd come home from our day jobs and my answering machine would be full of messages. 'Do you have a manager yet? Do you have an agent yet? Don't talk to anybody before you talk to me.' That was the kind of enviable position that you want to be in. Now people are calling you instead of you having to call them."

They got signed by Chrysalis Records in New York. Having a manager and a record deal are incredibly important details but getting a producer is another

Behind the scenes

This is the second of a three part series on The Pursuit of Happiness, its success and beyond. Last week, the series showed Moe Berg during his early years. In part 3, we'll get a look at what happened after the band made it big.



Hard to Laugh and Man's Best Friend from The Pursuit of Happiness' album. Lyrics by Moe Berg.

potentially quantum shifting detail too. Everything has to be done right, right?

Berg was always guided by dreams anyway. Why not throw another dream up like a feather on the wind and see where it would land?

"I'd always liked Todd Rundgren. I was a huge fan of his both as an artist and as a producer. That went back years and years and years. I was in our record company office and we were having one of those preliminary meetings. They asked, 'Who would you like to produce your record?' I just said, 'Todd Rundgren'. Why not? We left the meeting and I didn't think about it again. I thought they'd probably pick somebody else."

An unexpected pot of gold in Canada's Midwest was undoubtedly the last thing that the band was expecting. If Moe's life changed when *Adult* got into regular MuchMusic rotation, it must've changed again when he got a pretty sweet phone call during a sound check in Winnipeg.

"I pick up the phone: 'Hi Moe, it's Todd Rundgren.' There's a moment you've been waiting for your entire life! It was a pretty thrilling moment."

Chrysalis had sent Rundgren the demos. The mega-producer behind such knockouts as Meat Loaf's *Bat Out of Hell* and The Band's *Stage Fright* albums definitely wanted in.

Thanks to the producer's involvement,

the band signed an international record deal that they toured the world with. They opened for Duran Duran in major coliseum-type venues, then they toured American clubs for another year then toured Canada for a few years, then Europe. They opened for the Eurythmics and Minneapolis punk/alt-rockers The Replacements. This was the dream.

"I went to Australia twice. We were on the road a lot. I got to see the world without having to pay for it, which is pretty good."

The Pursuit of Happiness was fully fledged and flying high. Can you imagine what Moe must have thought, barely 30 and on top of the world? He had come a long way from Grandin, a kid scribbling lyrics and teaching himself guitar. If the universe tends to balance things out, he was finally cashing in on those early years as a social outcast.

"I was growing up a tiny bit of a nerd and not the most popular kid," he thought out loud, a small laugh escaping his lips. "This is a very standard rock 'n' roll story."

As much as it is a standard rock 'n' roll story, it's the only story you hear from those who actually make it.

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