

The First Lady of the Canadian Music Industry - Lori Bruner

Canadian icons are not always found on the cover of newspapers or profiled on the evening news. Their work quietly stands the test of time. Lori Bruner was a true original. The First Lady of the Canadian Music Industry has passed, but she leaves a groundbreaking legacy that has allowed generations of women to excel in music industry management. Here is her story.

In 1967, Lori Bruner joined Polydor Records Canada and became the first woman to break into the male dominated Canadian record industry.

She not only did the job, but did it well and other record companies followed suit.

What is astonishing is that she had attended Toronto's Riverdale high school for just months, never finished, and grew up in foster homes.

Her record career started in Dartmouth in the late 40s. She worked in a local record store in her late teens. It was Rodeo Records owner George Taylor who made sales calls to her store and encouraged Bruner to look at the record industry as a career.

In 1951, she returned to Toronto after a failed marriage. She worked in the Promenade Music Centre on Toronto's prestigious Bloor Street strip. The store was renowned for its classical music department.

Eventually she managed the Promenade store on Yonge and St. Clair and later managed the Disc Shop in Scarborough's Golden Mile Plaza.

From there it was easy to move into the industry as inside sales with MacKay Record Distributors, the London Record distributor in Ontario.

In 1960, Bruner became the second in

command at Astral Records. The company had recently brought the Pye Record catalogue to Canada adding it to its list of audiophile labels.

She was instrumental in breaking two Lonnie Donegan hits in Canada, My Old Man's a Dustman and Does the Chewing Gum etc etc which resulted in a U.S. release for the second time and this time the record topped the U.S. charts. She worked to make hits in Canada for Kenny Ball, Petula Clark and Rod McKuen as well as exploiting Pye's vast classical catalogue.

In 1964, Bruner joined Walt Grealis and Stan Klees and became one of the trio that started Canada's first weekly music industry trade paper.

She became part of the magazine's "Canadian Momentum" to motivate every aspect of Canadian content in culture and entertainment. She helped the magazine start a yearly award presentation that RPM eventually nicknamed the Juno Awards. The Junos went to national television in 1975 and have been televised yearly ever since.

She wrote an industry gossip column that had readers glued to the paper weekly and overnight she became nationally and internationally known.

She joins a list of RPM alumni who went



Bruner started her career in a record store in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia



A smokin' Sammy Davis Jr. seen with Bruner in the late 50s.



Bruner and constant companion Stan Klees with Guess Who's Burton Cummings at a 2005 awards presentation where Klees was honoured as a Legend.



Motion picture icon Douglas Fairbanks Jr. during a 1995 Canadian visit.

on to greater heights as writers. Vanity Fair's Lisa Robinson started her writing career with RPM, the Globe and Mail's Kate Taylor, who was awarded the prestigious 2009 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy and Jill Lawless, Associated Press correspondent stationed in London, England.

In 1967 Fred Exon of Polydor Records Canada asked RPM publisher Walt Grealis if he could hire Bruner away from RPM to become National Promotion Director for Polydor. Grealis agreed on the condition that Bruner be paid a wage equal to males doing the same job.

It was a landmark because females were usually receptionists, secretaries or clerks. Many feel that this opened the door for women in mid-management in this very male dominated music industry.

Looking after press and promotion for Polydor she dealt directly with artists like Rush, B. B. King, James Last, Thin Lizzy, The Bee Gees, Frank Mills, Cream and Bachman Turner Overdrive.

Bruner tells a story about a famous rock star who was about to go on stage when the zipper on his very tight pants broke. Bruner took a needle and thread from her purse and began sewing him into his pants. At one point she stopped, looked up, and said: "You know, I have a needle in my hand."

Another time as a room full of press waited, Bruner had to have the hotel open the room of Cream's Ginger Baker. There on the bed was a completely naked Ginger Baker. Bruner said she had never seen such a white body in her life. She brought him around and dressed him. It was all in a day's work.

Bruner was a big fan of Joan Rivers, and became a bigger fan after dining with Stan Klees in an upscale restaurant. Rivers was beckoned to their table by Klees who pointed to the topaz brooch Bruner was wearing. Rivers screamed, attracting the attention of the diners; she was so pleased that it was one of her brooches.

She thanked Klees for calling her over. After a quick embrace she went to the door, but walked back and handed Bruner a small

black box with a gold cord.

"This is new. We aren't selling it yet." She waved and left. It was a topaz brooch that became Bruner's favourite regardless of the expensive jewellery she had collected over the years.

Bruner had been a great fan of Sherlock Holmes and she knew that in the 50s Klees had befriended Jeremy Brett (Sherlock Holmes on television). So when Brett appeared in Toronto in the late 70s, the three met for a drink. It was a highpoint for her.

She once said, "I'm starstruck and Stan is a celebrity magnet, so we make a good pair."

In 1973, Bruner bought the Book Cellar in Yorkville across from the Four Seasons Hotel. The store was frequented by visiting celebrities and dignitaries like Mick Jagger, Elizabeth Taylor, Shirley MacLaine, Madonna, Whoopi Goldberg, and Keith Richards. Famous authors like Marshall McLuhan, Sir Peter Ustinov, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje, Shirley Temple Black, Tom Wolfe, Jeffrey Archer, Joy Fielding, Nancy Sinatra, and Dominick Dunne held press conferences and autograph sessions in the Book Cellar.

She expanded the store and built it up to become what many considered to be the best independent book store in Canada. The Book Cellar closed in 1997 when two mammoth book stores opened within a block of the Book Cellar.

Restless and only 65, Bruner started to work in antique and art stores. She always had an interest in art, antiques, Canadiana and heirloom jewellery.

Over the years, Bruner had befriended Dominick Dunne and it was two weeks before his death that Bruner found out she had a brain tumor. She died on December 18th, 2009. Her ashes will be inurned in a niche in the Garden Of Remembrance at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto beside the niche of Walt Grealis O.C. and where Stan Klees will eventually be inurned. The columbarium is beside the pond, the fountains, and the waterfall she loved so much. She left behind a great legacy.



RPM publisher Walt Grealis O.C. with Bruner and Nancy Sinatra at a signing at the Book Cellar.



Bruner and Klees with Donny Osmond and the cast of Joseph at an after-party.



Bruner with Canadian publicist, press agent, and close friend Gino Empry.



Bruner with the pioneers of the "Canadian Momentum" Stan Klees and Walt Grealis O.C. on the red carpet.



Tony Award winning Canadian and Broadway impresario Garth Drabinsky at a book signing at the Book Cellar.