

Meet Dave Harris

An institution in and around the Victoria Harbour, Dave Harris has been entertaining generations of Victorians and tourists with his musical talents

Recently, I spent an enjoyable evening at the Inner Harbour causeway listening to the perennial phenomenon that is Dave Harris One Man Band. A crowd had gathered for the daily performance, comprised of both enthusiastic locals and tourists, one of whom—a regular visitor from Washington State—told me that Dave is one of the attractions that keeps him and his wife coming back to Victoria.

Dave plays an electric mix of blues, folk, country, rock 'n' roll, as well as his own songs, such as the beautiful "Give Them Their Flowers" with its message to show appreciation for our loved ones before it's too late. It was during this song that the Coho ferry, passing in the distance, interrupted his playing with the loud sound of its horn. Dave quipped mid-song: "Even after so many years of playing down in the harbour, I still get excited when the Coho's horn blows and we're both playing in the same key." It's one of many such comments that reflect his positive attitude and his youthful enthusiasm for great music, the busker scene he helped to pioneer, and his warm appreciation for the many audience members he counts as long-time regulars and friends.

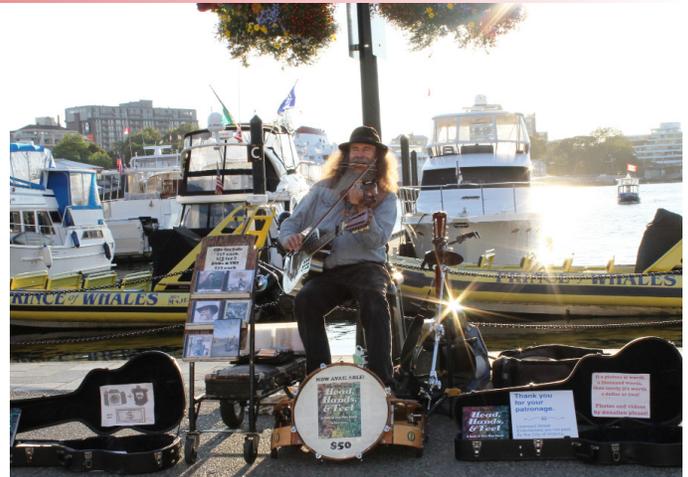
Even after so many years of playing down in the harbour, I still get excited when the Coho's horn blows and we're both playing in the same key — Dave Harris

come. Shortly after, he went back and I stayed on. I fell in love with the place—it's a beautiful city."

Dave, his guitar, harmonica, violin and distinctive vocals have charmed generations of audiences. "Often parents will bring little kids and they'll dance in front of me, and then 20 years later, they'll come as grownups and say: I used to watch you when I was a kid. That's what happens when you play for so long."

His earliest musical influences were formed

Dave grew up in Toronto and moved to Victoria at the age of 20 in 1976. A year later, he started busking. "I've been doing this for 37 years now," he said with a smile. "A friend, a drummer, said he was coming to Victoria and we played together and I thought just sure, I'll



as a child listening to a folk music show on Saturday mornings on CBC radio. "I grew up in a house where we didn't have a TV, we listened to the radio. I was quite influenced by Pete Seeger and later on Neil Young was a big influence. Allman Brothers were big, especially the amazing guitar work. Later, I got into the blues and the blues has been my passion ever since."

Dave's first foray into busking took place in 1977 but he really committed to it during the winter of 1978. "The first time, I was up on Government Street, I had a little bit of money saved, so didn't need to go every day, well, I thought I've always wanted to do something in music for a career, so I started busking. It wasn't the best time of year to start, but you know I was able to make enough money to pay my rent, buy my food. I was able to get by and I just fell in love with busking and I've been doing it ever since."

