

Ottawa songwriter turned his back on music at the peak of (his career, only to be (rediscovered by (peers and longtime (admirers 40 years (later ...)

by Greg Quill

For those who believe in the redemptive and restorative powers of song, the strange tale of the recovery of the lost works of William Hawkins is convincing evidence.

"I was never lost," claims the Ottawa poet and composer, whose best songs were written almost 40 years ago and forsaken when Hawkins turned his back on a burgeoning career in music for a life marked by bouts of inebriation, drug smuggling, rehabilitation and eventual obscurity as the owner/driver of a taxi-cab.

They have been lovingly revitalized in a remarkable two-CD set, *Dancing Alone* (True North Records) by producer Ian Tamblin and a crew of Canadian roots music notables, including Hawkins' former musical colleagues Bruce Cockburn, Sneezzy Waters, Sandy Crawley and Bill Stevenson, as well as Murray McLauchlan, Lynn Miles, Suzie Vinnick, Brent Titcomb, Terry Gillespie and Kelly Lee Evans, among others.

"I just dropped out sometime in the 1971, when I woke up in the Donwood Clinic, a rehab centre in Toronto, with no idea how I got there, weighing 128 lbs and looking like a ghost in my six-foot frame."

This was some time after Hawkins, who was already a nationally recognized poet, with five collections published between 1964 and 1971 and selections of his work in two major poetry anthologies, had turned his lyrical talent to songwriting, and, as manager/curator/host of Ottawa's famed folk haunt Le Hibou, had gathered around him an ensemble of fortuitously gifted musicians, among them Cockburn, Waters, Crawley and Neville Wells, who's also featured on *Dancing Alone*.

WILLIAM HAWKINS, LOST AND FOUND



PHOTO: CHRIS TOPP

"We called ourselves The Children," says Hawkins, 68. "Bruce transcribed my melodies and taught me the rudiments of guitar.

"We never recorded anything ... that was my fault."

In those years Hawkins, who was a good five years older than his musical peers, was something of a local legend, both as a writer of supremely melodic songs filled with stark despair and raw self-loathing mixed with dark humour – "most of them were written inside a bottle," he says – and as a performer and ubiquitous bohemian bad boy.

He had written the Top 10 hit "It's A Crying Shame" for Ottawa pop band The Esquires. He had hosted poetry marathons featuring contemporaries Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Jacques Godbout and John Robert Colombo, as well as musical performances by Gordon Lightfoot, Judy Collins and Joni Mitchell. He had partied with Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens.

"And one night in 1968, opening for The Lovin' Spoonful at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, the house lights went up and I saw all these 14- and 15-year-old

"I turned to Bruce (Cockburn) as we walked off and said, 'I'm finished.' All my troubles started when I left the stage."

kids screaming, and suddenly I felt out of place. I was twice their age. I turned to Bruce as we walked off stage and said, 'I'm finished.'

"I had a good thing going with my poetry, and a Canada Council grant, and I didn't see any future for myself or my songs in pop music.

"I got a part-time job for a while with the federal government, and as the producer of a TV music show in Ottawa hosted by (songwriters) David Wiffen and Ann Mortifee. Both jobs drove me back to drink.

"All my troubles started when I left the stage."

In the preface to Hawkins' 2005 poetry collection, also titled *Dancing Alone*, Cockburn compares his old band mate

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to the French poet Rimbaud, a flattering allusion that Hawkins sees as a singularly ironic summary of his post-Children misadventures.

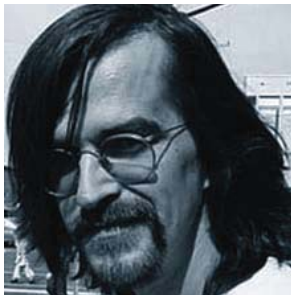
“Rimbaud got lost in Africa and became a gun-runner,” he says. “I got lost in Mexico and became a drug-runner.”

His marijuana escapades ended with a close call, when Mounties surrounded him at a remote airport after he'd stepped from a plane they suspected was loaded with dope.

“I came out with my hands up. Luckily I was clean. They had nothing on me, though they threatened to deport me to Mexico.

“When I woke up in Donwood, I saw the light. I wanted no more excitement. I wanted to be clean and sober. I wanted to write poetry. I wanted to drive a cab, to be anonymous, and that's what I've been since 1971.”

And Hawkins may have remained an obscure footnote to Canadian musical history if not for longtime friend, mentor, promoter and arts philanthropist Harvey Glatt, who had employed Hawkins decades ago in one of his Treble Clef record stores, before starting up the phenomenally successful Ottawa radio station CHEZ-FM.



HAWKINS CIRCA 1970

“Harvey gave me my first guitar,” says Hawkins, who has three grown children from a marriage long gone wrong, and five grand children. “He’s the guy who first suggested I should turn my poems into songs. He has always been my friend, suggesting quietly over the years that I should get the songs on record.”

Finally Glatt offered to bankroll the sessions that yielded *Dancing Alone*, which was launched late September. Hawkins’ lost songs immediately stunned the roots music community with their brilliance and sophistication, and with the high quality of Tamblyn’s arrangements and the spirited commitment of the performances by longtime admirers.

“Harvey let me choose the producer and the performers,” Hawkins says. “Then Ian forbade me to come to the studio till he was finished recording and mixing. I’m a well known manipulator and megalomaniac.”

Some of the songs Hawkins overhauled completely, others were reconstructed from fragments. Most, he says, were still in good shape, and easily adapted to the theatrical, folk, R&B, jug band, rock, country and jazz styles represented on the album.

“I have no formal musical training. I grew up loving the songs of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and Hoagy Carmichael. I know what a good hook is and where to put it.”

When Hawkins heard the completed recording, “I just loved it,” he says. “I asked for some re-mixes – I don’t like clarinets in ballads, so I had Ian take them out. Otherwise, I couldn’t fault it.”

The experience has rekindled Hawkins’ passion for performance.

“I’d love to play again. Some friends have put together a small acoustic group that I can sit in with. I doubt I’ll be able to go on the road – I suffer from emphysema – but I’d love to play some folk festivals.


“After 34 years driving a cab, I’m ready to quit.” 

PHOTO: COURTESY WILLIAM HAWKINS