

Ready to Rockville

 By Eugene Yiga 29 Aug 2014

With a name like Johnny Ray, perhaps it's not surprising that he became a musician. And yet the composer's path to his passion was a long and winding road.

Born in Durban and raised in an artistic family, Ray began singing in school choirs from an early age. "I wanted to play an instrument and, in fact, went on to play several," he says of his upbringing. "Music always had a part to play in my life."

At the age of 12, Ray started playing the piano and also got his first guitar. He then joined his school's cadet band (awarded top honours in South Africa), participated in his first musical and recorded a few LPs.

Composing began at 16. "I believe the times [1970s] were full of openness and free spirit musically, so one never felt that uneasy about expressing oneself," he says. "It's a kind of confidence that still fills me to this day."


When the opportunity came to enter a song-writing competition, Ray threw himself at the task. "I always seemed to involve myself in all things creative," he says. "[The competition] stimulated me and really got my creative juices going. It also came easier to me than others around me. Once I was bitten there was no turning back."



Ray's entry won in the folk/rock category. But despite his passions and his success, he didn't study music at university. "Sometimes you have to accept what life throws at you," he says. "As it turned out, I had to pursue a commercial career to step up to my responsibilities at the time (and as guided by my parents). I felt lonely, but determined to make the most of it and, perhaps, get that second chance."

That second chance came some two decades later, with Ray in his mid-40s and yearning to find a way back to his musical roots. "I realised life was way too short to bypass the biggest passion in your life," he says. "I felt I had stepped up and done all I could to make a life out of what I had and it was now time to pursue that passion. It was timing of its own choosing."





In the preceding years, as Ray continued to write as a hobby, he also went to many musicals. This made him familiar with the genre to the extent that it became a burning desire to write a musical of his own.

But creating Rockville 2069, a musical set in a post-apocalyptic world, was another long process. Five years, to be exact. "The music, lyrics, and story were the easy part of the journey," he says. "The obstacles were how to stage it and structure the book accordingly; how to integrate the music, lyrics, and story into the staging; getting everyone to take new work seriously; and funding."

Thanks to collaboration with top artists and producers, Ray overcame these obstacles. The result is a musical with a 25-member cast and exciting technical effects on stage. "The key to the budget is partnership," he says. "The key to partnership was a belief and shared vision in the script and score. Working with all these people has been incredible."

The production also features the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra together with a seven-piece band. Perhaps it's not surprising that Ray infused the score with classical and rock, given that his musical influences range from Led Zeppelin to The Beatles from Mozart to Queen. "The outcome is a stunning integration that leaves you feeling that it is one with each other and not rock music with some strings and things," he says.

After the premiere at Cape Town's Artscape Theatre, Ray hopes for a local tour. Then, with the help of DARLO (the Dramatic, Artistic and Literary Rights Organisation), he'd like to launch an international marketing campaign to license the production to other countries around the world.

"I learned that when life gives you that second chance, you go for it," he says. "And that belief, perseverance, and hard work"

pay off."

[Rockville 2069](#) is at Cape Town's [Artscape Theatre](#) from 29 August to 7 September. Book at [Computicket](#) or go to www.rockville2069.com for more.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow [@eugeneyiga](#) on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello. View my profile and articles...

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