



DERIC RUTTAN: CANADA'S COUNTRY MUSIC SUPERSTAR

By Joanne Wallace

Music Industry Arts grad's so-called "overnight success" followed a decade of tough slogging in Nashville. But for Deric Ruttan, it makes today's success that much sweeter.

Deric Ruttan wrote his first song when he was 10 years old.

Holed up in an ice-fishing hut he and his buddies used as a fort during the long, hot Bracebridge summers, Deric and his cousin wrote a verse and a chorus and figured they were done.

“It was so good we were like ‘man, we don’t even need a second verse. We’re geniuses,’” laughs Deric today.

The young songwriters were soon horrified to hear “their” song on an episode of the sitcom *Happy Days*, and to realize they’d ripped off the entire melody. What they’d actually written was the Everly Brothers’ *All I Have to Do Is Dream*.

But it didn’t matter. Deric tossed the song out and started over.

He didn’t know it, but he’d just taken the first steps on a road leading to the 2014 Grammy Awards, where one of his songs would be nominated as Best Country Song of the year.

Inspired by ‘60s classic rock

Deric grew up the oldest of three brothers in Bracebridge, the small town anchoring Ontario’s Muskoka district. His dad worked for the local hydro utility while his mom stayed home to raise the boys.

It wasn’t an overly musical home, but Deric was fascinated by music from an early age. He cut his teeth on his parents’ extensive record collection, which was mostly ‘60s classic rock, with a bit of country on the side.

He loved it all, but the record that made the biggest impression on him was CCR’s *Cosmo’s Factory*. “That was the record where I first understood the little name in brackets under the song title was the writer – when it first occurred to me that songs had to be written.”

Captivated by the idea of writing and performing this music he loved, Deric asked for a guitar the Christmas he was 12. By high school he was gigging

around town with a CCR tribute band called The Bad Moons, and realized this was what he wanted to do with his life.

Storytelling appeal of “New Country”

At the same time, Deric’s musical tastes were evolving. With The Bad Moons he’d been playing a mix of CCR, Eagles and Stones, along with some contemporary work by John Mellencamp, Tom Petty and the like. Then one day a friend gave him Steve Earle’s *Copperhead Road* and said, “I think you’ll really dig this.”

“I spent my lunch hour walking around town listening to that record on an old Sony Walkman,” Deric remembers. “When I came back – I was a fan.”

“*Ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert – in anything.*”

Deric began researching what else was coming out of Nashville, and discovered he wasn’t the only rockster checking out the country scene. This was the late ‘80s, and both pop and rock had recently been eclipsed by the “New Country” revolution, led by Garth Brooks.

Brooks paved the way for a new generation of hip, young country artists who oozed sex appeal while simultaneously remaining true to country’s songwriting roots. Deric started listening to bands like the Pirates of the Mississippi and the Kentucky Headhunters. He soon knew this new-country blend of strong storytelling, simple melody and rock ‘n roll was where he belonged.

Fanshawe MIA program first choice

Now that he'd found his musical genre, Deric wanted to know more about the business of music. Hearing about Fanshawe's Music Industry Arts (MIA) program from one of his Bad Moon bandmates, he decided to apply.

"I remember my high-school guidance counsellor giving me hell because I wouldn't pick any other college or university for second or third choice," says Deric. "But I knew if I didn't get into Fanshawe, I didn't want to go anywhere else."

Happily, Deric was accepted into the program, and spent the next few years learning everything he could about both country music and the music industry in general.

After graduation he spent another year playing bars and small venues across Ontario, but in the back of his mind was this idea that just wouldn't go away: he needed to go to Nashville.

"Finally I realized if I didn't do something, twenty years would go by and I'd still be playing these bars."

And that was it. He packed his car and headed south.

10,000 hours of songwriting practice

Today Deric has two offices; one at home and one on Nashville's iconic Music Row. In each office hangs a quote from *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell's meditation on success and what it takes to get there.

