



A break with convention

RED DEER COMPOSER VERNON MURGATROYD HAS SPENT HIS CAREER PLAYING WITH THE NOTES AVAILABLE TO US ALL

Photo by JEFF STOKOE/ Advocate staff

Pianist and composer Vernon Murgatroyd works on a score at his piano in his Red Deer home.

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When Vernon Murgatroyd fractured his collarbone and couldn't use his left hand, he didn't take a break from composing music at the piano.

The indomitable 74-year-old embraced the challenge by writing a piano piece for the right hand.

"The piece would never have existed had I not had a fall," said Murgatroyd, with a flash of his characteristic optimism.

As one of his friends joked, "at least something good came out of it!"

More than 150 original works are, so far, listed in his catalogue of published chamber, choral, vocal and piano pieces. And never once, through all the years of figuring out new music at the piano, has he experienced writer's block or any impediment to his creative flow.

The Red Deer composer who, un-

conventionally, comes up with the harmonies first, then adds the melodies, doesn't understand how anyone could be stymied when "so many notes are available to us all. ...

"You don't have to invent them from scratch," he maintains, "All you have to do is arrange the ones that already exist."

The music teacher has been writing original compositions since he was a boy growing up on an Innisfail-area farm. His parents played the organ and led the church choir. As their only child, Murgatroyd immersed himself in the family business, so to speak.

"I would line up notes on paper to make the sounds I wanted to make. They didn't always make sense," he admitted, but as a fast learner, he soon figured out how to achieve some interesting harmonies.

Murgatroyd moved to Red Deer with his parents in 1956, when much of West Park was a cow pasture and his father got the organist job at Gaetz Memorial

United Church. Their farm house was moved onto a city lot at the time — and the composer still lives in the same, later expanded, vintage residence.

As a student at Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School, he came to appreciate many composers, but became a particular fan of Alexander Borodin.

Like the Russian composer and chemist, he initially thought he could take pharmacy studies in university and continue to devote himself to music. But he soon learned "I was no Borodin."

After only a few months, he switched to the University of Alberta's music program, majoring in piano, clarinet and composition. This is when Murgatroyd's composing took a more serious turn, based on encouragement from Canadian composer and teacher Violet Archer, who became his mentor and lifetime friend.

He attained a bachelor's degree in 1965 and continued composing, even

while continuing with independent studies.

Murgatroyd would also make time for writing original music between teaching private piano and clarinet lessons in Bonnyville, and later Red Deer. He returned to this city in 1968 and taught school band classes in the 1970s.

His inspiration came from many sources, including the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the Central Alberta countryside.

The camping enthusiast recalled being stirred by the sight of rising mist one early morning. This image sparked his *Alberta Nocturne for Woodwind Quintet and Strings*, which he wrote in honour of this province's 75th anniversary.

This growing city also inspired Murgatroyd to write two *Red Deer Overtures*. The second, more dynamic overture was played in 1984 by a Lindsay Thurber band, *The Perfect Fifth*.

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'If I can do it, you can do it'

HIP-HOP ARTIST ENCOURAGES FANS TO BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES

BY LANA MICHELIN
ADVOCATE STAFF

To all the young people who feel like they're drifting through life, hip-hop artist Snak the Ripper says: Persevere.

"Keep on working on whatever it is you're interested in, and believe in yourself — even if no one else does ...

"Thinking too much about what other people think of you — that's what stops a lot of kids," said Snak, whose real name is William Scott Fyvie.

A decade or so ago, the popular Vancouver rapper and founder of Stealth Bomb Records was a homeless graffiti kid, sleeping on other people's couches.

"I was really unsure of myself and I didn't have a lot of friends," recalled the 32-year-old, who performs on Wednesday, May 20, at Wild Bill's Sports Bar in Red Deer.

His early childhood was mostly spent drawing and painting at home. "I always knew I was an artist," said Fyvie, who developed an appreciation for music — from Neil Young to Eminem and Nirvana — while growing up in Maple Ridge, B.C.

His dad was never a big part of his life. But his divorced mom worked hard selling fruit, vegetables and flowers by the roadside to feed her three kids. And Fyvie feels she set a good early example of entrepreneurship.

When his mom later moved to the U.S. to marry an American, he felt like an aimless 20-year-old, left behind and cast adrift.

"I was kind of a troublemaker," he recalled, moving from place to place, doing odd jobs, spray-painting public property, drinking and using drugs.

"That time was a real struggle for me. Sometime I didn't have a place to sleep and had to steal food to eat. ... It



Contributed photo

Snak the Ripper, a Vancouver-based rapper and founder of Stealth Bomb Records, performs on Wednesday, May 20, 2015, at Wild Bill's Sports Bar in Red Deer. Tickets for the 10 p.m. show with Caspian and Jaclyn Gee are \$30 in advance, \$35 or \$40 for VIP access from www.trueability.ca.

was a rough time, but a good learning experience."

By age 25, he'd hit "rock bottom" with his substance abuse.

Realizing "I needed something to do on my weekends that was not partying," Fyvie began staying home and writing music lyrics. The challenge of coming up with cohesive rhyme schemes became "addictive," he recalled, and "I started not caring that I wasn't partying."

He took the stage for the first time in front of an audience at Vancouver bar The Bourbon — and felt immediately at home.

"For me, the easiest part was the performance and joking-around-on-stage part. The hardest was coming up with the lyrics. I would really take my time writing the lyrics and working on my albums," said Fyvie.

He put out a debut CD called *The Ripper* in 2007, followed by the albums

SNAK THE RIPPER

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Sex Machine, Fear of a Snak Planet and White Dynamite. Among his biggest hits are the inspirational tune *Forgotten*, with 2.8 million YouTube views, *Yup* (with 1.9 million views) and *Bombay Dreams* (1.2 million).

His title track of his latest album, *Just Giver*, could be interpreted as taking an irreverent poke at the party lifestyle he once ditched. The video stars actor Paul Spence of the 2002 cult film *Fubar*, which Fyvie describes as a big influence, and a cross between *This is Spinal Tap* and *Trailer Park Boys*.

Fyvie said *Just Giver* could be interpreted as an ode to hard partying or as a motivational anthem. "I transformed the meaning at bit to if you do something, you've got to really do it — as in 'just give 'er.'"

The same work ethic has applied to his own music career.

Once Fyvie became dissatisfied with the way his label was treating its artists ("They were just taking money out, not investing money in"), he quit in 2013 and formed his own label, Stealth Bomb Records now represents five other artists — Merkules, Caspian, e.d.g.e., Young Sin, and Fyvie's girlfriend, singer Jaclyn Gee.

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