



HAM AND CHEESE: "You really want this, hey?" the director asked when I auditioned, making me feel both encouraged and ashamed (see p. 48)

Demeanor
Krynski

/GTA R L JOB!

After years of packing pharmaceuticals, serving seniors, clumsy construction and fishing for frogs, I became a full-time musician. I live humbly by some standards, but I stand before you, clearly surviving

By Kris ~~Wenzel~~
Photographs by Bryce

In Grade 8, I joined an extracurricular social studies club called Project Business, designed to help young people learn about supply and demand economics. I signed up because Krista Copper was in it. She had brown feathered hair, eyes like a stunned deer, and wore a corduroy jacket buttoned right up to her chin, which gave her a look of impenetrability that I found alluring. We were to make peanut brittle and sell it at lunch hour, calculating the cost of the peanuts, sugar, molasses and labour time, and fixing a price that would recoup our costs or, even better, make a profit.

The club was divided into three competing groups. I made sure I was in Krista's, and she set the strategy. The key, she said, was the quality of our peanut brittle. Her mom's was awesome, so she'd get her mom to make it. We would charge the same price as everyone else, but ours would be better, so we'd sell more. Ours was indeed better, and we did sell more. We made more money, but we used twice as many peanuts, which were the most expensive ingredient. Our expenses were nearly double those of the other groups, and we made less money than everybody else. Krista was demoted from club president to treasurer and I joined flag football.

From a slave to ulterior motives to a career in the performing arts, I've spent the past 10 years cobbling together a viable existence by writing, performing and recording original music as Kris Demeanor, often with my Crack Band. Sure, under the auspices of making a respectable living, I have made halfhearted stabs at biology, architecture, horticulture, English literature, but none stirred in me a sustainable passion. Many people love music, and love to play it, but playing professionally requires a type of enthusiasm akin to mild but unrelenting panic. I liken it to navigating through the maze of mirrors at the Stampede as a child. It was confusing, frustrating, and everywhere was *me*. I would bash into the glass and cry, but suppress my sobs and get it together so dad wouldn't have to rescue me. I'd go in again the next year.

Life as a touring musician is one of thrilling variety and profound uncertainty. I have been involved in theatre, film, public education, television and spoken word, putting as many fingers into as many pies as I can without feeling like a cheap huckster. Most artists, in their early years, and often throughout their careers, need "real"

We had the work ethic of our immigrant parents, rehearsing three or four nights a week in Andrew's basement while his parents tried to drown us out by cranking *Matlock* upstairs.

jobs to supplement their grand ideas. By real, I mean any job with a defined payment structure, with shifts of a set time frame. When the Crack Band and I play to drunken snowboarders at the Rose and Crown in Banff for \$300 and nobody listens until an insufferably insistent guy crashes the stage and plays "American Pie" to grateful screams, we call it a paid rehearsal, a punch-the-clock gig. Sometimes, a great gig pays good money; it doesn't feel like a real job when you're backstage at a folk festival chatting with Bruce Cockburn in the port-a-let lineup.

Usually, though, it's difficult to quantify where art meets making a living, or what is a satisfying experience as opposed to a perversely interesting one. Creating quality art sucks time and energy, and it takes years for the monetary payoff to come close to equaling the time and personal resources spent realizing the vision. An artist's ongoing internal debate bats around many questions: How much do I need in order to live comfortably? Will CD sales and live shows pay the bills? Should I focus on publishing and write a cookie-cutter country hit? Learn a bunch of Neil Diamond songs and do corporate parties? If I do these things, am I still an artist? Who cares? Where is the romance in being an artist of unwavering integrity when Alberta Health sends the collection agency after you? Do I party because I'm a musician or did I become a musician because I like to party?

Most musicians I know are in a perpetual state of unease, continually revisiting these questions and revising our answers, knowing that we'll be asked, at family parties, by old friends at bars, and by other artists, "So, can you survive doing just music?" We all want to look at them squarely and say, "Yes, that is all I do. I live humbly by some standards, but I stand before you, clearly surviving."

Many artists have colourful "real job" histories, though not because they have a lot of interests. They love their art, and secondary loves such as cooking and bird watching don't make any money. An artist's catalogue of real jobs is unique because they take whatever outside work they can, only when they absolutely have to or when it's convenient, jobs with flexible schedules, jobs devoid of deep responsibility.