Gladwell famously posited the 10,000 hour rule, which holds that 10,000 hours is the amount of practice required to achieve true mastery of any field. Today Deric says his arrival in Nashville marked the beginning of his 10,000 hours of songwriting practice.

"When I moved to Nashville I'd probably written 50 or 60 songs in my life. And to me that was a lot. Now I write that in a year – because that's what it takes to get a number one hit on the radio."

The boy from Bracebridge quickly settled in and started writing songs. He performed them at songwriters' nights in local bars and cafes, just like hundreds of others who'd come to Nashville seeking the same dream. He moved furniture and painted houses to make ends meet. Eventually he landed a publishing deal, but over the years there were still days he'd come home to find the lights off, because he and wife Margaret (also a songwriter) had to decide between buying food for the kids or paying the hydro bill.



During this time Deric was also following the best advice he'd heard from Fanshawe Professor Terry McManus: network, network and network some more. He threw himself into Nashville's uniquely collegial songwriting scene, making friends and contacts all over town. He began co-writing with folks he met at songwriters' nights. He sought advice from those he'd seen succeed. He began looking at his own work with a practiced, critical eye – making slight changes to bring it up to the level of excellence he found all around him.

"Be prepared to win or die in this business"

The hard work and dedication finally paid off with a number one song in 2003 (*What Was I Thinking*, co-written with and recorded by Dierks Bentley), the same year Deric released his self-titled debut album.

Since then he's written or co-written dozens of hit songs and released four more albums, each more successful than the last. His work has been recorded by Dierks Bentley, Eric Church, Tim McGraw, Gary Alan, Jason Blaine, Doc Walker and many others, and been recognized by both Canadian and American music industries with a variety of award nominations, culminating in the 2014 Grammy nomination for best country song.

So, was there ever a time he thought 'it's not worth it – this is too hard?'

"Never. I knew it was going to be hard. It took almost a decade for me to have a number one song, and if I'd decided just to give it five years I'd have gone home empty-handed. You've got to be prepared to win or die in this business."

And that's the number-one piece

of advice he'd give aspiring singer-songwriters today: be prepared to work harder than anyone else, learn from people who are better than you, and never give up.

And what about the Grammys?

As it happened, the song in question (*Mine Would Be You*, co-written with Jessi Alexander and Connie Harrington; recorded by Blake Shelton) didn't nab the top award.

But for Deric, that's ok. Aside from the huge honour of being nominated, he's truly adopted the Nashville mindset of never resting on his laurels.

The Grammys were great, but that was yesterday. Right now, there's a song to be written. ❄️

Visit Deric at www.dericruttan.net, for upcoming tour dates and to buy his latest album, *Take The Week Off*.

Deric Ruttan: Milestones

- 1972 Born, Bracebridge ON
 - 1993 Graduates Fanshawe MIA Program
 - 1994 Moves to Nashville
 - 2003 Debut album, *Deric Ruttan*
What Was I Thinking (Dierks Bentley) tops US Country Charts
 - 2004 *My Way* (Aaron Pritchett) most-played Canadian country song of the year
 - 2005 *Lot Of Leavin' Left To Do* (Dierks Bentley) reaches #3 in Billboard's Hot Country chart and holds at #1 in Canada for 5 weeks
 - 2007 Wins CCMA Songwriter Of The Year for *Hold My Beer* (Aaron Pritchett). *Guys Like Me* (Eric Church) is Top 20 on the American Billboard charts
 - 2008 2nd album, *First Time in a Long Time* garners 4 CCMA nominations
 - 2010 3rd album, *Sunshine*, gains Juno nomination for Country Album of the Year
3 CCMA nominations for hit single *That's How I Wanna Go*
CCMA songwriter of the year nomination.
Hell Of The Heart (Eric Church) is a US Top 10 single
 - 2012 4th Album, *Up All Night* – Deric Ruttan Live
 - 2013 5th album, *Take the Week Off*
 - 2014 *Mine Would Be You* (Blake Shelton) gains Grammy nomination for best country song and Academy of Country Music nomination for song of the year
-