

Quiet Beauty

Listen closely, because Fringe veteran Randy Rutherford can't hear you.

His shows have always been met with great applause, but long-time Fringe performer Randy Rutherford can no longer hear it. Due to a progressive congenital hearing loss, Rutherford's entire Fringe career has been hushed—but that hasn't stopped him from making a well-earned name for himself as a musical monologist with shows like Weaverville Waltz, My Brother Sang Like Roy Orbison and This May Feel A Little Funny.

script first; but given the inherently frantic nature of the Fringe, that often doesn't happen. Last year, for example, he wanted to catch Audible, a show about hearing impairment by the Kamloops troupe Saucy Fops. "But no one gave me the text," he recalls, "so I couldn't go see it."

"I don't think I ever had perfect hearing," says Rutherford. "I always said 'Huh?' and 'What?' a lot as a child. They thought that I was slow." Over the past 30 years, he's lost more than 70 percent of hearing in both ears. "My ears should be in wheelchairs, but it's an invisible disability."

As Rutherford talks, I begin to hear the slight slurring of his words. On stage, I had always just assumed it was an American accent of some kind; speaking to him directly, however, I realize it's part of his hearing impairment.

"Helen Keller said a blind person loses their connection to things, but a deaf person loses their connection to people," he continues. "And that's one of the things I'm trying to get across in this show."

Some are calling *Singing At The Edge Of The World*—Rutherford's latest acoustic autobiographic ramble down memory lane—quite possibly his best, and there's certainly enough material to warrant such acclaim: a folk singer in Alaska in the early '70s, young and in love, discovers he's losing his hearing. It could be a Nick Drake song, it could be a Hallmark Hall of Fame episode; instead, it's just Rutherford's life. "I started having this ringing in my ears and having trouble hearing what people were saying back to me from the audience," he recalls, but even though we know the story doesn't necessarily have a happy ending (spoiler: he doesn't regain his hearing), don't think it's a downer. "This is an inspiring show for anyone who feels stuck in their life or that they can't deal with something," he insists. "It doesn't have to be a hearing-loss kind of thing."

It's rather ironic that Rutherford has made his name on the Fringe circuit over the past decade, as he's always felt like an outsider. "Hearing loss is very isolating," he says. "There's a lot of camaraderie between performers on the Fringe circuit, but I tend not to do that—because I can't hear them that well." And in order to "hear" other people's shows, he needs to read the

Performance comes with its own wrinkles too. "A lot of solo performers never talk directly to the audience as themselves, but I do that throughout my pieces," he explains. "And a lot of times they're quiet, and they'll say afterwards that they loved the show, but I don't know that. I just think they're not liking it."

Rutherford says he's fortunate to have had some hearing in his life—consider his guitar work. "A lot of it comes from memory," he says. "If you know how to type, for example, you can type and think about other things at the same time. So I can play my guitar and think about something totally opposite because my fingers know what to do. And your whole body is like that; I'm using my whole consciousness when I do these shows."

He's tried sign language ("It's a foreign language," he laughs), wears hearing aids ("They help me hear the guitar better on stage—if it's completely quiet"), has a visual digital tuner for his guitar and frequently sells out his shows, but there are times when it all still gets Rutherford down. "I think the human condition has a certain amount of loneliness to it, but my loneliness is amplified because of my hearing loss," he admits. "It separates you from people; you can't be in with the crowd."

Fortunately, for both Rutherford and his audiences, he's still out there on the Fringe. "These performances are my biggest connection to people in my life," he says, "and they have been for the past 10 years. Because for the 90 minutes I'm up on stage, I'm not hearing-impaired."

Singing at the Edge of the World
Victoria Fringe Festival
WCD Studio Theatre