By global standards, of course, we enjoy lives of ridiculous

comfort and wealth (understanding this helps us through the droughts). And, like every successful business, we're helped by the supportive "teams" we've compiled: encouraging parents and spouses, understanding bandmates, the odd fan-turned-patron, a friend with some industry clout, the Canada Council. Still, it's a tenuous existence, because not only are we trying to create decent art, we are also trying to invent our own job niches. The dangerous thing about saying goodbye to real jobs is that the more time passes without one, the more impossible it is to imagine ever getting one again. But then, the most dangerous animals are the hungriest.

Let me regress.

My first band, Alchemy – from the blackest coal, may golden melodies rise! – was desperately earnest and hardworking, a schizophrenic democracy of divergent musical styles and a level of bombast that overshot our youthful chops. Our originals emulated the variety of genres that our cover songs did: folk, folk/rock, pop/folk, rock, country rock, reggae, punk, metal, soul, rap, folk/rap, country/metal, any style we could play clumsy homage to. We did both Dire Straits' "Sultans of Swing" and The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again." Extended versions. Our originals had names such as "These Are Your 20s" and "Ten Miles Out of Paris," all delivered with an early U2 sincerity.

We had little sense of what it meant to actually make a living playing music. We were driven by the teenaged rock star fantasy, fueled by a burgeoning music video culture, Live Aid, and nights down at the Glenmore reservoir blasting the Springsteen live box set in my bandmate Andrew's car. Talent, ambition and desire would be rewarded with fame, girls and money. It's totally gonna happen, man.

For us, George Harrison was the benchmark. He was 21 when the Beatles really hit it big. We had until we were 21. We'd make it by then. The "it" we would make was a never defined, imaginary finish line of some kind after which we'd find all the glorious trappings of rock and roll fame and thousands of people who were as deeply affected by our music as Andrew was by Springsteen, Paul by Bob Marley, Sean by Yes, and me by Cat Stevens (shut up).

We rarely got paid for our work, highlighting the bills of several Earth Day benefits, and when we did get paid, all the money went back into the band, into gear or recording. We had the work ethic of our immigrant parents, rehearsing three or four nights a week in Andrew's basement while his parents tried to drown us out by cranking *Matlock* upstairs.

Alchemy would get the odd nibble, some outside encouragement to keep on playing that we would amplify in importance so the dream could be extended a little longer. Our good friend and fan Tony changed his last name from the difficult Ehrenreich to the authoritative Foss and became our manager. He made up business cards. A handful of groupies came to rehearsals and all of our shows. Some were girls. The local A & M rep sent our demo to the Toronto office, and the guy there said he liked my voice. He said to send more. But the strains of reality outdrawing expectation became too much. Our youngest member turned 21. Alchemy disbanded.

In my teens, while waiting for the band to take off ("take off" being the beautifully vague signpost of success right before "making it"), I got a lot of jobs through the Hire A Student office. Landscaping, stuffing envelopes, making sandwiches at Olympic Village, officiating community soccer games: I was not discerning. I also worked for a temp agency that paid \$6 an hour, doing night shifts in industrial parks.

I unloaded Hugo Boss suits from long trucks. We'd form a chain of six guys and pass the suits as quickly as possible. There was a macho air to the passing, like it was a competitive relay event, and the other temp and I were in



ACH, A WEE SMELL: Bags of rotting molluscs were one of the perks of working on a Scottish mussel farm

boxes my mom packed for dinner. My workmate kept repeating how insulting it was that the temp agency only paid me \$6 an hour while he made four times as much. “Criminal,” he’d say.

There’s

nothing like the knowledge you’re getting totally ripped off to prompt you to seek refuge in the sleepy corridors of higher education. I spent four years at University of Calgary getting an English degree. Those are murky times. A bar called The Den had the cheapest jugs of beer in the city. But even cheap beer adds up, so I worked at The Renoir, “Calgary’s Premier Retirement Address.” I wore a peach tie and cummerbund and served the residents lunch and dinner as if they were dining in a fancy restaurant every day. Perks included free gourmet food and getting invited to the rooms of the elderly occupants for war stories. “When my girlfriend and I had to move our first cadaver, we laughed!” Mrs. Swanson told me. “We laughed and laughed! We didn’t know how else to handle it. It was so strange. Then, later, it wasn’t strange anymore.”

