

A Song of Survival: In an Environment as Cold and Harsh as Edmonton's, Some Local Musicians Have Found a Way to Grow

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A song of survival

In an environment as cold and harsh as Edmonton's,
some local musicians have found a way to grow

By Ana Holleman



Pablo Montaña began playing music when he was just nine years old, and he's still hard at it. (Courtesy Pablo Montaña)



CTOBER in Edmonton is cold, grey and foggy. It might rain or it could snow, but the sun makes it clear that it has chosen to hide most of the time. The landscape becomes desolate; trees lose their leaves and go bare.

However, there is still some vibrancy: evergreens and patches of grass stay green. There's still some light, too; a miserly sun can't withhold its light forever.

It's like that with being an Edmonton musician – at least, that's the impression Edmonton singer-songwriter Pablo Montaña gives. He's a young Colombian-Australian-

Canadian adult. His music career began in Colombia at nine, when he learned to play some guitar from his mother. (Before then, he was more interested in theatre.) His training was interrupted when he came to Canada in 2008, but with Internet resources, he has come to play guitar proficiently. He also plays bass, trumpet and drums.

We meet at a Starbucks near the Century Park transit station, which is where I first saw Montaña busking. It's something he enjoys doing, he says – he can cheer babies and adults alike.

When we sit down, he starts asking me enthusiastic questions about myself: what I'm studying; what year I'm in; how I feel about graduating. Eventually, he goes to get his drink from the counter. While he's gone, I try to process what just happened. It's pleasant, but a bit unnerving.

His inquisitiveness makes more sense when I learn about his part-time job: an on-call legal interpreter with Legal Aid Alberta and Catholic Social Services. The job allows him to meet all sorts of Edmontonian characters. Based on how readily he jumps into my life, and his own testimony, I'd say it's a part of the job he enjoys.

As we talk, Montaña uses the café's background music to illustrate the importance of music and musicians.

"Music is always there," he says. "And it's always going to be there. We give music to our babies before they're born. We give music to kids to teach them things. We listen to music when we're sad, when we're happy, angry. So society needs to see that music is everywhere, and that if you just consider artists something lower than what they are, it's not going to help anyone."

Musicians, especially smaller acts, are held back in many ways he says. For example, one major hurdle for him was trying to get voice lessons, which – like many music lessons – were expensive.

“They have to either pay a lot for a good teacher, or struggle and maybe not benefit, but save that money,” Montañó says. “So, I had to compromise several things. I took the voice lessons. I kept practising my guitar. I started busking to just make \$10-\$15 once a week, just to put in for the music lessons.”

EDMONTON musician Ryan Maier (of the “erotic rock” band Whale and the Wolf and of 100.3 FM’s *The Paul Brown Show*) agrees that costs can be prohibitive for some musicians. Some independent acts cannot tour in the United States and cover the cost, he says in a phone interview. This limits them to Canada, which is not an easy country to get around.

“It’s such a damn big country,” he says.

To that end, local ambient artist James Parrott suggests that, even within Canada, it can be hard for smaller musicians to get noticed.



Colleen Brown, shown here with her partner Elijah Abrams, says music can strain the soul, as well as the bank account. (Courtesy Colleen Brown)

“It can be really hard to stay motivated in such circumstances,” he says in an email. “And I nearly gave up several times because of this.”

However, Maier says he believes it’s “totally possible” for a musician to live on music alone. It may “take some time,” he says over the phone but, provided the music is “commercially viable” and one is willing to do things such as push merchandise at gigs, he says, it can be done.

Maier gets up at 5 a.m. for his radio show, and he gets home “around noon.” Whale and the Wolf has three-hour practices three evenings a week. On weekends, the band plays gigs.

Montaño says he’s not so sure about the possibility of living off music. The costs of living and performing don’t just prohibit acts from touring: they can prohibit them from performing at local venues, too.

“Most artists want to perform and get paid,” he says. “And that’s the problem. Many artists will not start performing without pay, and even some bars actually make you pay to perform.

“They say, ‘Oh, it’s just to get your name out there; it’s to make you popular; you have to pay us so you can perform.’ That doesn’t make sense. Entertaining your crowd, the people at your restaurant – why do I have to pay for it?”

