

# Front & Centre

**Born into a musical family, Bayview's James Gray has gone on to stardom as the keyboardist for Blue Rodeo, one of Canada's hottest bands**

by Belinda Bruce

It's 1962. James' tiny heart beats in four-four time. He's seven months strong inside his mom's womb, touring Russia with dad and his Canadian folk band, the Travellers. Jerry and Greta Gray's second son is off to a lyrical start.

At age two, James, though barely talking, can hum back a tune to his parents in perfect pitch. When he's four, his mother takes him to a piano test. The teacher plays a song. James sings it back to him, note for note. His formal music lessons begin.

Jump to 1967. Canada is 100 years old, James five. He sits with mom in a Halifax hotel room, cutting and pasting postcards and photographs from the week's travels into a scrapbook: Fredericton, Moncton, St. John's, Sydney, Glace Bay. The Travellers toot the centennial horn across the east coast with their Canadian version of *This Land is Your Land*. James' teacher at Owen Public School has let him out of class for one month to tour with his father's band, provided he brings back a report of his trip for Show and Tell. When he's done gluing the day's events, he strums a guitar and sings. School and his house in Bayview seem galaxies away.

Three decades later, James is still travelling with a group of musicians, but now he's one of them. His finely tuned ear has earned him a place in one of Canada's best known bands, Blue Rodeo. And it feels good.

"I was always bent towards music," he says, smiling over a huge cup of coffee at a Toronto diner, "with an emphasis on bent."

His dad's band played a large part in his leanings. "The Travellers' music was my first major exposure to any kind of music performed. They would often rehearse at our house, so I got to sit in and watch."

At 13, James was penning songs. He took up violin and guitar while attending Sir Sandford Fleming. At 16, he formed his first band, which stayed together for eight months and one gig, then broke up. His scholastic studies were already taking second fiddle to his obsession with band life. His parents encouraged him to buck up and pursue post-secondary education in music. He did. While studying classical music and composition at U of T, James dug his heels into the local club scene. He became a night owl, playing in experimental rock, pop and jazz bands, children's groups and local theatre. Still, he coveted the kind of musical latitude Bob Wiseman had in Blue Rodeo. "I was always impressed with the amount of freedom Wiseman had as their keyboard player. I thought 'I can do that' and wished I could find a band that would allow that kind of freedom. This was the '80s, when everyone wanted synthesizers."

Later in the decade, he cut his improv chops with some semi-famous local jazz groups: White Noise and N.O.M.A. (Northern Organic Musical Association). Performing for large crowds became more familiar: in 1991, N.O.M.A. closed the Montreal Jazz Festival.

Then came his shot at being a cowboy. In spring 1992,

Blue Rodeo announced that Wiseman had left the band. James buzzed drummer friend Glenn Milchem, who had recently joined Blue Rodeo, to ask about getting an audition. No go. They had hired a pedal steel player and would see how that went. James took a few Blue Rodeo tapes from him "just in case." Three months later, Glenn failed to turn up for rehearsal for a White Noise reunion show. James found out that Blue Rodeo was in the midst of auditioning keyboard players. He got a call from Glenn the next day — could he come for an audition in the afternoon?

"It was pouring rain," says James. "I didn't have any money. I needed to take a cab to transport my keyboard. I stopped at my girlfriend's workplace to borrow \$20."

When he arrived, the band was still auditioning someone else. Front man Jim Cuddy suggested that James wait 45 minutes in a doughnut shop around the corner, then come back. When he returned, they were still auditioning the other guy.

"He sounded really good. I thought 'Am I going to get this gig', I don't think so.' I was pretty nervous. I had only listened to their newer albums a few times, so I wasn't that familiar with the material, but I knew the songs from *Outskirts*."

The band brought him in and asked what he wanted to play. "Anything from *Outskirts* would be good," he said. "Play a song and I'll join in. Well, Greg Keeler was in the mood for challenging me, I think. He said to play *Floating*, which has a huge keyboard solo in it. I recognized it immediately. When they got to the solo they looked at me. I never played that solo better. It even amazed me."

