

NEWS

No town too small for Canada's unpretentious 'Country Gentleman'

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On their farewell tour, the guys in Tommy Hunter's band would play a game with him.

As they rolled through the Canadian countryside one last time, they read out the names of passing towns.

"We'd go by some little town and they would say,

'I bet you never played Swan River' (Manitoba) or 'I bet you never played Rosetown' (Saskatchewan)," the 77-year-old singer recalled this week.

"And I'd say - I'll bet I have. They were naming all these little wee small towns. I'd played most of them."

To paraphrase one of his singing heroes, Hank Snow, Hunter has "played everywhere, man." And returned to play it again.

Now that he's retired, Hunter has more time to savour the accolades still flowing his way.

His face is on a newly issued stamp. He was inducted into the inaugural class of Mississauga's Legends Row last year. On Sept. 7 in a ceremony starting at 4 p.m., a plaque in his honour will be unveiled on Mississauga's Music Walk of Fame in Port Credit Memorial Park.

Born and raised in London, where he

now lives, Hunter resided in Mississauga for most of his incredible 36-year run as a Friday night fixture, first on Country Hoedown

and then on the longest running show in Canadian TV history, *The Tommy Hunter Show*.

Anyone who watched

Canada's Country Gentleman play the genteel northern host to the royalty of Nashville's country scene knows exactly what to expect from him: effortless, egoless charm. Every Friday night, Canada put its collective heels up and started the weekend with tasty, down-home music.

"Mississauga is really where my career took place," says the three-time JUNO winner.

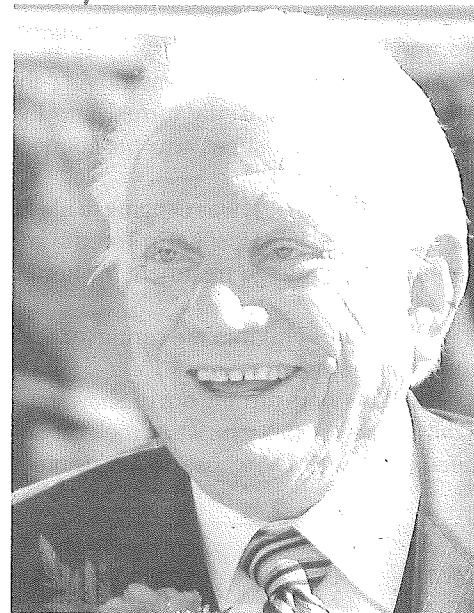
When he married his wife Shirley, the couple bought their first home on Sunningdale Bend in Clarkson and raised their three boys there.

When the house got too small, they moved to Springhill Dr. in Lorne Park where they lived for some 16 years.

Hunter's lost none of his enthusiasm for the city. He's especially proud of the *Mississauga* song he composed 40 years ago to celebrate the creation of this city. It's a civic



**My Back
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A plaque honouring Juno-winner Tommy Hunter will be unveiled on Sept. 7 in Port Credit.

ear worm of a tune.

The chorus goes:

Come on out to Mississauga/ It's the greatest place around/ Where on a quiet evening/ You can watch the sun go down/ And if you should need a friend/ there are plenty to be found/ that's why everybody loves/

that good old Mississauga town.

When he sat down to write the song "my idea was to have something that grabbed you right away," he says. "I wanted a strong beat, something almost military."

Hunter not only donated the song, but arranged free studio time at RCA and organized a group of prominent Mississaugans from all walks of life to take a bus ride to the studio and sing backup on the tune. The chorus is sung on one side of the 45 r.p.m. disc by the Laurie Bower Singers. On the other side is the celebrity choir. The jacket features a group photo including then-Ward 9 Councillor Hazel McCallion.

The mayor of that first council, Martin Dobkin, says the whole thing was Tommy's idea. "It was exciting and a great moment that someone of his stature did this for us."

Although the song was commissioned to commemorate the new city, it has very much the small town feeling you'd expect from Hunter. That's no accident.

"There's a certain amount of pride in your community if it's Lorne Park or Clarkson or Port Credit or whatever," he says. "That's never going to change."

He knows the importance of every little dot on the map. He's played 'em all.