

ECMAs – Homegrown successes

STORIES BY PETER J. CULLEN
PHOTOS BY JUD DELONG, EXCEPT MACKEEL BY PETER J. CULLEN

Reaching the higher ground

Brent Mason has been establishing a credible reputation over the past five years. By playing numerous festivals, various cities, and his weekly gig at O'Leary's in Saint John, the man has developed a loyal following throughout New Brunswick and nearby provinces. But now he's ready to impress audiences on a broader level.

Immediately after his Mainstage Showcase at the East Coast Music Awards last Friday, Mason knew he had made a lasting impression. "I felt great. It was better than I thought it would be," he exuded. "We played – and this isn't egocentric – really well. We nailed it. We got their attention."

Mason pointed out that the impact of his performance was immediate. "A woman who's publishing a book just came up to me on her own and said, 'We saw you last night and you're the best man we've seen this weekend. I loved it and I want to tell you that.' It was great."

But Mason isn't a stranger to the world of attention. He has released two albums – *Down To Heaven* in 1992, and *High Ground* in 1995 – and has a third on the way. "I'm going into the studio in a couple of weeks, actually. [Fredericton-based producer Lloyd Hanson] has a new studio space. It's the first album coming out of it, [and] it's a beautiful studio."

To add credibility to his work, Mason has also been added to a soundtrack. The British Broadcasting Corporation were so impressed with his work that they decided to include two of his songs in a documentary. "We were playing in St. Andrew's and some people from the BBC were there and bought the album," Mason said, explaining how the BBC came to hear of him. "I didn't know they were there but they phoned me a while later and said, 'Hello, we're from the BBC.' So they used a couple of tunes off *Down To Heaven* in a soundtrack about some environmental thing."

Undoubtedly, the most recognizable aspect of Brent Mason is that he is synonymous with O'Leary's. The Irish pub in Saint John hosts a weekly open mike night that has featured Mason each and every week for the past five years. And the pub has been packed each and every week, too. "I've been so lucky with the O'Leary's thing," he said. "Over the last three or four years I've learned how to play music live. And it's such a great audience that indulges you and doesn't care when you make mistakes. They appreciate the fact that you're trying."

Although Mason used to be a librarian to help make ends meet, he now seems more focused on the music than ever before, especially with the exposure the ECMAs have given him. "I want to just play music and make a living to support my family playing music. ... You don't come out of this [ECMA] weekend with a record deal, and a record deal isn't necessarily a good thing. It's far better to remain independent as long as you can. ... We came here to play. We're here to play. We leave the hustle up to the others."

With plans to head to the UK this summer, Mason believes his most brilliant days are still ahead of him. "The Showcase was dynamite. Twenty-five minutes of fame," he laughed. "Yup, it's starting."



BRENT MASON

The fantastic Madhat

Out of the four bands that played the Alternative Showcase last Sunday at the ECMAs, Madhat clearly has the most experience.

After eight years, the Lunenburg, Nova Scotia quartet consisting of Kirk Comstock (vocals, guitar), Hugh Moose (bass), Phil Zwicker (drums) and Jordi Comstock (guitar) have learned a fair amount about the music business. "We started playing bars when Jordi was twelve, and he's the youngest one in the band," Kirk said. "In terms of touring, we've been to Ontario about four times now. And we've played throughout the Maritimes, at university shows and stuff like that."

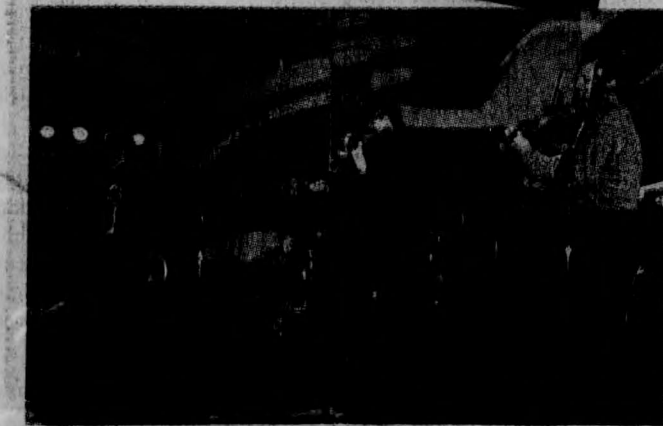
The band started recording on four tracks and contributing singles to EPs early on in their career, and they also spent time opening up for The Doughboys. But a major highlight for them recently has been the ECMAs – an event that greatly benefits the band, according to Kirk. "Just everybody comes here. You bump into a lot of new people, too. It's not like, 'I met this guy in Ontario, and I met this guy in Nova Scotia.' It's at least once a year everybody catches up with each other."

