

You have your whole life to write and record your first album.

This is a truism and a well-worn music-business adage – an adage usually followed by a cautionary postscript of the “and then mere months to come up with the next” variety – but let’s mess with the circumstances of the traditional narrative a little bit for this particular situation.

What if you wait until you’re approaching the age a lot of working musicians start dreaming of abandoning existences fraught with perpetual instability and sporadic poverty and the rigours of the road and hanging up their instruments for good to dive headlong into your first album? And then you discover a whole new life – a secondary life, a *renewed* life – in the business of rock-‘n’-roll? Except there’s no “business” involved. Just the pure, unadulterated joy of living the rock-‘n’-roll dream for the sake of living the rock-‘n’-roll dream. And realizing, in the process, that you’re rather good at rock-‘n’-roll. That you’re rather good at dreaming in rock-‘n’-roll colours.

I dunno if Rod Victor Cohen wants me to tell you his exact age. All I know is we befriended each other at a specific moment in time when he was readying his debut solo album, *RVC*, for release with a few more years on the planet under his belt than most callow, young singer/songwriters just about to throw their very first recording to the wolves and was maybe feeling a little trepidatious about the whole thing and was, thus, encouraged to encounter a fellow music nerd by chance behind the counter at a random record shop who not only knew he’d occupied a small place in Toronto’s proud indie-rock history but had actually heard of – and also knew how to *spell* – Plastercene Replicas. And, much more crucially, who really dug the *RVC* record he placed in my hands a few days later. So here we are. I am happy to sing the praises of Rod Victor Cohen’s first solo album because, like *RVC* itself, this was clearly meant to happen.

Cohen definitely didn’t have to make *RVC*. The guy has built a comfortable, non-rock-‘n’-roll existence for himself since abandoning a nascent musical career on the fringes of the hot-to-trot 1980s Toronto indie scene as a percussionist for (yes) Plastercene Replicas and a self-consciously strange Queen West outfit called Utterly Sputter and devoting his own life to bettering the lives of disadvantaged, damaged and at-risk young people in one of the more neglected pockets of Toronto’s east end.

A registered psychotherapist, Cohen founded the Blake Boulton Youth Outreach Service nearly 35 years ago. He’s been a fond fixture of the neighbourhood since 1989, when his office was essentially a park bench, and he’ll be there at the service’s humble headquarters at 41 Blake St. most days as long as he has breath in his body because he cares deeply about the job and the kids who come to him for help.

“This is like a vocation for me,” he told writer and fellow ’80s-minted Toronto musician Andrew Cash in a *Now* magazine interview in 2013. “I don’t mean it in the religious sense, but I love the work. And unlike many others in these people’s lives, I haven’t left.”

“The Replicas ended, for me, in 1987. I left them because, y’know, they were going off to be stars and I was working on the streets in my burgeoning social-work career, which was really what I wanted to do,” says Cohen now. “Utterly Sputter was this quirky, weird little Queen Street band where I could live out my rock-’n’-roll fantasies. But I was doing street outreach and studying psychotherapy wanting to become more, so when we ended I started my agency. And that was my life: I worked, I raised a family.”

Suppress your talents and your dreams long enough, however, and they have a way of bubbling out. As do all of the stories both tragic and triumphant, all the brilliant one-liners and lingering throwaway human chatter you’ve socked away in your notebook working as a therapist for 35 years.

When middle age caught up with one of Cohen’s other lifelong passions, hockey, about a decade ago the stage was set for Act 2 of his rock-’n’-roll career, although he had very little idea what was happening at the time.

“I had bad knees and all these different surgeries and my body was deteriorating and I couldn’t play hockey anymore, which was devastating,” he recalls. “So I thought ‘Y’know, it’s about time I put down the hockey-stick and tennis-racket air guitars and learned to actually *play* guitar.”

