



## Math teacher keeping his country in the city

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Like most of his songwriter heroes, Cape Breton-raised troubadour Michael Brennan doesn't have much to say about himself. Humble and self-effacing, perhaps to a fault, he's happy to let his rugged, bighearted songs do his talking.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

"I don't have an agenda," says Cape Breton-raised singer Michael Brennan. "I write when the urge strikes me."

He figures if people listen, the songs will take him where he needs to go.

That's one reason he has been able to hold down Sunday afternoons at Graffiti's, the honky-tonk boite in Kensington Market that is home to Toronto's most earnest and least affected country, folk and blues artists, for nine solid years.

"The audience there waxes and wanes," Brennan said earlier this week, "but it's casual and cozy, and they let me do what I want to do."

But partly as the result of critical praise for his just-released second solo album, *Anywhere But Here*, Brennan, a part-time math teacher and full-time dad, is starting to make a name for himself outside his traditional

home turf ... as far north as College St. He's the featured artist tomorrow night at Free Times Café's recently inaugurated Blue Fridays showcase of "big names in a small room, offering an intimate personal experience," in the words of curator and booker Brian Gladstone.

"Blue Fridays is for artists who need no introduction ... mostly blues acts, because sadly there are fewer and fewer places to hear the blues in Toronto," Gladstone said. "On Wednesday nights we bring in folk artists and songwriters of all kinds.

"The idea was to create a place for roots musicians and songwriters to hang out with friends, the way I used to hang out at Norm's Living Room (hosted by Toronto songwriter, the late Norm Hacking) at the Tranzac Club.

"Norm's gone and I miss him, and there are no rooms I know that provide that kind of informal pass-the-guitar environment."

For Brennan, who'll be accompanied tomorrow night by Steve Briggs, primo guitar slinger and co-founder of the country swing band The Bebop Cowboys, the gig is a chance to get in front of a crowd that's not so familiar with his muscular performing style, deep and intense baritone, and the raw-edged songs of displacement, misplaced hope and heartbreak that are the core of *Anywhere But Here*.

"I'd like to be playing more often," Brennan said. "Because of my job and family, I can't really get out and tour, though I'm hoping to get some festival bookings in the summer."

Brennan's new songs retell the quintessential Canadian story – about the journey from the desperate edges of the landscape to the gleaming urban heart, and the dreams and spirits that are broken there – with all the passion and power that his true Maritimer's heart can muster. These are pure country songs, delivered with an emotional candour that makes the detached irony of many contemporary composers sound phoney and contrived.

"I don't have an agenda," Brennan said. "I write when the urge strikes me. I write about the dichotomy of life in Cape Breton, where I tour every summer, and Toronto. This past year death touched my family in the East, so that got me thinking about mortality and distance. If people are looking for a theme, that just about sums it up."

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Just the facts

**WHO:** Michael Brennan with Steve Briggs

**WHEN:** Friday, 8 p.m.

**WHERE:** Free Times Café, 320 College St.

**TICKETS:** \$10 at the door