

▪ TO FREEDOM ▪

By Max Warfield

Every road leads in two directions. David VanDuzen of Grimsby, Ont., was born with talent and wit, but almost lost everything in 1969 when the motorcycle he was cruising was broadsided by a Buick. It nearly took his leg.

VanDuzen maneuvered through this fork in the road rather than veering off from the hard times, and went on to build two successful careers.

What would a teenage boy choose if he could master almost anything? VanDuzen chose rock ‘n roll and movies. He found early success as a guitarist at just 14 years of age, playing with a band called the Venturians. As an adult he played with a variety of bands, Looking Glass (signed by Polydor), Truck which carried a 12-piece horn section Chicago-style, Sea Dog and Hellfire.

“I remember walking into a record store in Halifax in the seventies,” he smiles. “The bin of 45s was arranged like they used to do by ranking, and in

the number one position was our Sea Dog release. Such a cool feeling!”

He’s been a session player for greats like Frank Zappa and Chuck Berry but most remember him for his stints playing with the legendary Ronnie Hawkins Elephant Band in Toronto’s Nickelodeon. VanDuzen made a name for himself, becoming one that Bill Dillon, Russ McAllister and other famed Ontario guitarists cite as an influence. While enjoying singing and strumming music of many genres, he also got his kicks from another creative outlet in the entertainment business: engineering the lights and stage effects. And he refashioned guitar pedals and pick-ups.

Deciding to polish his technical skills, he completed a three-year program at Humber College in just one year, receiving a diploma in Precision Instrument Mechanics. “I was desperate and in a hurry. I had a child on the way!” he explains.

In the ‘80s he began working at the IMAX Corporation in Mississauga, serving in the theater, camera, and projector departments. The cameras were innovative, rare and very expensive. IMAX sent him around the world to set up theaters and work on sets. Word about the quality of his work got around, and soon top directors were requesting his services. That has not changed, with a recent shift on location of

“I will find a road or make one; for bold resolution is the favourite of fortune.”

– Hannibal



Christopher Nolan's epic Dunkirk. (David's father served for Canada in World War II, and was at Dunkirk.)

While he accepts the label of "perfectionist", he insists it's more accurate to assign achievement to "effort". His connections to the movie industry led to opportunities to take his craft to California, but he chose to stay in Ontario to be near his three daughters, and now his grandchildren too.

His technical work remains in demand. His guitar experience is prolific. He can pat a tall stack of his recordings and affirm that he has played in every Ontario city and much of Canada, toured the United States, the Caribbean (including Cuba), Europe, Africa and played as distantly as Australia.

But in 2016, once again, the dangers of the road bit him. On a sunny afternoon, on a stretch of the four-lane Queen Elizabeth Highway between St. Catharines and his hometown Grimsby, his truck rolled

in a life-threatening crash pinning his arm as it ground to a halt and taking his fret hand and more. This time, the split in the highway met him while he was in his sixties.

With his musical identity presumably stolen by the accident, you would expect grief and gloom. And there was. But not so much now. "I'm excited!" he said recently with exuberance. "I figure, as one door closes, another one opens. Sure, I have ups and downs, good days and bad, but I can't wait to hear the interesting sounds and experience my style of playing guitar with my new set-up."

His new set-up will be a state-of-the-art "bionic" arm and a pedal steel guitar. "I've played a lap steel guitar since I was ten. My mother wanted to hear Hawaiian music." Humour, he offers, is important. "But a steel jams too."

Even with his colourful youth and musical success already enjoyed and achieved, he is still looking forward. "The steel has three pedals.

The knee lever is what I'll start off with. This will work."

He delights in a triumph when others doubt him. "After my motorcycle accident, my leg was so mangled they wanted to amputate it. I'm glad they didn't, though. It came around. Now I've had both knees replaced, and I'm walking without a limp for the first time in decades!" After eye-balling himself up and down he adds, "I'm looking forward to the end product!"

Today he is in his later sixties, dealing with the trauma, pain, and life's new circumstances with positivity. His family helps. His two Chihuahuas Lucy and Ricky deliver soothing support and comfort with their unconditional love. He advises others to choose optimism as well.

