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WHAT CAN
YOU SAY ABOUT
DON ALDER?
...PLENTY!

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Cover photo provided by Don Alder

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WHAT CAN YOU SAY ABOUT DON ALDER? ... *PLENTY!*

BY RICHARD FORZLEY

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DON ALDER

"Don is one of the most original guitarists I've come across. Unique in his acoustic guitar style, he blends great original compositions with a fantastic rhythmic foundation ... always funky with irresistible grooves ... he sounds like three guitar players playing at once!"

— **Lee Ritenour,**

Multi-Grammy Award Winning Jazz Guitarist

Don Alder is globally recognized as a world-class acoustic guitarist and the only player in the world to win all three major guitar competitions: the 2007 International Fingerstyle Championship; the 2010 Guitar Superstar Competition (Guitar Player Magazine); and the 2011 Worldwide Guitar Idol III in London, UK.

Born in Vancouver, he lived in Montreal from age two to ten. "My father died when I was four and

for my mom paying the bills was a struggle. She sent me to live with my grandma in Williams Lake for the summer, but I didn't want to return to Montreal so she moved to BC and started a new life.

"Both my mom and my grandma had hard lives and little education. But they never complained and pushed ahead with only limited support. What they taught me were important life values."



Rick Hansen and Don Alder



Don with his mother and grandmother

Life dramatically changed again when he was a teenager and met his lifelong friend Rick Hansen on the basketball court in high school. "I was one of the worst players on the team, but Rick took him under his wing and basically won my loyalty ... he was the 'cool guy,' hanging out with me."

It was the start of a friendship that would take a fateful turn when in 1973, Don and Rick were coming back from a fishing trip and riding

in the back of a pickup truck when the driver lost control and rolled the vehicle. The impact resulted in a spinal injury for Rick that left him paralyzed from the waist down. Don was lucky to escape with only minor injuries.

At that point, Don was a self-taught guitarist with a budding music career, working as the house guitarist for Brothers recording studio in the Okanagan. "I was in Vancouver and learned that Rick was

in the hospital so I went to see him. He shared his dream about going around the world in a wheelchair to create awareness that by removing barriers for people living with physical challenges, they could reach their full potential."

"I wasn't sure if he was serious and when a nurse walked into the room I asked if there was a straight jacket program and pointed at Rick. It turned out he was serious and in 1985 I put my music career on hold to travel with him on the 26-month long Man in Motion world tour, an amazing journey that has become part of Canadian History.

"I remember when we left Oakridge Mall to begin the trip, I made national TV as the guy driving who knocked the box off the top of the motorhome holding the spare wheelchair. People thought these guys are going around the world and they can't even get out of the parking lot."

But first, Don suggested musical accompaniment for the trek, realizing that they needed a big name to get media attention. Canadian heavyweight producer-composer David Foster came to mind. "Rick asked who's that? After I explained who he was, we both laughed. Joking I said do you want me to call Madonna as well, assuming either option was equally impossible.

"But Lady Luck was with us as one thing led to the next and Foster came came through big-time by cowriting and producing "St. Elmo's Fire (Man in Motion)" with British rocker John Parr. It made number one on the Billboard singles chart in September of 1985. The Canadian version wove in footage of Man In Motion with images of determination and sweat powering the pop song.

"St Elmo's Fire became my anthem," said Rick. "Wherever I was on a road, street or highway in the 34 countries I crossed, I would

hear that song, smile and dig a little deeper to keep pushing forward."

Today, the song remains tied to something larger, speaking to the hope, possibility and the determination within all of us to reach our potential. With that as its theme song, Man in Motion proved an unqualified success, earning \$26 million for the cause. When the tour finished in 1987, Don relocated to Vancouver.

"It was actually a pretty dark time for me," he says. "I hadn't really played guitar in two years and had no job prospects. So I started volunteering for BC Wheelchair Sports, working with wheelchair athletes on their sports chairs and sharing what I'd learned on the tour.

"But I kept playing guitar and found it a good time for writing music ... I got an acoustic guitar and just started writing and writing, and that was the beginning of it all."

