

the heat

arts and leisure

MUSIC

Executive ditched suit for the stage to follow dream

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Seed was sown for former gas boss in 2007 when audience warmed to his song

One day, Steveston's Rick Parnell was a highly paid senior executive with Terasen Gas and the next an unemployed musician.

The 51-year-old couldn't be happier. "I woke up one morning and I realized I wasn't getting jazzed with what I was doing anymore," said the folk/rock singer. "I always yearned to tap into my creative side.

"I'd performed at charity gigs over the years but in 2007 I wrote a song, *Another Nail*, which I performed at a United Way charity event and the audience were telling me they loved it and asking me who wrote it."

With those encouraging words, a seed was planted.

In 2008, compelled by a strong urge to follow his passion, Parnell quit his lucrative paying job to pursue a career in the less than secure musical arena.

The *News* sat with Parnell over coffee last week to discuss his music and to delve into how a middle-aged man with a wife and two teenage sons can do what others only dream of.

"I'm lucky that I invested well and have an incredibly supportive wife (Rena)," said Parnell. "Two years before I quit, Rena and I started talking about if we could do whatever we wanted, what would we do."

So with his wife's blessing and buoyed by audience reaction, Parnell dove into his music.

"Getting great feedback from audiences really pushed me to try it out full time," he said.

Audience members have often come to Parnell afterwards and told him that he sounds like a combination of Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, with a little Leonard Cohen, George Harrison and John Lennon mixed in. All of these seasoned artists have deeply influenced Parnell's vocal and song writing style.

"I'm told I have an ability to play with words like Leonard Cohen does," said Parnell. "My music is the background for the lyrics. For me it's about getting to the essence of a song."

In fact, he was thrilled to learn the O'Malley Project song *Still Waiting* — for which Parnell penned the lyrics — was awarded Folk Song of the Day by GarageBand on Oct. 3, 2009, and has



received multiple reviewer pick awards for Best Vocals, Best Melody, Best Mood, and Most Original Song.

He's also garnered radio play in Germany and in the United States for two tracks — *One Eye Open* and *Everybody's Wrong*.

"I view *One Eye Open* as a song about Eastern, Buddhist philosophies," he said. "I wrote it in about 20 minutes from beginning to end.

"It's about the need to let go of everything that isn't serving you and moving forward ... similar to the concept of me leaving Terasen Gas."

He composes songs much in the same vein as singers such as Neil Young, James

Taylor, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.

Songs, Parnell said, that he hopes transport and move his audience.

"You know songs where you sit down and really listen to the lyrics," said Parnell.

"I write very simple cords and it's the combination of the lyrics and the music that works.

"I think some of today's singers have lost that fresh, real sound and that's what I'm trying to achieve."

Parnell likes upbeat, happy songs.

"It's tougher to write happy songs rather than melancholy ones," he added.

He grew up in Northern Ontario, the third of six children.

CHUNG CHOW/
RICHMOND NEWS

Rick Parnell will be appearing at the Harmony Arts Festival in West Vancouver this weekend on the Garden Stage and Fountain Stage.

A military brat, Parnell and his siblings moved often over the years.

He attended Catholic school but always questioned his faith. In his twenties, he studied world religions and in his late twenties converted to Judaism.

Although he has had no formal musical training, Parnell said he grew up in an artistic family — his brother is a painter and sculptor, his mother was always into arts and crafts and a few uncles are artists as well.

"However, I didn't pick up a guitar until well after I graduated from Queens University in 1982."

Fast track to today, Parnell recently teamed up with musician/producer Graham Roone, who offered to produce a few demos with him. That led to a CD of six original tracks titled *One Eye Open*.

"In the last year, I have also been taking vocal lessons," he added.

Parnell has performed at various venues, including the Steveston Farmers and Artisans Market, the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, the UBC Farm Market and Main on Main.

"Three weeks ago I performed in Calgary," he added. "I really hope to grow my music from its grass roots beginning to building a fan base and larger audience."

Parnell is also in the studio recording a full length CD, which he hopes to release in November.

Meanwhile, during his upcoming performance in West Vancouver, Parnell will play a mix of his own songs and a few covers as well.

During the Harmony Festival, Parnell's 15-year-old guitar-picking son Hart will join him on stage, along with a bass player and drummer.

As he leaves, Parnell said: "Some people think I'm having a mid-life crisis to which I answer, at some point we lose sight of what it is we are passionate about. I questioned myself and I think we should all ask ourselves what do we really want to do before it's too late."

Parnell performs at the 20th Annual Harmony Arts Festival in West Vancouver on August 1 at 2 p.m. on the Garden Stage and again at 4 p.m. on the Fountain Stage.

For directions and more information about the festival, visit www.musicfestvancouver.ca. For more information about Parnell, visit