The band played two more songs with him, asked him to learn 20 songs over a five-day period while they played a few gigs out of town, then return for a call-back. That was a Thursday. James shored himself up in his parents' living room (he didn't have a piano in his apartment at the time) to learn the tunes. On Sunday, Glenn called from Calgary. "He said, 'Tomorrow is a rehearsal, not a call-back. Congratulations, you're in the band.' I jumped up and down for a while."

James' proficiency at learning new instruments has been a great asset to his career with Blue Rodeo. His sound



▲ JAMES (BACK RIGHT) WITH THE BAND

evolved with the band, starting with the *Lost Together* tour. His current instrumentation includes piano, electric piano, accordion, fiddle and clavinet. One year after James joined, the band catapulted to fame with *Five Days in July*, selling 500,000 copies. Two records followed, *Nowhere to Here* ("we were all indulging our personal neuroses") and the latest, *Tremolo*.

He takes advantage of time off to work with other musicians and do special projects. He has contributed to recent records by Bob Snider, Linda McRae (*Spirit of the West*) and Mary Jane Lamond. He's also the sole producer of three volumes of Blue Rodeo sheet music. This, he couldn't have done without his university training. For the last couple of years, he's also participated in the North by Northeast music festival, not only with Blue Rodeo, but as musical director for the All-Star Jam.

One thing that's been a spur in his side of late is the globe trotting. "It's a lot of work. Everybody thinks that when you're in a rock band, life is easy. Playing music is a lot of fun, but there's a lot of tedious stuff too. A lot of that is the travelling. And the waiting — waiting for the bus, the plane, the sound check, waiting to go on..."

But he isn't really complaining. Having grown up around travelling musicians, touring is nothing new.

Success has been sweet, but certain things keep him humble. For one, recognition in the U.S. has been a struggle: Blue Rodeo is either too country or too rock, according to the mandate of various American radio programmers.

"We still play to crowds of 30 in the States," he says, recalling a time at a record store in Chicago in 1992 when no one showed up, not even their U.S. agent. "Six people drifted through; three bought an album."

What really matters to James Gray is the music. "It's been an enjoyable five and a half years. I think I've found a niche."

## JAMES GRAY'S FATHER LED THE BAND THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR MANY ACTS

It was before the popularity of the coffee house soiree. Before the CRTC's Canadian content rule hit radio stations. Before national television and the Juno awards. Before the Canadian music industry even existed, Toronto songsters The Travellers were roving the country with their set of traditional folk tunes.

Self-taught banjo player and singer Jerry Gray is a founding member of the group that made the Canuck version of "This Land is Your Land" a "second national anthem". The Travellers were five people who liked to sing camp folk tunes. Jerry says the band name signified "travellers in song."

"In the 50s," he says, "the only other popular folk group was The Weavers. They were blacklisted by McCarthy, which ended their career. The Travellers thought they would take on The Weaver's torch and sing songs about freedom, labour and social strife."

The Travellers are a historical artifact. The milestones they have achieved in putting Canadian music on the map are many, including recording the first Canadian folk album, *Across Canada with the Travellers* in 1957, touring Russia on the first Soviet-Canadian cultural exchange in 1962 and touring Britain by invitation of the Queen and Prince Philip in 1964.

For gigs as remote as the Yukon, with modern transportation still in its infancy, The Travellers had to be true adventurers. They arrived via ox-cart, barge, snowmobile, dog sled, amphibious plane, flatbed truck, army jet or Hercules Transport to various performances. The 1960s were their heyday, but they weren't into the "blue moon June" songs; they sang about issues.

Home was a haven from the bustle. Jerry Gray — folk singer, dentist and lecturer of music history — set up the family digs on Chieftain Crescent. "It was convenient for everything — lifestyle, good schools, 401 access," he says. After 26 years there, the family moved, but remain Bayview residents.



▲ JAMES AND JERRY SINGING AT A FAMILY PARTY IN 1979