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Vannelli not stuck in the '70s

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Canadian musician Gino Vannelli talks about his new album, *The Best & Beyond* and his new memoirs. (Mark O'Neill/QMI Agency)

Montreal-born singer-songwriter Gino Vannelli's new CD of reworked hits may be called *The Best and Beyond* but when it comes to his trademark hair, it still reigns mightily in the past.

There's one picture in particular, from the accompanying CD booklet *Stardust in the Sand*, that stands out as Vannelli circa 1977 walks down the beach, shirtless, shoeless, in a snug-fitting pair of white rolled-up pants and with hair so high it threatens to topple his slight frame.

"It's just *Planet of the Apes*," says a laughing Vannelli, 58, viewing the photo while in a Toronto hotel leading up to the Thursday launch of a four-date Canadian tour in Edmonton. (Brampton's Rose Theatre is the closest Toronto date on March 11.)

"My hair was like that since I was a kid and by the time *The Beatles* came out, I started growing it out, (but) it just wouldn't do what I wanted it to do. I wanted the moptop but it would just keep going."

Vannelli, who stills possesses formidable hair these days (just not as big), says his famous follicles presented some challenges as he tried to move on from his '70s breakthrough with such songs as *People Gotta Move*, *I Just Wanna Stop*, and *The Wheels of Life*, and into the '80s which yielded such hits as *Living Inside Myself*, *Black Cars* and *Wild Horses*.

"In some ways, it was sort of an iconic thing but in some ways it kind of was a little bit of a detriment," said Vannelli, who divides his time between his wife's hometown of Portland and an apartment just outside Amsterdam.

"As you see in the early '80s I went out of my way to wear my hair really short and tried to break free from that image and then at one point, I just said, 'To hell with it, whatever I want to do, I'll do.'"

This was the same approach Vannelli, the son of a big-band leader, took with *The Best and Beyond*, whose jazz and harder rock rearrangements of his hits caused concern in some quarters.

"Some people said, 'Why do you want to mess with it?' " he admits. "But I don't get things like that being sacrosanct. I don't think anything is really sacred other than your intentions. If you want to redo it for redoing it's sake or you want to redo it just to mess with people, then I don't think it's really wise."

Vannelli said boredom led him to re-imagine his hits on the piano for live performances and fans began asking him if he would re-record them. He was also curious about how the songs would sound in 2010 with newer technology and better-sounding equipment.

The accompanying booklet, meanwhile, came about as a result of people asking him about his songs over the years.

"It started off as liner notes and because the truth aches to get out, I just extrapolated and there it was," he said. "And I found it interesting to throw myself into suddenly 'what I was thinking' moments before I wrote (songs like) *People Gotta Move*."

He actually wrote his first hit in 20 minutes when he was 18 years old on a dare to impress his girlfriend at the time, who didn't want him to go into show business.

Also included in the booklet is the often-told story about how a completely flat broke Vannelli and his brother Joe, who was his keyboardist-arranger, ambushed trumpeter Herb Albert inside the gates of A&M Records in L.A., and ended up getting a contract and making seven albums with him.

"That was a career for me," said Vannelli. "Herb and I became good friends from that moment on and he called me (recently) and I haven't heard from him in 20 years and we had a nice chat. He's into his art, he's done some bronze statues, sculptures that are 10 feet high, so he's still busy at 75 years old."

So is Vannelli, who's already got two album ideas for himself -- one of jazzified blues and the other a collection of duets with Burton Cummings, Lara Fabian and Isabelle Boulay -- on his wish list. He's producing an album for a kitschy late-'60s Italian artist named Massimo Ranieri, is working on a libretto for his own version of *Don Juan*, and is writing a novel.

"I've got to give myself deadlines or it's just one big empty canvas."

No hard feelings

Gino Vannelli says he's made peace with Eugene Levy who satirized him in a 1981 SCTV skit called *Lee A. Lococca's Rock Concert*.

Levy donned Vannelli's trademark black Afro, silk shirt unbuttoned to his navel, tight, flared pants and every time he turned around on stage, he seemed to grown more hair from his face, hands and chest, until he finally turned into an ape.

"I met him at the Gilda Radner cancer get-together a few years ago -- great guy," Vannelli told QMI Agency. "I mean I always loved his work -- funny guy."

One of Vannelli's actual claims to fame in real life was that he was the second Caucasian artist to appear on *Soul Train*.

"(Creator) Don Cornelius said he considered me beige," joked Vannelli, who got the offer after opening eight dates for Stevie Wonder.

Canadian tour dates:

March 3, 2011: Century Casino, Edmonton, AB

March 5, 2011: Red Robinson Show Theatre, Coquitlam, BC

March 10, 2011: Community Auditorium, Thunder Bay, ON

March 11, 2011: Rose Theatre, Brampton ON

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