

PROFILE

Ken Friesen

by Jennifer Abel



It's been a long and winding road," says Ken Friesen of his paths in both the music business and in life. Becoming House Engineer for the Bathouse (the Tragically Hip's Bath, ON-based studio) has settled him down somewhat, but he still hops a tour bus on occasion. "I've always moved around a lot, and being a little bit rootless, I suppose, I get uncomfortable settling in and getting complacent anywhere."

Friesen's current trajectory started in Calgary after a brief stint at university and about 50 uninspiring jobs. When he found himself installing carpet and hating it, he says, "I decided I was going to do something else, and I figured, well, hey, why don't I go and be a sound guy? You get to travel around, and there's free beer and girls and stuff." So, after a 12-hour course at a studio that was going out of business, he travelled with a band to the northern tip of Vancouver Island, "16 hours from home, and failed horribly!"

Safely back in Calgary, Friesen really started learning about sound. "That was at the time when the Olympics were happening, in 1988, and that was a really good time to be in that city. There were a lot of great sound guys around for that event, and I started picking up some mentors." Soon, armed with his newly acquired skills, he was hired on at Rocky Mountain Sound. When Calgary started feeling small a couple of years later, he found himself "heading down into America to make my mark. And lo and behold, as I went through Toronto, I was snagged by my wife." Auspiciously,

the first show Friesen worked after settling in Toronto included the Tragically Hip.

When Friesen and his wife got married some three years later, he decided it was time to come in off the road. "The studio seemed like a natural enough progression. But getting into a studio to do some work was not that easy when all your credits are live shows." Nevertheless, The Sound Shop in Nashville welcomed him with open arms, and he spent several months there on an expired work permit. When his thoughts turned to home again ("I'm a Canadian lad!"), he took a position working at a studio near Ottawa. It turned out to be a good place to start; the studio won the Canadian Country Music Association's Studio Of The Year award from 1994 to 1996, and the first record Friesen mixed there was Susan Aglukark's Juno-winning *Arctic Rose*.

A rumour some three years ago that the Hip would be building a studio inspired a curious Friesen to call longtime Hip associate Mark Vreeken one Friday. "He said, 'We're not quite that far along yet, but why don't you come out and do monitors for us and we'll talk about it? We're leaving on Monday for three weeks.'" Friesen and the band hit it off, and he was eventually given him the job of designing the Bathouse's systems. Because he knew the facility so well, they kept him on as house engineer when it was complete. He's been there ever since.

How does a man with wanderlust keep himself sane in the studio? Friesen has several methods.

He lives by the house plant rule: "If a plant can live in the studio, then so can I. That means natural sunlight, windows that open, that sort of thing." He still makes forays onto the road. "I really like to cross-pollinate – take the ideas from one world and inject them into the other." And he makes sure he leaves the studio behind every so often so he can refresh himself. "I find great value in getting out and doing things that have absolutely nothing to do with audio. And hanging around – I have a lot of friends who are not connected to the business in any way, shape, or form . . . It can become almost manic if you don't regulate it, jumping from one project to the other without taking any breaks in between."

Even with the two poles of family and the studio stabilizing him, Friesen still hits the road sometimes: travelling to Toronto to record a live show; heading up to Pembroke, ON to record in a convent; or running an events stage at Canadian Country Music Week. "I like to keep a variety of things going," he admits. And, after many twists and turns in the road, he's found a life he likes. "I just enjoy it. I try to stay enthusiastic about what I'm doing, and if I'm not, then I'll do something else. Life's too short to spend doing things you don't like doing."

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