

# Hearing Lost, Inspiration Found

By John Threlfall

**If it hadn't been for his hearing loss, theater artist and acoustic guitarist Randy Rutherford would never have found his profound success.**



**F**or some people, hearing loss can be a debilitating, isolating experience. But for others, it can also be an inspiring, life-changing event. Randy Rutherford definitely lives in the latter category. A multi award-winning solo theater artist and singer-guitarist who has lived with profound hearing loss for more than 30 years now, the most remarkable fact about Rutherford is that his theatrical success only began after his hearing loss.

“It’s the late ’70s in Alaska, I’m a folksinger in my early 20s, making 150 bucks a night headlining at the Fancy Moose Saloon. I’m driving an orange Karmann Ghia convertible—probably the only convertible in Alaska—and I’m adored by a beautiful girl, so I’ve pretty much got it made,” recounts Rutherford.

“Then one night I’m on stage, playing guitar and singing, and it’s almost like a panic attack comes on; the sound in the room totally changes, I get really disoriented and stop playing.”

While there had been earlier instances of hearing problems (usually while bartending in a noisy bar, so he thought nothing of it), this was Rutherford’s first true awareness of hearing loss—and, considering the path his life would later take, there’s no small irony in the fact it happened on stage. But rather than seek medical help, he did what many of us would do: ignored it.

“I got so mesmerized by the guitar teacher I was studying with that I kind of brushed aside the whole hearing thing.”

But when the distorted sounds and panic attacks didn’t stop, Randy did eventually see a doctor.

“The doctor said I had a moderate loss, and that I’d have trouble with background noise and understanding language. So I pretty much forgot about it again, convinced I was going to be the best guitar player on the planet.”

Spoiler alert: despite his natural charm and James Taylor-esque perfor-

mance stylings, Randy Rutherford does not become the best guitar player on the planet. Instead, his world continues to get more and more silent due to his congenital progressive hearing loss; and the news gets even worse the next time he sees a doctor, months later. “He asks what I do for a living; I tell him I’m a guitarist and singer, and he says to me, ‘You might want to find another career.’”

For the next eight months, depression becomes Rutherford’s career. He quits playing guitar, breaks up with his girlfriend, loses the convertible in an accident, and locks himself away in his Alaskan trailer to feel sorry for himself and binge on chocolate Ho-Hos and Ding Dongs. To borrow a phrase from the stage, it was indeed the winter of his discontent.

### The Art of Living

As fate would have it, salvation came in the guise of a guitar when his now-former girlfriend presented him with a beginner’s painting kit. “The watercolors she gave me were actually Guitar brand,” he chuckles. “So I started painting pictures of little birds out of National Geographic, and soon came out of myself. The doctors still couldn’t tell me how bad my hearing would get, so I thought, Well, if I go stone deaf and I can paint, at least I’ll still be making music visually; it’s just going to be on a piece of paper with colors.”

Tucking his guitar away and leaving his performance days behind in Alaska, Rutherford headed south to his home state and enrolled in the California College of Arts and Crafts (now known as California College of the Arts), in Oakland, earning himself a bachelor’s degree in art and master’s degree in fine arts in painting. Yet while he enjoyed both painting and teaching at the likes of CCAC and California State University for 15 years, and even picked up awards for his work, he soon realized art simply wasn’t enough.

“Painting is as isolating as hearing loss,” he admits. “I remembered I was on top of the world when I was a singer in Alaska, so one day I got my guitar out of the closet. I started hugging it, feeling

it vibrate, and realized it provided a way of hearing myself.”

After trying his hand playing coffee houses and clubs, as well as a short stint as a stand-up comic—none of which really worked, given his hearing loss—Rutherford decided to fuse his early days as a singer with his recent stage experience and wrote his first piece of solo theater, 2001’s *Weaverville Waltz*.

A nostalgic and toe-tapping autobiographical trip back to his days growing up in historic Weaverville, California (rumored to be one of the inspirations for Shangri-La in James Hilton’s classic novel *Lost Horizon*), the success of *Weaverville Waltz* was matched by further loss of hearing. But this time, Rutherford didn’t get depressed—he got inspired.

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“In some ways, my hearing loss is a gift,” the 60-something singer explains from his home in San Francisco’s East Bay Hills. “It’s the evolution of me, it’s determined my journey. You could say I accidentally fell into my own success. I never would have started doing solo theater when I was singing in Alaska, when I was on top of the world.”

