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After 25 years on the radio, Ray Sonin still enjoys magic

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By MICHAEL BEGGS

The same hospitality he projects over the air, radiates from the Mississauga home of CFRB radio personality Ray Sonin as he opens the door to a visitor.

"Do you drink tea or coffee?" is the offer upon entering, while a complimentary box of Flowerdale Tea (one of his sponsors) is supplied upon departure.

And so it seems no wonder that the host of such programs as *Calling All Britons* and *Down Memory Lane* will be celebrating his 25th anniversary with CFRB, on September 10 at the Sheraton Centre.

Sporting a full head of silver hair, the 69-year-old Sonin starts to speak in the voice that has filled so many Toronto living rooms on lazy Saturday afternoons.

The voice rings truer than expected and it, more than anything, may be responsible for his longevity.

"People always tell me I sound the same as on the radio," he says. "And I say, what do you expect? I don't put anything on. I'm really interested in them."

It's doubtful he had any idea what fate had in store for him as a journalist and former BBC radio broadcaster who paid a visit to Canada in 1957 and never returned to his homeland.

Little did he know he'd still be at it 25 years later when he first started *Calling All Britons* on September 13, 1958 for \$30 a week.

HONOR

"It's remarkable that I speak with an accent and have a different type of program and they've stood me for 25 years," he muses. "It's quite an honor."

He started on a month's trial which "seemed to click right from the word go. Assessing its success, he says, 'In every sphere, if

you're authentic you have a pretty good chance of getting away with what you're doing."

If there's one thing Sonin is it's authentic, spicing his show with such British euphemisms as "oojahkapping," "tiddlypush," "fanackerpans" and "how's your father?"

"He's so sincere, they feel they know him," offers wife June on his rapport with his audience.

He makes listeners feel right at home, able to stir a laugh or a tear with a song or a recollection of the past.

"I really feel the listeners are my friends," he continues. "I'm sincere. I never forget they're the ones that keep me on the air."

PERSONAL

Adding to the personal touch is his custom of playing dedications for anniversaries and other occasions.

"Playing requests is very important for older and lonely people," says Sonin. "It helps a lot of people who need it."

"It's a strange link in 25 years, like when a widow calls and says she and her husband listened to me for 17 years."

But, a generation of younger children has grown up with him as well. "Kids mirrored the adults," he says. "Now they listen to my music."

For Sonin his profession is a labor of love. "My hobby and pleasure have been combined," he explains. "That's the happiest way ever to be. And I'm paid to do it."

It's only when one reaches his basement that one realizes the extent of his passion. A collection of more than 12,000 records is stacked in row upon row of shelves.

MEMORABILIA

The walls are lined with memorabilia; a photo with

Louis Armstrong, the 1969 TV *Radio Mirror* Award for *Down Memory Lane*.

And in the typewriter sits the only script he ever uses these days, a playlist of the night's songs.

His collection extends all the way from Vera Lynn to the Police. And while he's known for playing vintage material, it was he who first premiered the Beatles on North American radio, playing *P.S. I Love You*, at the suggestion of a nephew in Britain.

"I didn't know what to make of it," he recalls. "Unknowingly I really started something."

GENERAL

On pop music in general, his feelings are ambivalent, at best.

"Obviously, the change in music is something I can understand but not necessarily appreciate. All the top tunes sound the same, which is what absolutely beats me. It's a strange happening."

But, while the music changes, Sonin just carries on. "I'll go on as long as they let me," he says. "I don't know what retirement is."

He has nothing but praise for the station, stating, "I've been very lucky in my employers. They never oversee me. They never ask what I'll be playing."

In typical fashion, he extends a warm welcome to anyone who wishes to attend the dinner dance in his honor. Tickets are still available at 361-1000.

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OVER



Ray Sonin and his wife, June, look over some of his record collection, reputed to be among the largest private collection anywhere. (Staff photo by Rob Beintema)