

## Ken Reynolds presents



**By Gord Atkinson**

It was in February of 1954 that my radio career took me from my hometown of Toronto to my adopted home, Ottawa, and Frank Ryan's CFRA. One of my earliest acquaintances at the station was a young entrepreneur-broadcaster whose name became legendary in country and western music. Over a half a century later his remarkable autobiography has been published with the revealing title, Ken Reynolds Presents. That banner heading is an appropriate one for an Ottawa Valley boy whose name became synonymous with wholesome, family entertainment. He was born in 1929 in Brownsburg, Quebec, and moved with his family to a local farm in 1935.

Among Ken's accomplishments was the formation of a group of talented musicians who performed on radio and at shows and dances throughout Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec. The CFRA Happy Wanderers were a top-rated country group of the 1950s and into the 1960s. While several well known musicians were featured with the group, the familiar mainstays were Joe Brown, Ward Allen, Vince Lebeau, Ken Davidson, Bob King and manager, Ken Reynolds.

My old pal Les Lye, who sadly left us last July, was the amusing emcee of their popular noon hour broadcasts. I went on the air following their live program and we became well acquainted.

Ken's role as a promoter and presenter of country performers took him across Canada 22 times. His shows in arenas and outdoor facilities were always well attended. He brought top recording artists to towns and areas that were seldom visited by major stars. The smaller communities in those touring years were known in showbiz parlance as "tank towns". The description was appropriate since these out-of-the-way places were only railroad stops for steam trains to take on water.

In 1953, while on a western tour, his career came to a dramatic halt when on a Saskatchewan highway in the Qu'Appelle Valley, he suffered near fatal injuries in a car crash. He was travelling alone when an oncoming vehicle hit his car head on. Medics who arrived on the scene lifted his seemingly lifeless body out of the wreckage. When his ambulance arrived at the nearest area hospital, it was assumed that he was dead. An alert nurse thought she heard a sound coming from his

blanket-covered body and notified the attending physicians. Following a long hospitalization and a full recovery, he and his fellow performers staged a big benefit show for the hospital that “brought him back to life.”

The bass-strumming musician-producer was a pioneer in organizing touring country shows that attracted the reigning stars of the day. Wilf Carter and Don Messer were not only his most frequent headliners, but his close friends. It seemed that every major “down home” performer appeared under his banner, including Johnny Cash, Hank Snow, Sonny James, Marty Robbins, Jim Reeves, Ray Price and George Jones.

As Wilf Carter’s personal booking agent, Reynolds’ reviews were not just North American events. Ken and his internationally acclaimed recording star embarked on a major overseas tour “down under.” Carter had a loyal following in Australia and in 1954 Ken flew to Sydney to arrange for a series of personal appearances. In his well-documented book Ken recalls with a chuckle, that way back then the Australian disk jockeys called country records “yodeling and hillbilly” music.

While pursuing a career in show business Ken led a double life. He was also a respected public service manager, whose government responsibility was corporate customer relations. Balancing two busy positions and raising a family he rarely took a holiday.

His life story covers 60 years in Country Music and has been preserved in a memorabilia collection at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The title of his book was inspired by the countless posters that promoted his shows. His wife of 53 years, Dorothy, personally input the entire text for publication. His story is dedicated to her and their five daughters and their families.

*Ken Reynolds Presents is a General Store publication for \$25. It is available by e-mail at: [kenreynoldscountrymusic@bell.net](mailto:kenreynoldscountrymusic@bell.net) or by calling 613-726-1285. It is a fascinating read and a wonderful trip down memory lane.*

*NOTE: I appreciate receiving your letters and e-mails with your own special memories ([gorda@rogers.com](mailto:gorda@rogers.com)).*

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