

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Blue Rodeo and Great Big Sea hit town



As many Great Big Sea members as we could possibly fit into one picture

Photo by Mike Dean

by Peter J. Cullen  
Brunswickan Entertainment

An invitation to warm up crowds for a nationally recognized music group usually denotes that the opening band has future promise. But when that act becomes the night's most memorable moment and garners greater appreciation from the crowd than the headliner, that signifies talent, which Great Big Sea appear to possess in abundance.

Arguably presenting a better performance than Blue Rodeo at the Aitken Centre last Friday, Great Big Sea have come a long way from the standard bar circuit and small Maritime market.

Seated in a musky locker room prior to their final appearance with Blue Rodeo, Darrell Power, the band's bassist, commented on the recent events surrounding the Newfoundland band's rise to popularity and the rich history of the folk and Celtic music that adorns their new album, *Up*.

Initially hemming and hawing while trying to determine the group's actual style of music ('post-modern folk' was the ultimate decision), Power began reflecting on the early days when he, Alan Doyle, Sean McCann and Bob Hallett came together in 1991.

The band originally played extensively throughout St. John's, NFLD, where their renditions of classic Celtic tunes were significantly appreciated, even with the younger audience members. "We initially had an older clientele when we first started, but there were always kids there... The younger people in St. John's might like other stuff but they would always be listening to folk music. But it's the same with me. One Friday night I might go to a dance bar, but the next Friday I'd go to an Irish pub," Power laughed.

That diversity immediately becomes apparent when listening to Great Big

Sea. The rollicking 'Run Runaway' and the perpetual momentum of 'Mari-Mac' certainly register as folk music but with a wild mix of youthful energy. The combination draws vast crowds from across the country at each show. "Well, we've sold out many venues when we tour, like the Town Pump in Vancouver, which holds about 800 people. And Barrymore's in Toronto, to name a couple."

But Power appreciates the assistance and word of mouth from Maritimers who have spread the word and coerced people into coming out to see the band. "Atlantic Canadians support their own. [Out West] there'd mostly be people from the Maritimes who come out to see our show and bring friends who hadn't heard of us. Then the next time we're through, the crowd might be 50/50. They do the work for you," he said with a chuckle.

During the extensive touring throughout Canada and Europe - including folk-friendly countries such as Ireland and Scotland - Great Big Sea are forced to spend an enormous amount of time together. Where many groups buckle under the stress of cohabitation, Power believes that the closeness is responsible for their current status today. "Oh, the conversation's never dull. We cover a wide range of topics," he said, casting a sideways glance at the merchandise salesman. "But the van is sort of like our think tank. The whole band is there and we might get talking about a show in a month's time or some long term thing. Just lots of ideas. When you sit in a van for eight hours, you get into pretty vivid detail and cover everything step-by-step..."

Part of that conversation will definitely be revolving around this weekend's East Coast Music Awards. Nominated in five categories, including Band of the Year and Album of the Year, Great Big Sea holds an excellent chance

of acquiring even more acclamations to add to their collective resume. "We basically only got signed by WEA at last year's East Coast Music Awards. So in the space of one year we've been signed, we have the new recording and we've done many shows," said Power. "We're just gonna go in there with our heads held high and hope for the best."

During last Friday's show, the troupe exercised their notorious sense of humour to make everyone aware of their Entertainment of the Year award nomination - the only category in which people can phone in their vote. "We're not here to entertain you. We're on a political campaign," they joked between songs. "In return for your vote, we will not raise taxes, we'll cut student cutting, and [pause] free beer for everyone!" The remark was met with loud approval.

Following their set, the quartet welcomed Blue Rodeo on stage and the ten men erupted into song. But Great Big Sea probably had as much fun as the audience. "Playing with Blue Rodeo has been an amazing thrill. One of their greatest secrets to success is longevity. Bands are breaking up every day and everyone's searching for it. Longevity is definitely the key," Power commented.