Not long after, he was serendipitously gifted “an old, ratty Yamaha acoustic” that had belonged to a longtime friend’s father and – after spending every waking moment at home morning and night and during breaks between clients at the office all day long hacking away at his new toy for weeks on end – gifted actual guitar lessons at Toronto music legend and Be-Bop Cowboys founder Steve Briggs’ Kitchen Music Studios as a 50<sup>th</sup>-birthday present. He learned Link Wray’s “Rumble,” realized that if you could master three chords you could master a few songs and, soon enough, formed a covers band with some of his fellow “old-man” students dubbed the Drummond Conspiracy. “And I’m living my dream,” enthuses Cohen. “Now I’m the front guy, but I’m not just the front guy – I’ve got a guitar in my hands. That was always my dream.”

Enter the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant panic, however, and suddenly Cohen found himself with a lot more time for solitude and self-reflection – some of it institutionally mandated, some of it by his own design – on his hands during his “off” hours than he’d bargained for. The therapist soon discovered, during “a complicated piece of my life,” the very real therapeutic benefits of songwriting.

“It was not a bright time. It was a dark time and, personally for me, kind of unhappy,” recalls Cohen. “So I’m at home, I go to work at 8 in the morning and I’m probably the only therapist in the city still seeing people in person because I knew I needed to and our clients needed it, too, and I’d figured out how to do it with all the right distancing and safety precautions. And then I’d go home and play guitar.

“My band was shut down. All bands were shut down. We had gigs lined up but nobody was gigging so that was that, and it was really hard to play with anybody online over Zoom because there was all this lag and stuff. I had a lot of emotional stuff going on in me, I work with really fucked-up stuff and I’m a rock-’n’-roll fanatic so I just started writing songs. And they were pretty good.”

Eventually, Cohen was sufficiently emboldened by the quality of his rough GarageBand recordings to run a couple by his friend and guitar teacher, Briggs. And when Steve didn’t run screaming, Cohen wondered aloud if his pal’s 21-year-old son, Duncan – bassist for the celebrated Toronto outfit Fade Awaays and an enthusiastic young student of music production and engineering – might be interested in recording one of his tunes. The younger Briggs agreed. The rest, as you’ll see and hear, is joyous history.

“I’ve known Duncan since he was a little kid and I send him these very rough guitar, vocal and basic drum tracks,” recalls Cohen. “A week later, he sends me ‘Runnin’.’ *Finished*. I was fuckin’ blown away. I was putting it on my stereo and blasting this thing constantly. It sounded like Aerosmith. All I did was write a good song with a good story and good chord structure. Duncan played bass, wrote this drum track, played an insane rock-’n’-roll lead and turned it into this fuckin’ masterpiece, this epic rock-’n’-roll song and it *sounded* great because he’s really, really good. I went ‘Oh, my god.’ And he was just, like, ‘So do you like it?’”

A musical May/September “bromance” had been kindled. Cohen kept writing songs and sending them to his new collaborator. Duncan would spiff the latest up and ask for the next.

“Each time we were working on one song, I was writing the *next* song. We were four or five in and Duncan said ‘So I guess we’re making an album. Keep ’em coming. We’re making an album,’” says Cohen. “I’d never thought of myself as a songwriter and I didn’t go into this intending to write an album. Literally all it was, when we started, was: ‘I have a song and I’d like to record it.’ And then it was ‘I’ve got another one. I’ve got another one. Hey, Duncan, I just wrote this one and I think it’s pretty good. And now I’ve got this other idea...’ And with none of them was it, like, ‘This is no good, this is crap.’ So we just kept going.”

*RVC*, the album, comes by its scrappy, youthful Cheap Trick-via-Status Quo-via-Replacements-via-Modern Lovers power-pop spirit honestly, you see. Its creator might be a few trips around the sun short of retirement age, but Rod Victor Cohen was on the same “let’s learn as we go” footing as his newfound right-hand man, Duncan Briggs, while making this record.