Going to university was an incredibly valuable experience. I learned that I should never again waste my time and energy doing something I wasn’t interested in, because I’d likely do a half-assed job. Degree in hand, my best buddy Paul (friend since the crib, drummer in Alchemy) and I decided over a bottle of red that we needed to go to Europe for a year. I’d bring a guitar, he’d bring his bongos, we’d work and busk our way around. No itinerary, no plan.

Busking in Europe was the first time I made a meaningful connection between making music and making a living. When you busk, people only drop money if they like the show or if they pity you. I pity some musicians: the armless, legless or blind; any child who looks like their parents put them up to it or is dressed in a woolen traditional costume; any opera singer

who is clearly classically trained and has been abandoned by their once government-funded opera centre. But two healthy, jovial Canadian boys with beer cans and donair wrappers littered around them – I’d like to think the pity drops were the exception. People seemed to enjoy it, our fast-paced “buskerized” versions of “Country Roads” and “Chelsea Hotel.” We did Spirit of the West and Barenaked Ladies, bringing Canadian music to the streets of Europe, and started injecting originals into the mix.

The money we made paid for hostel beds, beer and wine, pizza and kebabs, postage for letters home and pirated cassette tapes of Nirvana, REM and The Cure. It was an honest living, a source of income not based on negotiation or luck. But we also took black market labour jobs. We worked in Munich for my second cousin’s landscaping *gartengestaltung* company, constructing fancy water gardens and streams on the properties of rich *Münchener*’s estates. A neighbour of one client complained about the croaking sound coming from one of Dieter’s water gardens. Turns out there was a district bylaw with strict regulations about homeowners’ responsibility for animal noises made on their property. We pumped the water out of the pond, groped around in the mud for three hours until we

the deepest end of the truck, starting off the chain, pouring sweat and trying to out-hustle each other. We’d take breaks in a cold white room with United Way posters on the walls, drinking pop and smoking, nobody talking.

Elsewhere, I packed pharmaceuticals into various sized parcels for mail out. I worked next to a Québécois ex-biker turned born-again Christian named Fang (he had switched names with his German Shepherd, Étienne) who quoted scripture while we packed. He liked mentioning that there was a safe in the building containing a bag of medicinal-use cocaine worth \$500,000 on the street. “There was a time I would have been tempted,” he’d laugh, and he’d say it again on the next shift.

I once worked from midnight to 10 a.m. with a middle-aged guy next to a machine called the “extruder.” It was a giant green, steel beast. We fed it bags of small plastic pellets, and 20 minutes later it would spit out industrial-strength plastic wrap that we had to make sure got onto the spools evenly. We’d prop open the door of the plant and smoke cigarettes while keeping an eye on the machine. I’d eat the meatloaf sandwiches and drink the juice

found the frog, and drove it to the woods.

I worked on a mussel farm in Scotland, heading out onto the loch in a dinghy and spending my days on a floating grid of aluminum platforms attached to pontoons. We hauled up 20-metre ropes with staggered clusters of hundreds of mussels attached and stuffed them into long sacks. After spending hours knee-deep in mussels, starfish and seaweed, I'd be sent off with a plastic bag full of mussels. I didn't feel right rejecting the generous perk, but I had no appetite for mussels. After two weeks my caravan site was strewn with bags of mussels in varying states of stench and decay.

~~██████████~~ **The need to** play fast and loud ~~to get people's attention~~ on the streets while busking informed my songwriting style after I got back to Calgary. I came home with a handful of new songs and sketches for a half dozen more, a book of lyric fragments with notes on tempo, and a primitive, self-styled music notation to remember melody lines. There was also a confidence level I had never felt before, a strong inkling that writing and performing could be my career.

I applied for a new artist demo grant, and got it. I released my first cassette of original music, put a piece of my dad's art on the cover, and got an interview on CJSW, the U of C radio station. At the same time, I was working at the Good Earth café, and turned down a managerial position with a salary so I could "focus on my music," a bold decision considering I had no serious income from music and no industry interest.

