

MARC GARNISS

Marc Garniss and his band mates were frustrated.

"We were a punk band and proud of it," remembers Marc. "Punk is basically three chords played really fast and really loud. I thought we were pretty good - we certainly were loud - but club owners in Kingston had zero interest in us back then, circa 2000, and we couldn't get a gig anywhere. Finally we landed a slot in a local Battle of the Bands, a chance for our big break. The problem was we'd never come up with a cool name for the band. Show time was looming and we were brainstorming, arguing about names, and getting nowhere.

"As it happened, the Sally Jessy Raphael Show, a tabloid talk show, was on TV. One of the guys, venting his frustration, blurted out 'I _____ hate Sally!!' And we looked at each other and thought, hey, maybe we've found our name, although the organizer chickened out and dropped the "_____". After the show no one said much about our music, but several people said they really liked our name. And so I Hate Sally was born and lasted for six years.

Perhaps this incident typifies Marc Garniss's approach to his life and career. "I've never had a master plan or an overarching goal. Things have just sort of happened serendipitously."

Marc, a late 70's baby, born in Meaford, Ontario, was the second of four children of Lynda and Martin Garniss. "My dad was a minister and we moved around a lot when I was a kid, living in small towns from Ontario to Newfoundland. It was kinda like being an army brat."

The family eventually settled in Markdale, a dot on the map between Collingwood and Owen Sound. "The most eventful thing that happened in Markdale was getting a job at the Chapman's Ice

Cream Factory," says Marc. "I achieved that one summer but, no offence to Markdale, I couldn't wait to leave as soon as I finished high school."

There was one other "eventful" occurrence in those years which would strongly influence Marc's life. When he was nine he got his first guitar. "My dad and I would go to guitar lessons together. He'd go to the acoustic room and learn Bob Dylan songs and I'd go down the hall to the electric room and learn to play real loud. And after a few years of lessons I got pretty good. Although I often wondered if my parents thought what I was doing was music at all. Someone said that if your parents like the music you play you're doing something wrong, so I guess I passed that test!"

By grade nine Marc had formed his first band with friends and started playing gigs. "We were just kids," he remembers, "but we'd organize everything. There was no actual music venue in Markdale, so we'd book the legion hall, rent the sound equipment, sell the tickets. We played classic rock, Jimi Hendrix, The Ramones. All punk style. All loud. And kids would pack the hall. Remember, there wasn't much to do in Markdale."

By grades 11 and 12 they were playing regular gigs around the region. "We called ourselves Agent Orange until we found out there was already a punk band with that name. So we changed ours to Agent - in big orange letters. Maybe we weren't very original but we were resourceful and we had a lot of fun."

When it came time to choose a university, again Marc had no deeply thought out plan. "My best friend was from one of Markdale's upper crust families. He had an older sister who paid no attention to me. I was just the pesty friend of her little brother. But to me she represented the height of sophistication. One day she pronounced that 'the only university worth going to in Canada is Queen's.' That stuck with me and when time came to

apply Queen's was my first choice. I'm sure she has no idea of the effect her words had on an impressionable 15-year-old. But I've never regretted going to Queen's and Kingston has been home ever since."

Marc studied history at Queen's, but music was never far from his mind. One day he saw a homemade poster saying "Band looking for guitarist." That was an exaggeration. There was no band, just one guy, Ben Thomas. But Marc and Ben started jamming, found a couple of other guys, and eventually I Hate Sally was born as described earlier. But they didn't win that battle of the bands, and still couldn't get a gig in town.

"As a last resort we tried Club 477," recalls Marc. "It was Kingston's only gay bar back then and business was slow. The owner said he'd give us a try if we could draw 50 people. Well, we jumped at the chance and jammed 100 people, mostly friends, into that sweaty back room of what is now Trek Bicycle shop. And finally we had our first sniff of semi success."

I Hate Sally became a fixture at Club 477, packing the place every Friday night. Other bands took notice and started inquiring about getting a spot. "We didn't want to wear out our welcome," says Marc. "So we started booking other Kingston bands into Club 477. We did everything ourselves like we had in high school - rented the equipment, loaded the car, took tickets, but now we were 'concert promoters'." And this became the germ of Marc's second career.

"We started hearing from booking agents, started booking bigger, out-of-town bands like the Arkells and bigger venues like Scherzo! (now the Iron Duke), and the Iron Horse Saloon (Now Giant Tiger.) It started to feel like a real business, not just buddies in the back room of Trek. But it was still a seat of your pants operation."

Mark remembers paying bands with paper bags stuffed with cash. "Bands who didn't want to spring for hotel rooms would crash at our house on Brock Street. They'd be jamming at all hours and hanging out on our fire escape talking and smoking at two in the morning. I'm afraid we weren't very popular with the ladies in Elizabeth Cottage next door. Another time I was taking tickets at Scherzo! and told a big guy the show was sold out. He promptly punched me square in the face."

A modest fellow, Marc didn't want to call the business "Mark Garniss Presents" so they came up with Kingston Punk Productions. They gradually broadened their reach beyond punk, presenting a variety of musical groups. "So we changed the name to KPP, which sounded a little more businesslike." KPP is still going strong, and is now one of Ontario's top concert promoters. "We've done very well," says Marc. "Although I could have done without getting punched in the face."

