



'Eileen' Twain got her start at country resort

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In this summer-long series, the National Post takes readers to some of the most interesting places in the country, from the hometowns of the famous to little-known places touched by celebrity.

HUNTSVILLE - It's not often that three adjacent tables at a live music event include the following: a group of women wearing head scarves and drinking herbal tea; a teen celebrating his 19th birthday with his family and drinking whatever is put in front of him; and two senior couples sipping white wine.

But the varied demographics of people in attendance is entirely appropriate, given the show we are watching. It's also not often that the same bill includes performances of songs by Trooper, Michael Buble, k. d. lang and k-os. And Corey Hart, Alanis Morissette, Platinum Blonde and Gordon Lightfoot, for that matter. One thing that cannot be said about the shows at Deerhurst Resort is that they are too narrow in focus.

There's a good reason, though, for Deerhurst to aim to please a wide swath of people. This resort, which has been a popular high-end destination nestled in the craggy hills of Muskoka for as long as anyone from Toronto has sought to come up this way for relaxation, plays host to a diverse clientele. There are business conferences, weddings, couples, families seeking something to entertain the kids -- and, in 2010, the Group of Eight Summit. So it pays to cover a lot of bases.

On this August night, it takes until just before intermission for the show, Canada Rocks, to include a number by Shania Twain. As cast member Jaclyn Whittal sings the hit song Up, the video screens next to the stage provide the reason why it was a given Ms. Twain would not be overlooked in the tribute to Canadian musicians: She was a Deerhurst cast member for three years in the late '80s. The screens also note that Deerhurst is where she became Mrs. Mutt Lange in 1993. (No mention of the recent divorce.)

Glenn Bladon, now the musical director of the Deerhurst shows, played guitar back in the days when Eileen Twain from Timmins got her first musical break. "It was more of a Vegas-style show back then," he said in an interview. "More feathers and funny costumes."

He said he didn't know the woman who would become hugely famous as Shania particularly well, but remembers that she worked hard. "She worked all the time," he said.

Today's cast members don't get to spend a lot of time with their feet up, either. There are shows six nights a week, with two performances on Fridays and Saturdays, plus corporate outings and the odd bit of travel. Considering the general cheeriness of the show, it's easy to imagine that on some nights it's tough to keep smiling through every number.

Some performers keep up their own musical pursuits on the side, too. Ms. Whittal, one of the show's lead female singers, has released two solo albums and recently won a songwriting contest held by a Toronto radio station.

And as that career has grown, she says it's nice to have the steady work of Deerhurst -- this is her 11th season with the cast -- to pay the bills.

"It's great to be able to come back here when I'm not doing solo work," she said. "Having to learn to be comfortable with all these different musical styles, it really helps you to grow as an artist."

She certainly seems comfortable on stage, singing a Nelly Furtado song at one point, then a k. d. lang number a moment later. And when singing Chantal Kreviazuk's Before You, she slipped behind a keyboard to play a little, too.

All the cast members are required to be similarly versatile, which explains why many of them also perform on the variety shows that are the staples of cruise lines. Unless they are discovered by the Mutt Langes of the world first.

As the show on this night comes to an end, the audience cheers enthusiastically. The cast members come out for a last bow, and a final smile and wave. That table with the seniors? Playing against type, they seemed to most enjoy the rendition of INXS' Pretty Vegas, tapping their feet and drumming on the table along with the beat. More proof that the show's producers have good reason to cast such a wide musical net.