

COMING HOME

Kingfest brings Canadian country band back to York Region roots

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

Russell deCarle is right at home. Literally, figuratively and geographically.

Delayed by a spring rain, the instantly recognizable lead singer, bass player and songwriter for iconic Canadian band Prairie Oyster arrives at Hogan's, the elegant century-old King City eatery at the crossroads of Keele Street and King Road. He dispenses greetings and an apology.

Doffing the jacket matching his jeans, he sips coffee and begins a sentimental journey that began just a few blocks north 53 years ago.

Born at Newmarket hospital, as it was known before Southlake became part of the nomenclature, Mr. deCarle was raised in King City.

"It was a very rural upbringing," he recalled. "As a kid, it was a great place to grow up. And, it was close

enough to Toronto so we weren't oblivious to what was going on."

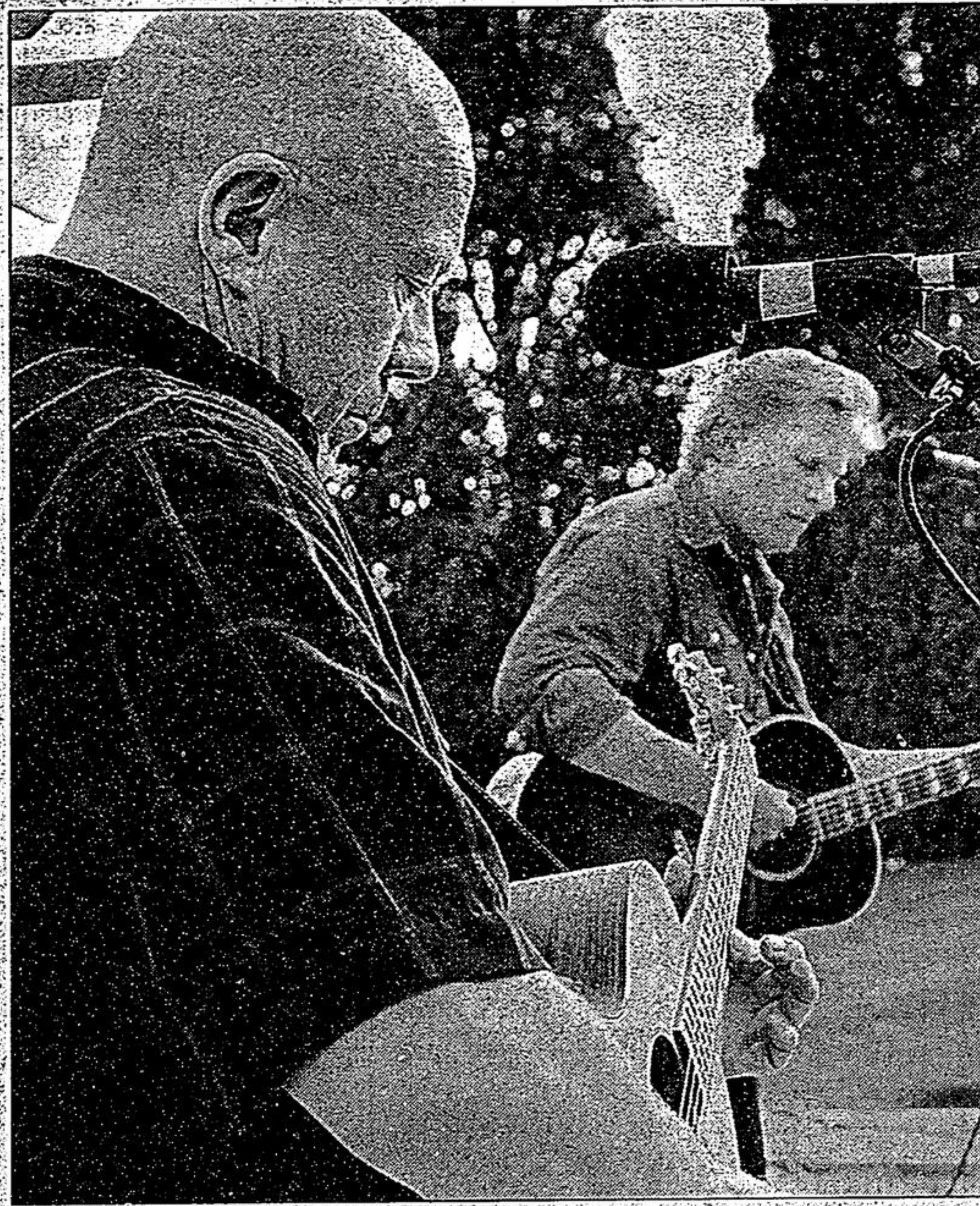
He reminisces about King City Secondary School and how he and lifelong friend and Prairie Oyster member Keith Glass, founded The King City Slickers, a band whose melodic folk, bluegrass and country offerings brought initial success and a following.

Principally self-taught at 14, he credits Mr. Glass, who had musical training, as an early influence.

He remembers how, as teenaged musicians, they played the local Anglican Church hall and the Laskay Women's Institute Hall in between university and big city gigs at the landmark El Mocambo, Grossman's and New Westminster Hotel venues.

He recalls, too, how his home town has changed.

"Huge," he said. "In '72, they tore down trees to widen roads. Maples used to line the main road. They



took out 14 buildings right around here to lower the rail tracks. It was a beautiful little country town."

Lanky and laconic, the acclaimed entertainer is as comfortable in his own skin as he is in his well worn work shirt and cowboy boots. True to his art and heart, the honky tonk and country music purist calls them as he sees them.

Still, for the small town boy who left for the road at 19, it's good to know he can go home again.

The homecoming begins June 23 when Prairie Oyster headlines at the Kingfest outdoor music festival on the Eaton Estate at the Seneca College King campus. It continues in November when the band plays the Markham Theatre.

YOUR GUIDE TO KINGFEST

Kingfest, June 22-24, supports the York Region branch of Habitat for Humanity.

For information, visit www.kingfestmusic.com and www.yorkregion.com

Early bird passes are on sale at Ticketmaster, 416-870-8000 and www.ticketmaster.ca

Advance tickets are also on sale at The Arts Music Store at 274 Eagle St., Newmarket, McAlpine Ford at 15815 Yonge St., Aurora, Budget Rent a Car at 10619 Yonge St. Richmond Hill and the TD Bank at 2200 King Rd., King City

In the 33-year history of bands, players, more than Mr. deCarle can recall, have come and gone.

After spawning into Prairie Oyster in 1974, the group disassembled in 1978 and reunited in 1982.

Eight albums, including the recently released *One Kiss*, six country group of the year Juno awards and loads of Canadian Country Music Association hardware and All-Star Band citations later, Prairie Oyster remains as well liked as a worn and favoured hat.

The group's durability could be attributed to familiarity without contempt.

Relaxed and intimate, these are longtime friends, pickin', grinnin' and paying tribute to those who came before them in the hope a musical genre will remain vital.

The band's popularity is partially based on its ability to avoid typecasting, Mr. deCarle said.

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