

## Coming Home Again...this time to stay

Being able to do what he loves in a place that he loves, has brought harmony to Norman Winter's life— in more ways than one.

By Christine Smith  
Dubois Frontier Editor

"I'm making a living from the music— that is a mindblower," he says with as much wonder as unabashed pleasure.

In a high school graduate profile published in the Dubois Frontier in May 1998, Norman Winter said his "future plans include a musical career." Norman also intended to attend the University of Puget Sound in Washington to pursue a music education degree that would ultimately lead to a position as a college music educator.

As with most plans that are made at the age of 18, pieces are discarded as experiences cause new interests to take their place, but for Norman, his plans for the future written a dozen years ago have come perhaps through a rather circuitous route, but one close to the mark— which has nonetheless landed him exactly where he wants to be.

Having moved to Dubois when he was five years old, Norman spent most of his formative years on the Diamond G Ranch where his father worked. After graduation, he did indeed attend the University of Puget Sound, where he graduated with a degree in vocal performance.

Returning home to Dubois, among other jobs, Norman coached high school tennis for two years before taking a position in Alaska with Princess Cruises as an assistant food and beverage manager.

Although his initial desire was to sing aboard the ships, he realized he would have been performing the same show every week for six months to a year.

"I actually took a cruise and talked with one of the performers about it," Norman says. "I can't imagine how that would make you grow as a performer. I really decided not to do that, but I knew I wasn't and I missed Wyoming." Spending enough time on my music— Tucking the travel experiences under his arm, Norman left the cruise line on good terms and came back to Dubois in 2007.

Determined to be able to pay the bills and build a life here, Norman set about finding work, which he did. And, like many others who choose to live in Dubois, he found work wherever he could— at Super Foods, Ramshorn Inn Liquor and the Really Wild Bunch, to



name a few. He also coached high school tennis and girls basketball with his best friend from high school, Tricia Kelley.

“You have to wear many hats to make ends meet if you make the commitment to live here,” he says. “It gets you out of the box...it makes you more adaptable. I think that’s one of the reasons we have such a variety of people here– you have to learn to do a lot of things and make little sacrifices in order to make it work.”

All the while, he still “just wanted to do music, but had no idea how to do it.”

And that’s when Locke Hamilton of the local Western singing duo Prickly Pair called and asked Norman to audition with she and her the Cactus Chorale. husband, Les, for the third part of their trio–

“I didn’t know a lot about the (Western music) genre– even coming from my background. I was vaguely familiar with Prickly Pair, but didn’t know anything about their prominence in the genre,” Norman admits. “When she called and invited me to come practice with them, I thought, ‘What do I have to lose?’”

Norman’s music interests are broad, ranging from “country to classical,” and even though his knowledge of Western music was nearly and for nonexistent, he felt an instant affinity for the music– harmonizing with Locke and Les.

“It reminded me of growing up where we lived on the ranch...it was a sense of ‘This is why I came back,’” Norman says. “It was kind of a blind chance, but– and I know this sounds corny– it made it feel like a complete circle.”

“We knew from the first couple of songs that we had definite chemistry that you don’t find very often,” he says of that first audition.

Fortunately, Locke and Les felt the same. Locke handed Norman their six CDs with the instructions to get started.

“It was like, ‘Here you go, this is what we have. No rush, no pressure, but you need to know these songs.’ I had about one month to get most of the songs together,” Norman laughs. “They were looking for that three-part harmony, and something I had never done before was play (bass) and sing at the same time. They were very patient with me.”

Prickly Pair also plays Celtic music, which, Norman says comes naturally to Locke, but is difficult for him. “So many roots of cowboy music come from Celtic music...this is all stuff I didn’t know.”

The trio’s touring season is year-round, but they are able to spend the majority of the summer in Dubois, playing at local guest ranches and the chuckwagon dinner show at the KOA campground in town. Weekends the largest being in Winfield, are spent traveling to music festivals– Kansas– for what is billed as the world’s largest acoustic music festival.

“The first time, it was a little bit intimidating, but you have to remind yourself that we are good at what we do,” Norman says of his first performance in front of a crowd of a few thousand people.

And, then, there are the autographs.

“You always hope you get to that point, but when it gets to that point, it’s a mindblower,” Norman laughs. “Picturing it is so much different then when it actually happens– it’s great, but it’s also kind of weird...in a good way.”

Studio recording is another new experience he can add to his repertoire. Norman has recorded one album with the group, “Romance with the Range,” and another is expected to be released for the upcoming summer season.

He is also beginning to write some music with Les and Locke, of which, "Ranch Sale," was recently honored by the Western Music Association with a nomination for Best Collaboration of Poet and Musician.

"I've always been a pretty busy person, but it's crazy to think about how much I've learned and how much I've done," he says. "I can't think of one of those things that I would omit. It makes you more adaptable to wear many hats— it gives you more things to draw from."

Being back in Dubois and finding happiness in the place that has always been home is "a cherry on the cake."

Norman has never bought into the line, "There's nothing to do in Dubois," which is often spoken by young people on the cusp of breaking into adulthood.

"Just look around," Norman says. "I really learned that from my friend Erin Hannelly. I was 15, she was 16. We were walking out of the high school one day and she looked up at Windy Mountain and exclaimed about just being here and how kids just overlooked what was right in front of them. Erin was from New Jersey and I had heard her say that about 80 billion times, but that day, I really kind of got it."

"I'm never leaving again," Norman says with genuine fondness for Dubois. "This is just a special community— everybody knows that. In a big city, you might meet more people, but you don't really know as many. Here, your walls are down a lot more and you really get to know people. The whole town is like your parents— always."

Quite simply, Norman says, "Life is good right now."

And while it's easy to rest in that contentment, Norman still has more goals to attain.

"In the industry we're in, we can't just sit back on our heels— we have to keep growing," he says. "At some point, if Prickly Pair retires, my goal is to be able to do this on my own."

But, more than that, he wants to bring Western music to more people.

"If you really 'get' the West, this genre is something that needs to be shared," he says.

"I'm always keeping my eyes open for something new...inspiring. That's what it's about— making people feel something."