

Brendan Dugan

'Do you remember those famous men who had to fall to rise again?
So take a deep breath, pick yourself up and start all over again.'

Frank Sinatra

For all the confidence that Brendan exudes on stage, he still suffers from stage fright and likes to be on his own to concentrate fully on his performance before a show. He also has a remarkable memory for lyrics. In 2018 he celebrated 50 Years in Country Music by re-releasing an old Richie Pickett song, *Honky Tonk Heroes*, which hit #1 on the *Australian Country Songs Chart*.



Brendan David Dugan was born in Christchurch on 29 February 1952 (a leap year) to Coral (born Alexander) and Patrick Dugan. Pat was a factory worker who took part in a concert party that travelled around Canterbury after WW2 and specialised in traditional Irish songs and country ballads. He later took up playing drums. Brendan's older brother Kevin had an unusually deep voice similar to Brendan and his younger sister Annette was also talented musically. The Irish-Kiwi Dugans were brought up on a cropping farm on the outskirts of Christchurch.

Brendan was inspired by Ranfurly country singer John Hore (later John Grenell) and learnt the guitar for 3 months before entering and winning a talent quest at the age of 11. He proceeded to win the next seven quests in a row; the biggest one was in January 1966 at Timaru's Caroline Bay in front of 15,000 holidaymakers. One quest awarded him a recording session which resulted in a release of *Four Strong Winds* which topped the country radio chart in Invercargill for 10 weeks. An album, *Country's Greatest*, followed when Dugan was 15. In 1968 he won TVNZ's *New Faces* talent quest with *Do What You Do Do Well* and *There Goes My Everything*. An Ep, *Brendan On Studio One* was released then he signed up to *HMV Recordings* which released an album with the *NZBC Symphony Orchestra*; *Can't Keep You Out Of My Heart*, then 3 singles including the #1 hit *Pancho Lopez*.

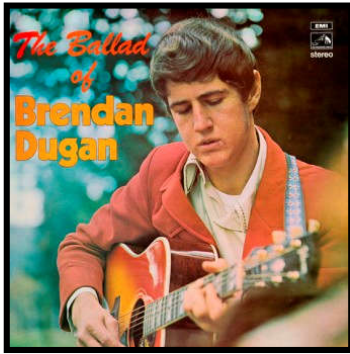


He left *Lincoln High* at age 16. The musical-comedy team, *Lou and Simon*, were breaking up and Lou Clauson contacted Brendan to tour Northland with him. In March 1969 Brendan moved into the Clauson homestead with a contract that tied him to joint appearances with Lou only, but a year later they agreed to working solo as well. Pam Stoupe, a friend of Lou's daughter, was singing in the *Drury Folk* choir, conducted by Lou's wife, Lorna, and Pam and Brendan soon became engaged. He later spoke about this time. 'Lou taught me the trade. He taught me how to talk on stage, how to entertain. I always believe that if I hadn't had him as a teacher for those first couple of years I wouldn't be like I am on stage now.' Brendan performed at the *1971 Royal Command Concert* with Rusty Greaves.



Two more albums were released; *The Ballad of Brendan Dugan* (1970) and *A Touch of Nashville* (1971) then he cut ties with Clauson in 1972 and accepted a contract to perform at US Army bases in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Philippines. 'It was pretty bad in those days. You didn't leave your hotel unless you had a bodyguard. In Manila you just stayed in your hotel.' A female singer was shot dead on stage in Okinawa a week before Brendan was due there. That was enough for Dugan and he returned home and got married in 1971. 'They begged me to come back but I wouldn't take my wife there.'

VAC Patron Gray Bartlett returned to New Zealand in 1973 after working as Musical Director for Australian comedian Ralph Harris and suggested to Brendan they join forces and tour the brewery circuit with a country show. They released the *Hits Country Style* album then recorded *The Ballad of Robbie Muldoon* in 1975 which went to #4 on the charts in August. They followed that up with a single about Arthur Allen Thomas who had been falsely convicted for the Crewe murders, and then in 1976 they released the *All Blacks Song* about the *New Zealand Rugby South Africa Tour*. Five Māori players and Samoan Bryan Williams were to become 'honorary white fellows'. The album *Brendan and Gray* followed.