Despite the apparently incompatible combination of profound hearing loss and theatrical performance, Rutherford quickly realized what his life had been missing. “With the miracle of new digital hearing aids, I realized I could still shine in front of a theatre audience. Let me tell you, when I’m on stage performing and I have to pause and wait for the audience to stop laughing... well, it doesn’t get any better than that. It’s the best feeling in the whole world.”

True, it makes for a great story—one that Rutherford recounts in his acclaimed 2007 play *Singing at the Edge of the World*, the theatrical equivalent of

his hearing loss memoir—but it’s not like he planned the success that would come with his string of hit solo shows. Thanks to his Garrison Keillor-like storytelling ability and his musical prowess, productions like 2003’s *My Brother Sang Like Roy Orbison*, 2005’s *The Guitar Teacher* and 2012’s *The Water is Wide* went on to earn him the kind of sold out houses and standing ovations most actors only dream of hearing. Winner of London’s Brickenden Award and named “Best of the Festival” 21 times on the international Fringe Theater circuit, Rutherford is still at it 20 years later with his latest multiple-character show, 2013’s *Walk Like A Man*.

Award-winning San Francisco-based director David Ford has worked with Rutherford on all seven of his shows over the past two decades, and says hearing loss isn’t even a factor in their professional relationship. “First thing I thought was, ‘This is a great guy to listen to. He’s just a natural that way,’” laughs Ford. “The fact that Randy could still sing and play guitar didn’t seem odd to me at all; when he’s performing, it’s easy to forget that he has a profound hearing loss.”

As a director, does Ford have to spend extra time reinforcing Rutherford’s connection with the audience? “Not at all—which is interesting, and says something about the mystery of human beings,” he says.

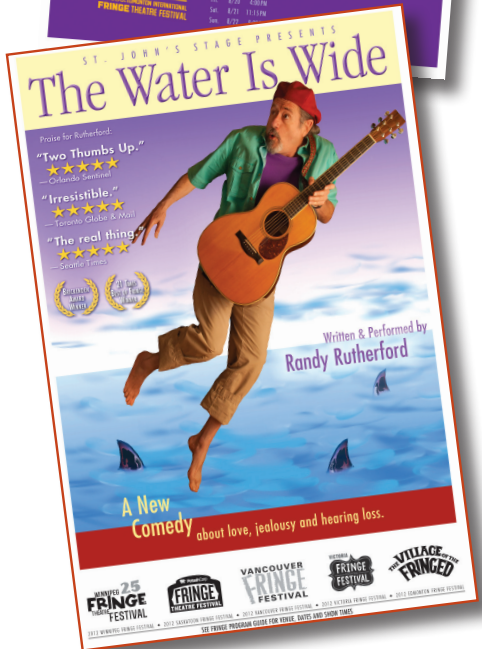
“Randy has a very good sense of where the audience is at, even when he can’t hear them. And he’s got a really easy connection to the story he’s telling; that’s probably what makes him such a good singer as well. There are a lot of performers who have very good hearing who can’t do that.”

### Say What?

Despite hearing loss being a significant plot point in many of his plays—and that he tells every audience up front that he wears hearing aids in both ears—Rutherford still gets people coming up to him after every show... wanting to talk. “I don’t think people understand hearing loss,” he says.

“If you saw me in a wheelchair, it would be a constant reminder that there was something different about me.

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## Inspiration Found *from page 29*

But people hear me talking, see me playing guitar and singing, and they're convinced there's nothing wrong. After the show, they come up and just don't believe that I can't hear them—after all, they've just seen me performing. It's an invisible loss; there are no visual reminders. My ears should be in wheelchairs."

What about performing specifically for audiences who have hearing loss?

"They're fantastic—they laugh just as much, but they get all the nuances a general audience misses." Better still, Rutherford doesn't have to change his shows when performing with captioning or interpretive signing at hearing loss conferences. "All I have to do is slow down a bit and make sure I don't get too far ahead of the captioning, give the audience time to keep up," he explains. "The show takes a bit longer, but the laughs are still there. They've experienced what I'm talking about first hand, so they understand it in a deeper way."

While he has managed to make peace with his hearing loss, Rutherford doesn't sugarcoat what it's like to live without sound. "It's lonely, it isolates you from your community and other people," he says frankly. "You go out in the world and you can't hear what's being said, you're confused and you don't connect. A lot of people with hearing loss just stay at home, because they're

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constantly confronted with gibberish and noise, constantly reminded that they don't fit in."

