

Music

Oscar Brand: radio host, folk singer, song writer



By
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Under The Radar: 30 Notable Canadian Jewish Musicians, which I wrote with Alan L. Simons (Publisher) takes an historical approach, covering musicians of most genres and genders, some alive and others having passed on, but excelling somewhat out of sight. This is the second in a two-

part series of excerpts from the book, which was released in November 2021, and is available in paperback and as an eBook from Amazon.ca. The two performers with Winnipeg, Manitoba roots are Victor Feldbrill (who was profiled in our Feb. 2 issue) and Oscar Brand.



OSCAR BRAND

In 1965, it might have become Canada's new national anthem.

The tune was the Oscar Brand-written "Something to Sing About".

The lobbying was intense to convince Prime Minister Lester Pearson's Liberal government and Parliament for Brand's composition to replace "O Canada".

That tune extolled Canada and became the theme for "Let's Sing Out", a weekly TV show hosted by Brand, launched on CTV in 1963 and was later broadcast on CBC. It also was the Canadian pavilion's popular theme at Expo '67.

Oscar Brand was a folk singer, songwriter, radio host and short story writer.

But he was best-known as a New York City radio show host. That gig lasted 70 years. Brand composed some 300 songs and released 100 albums, many with Canadian and American patriotic lyrics.

The Guinness Book of World Records confirms he holds the radio show host longevity record, beginning on Dec. 10, 1945 and ending Sept. 24, 2016. His 10 pm Saturday fixture, "Oscar Brand's Folksong Festival", ruled that slot for 70 years on WNYC-AM 820. He loved this job, never had a contract and was never paid.

Of Romanian-Jewish heritage, Oscar was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba on February 7, 1920 to Isadore and Beatrice Brand. They lived on a wheat farm near the provincial capital. His father was an Indigenous interpreter for the Hudson's Bay Co. He also owned a theatre supply company, then a pawnshop.

The family moved to the U.S. in 1927, living in Minneapolis, Chicago and New York. Residing in Brooklyn's Borough Park, his parents sought medical treatment for Oscar, who was born with a missing calf muscle, according to his obituary.

After graduating from high school, he barnstormed the U.S. with his banjo, working on farms to pay his way. Returning home, he graduated with a psychology degree from Brooklyn College.

Brand joined the U.S. Army in 1942 as an induction centre psychologist and edited a newspaper for psychiatric patients. Following his discharge, he moved to Greenwich Village and wrote a book, "How To Play the Guitar Better Than Me".

The music bug had bitten him at seven because he loved listening to player-piano rolls. Interested in music, he had a creative bent but he always wanted to be "on the radio." That childhood dream turned into a labour of love and when hired by WYNC, he never left.

His show was a 'must appearance' for musicians like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte, Lead Belly, Harry Chapin, Arlo Guthrie, Emmylou Harris, B.B. King, Phil Ochs, and Pete Seeger, among others.

As a radio and stage performer, Brand's sometimes off-key and gritty voice had believability.

He applied the voice "to old, new and sometimes deliberately mangled songs, both on and off the air," the New York Times reported. "He was also an accomplished songwriter: Doris Day's version of his song, "A Guy Is A Guy" reached No. 1 on the Billboard chart in 1952."

In 1959, Brand was one of the original organizers of the Newport Folk Festival. During the '60s he was on the Children's Television Workshop Board advisory panel, helping develop Sesame Street. A somewhat prickly advisor, it was rumoured that the Oscar the Grouch character was named after Oscar Brand.

In the 1960s, he was a Mariposa Folk Festival mainstay, later in 1987 and at the Festival's 50th Anniversary in 2010.

He scored ballets for Agnes de Mille and commercials for Log Cabin Syrup and Cheerio's; wrote music for documentary films, published song-books, short stories; and hosted the children's television shows "The First Look" and "Spirit of '76".