My brother-in-law Greg, who booked entertainment at the U of C, sat me down with a proposal: my sister Monika would sing harmony, we'd get my longtime friend Ron to play percussion, and become Tinderbox, a folk/pop trio playing all my originals and a couple of well chosen covers. In our first year together we got a gig at the Calgary Folk Festival, and over the next few years played dozens of shows in Western Canada and released a full-length CD, *No, Really, Let Go* (I was still pining for my lost love in England).

I started to learn the ropes, applying for festivals, grants, putting together a package to pitch to labels, going to industry conventions, sending recordings to radio stations, finding a good web designer and, oh yes, working on the craft of songwriting and guitar playing under various forms of soft-drug inebriation. To cover living expenses (again, all money we made went back into recording, postage and travel costs), I worked at a health food store, stocking shelves and pilfering as much organic cheese, nuts and meat as my conscience could handle.

By this time I was playing with my Crack Band: Diane Kooch, Chantal Vitalis and Peter Moller. The bonds formed between musicians in the same band over nearly 10 years are too deep to describe with any justice here. We share the joys and burdens, and talk about really filthy things in the car. The gigs got bigger and more varied, the money better, but it was still mostly re-invested into the music, or eaten up quickly by rent, food and booze.

I was supplementing my income doing songwriting workshops in schools for an organization called the Calgary Arts Partners in Education Society. I went into classes and taught songwriting with curriculum tie-ins. We'd write raps about the animal classification

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system ("Arthropods are invertebrates/ But they still get exoskeleton aches) and compose pieces about rainforest destruction sung to Britney Spears tunes ("Oops, we killed them again/ The rainforests fall/ Clear cutting them all/ Oh, maybe, maybe, there's something we can do/ Like stop CO₂/ The trees are innocent"). The ability to pick and choose projects and regulate their duration made the job ideal because I could tour and record without scheduling conflicts, but eventually I found myself relying on the same bag of tricks in the classes, recycling melodies and growing impatient with the kids. I come from a long line of innovative and proud teachers. So I quit.

My last job outside of music, or at least outside the arts, was with Paul, comrade from the seminal busking trip to Europe. I was gigging a lot at the time but had a couple of dry months ahead. Paul had his own construction business and needed a hand. I got my own tool belt and prepared myself for the classic rock that invariably gets blasted at construction sites. We painted baseboards in apartment buildings, built porches and painted faux window frames onto stucco walls six stories up on rickety ladders. We did jobs in the newest communities on the edges of prairie, sterile homes big enough to be orphanages, every design the same, a postage stamp lawn and three-car garage, each community adhering to a limited colour palette of earthy pastels.

The hours were flexible and it was cash under the table, but Paul and I hadn't been hanging out regularly for a few years, so each day's work would be sabotaged by a lunch-time joint, a reminiscing session, and the subsequent installing of a window upside down, or the pull of the early afternoon sun to enjoy a pint on the nearest patio. These distractions forced us to work frantically to hit deadlines. One Friday, we were trying to finish a drywalling job in Mackenzie Towne before the weekend, before a sound check I had at 5:30 p.m. I was measuring and scoring sections of drywall, and in my haste sliced open my left index finger with the exacto knife.

I rushed over to my guitar player Chantal's house, taught her the basic chords to half a dozen songs, and at the show did the other songs either *a capella* or blowing into a harmonica and stomping. That's where it ended. That was it for the real jobs.

~~██████████~~ **It's been seven years** since that fateful slice of the finger and I feel like an inventor who, instead of developing and marketing an actual really good new can opener, is trying to sell the instructions for making your own really good new can opener, with a footnote saying it's OK if you accidentally put together a potato peeler.

What I mean is that on the fringes of the working world, I can be industrious and ambitious, but in essence must create my own job description



HAMMER TIME: Drywalling and rushing to sound checks don't mix



Extra Cheese pizza cowboy rides into the sunset

Three years ago, I got a call from a theatre friend who scouts for a local talent agency about a television commercial being shot in Calgary that required a man to play guitar and sing. I auditioned for the McCain's International Series Thin Crust Texas Barbecue Chicken Pizza ad, waiting in a holding pen with the majority of the city's roots-rock singer/songwriters. Most of us were wearing country suits and western hats. The commercial's story arc was brilliant: a young cowboy rises spontaneously from a long table of pizza-eating family and friends and woos a pretty cowgirl at the head of the table by singing "Yellow Rose of Texas."