As for themselves, Power thinks the one-step-at-a-time progression is benefiting them well. "Radio stations are really starting to just get our CD now, so we should be getting a bit more air play... It's a long term project, but things are really taking shape."

Regardless of the outcome from the East Coast Music Awards this weekend, the Newfoundland natives have already attracted a true following internationally as well as throughout Canada. With their solid lock on the Atlantic provinces and being in constant demand, there is little doubt that Great Big Sea are starting to shape up to be one great big success.



One of Blue Rodeo with one of their beloved guitars

Photo by Mike Dean

by Michael Edwards  
Brunswickan Entertainment

Great Big Sea seemed more than a little out of place in the Aitken Centre as I can't think of them as anything but a pub band. Their songs seem to go hand in hand with a smoky atmosphere in a darkened room where everybody has at least one beer in front of them. Not that they didn't do a good job of adapting to their new surroundings, making the Aitken Centre seem a little bit more like a pub; the cabaret seating did help (what a little goldmine a liquor license can be...). Call it folk music, call it traditional Newfoundland music - call it whatever you want, but it is the kind of music that is so incredibly popular these days.

But Great Big Sea still remind me of so many bands that I have seen playing in bars over the years - they aren't that much better than anyone else, but they do seem to have that little something extra that gives them the level of success that they enjoy today. Their recipe for success? Just take an old Slade song, add a wacky video with the band dressed as nuns, and wait for the world to notice. They are still riding high from the release of their second album, *Up*, and their exuberance was obvious. It was contagious too, as most people's feet were tapping before they left the stage after one final song where they were joined by Blue Rodeo. Quite the ending.

Blue Rodeo love their guitars. They really do. That is the only reason that I can think of for the long, long guitar solos that were introduced into some of their songs. The kind of solos that really don't serve any purpose except to show the guitarist's mastery of his trade. They also can make songs rather boring - you could hear murmurs go around during them as the audience broke up into discussion groups to fill the time until the solo ended. In the meantime, most of the crowd had forgotten what song they were singing in the first place. The absurd thing is that Blue Rodeo are not the only guilty party - most bands performing live seem to do it. Why? Here's my explanation - when in the recording studio, there is someone sitting behind the desk pushing buttons telling the band that they have gone on

quite long enough, and they stop the tape. No problem. Performing live, however, there is no such person and the band are pretty much left to their own devices. There is an answer though. All it takes is for the audience to unite, and rise above it. When the guitarist just can't take their hands off their instrument (so to speak...), everyone can start to boo or something similar. Let them know that it just isn't acceptable.

I shouldn't make it seem like there was nothing good about the show. That simply isn't true. Blue Rodeo have the ability to write songs that always sound familiar. Like an old friend. Like a comfortable pair of pants. It's a nice feeling. They write damned good songs - they've written quite a few albums of good songs which makes it rather easy to put together a concert of songs that will please the crowd. So you got 'Try', 'Hasn't Hit Me Yet', 'Lost Together' and all your other favourites with only a few of those pesky new songs that nobody really knows too well to interrupt the flow. The songs weren't the only high spot - the performances onstage require a mention too. Those wonderful harmonies that remind me so much of the Everly Brothers, and that wonderful understated mandolin and steel guitar that served to take the focus away from those long guitar solos I mentioned earlier. It was worth the admission just to hear the splendor of 'Lost Together', their final encore. I don't know what it is exactly about that song; probably the organ that sounds pretty Procol Harlem-ish in a 'Whiter Shade Of Pale' way; but whatever it is, it was the absolute highlight of the evening.

It was all enough to make you get your lighter out and sway it in the air from side to side, if you like that sort of thing. And if you do like that kind of thing, there is a good chance that you also like to cheer like an idiot at the end of every line during the most heartfelt song of the evening. Nothing shows your appreciation for a band more than interrupting an a capella song at every opportunity. Sigh.

So it was a good concert. Really, it was. Honest. Just don't press me too hard on it as I might just cave.