"And people look for you," Hugh commented. "They try to get ahold of you while you're here."

"Yeah, lots of people have been calling us for months but nobody's answering because we're gone," Kirk continued. "We run into them from walking around or just in the lobby of the hotel."

UNB students may be familiar with Madhat from their performance at The Collar last month with Cool Blue Halo. However, the band is hoping for a stronger profile in the near future. "We have an EP out right now called *Hard Hitters*," Kirk said, "and we're starting to work on a full-length right now. It should be out by the end of this year."

AN AWARD WEEKEND: (Clockwise from top) Natalie MacMaster displays her three trophies, Ashley MacIsaac and the technicolour outfit, The Barra MacNeils filled Champlain Place for an afternoon performance.



For the love of music

Debbie Adshade launched her new album, *Alchemi*, at the East Coast Music Awards last weekend, and despite the number of events coinciding throughout the day, she still managed to attract a large audience for her album launch.

"There is just so much going on that it's hard to get people to come to it," she said after her performances. "But the [Adshade's manager Moka Case] managed to pull in quite a few people from the media, so we got some attention for it."

The Saint John-based artist has received attention over the past few years, and even showcased at last year's ECMAs. But she acknowledges that achieving any degree of success is a constant struggle. "It's so funny how long it takes, but it's all helping. I'm really happy with the way this album turned out, so I'm hoping it will open up a few doors."

Very few have heard the new album so far, but Adshade is very hesitant to discuss the sounds and feel of the tunes. "I just can't tell; it's up to you. It's like the trees from the forest," she explained. "It has a theme. The songs are all things that lift us up. There are some pagan things, ritual things I wrote about, Christianity, Daoism, all different subjects and different angles."

Adshade became well-known around Saint John and New Brunswick with the release of *The Thunder God's Wife* a couple of years ago. Its distinctive, mystical sound was a hit with many, and combined with the success of *Alchemi*'s album launch and its ensuing launches, Adshade should build upon her support base. Although she hasn't been performing to any great extent as of late, but she has been maintaining a relatively high profile in New Brunswick. "I was in Fredericton on New Year's – I played First Night. St. Paul's church was beautiful. And I got a grant to perform at the Imperial Theatre. And the Imperial people booked us a show with some other artists in their next season."

While Adshade loves her brand of music, she is noticing that her particular style has transformed her playing venues.

"This stuff has taken me away from playing bars and whatnot. Now it's warm-ups or small concerts or festivals – that's the big thing where I'm at right now."

Although many attend the ECMAs as media, record reps or music connoisseurs, Adshade was there strictly as an artist. "I don't get involved in a whole lot of schmoozing, if I can help it," she commented. "This is one of the few times you have to hang out with your friends. You're all staying together for the whole weekend; it's like a get-away, so it connects you with the musicians again."



DEBBIE ADSHADE

Absolutely Spunkilicious

Spunk isn't famous. Nor is the band well-known outside of Newfoundland. But they have two assets going for them: their music and their humour.

Colin Stoker (guitar, vocals), Jason Denief (drums), Aneirin Thomas (bass) and Stephen Guy (guitars, vocals) are a world of conversational consternation during an interview, but they certainly make their points. After forming only one-and-a-half years ago, the group will have an EP distributed by Cargo Records in early March. And they hope that will soon get them press outside of St. John's.

"Unless we do a tour across Canada, the ECMAs are about as far as we're going to get right now," they said.

Although their exposure on the weekend was limited to a 7 am showing at the NonStop Jam and the alternative showcase on Sunday afternoon, the band remained extremely cheerful about their performances.

"This Sunday afternoon gig is weird. They can listen to church radio and then come on down," Jason laughed.

Stephen also joked about the early morning appearance at Spanky's. "We played at 7 o'clock in the morning but there were some die-hards at the jam. 'Har, we've been here for four days and we haven't seen the sun and we haven't showered for 72 hours, but God damn, these boys are good,'" he drawled.

Apparently 'these boys' are good. They draw crowds in their hometown with hardly any promotion. "St. John's is great," Colin said. "We'll be playing a gig and there's only a couple of posters up and the word of mouth works great."

"Yeah, it's like, 'There's a show happening, party, let's go,'" Jason added. Then Colin whispered, "There's nothing to do in St. John's, that's why we sell out. (Laughs.)"