I hammed it up when it was my turn, getting down on my knees as though I were pleading. I played the song faster and more energetically than the original and was called back to audition again for the commercial's director, an L.A. industry type with blonde, shoulder-length hair and a tangible air of self-assurance. (I overheard people say that he'd just come from working on a movie with one of the lesser Baldwin brothers.) "You really want this, hey?" he asked after I laid the cheese on thick, which made me feel both encouraged and ashamed. My third audition was in front of the McCain Foods board, who had flown in from Halifax to make the final decision. They seemed pleased, but it was lunch hour and most were tucking into sandwiches. (The catering got better at each subsequent audition.)

I wasn't informed I had the part until getting a call at 8 p.m. Go to the Currie Barracks parking lot at 3 a.m., I was told. The barbecue in the commercial was supposed to be taking place at sunset, but for our purposes sunrise could masquerade as sunset, giving us two chances to film the spot in one day.

The amount of equipment and size of the crew on location was ridiculous for a one-minute ad, I thought, knowing how excited my filmmaker friends would be to have such resources for one day. We filmed the courtship scenes dozens of times, from all angles, but I wasn't allowed to eat the pizza because it had red pepper on it which could get caught in my teeth. All the other actors and extras were told to take bites out of their slices during each take, to chew and nod like they were enjoying it. Pizza with a barbecue sauce base doesn't taste right at 6 a.m. — one of the girls had to purge behind the barn. The pizzas were replaced when the cheese hardened and started to sweat, usually every other take. Two women doctored the frozen pies by adding freshly cooked green and red pepper and pieces of white chicken breast. One of the ladies at the table said she was so sick of the song, she wanted to smash my guitar, like in that Juicy Fruit commercial.

At 3:30 p.m., the director was calling for the last shot, and by 3:45 p.m. the skies unleashed one hell of a wind and rain storm. As the crew scrambled to cover their gear, I had to go into a barn with the sound guy to record the song another dozen times. Most of the actors had done a number of commercials before and said this was an unusually smooth shoot. "You're a principal," I was told over and over. "You'll get a whack of cash for this." I shook off the hat head and waited for the royalty cheques to roll in.

A couple of months later, when the commercial first aired, my e-mail inbox was full of "Is that you?" notes.

Corb Lund saw the commercial and he told a mutual friend of ours, "I would never do that." And of course he shouldn't. Corb is a cowboy. A real cowboy might seriously damage his stature as a country music artist were he seen dressed up as a Hollywood cowboy, hawking pizza. I, on the other hand, do not play country music and am not a cowboy, therefore my career as a singer/songwriter and my stint as the Pizza Cowboy do not conflict. Very often.

At one of my shows not long after the spot started airing, a nearly hysterical woman and her sister approached me. They had seen the commercial and discovered my true identity. They asked me to please, please, please play "Yellow Rose of Texas." They were disappointed it wasn't on any of my CDs. They were at a Kris Demeanor show, but all they wanted was the Pizza Cowboy.

daily, and try to ascertain who it is I am delivering a service to. Some bands sell bouncy, sea-of-no-cares escapism. Some sell free-floating adolescent aggression. Some are the soundtrack to fashion. Some have a target demographic that must be keen on word-heavy, satirical story songs about immigrants, the suburbs, dead elephants, police murder and gambling, each in a markedly different musical style.

The questions get more existential. Have I turned my back not only on real jobs, but also on the real world? Will my songs become intellectual exercises, using the lives of others as fodder like a tick feeding on a plump host? Will vitality and experimentation be silenced in a bubble of self-indulgence and complacency? Should I dumb it down for the masses? Are the masses wrong? Who are the masses? Who knows a cheap accountant?

Ultimately, all I need to know I learned from Krista Copper. I will do whatever is in my power to make the best peanut brittle I can, for as many people as I can, for as long as I can, and in case of a shortfall, hopefully Krista's mom will help pay for the next batch of ingredients. Regardless, I won't quit to play flag football. This is a full-tackle game. **U**