"For me it's a no-brainer; the other way is negative and miserable and everyone else suffers too. You have to just keep on keepin' on."

His recent set-backs have not fazed him either. While working out,

doing one-armed push-ups, and exercising his shortened limb lifting weights, he tore muscle from the bone which required surgery for repair. "Wasn't meant to do that, I guess. But they tell me prosthetic technology is advancing every day. Maybe my delay will mean a more sophisticated arm," he chuckles.

VanDuzen, in recent times, has played with assorted bands: the IMAX corporate band IMPAX, Swampedelic, and Brian Neale & Northern Harbour, which he describes as deliciously filthy blues rock bands... not an Edsel, but a Pontiac GTO with big ass tires on Cragar rims. And while he pines to be in a band once more, he has to wait. He waits with confidence, of course. No one is doubting his powers of recovery.

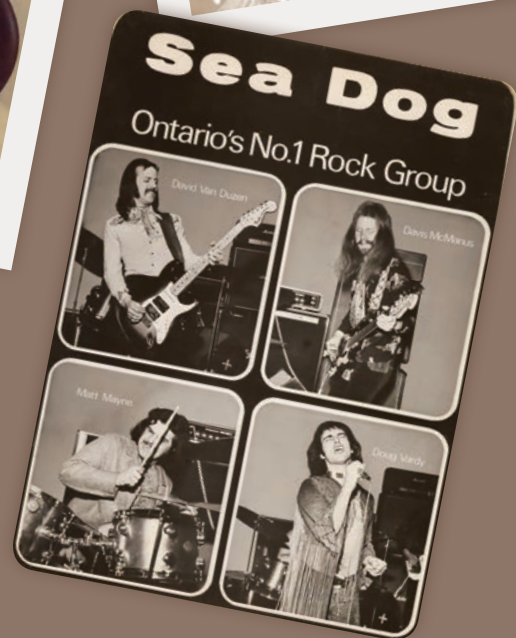
"My doctors are excited, considering me a fascinating candidate for a prototype arm."

His surgeon buried nerves in his residual limb into the surface muscles where his command signals can be picked up by electrodes to make his new prosthetic arm operate. Not that long ago his upcoming device was considered experimental. TMR (Targeted Muscle Reinnervation) is a new surgical procedure that reallocates nerves that once controlled the arm and hand. By reassigning existing nerves, it is possible for some with upper extremity amputations to control their prosthesis by merely thinking about the action they want to perform. Rather than feeling any concern about what is happening, VanDuzen is fascinated by the amplifiers and servo motors on his new arm.

"I just hope they have plenty of batteries! I tried out a video version of it. It's intriguing the way the hand works on a video screen. Pretty neat. Lots of options.

"I have such a long career in music stored into my muscles. It's in my cells; plus, I am a technician and an





artist. No one in the world is doing what I will be doing. I sing my guitar notes either in my head or out loud as I play them... they are a part of me. I believe what I want to do will not be terribly hard."

He quickly gives credit to others for his aptitude and attitude. "My doctors have been great. And thank God for insurance. Local musicians in Hamilton and Toronto have offered me tons of support as did IMAX after the accident. Next year, for me, will be something big."

He is quick to point out that other musicians have reinvented their music after sustaining physical setbacks – Romani-French jazz guitarist and composer Django Reinhardt, Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi, Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead among a few. But none has attempted reintroducing their sound through a

prosthetic device. It is new territory, a land where VanDuzen sees possibilities and beauty.

A gypsy sings of birds with broken wings. VanDuzen will be strumming his guitar while working the frets and strings with his mechanical fingers, an opportunity available to him because of his optimism and tenacity, picking that high road with gusto.

After a life of rubbing shoulders with musical greats, touring the world including volcanoes in Africa where he was charged by an indignant gorilla, he is gathering his memoirs to be published while he waits for his musical rebirth. When asked if he had any anxiety over changing his music, he answered: "It was my motorcycle accident that made my music in the seventies. The hand? The guitar is a machine. It's all about manipulating the machine!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Max Warfield was born in Ridgefield, Connecticut, now making his home on the southern shores of Lake Ontario.

A correspondent for the *Lockport Union Sun & Journal* and the *Niagara Gazette*, Warfield has also written and published numerous novels.