"No, the fans in St. John's are great," they continued. "And people dance, too. They socialize, and jump off the stage. They get up on the tables and dance. ... They should try to get more active here."

While the fans at the Sunday afternoon show may not have been overly enthusiastic in terms of crowd activity, the city seemed to pick up on the Spunk-fever. "Oh, the TV coverage is amazing. That's the best thing," Aneirin said. "A lot of bands that didn't get showcased still have a chance to get out there. More people have said to us, 'Hey, we saw you on TV the other morning. We just say, 'You were up! What's wrong with you?'"

The four young men said that they met a lot of new people, but they didn't come for the schmoozing.

"You don't expect to get signed right away here," Colin said. "[The ECMAs are] something you go to to get exposure and make contacts. ... Everyone's practicing their handshakes and their smiles and their card passing."

Stephen piped up in his best Simpsons impersonation, "Yeah, it's like, 'Hi, I'm Troy McClure. You may remember me from such music festivals as North By Northeast and The ECMAs!'"

With regards to their show on Sunday, Aneirin commented that the "twenty minute set is like a bit of foreplay. ... There was no warm-up and the PA was terrible. Spanky's had better sound, and that's not saying much. I've got more bass power in my little toe."

"You can plug your bass into your toe?" asked Jason. (Laughs.)

In a serious tone, though, the group stated that "we came and met other musicians and others who are trying to do their thing. ... When these people come to St. John's they'll have a place to stay with us, and hopefully it'll work vice-versa. ... It's an invitation to any east coast band to come and stay with us. You're welcome on The Rock."

"The weekend was fun. That's the bottom line."

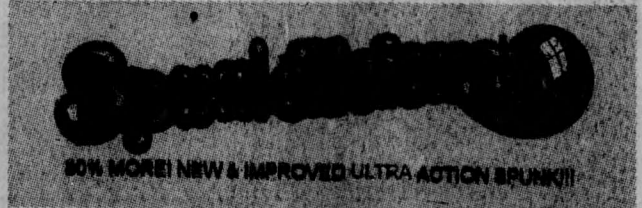
And while the interview was winding down and the band started to spell their names out for the article, they took great notice of the pen they were using:

Colin - "Hey, you've got one of those erasable pens. I didn't know they still made those!"

Peter - "I just found it."

Jason - "I'm going to spell my name wrong on purpose just so I use that darn thing."

And that's the flavour that makes them Spunkilicious.



Reelin' in MacKeel

It was only fitting that MacKeel closed out the Non-Stop Jam at Spanky's over the ECMA weekend. As the closing act to the incredible 75 hours of continuous music, MacKeel punctuated a weekend-long event of tremendous live music – something that has boosted their popularity level to new heights as of late.

"Once we feel the crowd going, we just get into it," said Kevin Brennan, the group's main guitarist. "The crowd was into it 100 percent. And we were all pumped."

The band has been exhilarated ever since their album was packaged at Sam the Record Man for the last two months of 1996. In those two short months, MacKeel managed to outsell all indie artists for the year. "We even made it to number four on the main chart. ... And being the number one indie for '96, I sure didn't expect that."

"And we didn't have any radio play!" contributed Dave Hoare, the band's bassist and vocalist.

A lot of the band's popularity has grown from their fan club and an honest reaction to their live efforts. But the group is expecting even better things from their first authentic radio release, entitled "On That Day," which just went to airwaves during the ECMA weekend. "I'm just waiting for friends in Vancouver to turn on the radio and say, 'Holy cow, man! I just heard your band!'" exclaimed Dave.

While their popularity in Vancouver might not immediately be apparent, MacKeel certainly garnered recognition from the audiences in Moncton during the weekend's events. "There's a lot of hype in this industry, and a lot of people were talking about us. People actually went out of their way to speak to us," said Kevin.

"Yeah, we tried to get wherever we could this weekend and meet who we could and not stick our feet in our mouths in the process," laughed Dave.

"Yeah, we tried to take in as much as we could," Kevin continued. "We've met a lot of people we consider mentors."

With the confidence they've developed over the ECMA weekend, the band is ready to head off to Ontario and beyond to make their name known beyond Atlantic Canada. And Kevin and Dave are positive that their style of music will be a hit with many fans outside the Maritimes. "Celtic music is one of the best sellers. It can compete with anything," Kevin said.

"We did the COCA thing in Toronto and they see a bunch of guys and girls come on stage with kilts and bagpipes, and the crowd just went bananas," Dave laughed.

