

# Randal Arsenault

## Rock & Roll To My Grave

It's often said that artists have their entire lives to make their debut album. In Randal Arsenault's case, truer words have never been spoken. The Newfoundland native—now based in Alberta—has packed over two decades of experience into his first solo release, *Rock & Roll To My Grave*, a shot of old school roots rock that brings Arsenault's music career full circle.

Until now, Arsenault was known as bandleader for Dr. Zoo, the group he formed while studying in South Africa, whose unique sound was once famously described as "Paul Simon's Graceland meets The Pogues." That band's many accomplishments include touring the world and having their work recognized by the Canadian Songwriting Awards, East Coast Music Awards, and Music NL Awards.

But after taking a break to raise a family, Arsenault began writing new material in a much different vein, drawing inspiration from the Americana artists he's always admired, both old and young. It all started coming together when he revisited what became the album's title track, a song he'd begun writing many years ago. "I recently bought an acoustic guitar that didn't suit the Afro-reggae-funk of my other music in Dr. Zoo," Arsenault says. "It sounds old, and the only music that seems to sound good on it is Johnny Cash and Elvis."

"So I started playing some of my songs that might fit this 'old' guitar, and one was 'Rock & Roll To My Grave,' which I mostly wrote over 20 years ago. Back then, the owner of Bridgett's Pub in St. John's really liked it, and a musician friend even wanted to record it. But the song did not fit me at the time, even though I always felt it was special. It was an oddball and still is an oddball actually. But it suits this guitar, and it sounds good."

Those humble beginnings eventually spawned a new album of material laid down with co-producer Murray Pulver (The Bros. Landreth, Crash Test Dummies) at OCL Studios near Calgary. With Pulver also chipping in on guitar, Arsenault kept the sound lean and tight, courtesy of the rhythm section consisting of keyboardist Brendan Waters, drummer Darryl Swart, and bassist Justin Kudding—on loan from country superstar Brett Kissel's band. It all adds up to a lively, radio-friendly sound sure to reach a lot of new ears.

"We cut the song 'Rock & Roll To My Grave' in only half a day," Arsenault says. "It was the first time I sang lead vocals with the band playing the full song from start to finish. I could see everyone, and I could feel the energy. It's the way I always wanted to make a record, it's raw and real."

Arsenault also makes some powerful lyrical statements on the album, particularly with the song "Respect," inspired by volunteer work he did a decade ago in Winnipeg at an Ojibwe employment centre called Anishinaabe Respect. One of the projects he initiated was a youth songwriting seminar, and "Respect" grew out of his interactions with those young people. "That was another song idea I always felt could be special" says Arsenault "I rearranged the melody and the hairs on the back of my neck really stood up. I then had a friend named Dave

McRae help me finish the lyrics, and I brought it to Murray Pulver. He's worked with Indigenous musicians in Winnipeg and had a great singer named Coco Stevens add a part to it. I'm really proud of what we created together."

What started with the purchase of a new guitar has taken him on a journey back in time, literally and figuratively. But it's also reinforced the message of "Rock 'N Roll To My Grave" that we should never stop doing what we love.

"I had a cancer scare last year," he admits. "I'm fine, but it sure makes you evaluate what is important in life. For me, it is my family and kids, and then music. As the song says, 'Someday I know I'll be travelling to my grave, when I die please don't cry because I'll be rockin' and rollin' all the way.' I believe that can be a mantra for us all—find the things that are important and hold on to them all the way to the great beyond."

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