

Saying farewell to a good friend

It's been a sad week for me.

I lost a longtime friend, Vern Denny, after his six-month fight with cancer.

Through my sister Mary Lou, I met Vern in the 1960s, a time when folk music was alive and well, and many our age were flocking to Woodstock, to express love and peace, and protest social injustice.

Vern and I were neither political or fanatical pacifists, but we loved the music, and shared a common love—guitars.

I learned to play guitar with Vern. We accompanied each other to buy our first 'really good' guitars, and spent countless nights in the Denny family room, trying to figure out fingering for this song, or the chord progressions for another.

Many nights, in the creative sanctuary of the Denny family room, Vern would hold court, frenetically rocking his rocking chair. Vern and I would play until our fingers were throbbing numb, we'd watch Glen Campbell, Johnny Cash and The Smothers Brothers on TV, trying our best to figure out how they played a tune.

After midnight, others in our group would drop by after kissing their dates good-night. We'd start all over, playing into the wee hours of the morning.

Together with Gord McDonald (Gordie), and Mary Lou, we formed a folk group, calling ourselves 'The Missing Link'. Throughout 1968-70 we played various folk church services, with then-Churchill Community Church student minister Bob Hyde looking after the preaching.

We traveled to places like Simcoe and Hagersville to play our folk services, and closer to home at Limehouse Church and some in Georgetown, and countless services at our 'home base', Churchill Community Church, north of Acton.

Sometimes we'd gather around the kitchen table in the farmhouse at my place, with music and lyrics strewn all over the table as we practised our songs.

It was an incredibly creative and influential time in our lives.

My sister later married Vern's brother Ray, and with that, Vern became 'family.'

In a column I wrote in 1990, I reminisced about our group playing a candlelight Christmas service at Churchill Church in December 1969, and how we encountered nervous flutters—my guitar suddenly went out of tune, and Mary Lou forgot the words to *Silent Night*.

I later wrote about the night Vern and Gordie dropped by my place with the Denny family's Chrysler

New Yorker, which had a huge 440 engine. That car could burn rubber like something else, and on the way home, Vern and Gordie did a number of 'burn-outs' on the plank bridge in Limehouse. (You know, the bridge with big nails to hold the planks in place.)

A mile up the road one rear tire went flat, ripped to shreds. They changed it and threw the flat in the trunk.

I was at Denny's the day his dad Clarence opened the trunk and started praising that brand of tires for "wearing right down to the cords before going flat..."

When Vern was diagnosed with cancer last October, he decided to take care of some loose ends—like revitalizing Churchill Cemetery board with new younger members, and taking time to ensure the Denny family history was in good hands.

He also made a list of things he wanted at his funeral—including a performance of *'Blowin' in the Wind,'* by the remaining members of The Missing Link.

That was a tough gig for us.

During his final six months I tried to visit Vern regularly. We talked candidly

Ted Brown



about our friendship, and the 'early days'.

"We grew up in the best time in society," said Vern. "We lived in the country, we had good family values and our friends were all like us. We were so lucky to have all that."

Like countless friends from childhood and adolescence, we had our 'drifting away' periods, when we married, had families and other commitments that got in the way of guitars.

But, as Vern said, we could still meet, sit down and continue to talk and play like there hadn't been a break in the conversation.

And we still played guitar, intuitively knowing how the other was going to play in a song. Once in a while we'd get together for an evening to just play—

and reflect.

I visited Vern just before Easter. By then, he could only talk a few minutes before drifting off, but he was still quite lucid.

That day, when I left, I said goodbye to my friend. His eyes opened. He squeezed my hand. He nodded his good bye.

As I pulled on my coat, and watched his tired body, I thought it was likely the last time we'd talk—in this life. He'd fought the good fight, but sometimes cancer is bigger than all of us.

He died Easter Sunday.

I expect Vern's now rocking in his heavenly rocking chair, finger-picking a folk tune, quietly pleased with himself that he 'figured that one out.'

He leaves behind his wife Linda and two sons Brian and Kevin and their wives, two grandkids, his brother Ray and my sister Mary Lou, and his sister Joyce, as well as his mom Vera. They all carry their own warm memories of good times together.

Vern was a good friend and a good person.

And I know I'll really miss him—I do already.



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Holly!
Love, Larry, Carly & Tyler xo

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