To mark 20 years in business and over 1000 shows presented, Marc is producing a new music compilation, the KPP@20 Collection, featuring original songs by ten local artists. KPP sponsored a professional recording session, producing a high quality music video for each song. The artists are being kept secret until their videos are released on You Tube. "It's a way for us to pump Kingston's tires and do something meaningful for local artists," says Marc. "And they were so happy to be playing live again. It was like coming out of a cave."

While KPP was growing, I Hate Sally had continued apace. Marc had graduated but jokes "What do you do with a history degree? Teach. Go to law school. Or play in a metal band. I chose the third."

The band played all original material and, after two years of honing their chops at Club 477, they started touring extensively in Canada, sometimes opening for other bands,

sometimes headlining. They signed record deals in Canada and the U.S., put out three CD's, and expanded their touring to the U.S. and even Europe. Marc has fond memories of playing in old blown-out factories in Germany, where there was an active punk scene and the band was popular. But it wasn't glamorous by any means.

"We stayed in dives," recalls Marc. "Often played for handfuls of people. One time we drove to Hamilton for a gig and zero people showed up. Not one. We were part of a double bill so we played for the other band and the sound guy. But we were young, we had loads of energy, it was all an adventure. We loved it. And we had a great run of six years or so, but I got to an age when I needed a break."

And there was another factor. While at Queen's, Marc had met Moira Demorest, a music student, "in a bar, of course". Something clicked and they're still together 20 years later. A talented solo musician, Moira records her own material and teaches piano. But during the years when Marc was touring, they were apart a lot. Moira had to run KPP pretty much on her own, another reason for Marc to quit the road.

So I Hate Sally came to an amicable end. Mark still plays music with friends - "not quite as loud as it used to be" - and collects old guitars.

With his touring days behind him, Marc kept busy booking KPP concerts and teaching guitar at Renaissance Music, but he had an eye out for other opportunities. In 2011 he spotted an ad for general manager of the Kingston Canadian Film Festival (KCFF). "The job description fit my skill set to a T," he says. "There was only one problem. I didn't get it. It was a phone interview and the minute I hung up I knew I'd blown it. I felt terrible."

But again serendipity intervened. Within six months, quite unexpectedly, the job came open again. Marc summoned his nerve

and called KCFF. "Hey, remember me?" And this time he got the job. And, as he suspected, it was a perfect fit. Within two years, he was promoted to Festival Director.

The KCFF has grown dramatically since its founding by Alex Jansen in 2001. Starting out as a small celebration of Canadian films at one venue, The Screening Room, it's become the largest showcase of Canadian Films in the world. "We now screen films in four or five venues simultaneously," says Marc. "And we feature lots of other programming like comedy, music, workshops, and bring in hundreds of guests, many of them famous names."

Marc's organizational skills are responsible for much of KCFF's growth, but he deflects credit and heaps praise on his predecessors Alex Jansen and Alison Migneault. "They put in tons of amazing work getting the festival into an awesome position with an enthusiastic core audience and solid funding. It was primed to be taken to another level. And we still haven't maxed out our potential."

But it hasn't all been smooth sailing. The 2020 festival opened on Wednesday, March 11 with a gala screening and reception. But the dark thundercloud of Covid 19 was looming over the festivities. "It was weird," says Marc. "I felt like the captain of the Titanic, watching people sipping cocktails while the ship slowly sank beneath us."

"The next morning we held an emergency board meeting. It was extremely stressful. We'd put 18 months of prep into the festival. Filmmakers and musicians from across the country were already here or in transit. Cancelling was the last thing we wanted to do. I was a nervous wreck. I thought this could spell the demise of the festival. But we had to put the health and safety of people first. So we voted to shut down immediately. A lot of people were disappointed, no one more so than me. But it was the right decision. And our sponsors and patrons were

terrifically supportive. Almost no one asked for their money back. But I never want to go through something like that again. Ever."

In 2021 the festival was entirely virtual. "In some ways it was good," says Marc. "We sold tickets to a wide range of cinephiles, not just across Canada but in Europe, even Russia. That broadened awareness of Canadian films, but it just wasn't the same as an in-person festival." For 2022 Marc and his team are planning a hybrid festival where people will be able to attend films in person or watch at home. "I hope it works."

With Marc's organizational talents, dating back to grade nine, here's betting that it will. When it's suggested to him that while he was a pretty good musician he's an even better organizer, he modestly agrees. "I'm lucky enough to have the perfect job," he says. "It allows so much room for creativity, for new ideas." Indeed, Marc thinks Kingston as a whole is like that. "With the university crowd and a vibrant arts community it has a personal, small town feel with big city amenities. It's very supportive of everything, from a punk concert to an obscure Canadian art film."

As well, Moira was born here and always wanted to stay. Serendipitously, she's recently landed a new job as Director of the Kingston School of Art. "As usual, it wasn't planned," says Marc. "But we're here and we're happy. We're not going anywhere."

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Doug Bowie

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