That kind of crowd response helped them claim the distinction of being the band to close out the 75 Hour Jam. "It's an honour," Kevin admitted.

But after they closed out the jam, they were loudly invited back for an encore. "I had packed my stuff up and came off stage," Dave laughed, "then I heard them stomping and was like, 'Let's go!'"

"A lot of great bands played this weekend," said Kevin. "To actually come in and close this whole shebang off is like, 'Wow.'"



KEVIN BRENNAN OF MACKEEL

Red, hot & Smiley

If you haven't already succumbed to the Smiley machine you soon will, because, as the Maritimes are discovering, it's pretty hard to resist them.

Scarcely a year old, the three man band has evolved rapidly from its humble beginnings. With the release of their popular *Snappy Tunes for Happy Feet* album last year and a quality video for the single "Old Man in the Woods," Smiley possesses the basic tools for a high level of success. However, they also maintain one other important asset: a creative attitude on stage.

"We're pure escapism/entertainment," said guitarist and lead vocalist Alex Madsen. "We think it's time to bring in something time tested and true. Maybe get a little more theatrical, a little more cartoonish, a little more over-the-top."

Their shows at the East Coast Music Awards were just that; Alex sported wild pigtails while bassist Jeff Wheaton wore a smoking jacket and sunglasses. Although drummer Shawn Poirier didn't dress as wildly as his bandmates, his intensity was certainly on the same level. "Just before I get on stage, I totally erase my identity," Alex said. "I become something else just for the hell of being something else."

"It's like a movie," he continued. "Sometimes people want horror, sometimes they want a serious film. In our case, we're thinking they want to see a comedy or a Jackie Chan film. (Laughs.) ... It's a wonderful thing for me, and I hope it's good for the audience. I invite everyone to go nuts with me; forget about everything, hoot, holler and jump around. And at the end of the two hours, the audience does the same thing as me: we duck out of the building, assume our regular identities and become our mild mannered selves."

Smiley's live show obviously contains a great deal of entertainment and theatrics, but the three men had to seriously evaluate their lives and then consider the effects of devoting their lives to music. "It was a band formed out of mutual frustration," Alex said, explaining the group's origins. "It was like, 'I just can't stand playing this same cover song over and over and over.' So, we said, 'If we're going to do this, let's do it.' ... We're all mid-twenties and we all spent lots of time doing the classic rock thing. So, three people all hit at the right time and thought, 'Let's do it.'"

And so they did. After a scant two weeks, Smiley had already written a dozen songs, a testament to their new pact. "You really have to make a decision and decide how far you want to go," Alex stated. "Once you make that decision and cross that line, it's risky. And when you lose, you really lose."

So far, however, Smiley hasn't seen the losing side to the music game. *Snappy Tunes for Happy Feet* has drawn recognition from many, but it was the video for "Old Man in the Woods" that caused people to do a double take when they discovered Smiley was a 'local band.' "It wasn't so much a decision to make the

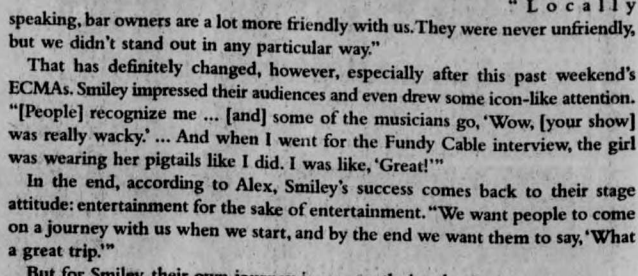
video as it was a natural thing to do," said Alex. "It took four months; a lot of cold weather and a lot of 6 am mornings. But we receive four to six plays on MuchMusic now, and we've been on the Indie Spotlight, as well as MuchEast."

"And now bar owners are calling us instead of us calling them," he continued. "Locally speaking, bar owners are a lot more friendly with us. They were never unfriendly, but we didn't stand out in any particular way."

That has definitely changed, however, especially after this past weekend's ECMAs. Smiley impressed their audiences and even drew some icon-like attention. "[People] recognize me ... [and] some of the musicians go, 'Wow, [your show] was really wacky.' ... And when I went for the Fundy Cable interview, the girl was wearing her pigtails like I did. I was like, 'Great!'"

In the end, according to Alex, Smiley's success comes back to their stage attitude: entertainment for the sake of entertainment. "We want people to come on a journey with us when we start, and by the end we want them to say, 'What a great trip!'"

But for Smiley, their own journey is apparently just beginning.



SHAWN POIRIER OF SMILEY