Back in the 1960s when I was a fledgling disc jockey in Calgary at the University of Alberta's radio station UACR, I was impressed with his cross-Canada and university campus performances. Brand's Canadiana love-initiative played at many universities and revived the careers of folk music pioneers like the Womenfolk and the Weavers, and helped kick-start then little-known musicians Gordon Lightfoot and Joni Mitchell.

Brand was a civil rights activist who participated in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches. The House Committee on Un-American Activities branded his show a "pipeline of Communism because of his support for First Amendment rights for blacklisted artists to be allowed to have a platform to reach the public," reported the New York Daily News. Brand, reportedly was anti-Stalinist and not a Communist Party member.

"Few have sung and strummed more prolifically," his Times obituary noted." The hundreds of songs he recorded include election songs, children's songs, vaudeville songs, sports car songs, drinking songs, outlaw songs and lascivious ditties about Nellie the Barmaid."

Sadly, much of his and hundreds of other artists' original masters and recordings were lost in a fire at Universal Studios Hollywood in 2008.

His numerous awards and honours included a 1995 Peabody Award for "more than 50 years in service to the music and messages of folk performers and fans around the world."

Brand died at age 96 (Sept. 30, 2016), survived by his wife Karen, four children, and nine grandchildren.

*Excerpted from
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A prominent German Holocaust denier is escaping arrest by hiding in Brazil

Feb. 9, 2022 (JTA) – A far-right German extremist who has been convicted of denying the Holocaust is taking shelter in Brazil.

Nikolai Nerling, 41, told Brazilian news site Globo that he fears he will be arrested if he returns to Germany.

The Berlin public prosecutor's office declined to say whether Interpol was notified of his presence in Brazil or whether an extradition request would be filed.

Nerling was fired in May, 2018 from a Berlin elementary school where he taught from 2009 to 2018 after a report in a local newspaper showed that he was disseminating neo-Nazi content.

In December, he was fined 6,000 euros for denying the existence of the Holocaust in front of a group of students visiting the Dachau concentration camp.

He arrived in Brazil on a tourist visa in November 2021 and has spent the last few months touring cities in southern Brazil and creating more content for his channels, often denying the Holocaust. In one video recorded in Pomerode, in the Santa Catarina region, Nerling can be seen removing "FCK NAXS" from a graffitied wall together with another man.

Because YouTube has blocked his channel several times, the majority of his videos are published on his Telegram channel where he has over 30,000 subscribers. He funds his work with donations from his followers.

Michel Gherman, an advisor to the Instituto Brasil-Israel (IBI) and professor in the sociology department at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, suspects that Nerling chose the south of Brazil, specifically Santa Catarina, because of the area's history of having a large German immigrant population.

"We think it makes sense from his racist and Nazi perspective to have searched for a population of German origins," Gherman told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Nerling considered heading to Paraguay next, following the lead of the over 1,000 Germans who have moved to the South American country in the last year to avoid Germany's strict COVID-19 rules. However, Paraguay updated their entry requirements on Jan. 10, 2022, now requiring vaccination from foreign travelers not residing in the country. Nerling, who is unvaccinated, is afraid he won't be able to get in.

For now, he has decided to wait and see how things develop in Brazil, though his tourist visa expires after 90 days. Little is known about what, if any, course of action the government will take regarding Nerling's presence.

Gherman said that Jewish groups have been raising the alarm about close ties between Brazilian neo-Nazi groups and the government of President Jair Bolsonaro. Last year, he extended a warm welcome to a lawmaker from Germany's far-right AfD party who is the great-granddaughter of a prominent Nazi. One of his advisers made a sign associated with white supremacy during a legislative session.

"We think there should be a stronger pressure, a condemning, from past victims of Nazism, in relation to the ties between the current administration with nazis," said Gherman.

Brazil has an infamous past as a haven for Nazis looking to hide from persecution after World War II.

Also this week, the presenter of a popular podcast said he was in favor of a legally recognized Nazi party in Brazil.