## Hearing Your Gift

Rutherford long ago accepted the fact that his hearing will never improve; he currently estimates he's lost about 80 percent of his natural hearing. "It's actually gotten worse in the last few years," he admits. "I lost the higher tones years ago, but now I'm starting to lose the lower tones. I'm pretty certain I wouldn't be performing if I didn't have these digital hearing aids."

Whatever the future holds, Randy Rutherford knows he'll never consciously isolate himself again. "When I'm on stage, I don't have a hearing loss. I'm connecting with total strangers and I know exactly what's going on. I don't have to hear to know when the audience is laughing and if they have tears in their

## Audience Appreciation

**R**andy Rutherford doesn't have to hear the applause to know his place in the world. After premiering his seventh show—his coming-of-age memoir *Walk Like A Man*—in the summer of 2013, Randy Rutherford's success can perhaps best be summed up in the words of one of his audience members: "I think it's fascinating that someone who has a hearing loss can communicate more effectively than anyone I've ever seen."

That innate sense of communication is also what makes Rutherford such a hit with professionals in the hearing health care field. Richard H. Meyer, past president of the Hearing Loss Association of America, says he was "privileged to be in the audience" when Rutherford performed *Singing at the Edge of the World* at the Canadian Hard of Hearing Conference in 2009. Finding him "funny, moving and very entertaining," Meyer felt Rutherford's engaging turn as storyteller and musician was the most memorable aspect of the conference. "Long after facts and figures have fled their brains, Randy's audience will recall and repeat his wonderfully-delivered story."

eyes; I can feel the difference when it's working."

Rutherford pauses, and it's easy to imagine him smiling out at a silently applauding audience. "You feel like, This is my gift, this is what I can contribute to the world, this is my reason for being here. It's touching people, it's connecting with them. There's nothing like that, especially for someone who is isolated from other people most of the time." **HLM**

*Below: Randy is also an accomplished artist, working in pastel and watercolor.*



## Singer's Dozen—13 Questions with Randy Rutherford

*By John Threlfall*

**What kind of guitar do you play?** On stage, I play a Martin double-ought 21 acoustic. It's the one I played when I became a folksinger in Alaska 40 years ago.

**Do you still paint?** Yes, I'm actually having a show of new watercolors back in Alaska this year. Watercolors always felt more ephemeral, more like finger-style acoustic guitar to me; oil painting was like heavy, electric guitar. The two things I love doing are painting and making music.

**Who are your inspirations?** James Taylor, Gordon Lightfoot, Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd. My first guitar teacher in Alaska. And, my director, David Ford.

**What's your absolutely favorite thing to do?** Make people laugh.

**What do you miss the most from when you had full hearing?** The sound of falling rain, a zephyr of a breeze, birds singing, people sighing, punch lines to jokes, violins. No matter how much my hearing aids amplify, I don't hear most of that at all.

**Have you ever had to cancel a performance due to problems with your hearing aids?** No. I've had problems just before going on stage, but you still have to go on and just do it. If one side goes off and I can't get it working, I still go on and work out of one side of my head, which affects the way I walk and stuff. But I've never not done a show.

**Let's say you're given the keys to a time machine for a day. Where and when do you go, and why?**

I'd go back to Weaverville, California, circa 1960. I'd be on my bicycle with my fishing pole and my little fox terrier Candy, and we'd be riding on some logging road looking for a place to fish. We'd be out all day and I'd be singing to God, the stream, the mountains and the clouds, just thinking how fantastic it is to be alive.

**What question are you tired of being asked?** "Is that really true? Did that stuff really happen?" Trust me, folks, I can't make this stuff up.

**What song do you wish you had written?** *When I Fall in Love ...* sung by 'saint' Nat King Cole.

**What are you most sorry for not doing in your life?** I never travelled abroad: Paris, Rome, London. I'm basically the Weaverville kid.

**What are you most grateful for in your life?** The spirit in me that loves to create.

**What would you do for a living if you didn't have to worry about money?** The same thing I've been doing for 30 years now: music, writing, performing, teaching, painting. I love what I do.

**What would you like your epitaph to read?** "That Randy was something, wasn't he? He was really something."

*For the past 20 years, John Threlfall has been an editor, journalist and theater critic writing for local and national newspapers and magazines. He is as passionate about the arts as most people are about football. John currently works as a communications officer at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, where he also teaches in the department of writing. He can be reached at t-house@shaw.ca.*

**Website:** [www.randyrutherford.net](http://www.randyrutherford.net)

Visit Randy's website for more about his shows. Email him at [randytales@earthlink.net](mailto:randytales@earthlink.net).