

## Joe Coughlin Biography

Legendary jazz guitarist and vocalist George Benson may have said it best when he dropped by to introduce himself to Joe Coughlin and his quartet at the 2010 Victoria Jazzfest International. “You guys kind of remind me of the old days,” said Benson, complimenting Coughlin and the group on their show. While Benson didn’t elaborate, it was clear he was thinking of the heyday of the great jazz vocalists like Mel Torme, Frank Sinatra, and the still-going-strong Tony Bennett.

Anyone who has heard Coughlin deliver classics like Kahn and Donaldson’s *My Baby Just Cares* or Frank Loesser’s *Luck be a Lady* from the *Great American Songbook* knows that such a comparison is apt. Pit him against any of the best – past or present – in a blindfold listening test, and you’ll realize that like other well-kept Canadian secrets, Joe Coughlin not only belongs but excels in higher company.

Through three decades, seven albums, one Jazz Report Award, and two National Jazz Awards, he’s performed with a flock of great Canadian artists with international credentials – players like Ed Bickert, Terry Clarke, Bernie Senesky, and Don Thompson (on his stellar self-titled debut album); Mark Eisenman, Steve Wallace, Lorne Lofsky, Rick Wilkins and John Sumner (on subsequent Toronto-produced projects); and, since his 1995 move to Victoria, west coast giants like Pat Coleman, Miles Black, Tony Genge, Ken Lister, Jodi Proznick, Buff Allen, Dave Robbins, Ross Taggart, and Mike Herriott, with whom he’s produced (in various personnel combinations) three superb albums.

With over thirty years of performing under his belt, Coughlin has proven himself in everything from heavy metal (yes, he fronted Whiteheet, a successful Ontario metal band in the late 70s) to adult contemporary (he scored a couple of Canadian top ten singles in the early 90s), but since winning CBC’s *Search for the Stars* in 1979 and landing his first recording contract, he’s been most at home with the music of singers like Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae and Johnny Hartman, vocalists rooted in jazz who can appeal to a wider audience.

A small jazz ensemble is a perfect setting for Coughlin’s warm, sweet, and supple baritone, but it should come as no surprise that, like the great singers who have come before him, he soars with a full orchestra. Add well-arranged horns, strings, and a little tinkling sweetener to his core quartet and you’ve got the ingredients for magic. In fact, if we could wave a wand and plunk Coughlin in front of Nelson Riddle’s orchestra circa 1955, it’s not overstating the case to say he might even give Ol’ Blue Eyes a run for his money.

Honouring the legacy of his mentors and acknowledging the affinity of his voice for lush, painterly orchestral arrangements, Coughlin has recently created *Salute to the Saloon Singers*, a larger-than-life pops symphony tribute featuring stunning 62-piece arrangements written specifically for him by National-Jazz-Award-Arranger-of-the-Year John McLeod and Juno Award winner Phil Dwyer.

Titles include Come Fly with Me, Witchcraft, One for My Baby and The Way You Look Tonight, tunes familiar to the lovers of songs written in an era when popular songwriting was an art form and when the music of writers like Johnny Mandel, Jimmy Van Heusen, Frank Loesser, Harold Arlen, and Jerome Kern graced the stages and screens of the world.

Joe Coughlin has an ear for the past, but it would be a mistake to call him yesterday's singer. Listen to him dig into the contemporary, socially aware standards penned by Pat Coleman and Colin Lazzerini for the recent National-Jazz-Award-winning Things Turn Out That Way, and you'll understand that he's a voice for the present too.

But then, given his extensive media and communications career outside of music, where he's done everything from hosting TV shows on CBC and CTV to launching major employment initiatives for people with disabilities, he's always been a man of the times.

There are a number of singers these days who can give a decent nod to the artists of the past, but Joe Coughlin, with his wise, easy delivery and ability to plumb the emotional and musical depths of a great and timeless tune, is the real deal.