The two wound up forging ahead through mutually dark times for themselves personally (not to mention for the planetary population at large) by making *RVC*, and the breathless delight they shared in creating an entirely unexpected piece of pop art way better than it had any right to be in concert comes through in the finished product, even though they’d put in a good eight months of back-and-forth file-and-idea-sharing and committed six songs to tape before they actually got to sit in Steve Briggs’ basement and record together – with Duncan improvising a lead-guitar part and his dad dropping an off-the-cuff Motown bassline into the breezy “Wheels Waiting” while Cohen sang and strummed his rhythm track and generally stared on in awe.

“This kid is a genius, a musical wizard. He very quickly went from being this kid who’s the same age as my daughter and who I’ve known since he was just a little guy – ‘Little Duncan’ – to my mentor, my colleague, my musical producer and the person I’m looking up to. I’m 40 years older than him and it went like this,” says Cohen, illustrating a flip with his hand. “It was like I was working with Michael Philip Wojewoda or Rick Rubin. I wasn’t working with a little kid. I was working with a guy who knew *waaaay* more about everything we were doing. All I brought in were my songs. But he loved them.”

Briggs is similarly effusive, mind you.

“Getting to work with Rod has been such a joy,” says Duncan. “His energy and willingness to try anything felt so welcoming and, not to mention, made my job incredibly easy and enjoyable. This was the first long-form recording project that either of us had worked on so there was a sort of naïveté that we both had going in, which made everything so natural. Rod’s love for music and joy around making music really set the tone for that.”

Further warmth and youthful vibes were contributed to *RVC* when Brodie Clark, the son of Utterly Sputter’s old drummer Jocelyn Grills, was lured in to grace the finished product with the live drums it demanded.

A prog-metal drummer used to covering Meshuggah, Clark gamely sat behind to kit to bring some human warmth to a record replete with “country honk, raunchy blues, funky pop and ska” during two full-day, 12-hour sessions, quipping along the way that some of Cohen’s “easiest, simplest songs were the hardest things he’d ever done.” And, once again, Cohen sat back and watched in amazement while a ridiculously talented young collaborator with connections to his past musical life elevated his songs to another level. Briggs then suggested Matt Rogers of capricious queer art-pop combo Fleece as exactly the right person to contribute “some sick keys” to the Gord Downie tribute “You Got Your Flowers,” which recasts the Tragically Hip’s “Nautical Disaster” as a moving, aqueous ballad, while Toronto production luminary Michael Philip Wojewoda – who sat behind the boards and the drum kit for Plastercene Replicas’ 1988 LP, *Glow*, and has added lustre and polish to seminal CanCon recordings by everyone from the Barenaked Ladies to Change of Heart to Doughboys to Spirit of the West to the Rheostatics over the past four-and-a-half decades – came in to do a final mixdown and bring the whole thing full-circle back to the past.

It’s a testament to the strength of Rod Victor Cohen’s songs that so many people worked so hard on them to make this “remote” record sound like the product of several human beings engaged in a group hug in a nice, cozy studio somewhere. But labours of love have a way of working out like *RVC* because ... well, as previously stated, they were just meant to happen in the first place.

“It doesn’t sound like a cold record. It’s really, really warm. That’s all Duncan. That’s all Duncan’s brilliance and beauty, and then Michael Philip’s hands and (Toronto mastering maven) João Carvalho’s hands got onto it, too, and the part that I love about it is there was no plan. Nothing was planned. It just kept coming and coming,” says Cohen. “But I’m really proud of it and I’ve listened to it probably a couple of hundred times and each time I go ‘Y’know, this is a really good record.’ And everybody I play it for goes ‘Y’know, Rod, this is a really good record.’ And it *is*. I actually think it’s a really good record.”

It is. Dig in, dig deep. Dig deeper. *RVC* gets better the more you listen. It ventures into a lot of unexpected musical places, and the stories behind the songs in the liner notes will confirm your suspicions that there's more food for thought on the human condition to be found here than three chords and a kick-ass chorus tend to let on. I play it a lot. Nice work for an old guy. Keep it up, granddad. And I say that sincerely with much love.

Ben Rayner

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