

Seasoned Hamilton singer-songwriter looks bound for stardom

By NICK KREWEN
The Spectator

A STAR is born.

From the moment Jim Witter walked on the main stage of last night's Festival Of Friends at Gage Park's George Robinson Bandshell, there was no doubt that this Hamilton singer-songwriter's future is so bright he better start wearing shades.

Mr. Witter, who will probably nab a few Canadian Country Music Award nominations when they're announced at the Hamilton Convention Centre, is one of those treasured rarities: a pure, natural talent.

He's a great songwriter whose heartfelt songs are immediately contagious, and a gifted lyricist who can capture the magic of the moment.

He's a seasoned entertainer who — after paying his dues over the past decade in piano bars and talent contests — appears so comfortable in front of an audience that he looks as though he was born for the stage.

And he's an amazing singer, with a golden tenor that fits like a glove whether he's in the "new country mode" or light rock, as he proved with effortless versions of The Eagles' Take It Easy and Elvis Presley's All Shook Up.

But most of Mr. Witter's 45-minute set, which was simulcast over 820 CHAM

as part of the station's 10th birthday celebration, was original material from his new self-titled debut album.

He started on an upbeat note with Distant Drum before moving into the dramatic feel of Hurricane Alley, but his first truly great performance was a tender rendition of Stolen Moments, which he dedicated to his son.

The Crossing, his top-five ballad Everything And More and even The Peanuts Theme were paraded before an estimated crowd of 4,000, with performances from Mr. Witter and his six-piece band as polished and professional as they come.

Keep your eye on this hometown success. He's gonna be mega!

Earlier on, The Stars Of Country North — a showcase for Canadian country talent appearing on an album of the same name — were also warmly received.

Hosted by Larry Mercey, artists diverse as country veteran Colleen Peterson (who performed her radio-hit rendition of Patsy Cline's Crazy), Jack Diamond, J.K. Gulley, Morris P. Rainville, Kelita and Kimberly Richards played a couple of songs each.

But the most pleasant surprise was singer Diane Raeside, another local dues-payer who seems to have developed an identifiable sound and a confident stage presence. It's to be hoped some Canadian record companies will look her up in the future.

The evening was also a celebration of CHAM's 10th anniversary of broadcasting country music. Aside from the simulcast, park patrons were treated to slices of a giant birthday cake, free cassettes, T-shirts and concert tickets, and taped messages from country stars Steve Wariner, Trisha Yearwood, Michelle Wright, Brooks & Durn and others.

New Brunswick country singer Joan Kennedy closed the festival last night. Tonight's headliners include Valdy, Burlington R&B diva Vivienne Williams, Hamilton songwriter Ray Lyell and rock 'n' roll great Ronnie Hawkins, while Bruce Cockburn closes the Festival Of Friends with a solo performance tomorrow night.