After a few years performing along Government Street, Dave switched to the Inner Harbour and then finally to his current home in the causeway. "I remember when I first started playing in the harbour, we used to play in front of the Captain Cook statue across from the Empress. I was with a small group at the time and we played there because we thought people would come out from the Empress, and it's true that they did, but it was noisy with cars going by and no seating." After a couple of summers there, it occurred to Dave that the causeway would make an ideal home for busking. "One night we showed up and there was an accordion player already at the statue, and we thought what are we going to do? Let's not write off the night, let's try going down the stairs and see if people will come down. So we played down there, and sure enough, all the people followed us down the stairs and there was lots of seating. It was just a natural busking area."

Dave is a walking encyclopedia about the busk-

Dave Harris One Man Band: 37 years and counting!

ing scene in Victoria and over the decades has seen the city evolve dramatically. "The city has just grown up so much and tourism has grown so much. Back then, everything was closed on Sundays, there was nothing. In the 80s there weren't a lot of people busking and it was new and exciting. Locals would come down and we'd play a lot later into the evening. We'd play until midnight most nights and people would still be coming at 11 o'clock. It was really quite something."

The scene has experienced ups and downs but Dave is rightly proud of the history of high quality busking in Victoria. He recalled with fondness some of the acts of years gone by: "we used to have four or five-piece bands, duos, trios, jug bands, Celtic bands. They're now playing major festivals and they started busking right around here."

When I asked Dave about memorable anecdotes, the stories kept flowing with a twinkle in his eye. "Well, I've had quite a few—I was playing down here one night and was just setting up my gear and a fellow and his wife stopped at the upper spot, and the

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fellow looked down at me and said: do you know the song "Summer Wages?" I said: sure I know that song, just give me a few moments—I got to finish tuning my 12-string and he said: 12-strings are never in tune anyway—just play the song. So I played him

the song on the slightly out of tune 12-string and when I finished he walked down the stairs and he stuffed a \$20 bill in my hand and he said: I like the way you did my song. It was Ian Tyson! I tell that one in my show quite often when I play his song."

Another of his favourite stories involved a mysterious old lady out shopping for Christmas presents: "I was playing on Government Street around Christmastime in 1980 and a little old lady came along while I was playing fiddle, sawing away fast and furious, not particularly good, but lots of energy and the little old lady comes along and puts a \$5 bill in my case, and in 1980 a \$5 bill was a really big tip, back in those days there wasn't loonies and toonies, it was a lot of quarters, nickels and dimes. She put a \$5 bill, and I said thank you, and she scurried off. I watched out of the corner of my eye and she stood at the entrance to the old Eaton's building, then she scurried back and turned her change purse over my case and dumped it out and this big roll of bills in an elastic band fell in my case

and I kept saying thank you, thank you, just in shock, couldn't believe it. It took me about five minutes to stop and look into my case and I finally picked it up and the outside was brown and I'd never seen a hundred dollar bill before—it was \$562! I went the next day and bought a new violin. It was a good story and the biggest tip I ever had obviously! I have no idea who she was. I think she wanted to be anonymous."

Dave's passion for sharing great stories was put to good use for one of his proudest projects. "I wrote a book about one man bands a couple of years ago. I was looking to see who was out there, and there wasn't a book, so I decided I was going to write one. I spent three years doing that and researching one man bands from all over the world and created an incredible network of people from Japan, Australia, all over Europe, north America—I put it all together and wrote a book."

Dave feels fortunate to have made the causeway his home. "This is a great environment, there's good seating, a beautiful view. The support is here, and that keeps me coming back. There's a great bunch of people who work down here too. That makes a nice ambience. Most people who play music for a living, travel a lot. I've chosen a different route just staying in one place. I want to compliment the locals, they've always been so supportive of me over the years"

When asked to sum up his busker experiences Dave replied: "I hope I'm still doing this until the day I die I guess. I play music because I love playing music. Of course, when you're making a living from it the money is important too. I made choices that would allow me to have a quality of life that I like, to sleep in my own bed at night, be in the same place, work in a beautiful environment, meet new people all the time, not have to be travelling all the time, and I just love it!"

Dave is active on [YouTube](#) and [Facebook](#). You can also buy one of his CDs directly from him on the causeway. Cost? One for \$15 or two for \$25. Stop by, say hello and stay to listen to the great music.

— by Ivan Watson

