



Photo courtesy of Perry Ehrlich

PERRY EHRLICH

noteworthy

BY PETER BIRNIE

His first paying, piano-playing gig came as a teenager at a hotel in Yorkton, where the sign declaring "Piano Stylings With Perry Ehrlich" must have given the kid a frisson of delight. "I was paid \$1.75 an hour," he recalls with a laugh. "I'd start at 5:30 or 6:00 P.M. and play for two hours without a break. Fifteen minutes off and then I'd come right back."

It was only when Perry Ehrlich had moved to Saskatoon to attend the University of Saskatchewan, and was back at the piano to help pay the bills, that he learned how his peers actually work in this music business: 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off. "This is work?" he thought. "This is fun!" And forget the cliché about tips in a brandy snifter—patrons showed their gratitude to the young guy at the ivories by sending him drinks. "But I'm so low-level tolerant of alcohol that I said, 'Make me a fancy-looking drink with no booze in it.' At the end of the summer, I had this huge liquor credit!"

This is not the story of a successful Saskatchewan lounge lizard. Perry Ehrlich is, in fact, a successful lawyer in Richmond, B.C., with a love of music so grand that his partners at Kahn Zack Ehrlich Lithwick learned a rule long ago: If Ehrlich isn't working with a client, he's out on a stage somewhere leading a hundred kids in the rehearsal of a song. Ironically, while Ehrlich has always appreciated applause and loves to bask in at least a little of the limelight, he learned long ago that the greatest satisfaction comes as an accompanist, playing second fiddle to young talent in its first bloom. From little acorns, the saying goes, and thanks to Ehrlich's need to share music a decade ago with his daughter Lisa, who was then 10 years old, mighty oaks have indeed grown.

First came the show choir Sound Sensation, built with cocreator Simon Isherwood. Today there's another show choir called ShowStoppers, and many of its high-energy young members are graduates of Ehrlich's largest

legacy. Each summer, the musical-theater training program Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! offers two separate month-long sessions that fill Vancouver's Jewish Community Centre with hundreds of enthusiastic kids, singing and dancing their little lungs out in preparation for a big end-of-term show—written, of course, by Ehrlich.

Vancouver film producer Shel Piercy once directed a stage production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, and had to turn Ehrlich down when the then-thirtysomething lawyer auditioned to play 18-year-old Motel Kamzoil. No matter, they became the best of friends. "My 11-year-old daughter is in Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance!" Piercy says, "and what she loves the most is the very last thing they do every day. After rehearsing all day, after notes and frustrations, triumphs and pain, after all the pressure and tension and energy it takes just to get through the day putting on such a big show in so short a time, Perry has them all group together, look at each other and then shout as loud as they can in one unified voice, 'We are fabulous!' Perry truly is."

That sentiment is echoed by Ehrlich's longtime collaborator, Wendy Stuart, a musicologist who spends each summer with Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! "Most people would struggle to maintain a law practice and some semblance of a personal life," says Stuart. "Perry does that along with running an incredibly successful music-theater program for youth, leading a performing group for talented teens, composing, accompanying and promoting the careers of his friends—myself included. What more can you say about determination and dedication? Perry has some

secret weapon—no sleep, perhaps—that allows him to do three times as much as ordinary mortals and come back for more. After 10 years, I still don't pretend to understand how, but it's been a great ride."

Ehrlich's ride started in Yorkton, where he was born to Grace and David

tive, wanting to do my best all the time," David adds, "and that Perry got from me." Ehrlich recalls his first-grade teacher, Jean Adamson, asking him if he'd like to take part in Yorkton's annual music festival. About a dozen boys sang "Fishing," with Perry's performance judged second only to that of one David MacIntyre—now a Vancouver musicologist and composer of such works as the opera *The*

Architect. "You really love fishing!" declared an enthusiastic adjudicator to young Ehrlich. "Well, I hate fishing," he now recalls, "but I really sold the song!"

Like any child, Ehrlich wanted to be popular. "Growing up in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, being musical and being Jewish was not an advantage, because I always wanted to be athletic and I was not. When you're athletic you



Photo courtesy of Perry Ehrlich

"Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance!"

"We should all be getting kids involved, giving them huge direction in life."

Ehrlich. Mom and Dad knew from the start that their firstborn son loved music—he was taking piano lessons from grade one—but David says he didn't realize Ehrlich's drive and determination until a little later. "We still have a picture of him on a local TV show," says the proud dad. "When he was about 9 years old he taught his younger brother, Howard, who was 5, a song, and they appeared on this program. I should add that he did not inherit from me any of his musical talent. He did that from his grandfather, my wife's father, who had a phenomenal cantorial voice and played onstage 100 years ago in Austria, now the Ukraine.