Don's knowledge of wheelchairs and functional mobility landed him a job with Sunrise Medical Canada. "I got to work with many therapists at GF Strong and other facilities, helping with demonstrating strategies to enhance quality of life and mobility. This and my work with wheelchair athletes led to representing Canada as Equipment Tech for the Canadian Paralympic Team.

"That was when I met Sam Sullivan and Dave Symington, both musicians before their accidents

left them as quadriplegics. They wanted to start a band and I was totally game. But you can imagine the challenges to adapting devices allowing them to play realtime. This launched the Vancouver Adapted Music Society (VAMS) which partnered with many champions to assist in developing adapted devices. The band Spinal Chord was now a live performing band with our own original material.

"In retrospect, I can see that the accident triggered a new awareness in me ... I had to rise to challenges because of the standards [Rick] lived by." Applying this insight to his musical career proved more difficult. Never much of a solo performer, he was overcome by performance anxiety and lack of direction, having spent his musical life playing by, and for, himself.

"I learned many valuable things on Rick's tour: primarily that it's not usually the most talented or gifted that wins—it's the most determined. Break all the rules. Believe in what you do and own it fiercely. Find your own voice.

"Passion is paramount ... and I found my voice on the guitar just through natural progression and experimentation."

When he started going to talent nights at local pubs, things didn't go well. "I'd sign up for open mic night and then pretend I wasn't there. I finally found the courage to take the stage but once the lights went on, I froze. I went home and learned to

"Even though Don stepped onto the Guitar Superstar stage as a solo-acoustic performer, he played with ferocity and charisma, and totally owned the audience and that's what a guitar star does.

You have to deliver something so thrilling that people can't help but stand up and cheer. Don nailed it."

— Michael Molenda,
Editor in Chief, Guitar Player magazine

stand and play, chipping away at it, one step at a time."

Don plays "fingerstyle" guitar, playing by plucking the strings with the fingertips as opposed to flatpicking or plucking individual notes with a pick. He devised a compositional approach that incorporated speedy fingerpicking with simultaneous percussion,



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played on the guitar's body, creating a vibrant wall of sound. Contest judges took notice.

"I'm not formally trained, so I don't consider myself a professional player with that kind of skillset. I don't even consider myself a guitarist, because a true purist is all about precision. I'm still that little boy in the bedroom that loves to create, so I went down the artist track. With artists there are no rules—you just have to make people like and appreciate you by creating your own mystique, I guess. That's where I've been lucky."

All these years later, Don is widely acclaimed as one of the top acoustic guitarists in the world. Acoustic Guitar magazine called his playing "spectacular." Guitar Player called him "the full package [with] talent, technique, and passion." Picque News Magazine said, "Alder can make a single instrument sound like a 4 piece band. The guy's like the acoustic Hendrix."

And the awards piled up: In 2013, he was awarded the Brand Laureate Award (Malaysia) for using music to inspire others to go after their dreams and make an impact in their communities, and in 2015, he was awarded the "Domenic Troiano Guitar Award."

In 2017, Don won "Artist of the Year" at the Vancouver Island Music Awards; in 2021, the BC Entertainment Hall of Fame honoured him with Star Meritus status; in 2022, he was awarded The BC Lieutenant Governor's Arts and Music Award; in 2024, he was appointed to the Order of Canada; and in 2025 he received the King Charles III Coronation Medal.

Today, he plays to audiences in venues around the world, writing and performing all of his own music. He has released seven albums, featuring his very melodic sound language, creating songs without words, a dialogue between two "voices" with his guitar.

He plays with passion and is an acoustic guitar magician with a signature style. Currently, he is the only guitarist on the planet to have won the top three modern guitar competitions and his long list of accolades puts him alongside the best players in the acoustic genre.

Often referred to as the "acoustic Hendrix" due to his unique fingerstyle and playing technique, his music combines deeply textured melody and rhythm, soulful singing with haunting lyrics and guitar fireworks, making his shows highly entertaining.

Don continues his work with non-profits and currently sits on the Board of Directors for Empower Through Music, a registered non-profit with free or low-cost programs for music lessons and instruments for underserved and neurodivergent youth.

"At the end of the day it's about creating your own magic and doing your best to leave the world a better place. So for me, as corny as it sounds, I try to play music in the Key of Social Responsibility."





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music career on hold
to travel with Rick
on the 26-month long
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