



Compassionate crooner

A life on stage prepared singer Cindi Cain for a special new gig — bringing a tune to the bedside of palliative care patients

By: David Sanderson

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Country singer Cindi Cain has received plenty of accolades during a career now spanning five decades.



Thrice-named the Manitoba Association of Country Artists female vocalist of the year, Cain has shared billing with industry heavyweights such as John Anderson and Tanya Tucker, represented Canada at a slew of international festivals, including Nashville's Fan Fair, and, in 2019, was inducted into the Manitoba Country Music Hall of Fame.

Those are feathers in her cap, most certainly, but if you're asking her, few of her many accomplishments compare to the personal satisfaction she's been getting out of her current "gig," by volunteering her time singing for patients in the palliative care ward at St. Boniface Hospital.

"It's an amazing experience to be able to soothe the souls of those who are at the end of their journey," Cain says, seated in the lobby of the Tache Avenue facility, an hour before her regular Thursday afternoon shift commences. "People often say 'oh, that must be all doom and gloom,' except that often isn't the case at all."

To illustrate her point, Cain mentions a family she met a couple of weeks ago, who were at the hospital visiting their ailing father. After she introduced herself, and let them know why she was there, they asked her if she was familiar with their dad's favourite song, the '70s chestnut *Hooked on a Feeling*, by Scandinavian rock band Blue Swede.



Country singer Cindi Cain volunteers her time singing to patients in the palliative care unit at St. Boniface Hospital. (Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press)



Of course she was, she told them. The next thing she knew, everybody in the room was chanting “ooga-chaka, ooga-ooga,” Cain says, referring to the No. 1 smash’s famous chorus.

“Suddenly there was laughter in the room, they were remembering their father singing (*Hooked on a Feeling*) to their mom at socials; it turned out to be a beautiful moment, shared as a family.”

If you’re unfamiliar with Cain’s resumé, here’s a quick primer.



Winnipeg country singer Cindi Cain, in a promotional photograph from 1989, says she learned early on how to be comfortable performing on stage. (Mid West Impressions)

Cain, the middle of three siblings, grew up in Elmwood. Citing Olivia Newton-John, Linda Ronstadt and Rita Coolidge as some of her early singing idols, she guesses she was 13 when she began performing on locally televised talent shows, which led to guest shots on a number of widely watched programs, including the *Lions Telethon*, *The Eddie DeVega Show* and *The Tommy Hunter Show*.

She chuckles, saying while her high schoolmates were working their tails off at McDonalds at age 16, she was earning spending money by performing as a lounge singer at tony venues such as the downtown Carleton Club and Old Bailey’s lounge.

By the time she was 19 she was appearing on stage as many as six nights a week, alongside some of the top musicians in town.

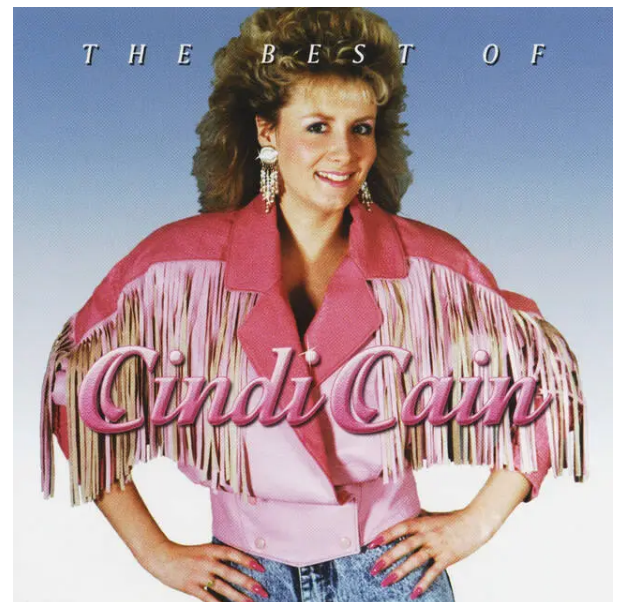


She credits that period of her life for learning how to be completely comfortable in front of an audience, and for figuring out what would and wouldn't work, set-wise.