"I'm into sports, very competi-

have teams and all the fun that comes from being part of the fun."

"Perry," declares his mother matter-of-factly, "couldn't catch a ball if he had Velcro on both hands." Instead, Perry says he found his sense of community in musical theater. "I know it may sound a little sappy to say it, but there's a real happiness onstage, and there's always a community of players that get along well. Musical theater is the best of all worlds."

Ehrlich's mother is Yorkton-born, while his father is a Holocaust survivor. David and Grace met thanks to the kismet that can come in even the most awful of circumstances—when David was befriended by Sybil Shack and her

family in Winnipeg, and was able to bring to Canada his only surviving relative, his sister Rose's husband Louis, who then reported from Yorkton on a lovely gal named Grace. "One thing led to another," says Ehrlich, "and David moved to Yorkton, took over his father-in-law's business and became a dry cleaner. He worked like a maniac, to this day the hardest-working man I've ever known. Here's a guy who barely spoke English when he arrived in Canada, and they ended up asking him to run for mayor of Yorkton. My father was such a schmoozer that he was approached by the Liberals, the NDP and the Conservatives to run for them. He would buy *Awake!* from the Jehovah's Witnesses because it was easier to give them a 5-cent or 10-cent donation than say no to them."

There were no Jewish schools in Yorkton, so David drove the three Ehrlich boys to Hebrew class in Regina, 200 kilometers away. David and Grace never mentioned the Holocaust when the children were young. "I was a closet survivor until they were into their teens," says David. "If the kids would ask, 'What's that number doing on your arm?' I would say, 'This is from the war.' Period." When that changed, the news had its most profound effect on the Ehrlichs' firstborn. "When you're the oldest of three bright, talented children of a Holocaust survivor," says Perry, "when you're raised by a father who's seen everything he knows in life disappear and every opportunity in life disappear, then you don't take anything for granted. My parents never said 'You have to do your homework, you have to get As—I just knew. There was never a question that I needed to find something productive to do.'"

Bunny Pearce was Perry's piano teacher in Yorkton. Now in West Vancouver, she recalls the turning point for her prize pupil. "Perry loved music so much, and I know he would have loved to be a teacher. But his father pointed out to him that no matter how good he got, Perry would still have to take in students to pay the bills."

Ehrlich says his epiphany came in Enid, Oklahoma, where the musical star of Yorkton Regional High was



Photo courtesy of Perry Ehrlich

ShowStoppers.

attending a tristate music festival. "And there I got a big dose of reality. From big fish in a small pond to, well, you know what, I think I'll leave all this music stuff as a passion and go into law." He spent a summer selling carpets in Vancouver, with a gig on weekends playing dinner music.

Just before returning to school in Saskatoon, Ehrlich met a girl named Marilyn Moscovitz, and in the losing of a phone number lies a tale. "I called every Moscovitz in the phone book," he recalls, "and with the very last one I heard, 'Oh, you mean my granddaughter!' Marilyn and I dated every day in Vancouver." Love and graduation (he from the USask in law, she from UBC in accounting) and marriage followed, with a call to the bar in B.C. and law partnership not long after. Then came Lisa, now a talented singer in her own right, and younger sister Mandy.

Just before Perry and Marilyn were

married, David and Grace sold out and headed west from Yorkton. "We always knew that our kids wouldn't come back to Saskatchewan," says Grace. "There was nothing there for them."

Perry and Marilyn have been members of the Beth Tikvah Congregation in Richmond for 20 years. In May at a concert marking Yom HaShoah, David will

introduce his granddaughter, Lisa, before she sings "Remember," a moving song written by Perry for his father and all Holocaust survivors. Ehrlich will, of course, be at the keyboard. "A few years ago they started a Jewish day school in Richmond, and couldn't afford a music teacher," David recalls. "Perry would leave his practice for an hour each week to teach 30 or 40 kids. Come December, the Christian kids are singing 'Jingle Bells' and

'Silent Night' at the mall. Perry thinks about it, packs his kids up in their white shirts and skullcaps, and takes them to the mall to sing Hanukkah songs. I think that gave him the idea to harness young talent and do something with it. How much more multiculturalism can you have than Christian kids and Jewish kids singing at the mall, and they're both proud of what they're doing. I thought that was great," waxes David Ehrlich.

"The bottom line is that these kids should be supported," says Perry Ehrlich. "There should be 20 different ShowStopper groups, 10 or 15 musical-theater programs in the community. We should all be getting kids involved, giving them huge direction in life. What it's all about is self-esteem, working together and respecting the people we work with. This gives these kids the chance to mature and grow in a very nurturing, positive atmosphere." lifestyles