

A black and white photograph of Michael B. Poyntz, an older man with glasses and a goatee, wearing a dark suit and tie. He is seated at a grand piano, looking down at the keys. A champagne flute is placed on the piano's surface to his right. The background shows a grand, arched stone structure, possibly a cathedral or a large hall. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's face and the piano's keys.

MICHAEL B. POYNTZ

SINGER, SONGWRITER AND ... THAT CANADIAN POET

by David Morrison

When once the itch of literature comes over a man, nothing can cure it but the scratching of a pen."

Throughout history dozens of writers have attempted to explain exactly why it is they write. Many say it is simply because they must. The quote above is one of hundreds proffered by writers concerning this compulsion to put pen to paper. These particular words are accredited to the delightfully named Samuel Lover (1797-1868), a noted Anglo-Irish painter, novelist and composer of songs. More pertinently in respect of the subject of this month's profile, Lover was also a poet.

Qualicum Bay poet Michael B. Poyntz, a.k.a. "Irish," is a man who can clearly relate to the sentiment of Lover's laconic statement. Poyntz has written poems and other literary works since his teens, but when the pull of his creative muse became irresistible a few years ago he decided to go all in. Following a long and successful corporate career in international sales, Poyntz took advantage of forced circumstances to take a leap of faith, and has not looked back.

"I was 55-years old and had just finished a nine-year run outside of Canada," he explains. "I was in an accident in France that essentially necessitated me coming back home. During that summer I thought I'd always wanted to write, always thought about being a writer, so maybe I should do it now... otherwise, perhaps I was always going to be a wannabe writer. With my inability to work physically for six months, I thought I should put my energies into the mental process of collecting a book, and back on Vancouver Island, I did it."

Self-published in 2010, *Dusk to Dusk* was, and remains, a massive event in Poyntz' life. Representing a check against a 'bucket list' item, the book launched the poet into the local literary marketplace in style, but as with most self-published titles its creator had to do the legwork himself to get it into bookstores. Three months after publication, his tireless sidewalk-pounding efforts resulted in *Dusk to Dusk* gracing the shelves of fifteen bookstores across Vancouver Island.

Poyntz' journey to this proud breakthrough began way back in high school with the discovery of a poet he still cites as his main inspiration and greatest influence on his own work. The impact of this introduction was so powerful that Poyntz retrospectively identifies it as a genuine life-changing experience.

"I find it very interesting that for many artists there was a changing, paradigm moment in their lives that made them want to do this or that," he says. "It's a kind of change that has you turning left or right, but you know that's where you're going to go. When I was finishing my last year of high school a friend handed me a copy of Rod McKuen's book *Stanyan Street & Other Sorrows*. Poetry when you're in Grade 12 is English lit and Shakespeare, which really wasn't very interesting to me. As a kid I wanted to find a way to express myself, and found it very hard to do that, but within minutes of reading McKuen's poetry I understood a) how to express myself, and b) that I would be a writer. I feel very comfortable that I can go to a piece of paper with my pen and create what I really want to say to people, but when you're a gangly 17-year old kid who wants to date a cheerleader, that's hard to figure out! I didn't get the cheerleader, but after discovering McKuen I did figure out how to say, 'I like you!'"

It is not difficult to surmise that the transition from the pressures of a corporate sales environment to the challenge of living off his

creative wits was not without difficulties for Poyntz. I experienced a similar shift myself when moving to Canada: I left behind an industry I had worked cushily in for most of my life (though eventually reconnecting to it here), but after dabbling with writing for pin money and fun for years, I viewed the start of a new life as the opportunity to give writing for a living a darned good go. It was a scary situation, I tell you. Am I good enough? Do I possess a unique voice? Will people like my work? As Poyntz will also tell you, the only way to find out is to steel yourself, have the courage of your conviction and give it your very best shot.

"For anyone aspiring to do anything with their imagination, I say do it!" he booms. "It is not important that it be commercially or economically 'successful.' It is important that it is you in that work, and that you are proud of it. It is not important that one person or the world falls in love with your work, but if they do, it is the icing on the cake."

Most of the battle is gaining acceptance and being treated seriously as a writer, or indeed as an artist working in any creative discipline. It is well documented that despite his huge mainstream success, due to the 'uncool' romantic nature of his work, even Rod McKuen has struggled his whole career to attain critical acclaim. Poyntz decided a good way to gauge opinion of his similarly inspired work was to test the water online.

"I took my work to the Internet five years ago, to a website called Poetry Soup," he explains. "On there I put 168 of my pieces, and in the overall written review, from 98 percent of people all around the world, I got a five-star rating for my poetry. That let me know that people thought my work was okay."

This said, Poyntz feels that widespread domestic acceptance is still some way off, the reaction to one of his best pieces of work seemingly indicative of this.

"The first big poem for me was *I Want*, which I wrote for Obama's inauguration. I knew with that poem I had reached a level of writing that I was happy with, that if I did nothing else with my life as a writer I was prepared to have that one as my legacy. That piece has garnered me three international awards, but nothing in Canada. I couldn't give that puppy away in Canada!"

Nonetheless, local avouchment of Poyntz' considerable talent has been very strong, ensuring healthy Island-wide sales of his greetings cards series, and acknowledgment for diversification within his craft, including a confident move into songwriting. It is all going well on home turf, which will surely ultimately create interest further afield.

But why, I obviously had to ask, does Poyntz work under the nom-de-plume "Irish"?

"My family is Irish and I have Irish and Canadian citizenship," he replies, so matter-of-factly that I feel rather silly in having asked the question in the first place. "When I was in university there were a whole bunch of writers with the first name Michael, so I thought I'd take on my culture and publish as 'Irish.' It's the name I'm registered as with Archives Canada and, hey, there's a thousand Michaels out there, but only one 'Irish!'"

For more information about the poetry of Michael B. Poyntz, or "Irish," including where to purchase his book, Dusk to Dusk, as well as greetings cards and posters, please visit thatcanadianpoet.com. Photo courtesy of Carnival Cruises: used with permission.