

Turning tragedy into music

Filled with laughs and radiant imagery, *Singing at the Edge of the World* is a triumph of confessional storytelling and an inspiring tale of one man's ability to overcome adversity. Written and performed by Randy Rutherford, this latest musical memoir deals with his hearing loss.

The woman in the aged photograph had the saddest face Randy Rutherford has ever seen.

His mother told Rutherford the photo was of his great-grandmother, who had been deaf since her thirties.

A few years later, Rutherford felt just as sad when he learned his own hearing was fading away.

Now, Rutherford has overcome everything to become an accomplished performer and tonight at the Havana Theatre he'll begin a four-day run of his one-man show—*Singing at the Edge of the World*—about his hearing loss.

Rutherford first saw that old photo in his childhood home in the tiny town of Weaverville in California.

"It was pretty straight-arrow America," he says. "I was the nicest boy in school. I didn't cuss, I didn't drink, I didn't smoke. I promised my grandma I won't be a bad man like grandpa. I think he drank a lot, and left."

After high school, Rutherford did a stint in the air force, then found work playing his guitar in Anchorage's Fancy Moose Saloon. In the 1970s, Alaska, with its new oil pipeline, was a larger version of the gold-rush town he'd grown up in.

Still, he pined for something larger—to study acting in New York and become a folk singer like Gordon Lightfoot. But those plans were derailed by the ringing in his ears.

"I went to the doctor and he said I had a hearing loss.

It might be genetic and there's nothing I can do about it." It was at an early stage, so he went into denial, and continued performing, which on occasion would be silenced by his hearing loss.

"All the sound goes out of the room," he recalls. "I'm just seeing people's lips move. It was just a cold feeling. It's like something swoops me up, just takes me away from the world. It's an invisible disability, so a lot of people don't understand."

Soon, Rutherford bottomed out. "I got really low. I lost my girlfriend. I lost my gig at the Fancy Moose." For eight months, he sat in a trailer with drapes closed, and slept and watched TV and ate junk food.

It was his gift for visual arts that brought him out of his depression over an invisible ailment.

"I started painting birds out of National Geographic. Moved to the Bay Area and got a master's degree in painting," he says. "I figured if I couldn't make music on the guitar I'd do it visually. I made a living for 15 years as a water-color artist."

But Rutherford missed music. "The guitar led me back into the world. If it's quiet in a theatre environment I can play the guitar and sing with the help of a digital hearing aid."

Singing at the Edge of the World is Rutherford's fifth in a series of acclaimed "musical memoirs," but it's first time he's addressed his hearing loss. It's drawn interest from individuals and organizations dealing with hearing loss.

"The biggest issue of my adult life has been my hearing loss," he says, noting it's about 70 per cent gone. "As soon as I leave the house I have to deal with it. The world doesn't slow down and stop so I can hear it."

—David Spaner, *Vancouver Province*



Critics pick:

***Singing at the Edge of the World*, San Francisco's Randy Rutherford tells and sings his autobiographical hit show about his own growing deafness. Rutherford's vivid, gentle storytelling, accompanied by his guitar, has made him a Fringe mega-star.**

—Jerry Wasserman, *Vancouver Province*, *Thursday, March 27, 2008*