"I feel bad for the young singers of today, because they don't have those same opportunities we had in the 1980s, when you could get booked Monday through Saturday, and gain what I call street smarts," she says.

"That doesn't come overnight — it only comes by doing — and I was blessed to be able to work with legends like Jimmy King and Ted Komar."

In addition to a successful recording career that began in 1988 with the release of the Top 5 single *You Were Listening to the Singer (Not the Song)*, Cain quickly became a popular draw on the concert circuit, together with her backup group the Cheeters.



Winners of a Coors Fan Award for most popular band, Cindi Cain and the Cheeters performed regularly at the Craven Jamboree, the Calgary Stampede and various Grey Cup festivities.

It was a great run, Cain says. But after five years of crisscrossing the country in a converted school bus 50 weeks out of the year, she bid adieu to the road in 1993 — the same year she got married, and a year after she was nominated for a Juno Award as female vocalist of the year — to open the VoiceShack, a coaching studio for up-and-comers.



Cain never left the “biz” completely, while she was guiding others. She also stayed in touch with her former bandmates and such, with whom she paid annual visits to Victoria Hospital during the holiday season, to stroll up and down the halls, singing carols.

“Every once in a while a family would invite us into a room, to sing to a loved one,” she says. “That’s when I started to realize it was OK to sing at a person’s bedside while holding their hand, and that it was OK if what I sang made them laugh, cry or both.”

In the spring of 2019, Cain registered for an eight-week compassionate care course offered by Palliative Manitoba. Her original intention was to volunteer her time as needed, whether it was by helping out at meal-time or reading to patients.

When she met with a representative from St. Boniface Hospital upon completing the program, however, she was asked what services she felt she had to offer. She responded by saying it would be her honour to be allowed to sing for patients.

Weeks later, after securing the necessary equipment (instead of a guitar or keyboard, she relies on prerecorded backing tracks), Cain was poking her head inside patients’ rooms, politely asking if they were interested in hearing a tune or two.

“Obviously, if it’s not the right moment — if somebody’s sleeping, or looking peaceful — I move on to the next room,” she explains.

“But lots of times a son or daughter will hear me down the hall, and will walk over to ask if I can make sure to stop by their mom or dad’s room, before I leave for the day.”





At the end of '80s, Cain and her backing band the Cheeters were a popular draw on the concert circuit. (Supplied)

Cain smiles, saying thanks to her trusty phone, it's now difficult to "stump the band." Even if it's a song she hasn't totally memorized — Dolly Parton's *Jolene*, for example, or Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Bad Moon Rising*, both of which are popular requests — she can almost always find the lyrics online.

Style of music isn't a problem, either. Admittedly, she isn't overly familiar with David Bowie's vast catalogue, yet there she was two weeks ago, going, "Ground control to Major Tom," seconds after a person let her know how much their father adores the late rocker's music.

Cain, who also sings to dementia patients at a care home north of the city, repeats the same message when others commend her for what she's doing, and remark how they wish they had a talent of some sort to share, as well.

"You don't have to sing or play guitar to take the palliative care course. Helping a person who can't remove the lid from their container of milk is equally important," she says, noting she wasn't permitted to sing for patients at the height of the pandemic, and missed doing so dearly.

"Time is love, and even if it's just sitting next to somebody, so they aren't feeling alone, is gift enough."





Cindi Cain at St. Boniface Hospital (Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press)

As for those kudos we mentioned off the top, here's one more.

Cain was at the hospital last month, gathering her belongings before departing for the day. A man seated nearby leaned over to say hello, and to thank her for singing to his wife, the previous week.

"He told me how for the last seven days, he'd been telling everybody he bumped into how he'd been at the hospital to see his wife, and how, while he was there, it had been as if Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline had personally dropped by for a visit," she says, polishing off the last of her coffee.

"Of all the compliments I've ever received, that one has to be right up there."



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David Sanderson

Dave Sanderson was born in Regina but please, don't hold that against him.

 [Read full biography](#)

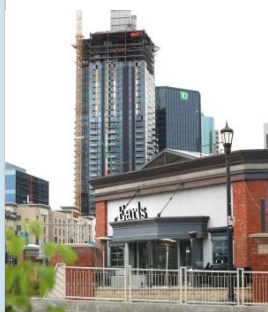
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