In 1975 they hosted a series of country talent quests around the country with John Hore; the grand finalist won a trip to Nashville. The big news of 1976 was Brendan's tonsillectomy, followed by their discovery of Jodi Vaughan singing in the finals of the TVNZ talent show *The Entertainers*. Brendan and Gray encouraged her to join them and the trio toured almost constantly to every small town and big city in New Zealand for the next 10 years. By 1979 Brendan was living in Papakura with Pam and their children Kiralee and Craig, touring with Gray and Jodi and racing cars as a hobby. He opened up a car yard then toured Australia with Gray, finishing with a performance at the *Grande Ole Opey* in Nashville, USA. By 1982 he had released eight albums, raced in the *Benson and Hedges 500* and made a series of adverts. He joined the VAC in 1981, the same year as Guy Cater, Tony Wilson & Neil McGough. He also performed at the annual 1981 VAC vs Drury cricket match and at Max Cryer's Celebrity Roast.

He is often asked if he is married to co-partner Jodi Vaughan. On stage they are extremely comfortable together, the chemistry is there but in fact Jodi finds it difficult to show intimacy, claiming, 'It's like singing a love song to your brother!' Brendan was best man at Jodi's wedding in 2002.

The first broadcast of TVNZ's *That's Country* went out in 1980. Brendan met his future wife in rehearsals two years later when resident singer Maree Humphrees introduced him to her sister, Sandy. His *RIANZ 1982 Most Promising Male Vocalist Award* ruffled a few feathers, he had already recorded seven Albums and been professional for 14 years; hardly promising! A series of setbacks followed: his marriage failed then in 1982 his *Country Gentleman* restaurant was damaged by fire, his car tyres were slashed, his house was burgled and a series of thefts occurred while he was away on tour. Brendan once stated, "Every time I walk into my home the first thing I feel like doing is check to see if anything else has been stolen."

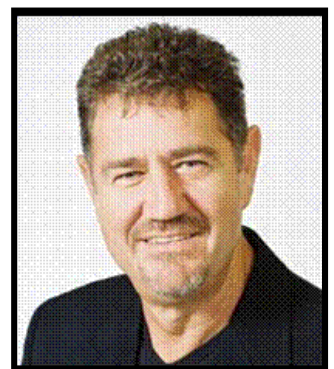
CBS released Brendan and Jodi Vaughan's duo LP *Fairweather Friends* in 1982 and it went platinum. The single *No Fool Like An Old Fool* got as far as #12 and spent 10 weeks in the NZ Top 40. Dugan's first label head Hoghton Hughes re-released most of Dugan's 1967 catalogue on a myriad of New Zealand country compilations, piggy backing on his latest success. 'They still sell the bloody tracks off that and it pisses me off. And I've never ever been given a cent.'



1983 was the year of the *That's Country* fiasco. Brendan was given 48 hours notice by executive producer David McPhail when he pointed out publicly that Suzanne Prentice's manager, Trevor Spitz, was also the show's producer, which accounted for Suzanne getting the lion's share of appearances on the show. Jodi Vaughan and Gray Bartlett quit in support, stating that they had no confidence in Spitz. Questions were soon asked in Parliament about the double standards and *Actor's Equity* became involved until a full-scale inquiry was held which agreed with the trio. The *Nashville Network* in the USA refused to renew its contract and the show finished in 1984 creating a rift in the country and western community that took years to heal.

'The unexpected result was that the public couldn't get enough of us. We just packed them day in and day out,' Dugan said. 'We were going three and four months at a time without a day off. We worked our arses off.' They appeared on *Nashville Now* in 1984 and toured New York and Florida. In 1984 he won the *RIANZ Top Male Country Vocalist Award*, the *Top Country Duet*, with Jodi Vaughan, and the *Best Country Album*. The trio appeared together at the *Fan Fair Festival* in Nashville then in 1985 they were guests at the annual *Gold Guitar Awards* in Gore.