Many musicians in Edmonton have to take day jobs to support themselves, the demands of which – combined with expensive venues – can bring prospective music careers to a halt. Even when musicians work full-time jobs, Montaño says, they often cannot afford to perform at small venues. In turn, would-be musicians can find themselves having to turn away from their passion to pursue more mundane yet pressing affairs.

He says large, corporate ticket distributors also can harm small acts by making them pay for tickets to their own shows, which they are expected to resell to make their profit. For some artists, this model often leads to a loss on a show.

“If you buy 30 tickets off of them for \$10, and then you try to sell them for \$15, but then let’s say you only sell 15 (tickets), you’re in the negative, because you paid more money to get the tickets. And that’s a big concern.

“Most companies, now, they’re doing that strategy. You pay for the tickets, and then, you try sell them. What time does an artist have to try sell 30 tickets? Plus rehearse? Plus have their regular, daytime job? They’re just going to be in the zeros.”

Local folk-pop artist Colleen Brown echoes Montañó’s sentiments about money and music. To tour in support of her latest EP, *Seasons Are Changing*, she and her team had to book “more house concerts and (veto) the high-exposure/low-pay shows,” she says in an email. The financial strains that come with music can also lead to spiritual strains, she adds.

“When you face your life with a total certainty that music is your path, but the money doesn’t seem to be following, it can lead to a real crisis of faith. That’s happened to me several times, and you just have to keep pulling yourself back up out of that, reconfigure and decide what your priorities really are, over and over.”

TO MONANO, too, the obstacles aren’t just financial – they also stem from society’s attitudes towards musicians. Whether it’s being stereotyped as unambitious or as swindlers, Montañó says, negative perceptions of a music career are harmful to everybody.

“Musicians are always trying to succeed,” he says. “And they push so much to step forward, but society pulls them back ... The misconception is, as soon as you tell someone you’re a musician, they’ll say, ‘How much money are you making?’

“You tell them, ‘Well, not that much,’ or, ‘A bit, but I have a part-time job.’ And they’ll tell you, ‘You’re not going to go anywhere; you’re not going to be able to buy a car, you’re not going to be able to buy a house What are you going to do when you have a family? You’re going to have to give up all that; you need to have a real job.’ ”

Some musicians are barely able to make money to eat, never mind own a vehicle or a house, Montaño says. And being constantly told to stop what you love doing and instead find other work might quell anyone’s ambitions.

He also admits that, because of long periods between shows, he has not been able to make much of a living from music alone.

Regardless, Montaño says he isn’t going to quit the passion he calls “part of a hobby, and at the same time, part of a job.” As it is, he’s found overlap between his music and his interpreter job.

“As a legal interpreter, I’m helping people solve all their problems, and one thing I really want to do with my music is help people.”

He has, in fact, directly helped people through his music: while performing at a charity event, Montaño and his then-band, The



To tour for her EP, Seasons Are Changing, Brown nixed the idea of playing “high-exposure/low-pay shows.” (Courtesy Colleen Brown)

Odd Journey, were informed that Mayor Don Iveson would be visiting, and were urged to play a country song for him. The band got Iveson's attention – and helped get his approval.

Iveson tweeted positively about the event, and several people came in to make donations because of it.

“That was probably one of my favourite moments: knowing that I helped a charity, and they achieved their goals,” Montaña says.

It's not as though small Canadian acts cannot get any mainstream exposure, though, or that there is no one looking out for them at all. Maier praises Canadian content quotas for helping Whale and the Wolf get airplay.

Brown says she is keen to keep on keeping on, too: via email from Ontario, she says that, though her tour was a lot of work to get together and arrange, it was well worthwhile.

“We had our kickoff show at the local watering hole (The Toucan) in Kingston last night (Oct. 31), and everyone came out in costume. It was a really great show, a high-energy dance-fest!”

That “high energy” can't be matched at the Century Park Starbucks, especially on a grey, dreary day in a cold, industrial city. This seems no place for bright-eyed, cheery dreamers. By all logic and reason, this environment is designed to beat the happiness out of you.

If that were true, we wouldn't have Montañó, Maier, Parrott or Brown. Somehow, in an industry that seems as miserable as the weather, spritely patches of green pop up and grow. Maybe it's not a quick, strong growth, but it *is* a growth.

Maybe Edmonton's music scene is a wispy reflection of some basic truth about the city: if you make the effort to push through, you can push through. Not burst through, as you might like, but you can get through all the same.