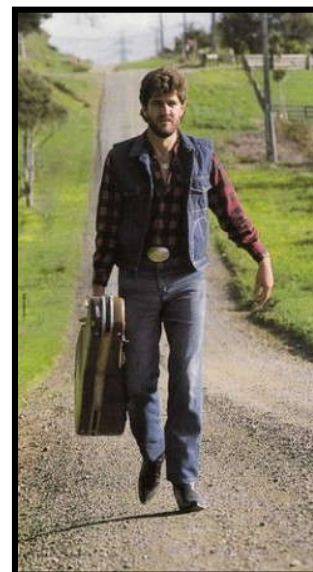
Another setback occurred when Jodi's hour-long television special was caught up in a *Musicians Union* ban over wages and conditions. The stress took its toll and Gray and Brendan split in 1985; Brendan signed former pop singer Lew Pryme as his manager and put together his own band, touring the country and the USA. In that same year he became the second country music artist to



ever be named *NEOA Entertainer of the Year* and in 1986 he won *Top Vocalist*, *Top Professional Country Music Artist*, a *VAC Scroll of Honour* and his album *Dusty Country Road* took 5 awards including *Best Produced Album*. He recorded on Gray Bartlett's new album, *Two sides of Gray* and also won *Male Vocalist of the Year* at the *Australian Country Music Awards* at Tamworth.

Plans to create a follow up of *That's Country* called *Dixie Chicken* looked great but it was pulled after just one series. After TVNZ became a state owned corporation the accountants took over programming and shied away from Variety and live music. *TV3* won a warrant to be the third channel and from then on New Zealand country music would struggle to gain air time.

Brendan toured the USA and Asia 8 times with a *NZ Tourist and Publicity Department* contract doing television and radio promotion. Americans loved Brendan's deep voice but he was too homesick to consider basing himself there. 'My voice got deeper and deeper as I got older and because I was very tall I was seen as someone who was a little different.' His albums were selling well so he and Sandy moved to Rotorua and took up a contract as emcee and performer at the *Agrodome* doing duos with singing dogs and dancing sheep. In September 1988 he opened a restaurant next door with his ex-manager, Ross Sutton, called *Doogie's Steak House* but things went pear-shaped in 1990! It went bust after the airline pilot's strike in Australia then he lost his afternoon slot on Auckland radio station *Country FM* when they too became insolvent due to poor advertising earnings. When Lew Pryme died, Gray, Brendan and Jodi patched up their friendship and three successful *Together Again* tours resulted. Next year they toured Queensland, released a new album and were planning more tours when tour promoter Ian White declared himself bankrupt and ran off to Australia with their earnings. The three mortgaged their homes and soldiered on!



His 1992 album *All This Time* was all set to go when *Festival NZ* boss died suddenly and company staff decided not to promote it. 'They later rang me to tell me there was a mountain of albums in their warehouse and they gave me boxes and boxes of them. All for free!'

Brendan and Sandy moved to Hamilton where he worked in real estate, raced cars, set up a Japanese import car business and took the occasional gig and advert. He became the voice of *Golden Coast Chicken* (Green, Green, Grass of Home), *Chesdale Cheese* (We Are the Boys from down on the Farm) and *NZ Rugby Union* (Rugby's a Ball, Pass it On!). In 1998 he performed at the *Hamilton Lake* with Dame Malvina Major then did a 1999 national tour and guested at the *Norfolk Island Country Music Festival*.

For the new millennium Brendan's father Pat released his first CD and they did a concert together in Christchurch. In 2003 Gray and Brendan returned to the USA with three young NZ stars; Violinist Ben Morrison (2005 *Pat McMinn Rising Star Award* winner) and singers Tim Beveridge and Taisha. He won his class in the six-day 2005 *New Zealand Rally* in his BMW M3 then in 2008 he took to the road with a Johnny Cash tribute show.



Doctors discovered a cyst on his vocal chords which necessitated draining but by 2005 he was back, singing at the fortieth birthday party of the Lawson Quins. He returned to touring with a number of former *That's Country* stars in a series of tours put together by Gray Bartlett: *Together Again: The Reunion*, *Highway Of Legends* (2004) and *True Legends* (2012). In 2008 he released an independent album *40 Years On* and in 2012 he and his father were inducted into the *Gore Country and Western Hands of Fame*.

In 2015 he worked on Aly Cook's *Horseshoe Rodeo Hotel* album with Graham Brazier and producer Alan Jansson, the co-writer of Paul Fuemana's *How Bizarre*. Brendan now lives in Tauranga where he sells real estate and has recently toured in Australia with Eddie Low, Kevin Greaves and Aly Cook. He took the VAC Benny this in 2018.