

ENTERTAINMENT

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The Tragically Hip and their 'dream come true'

PETER J. CULLEN

THE BRUNSWICKIAN

AS THE OLD saying goes, "hard work pays off." And that particular statement couldn't be more true for the Tragically Hip.

After amassing hundreds of thousands of records sales and a cult-like legion of fans across Canada over the last decade, the five member band makes a return appearance to Saint John despite playing Harbour Station just last year. While the Hip commands more than enough attention to play larger venues in more accessible locations, the band certainly desires to pay their dues to those fans who have assisted in elevating them to their current rank among Canadian music icons. "We don't take our fans for granted in any way, shape, or form," bassist Gord Sinclair emphasized in a phone interview last weekend. "The east coast, just like the west — and even Ontario for that matter — supported us right from the very beginning. When we first started out touring at club and theatre levels we got a lot of experience playing out in the east coast and sort of fell in love with that part of the country."

Sinclair remembers the evenings that he and fellow band members Gord Downie, guitarists Paul Langlois and Rob Baker, and drummer Johnny Fay would perform week-long stints in various cities, playing two or three sets of cover material each night. But the support and admiration the band received from Canada's eastern crowds draws them back on each tour. "It means very much to us. In fact, that's why we're heading out there [to the east]... Our only regret is that there's just not enough time — physically and [in terms of] venues — that we can play more

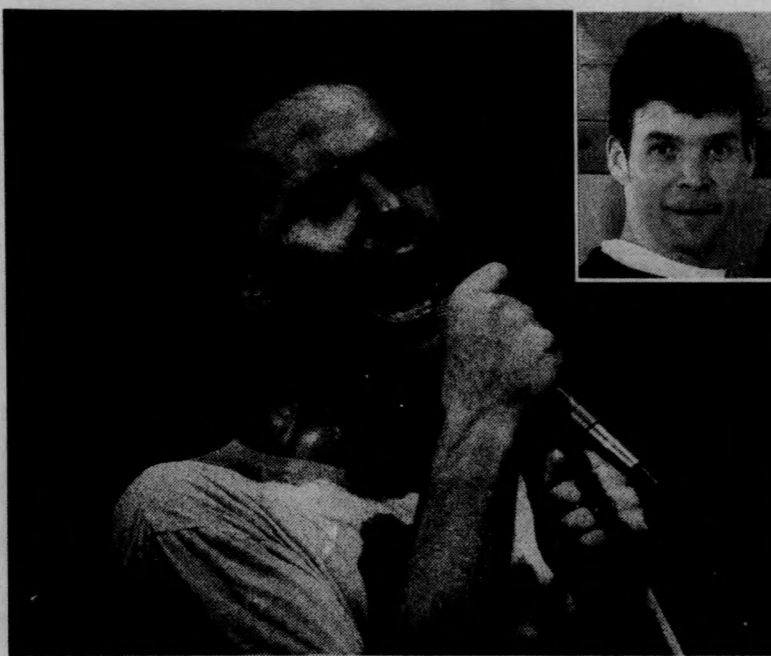
"There were days where it was too nice to be playing music inside. So we'd go out back of our farmhouse on our pond and skate around, enjoying the day."

shows! We're not even able to get into PEI, which is kind of disappointing for us. But it does mean a lot for us to get out there."

However, on this return to the east coast the Hip come equipped with a wealth of original songs and a finely-honed live act that has evolved through years of hard work and determination. The group is touring in support of their latest masterpiece, *Trouble at the Henhouse*, and the album has followed the traditional pattern of Tragically Hip albums, proceeding to total an extraordinary number of record sales.

Recorded in the Hip's own self-renovated studio just outside of their hometown of Kingston, Ontario, *Trouble at the Henhouse* reveals the musical maturation and intensified production efforts that the band has strived for the last few years. "We've been really fortunate working for the company that we work for that they don't really tell us what to do song writing-wise or producer-wise. We've reached this level of complete creative autonomy. I guess we go in to make our records ourselves in our own place at our own pace and off we go. I wouldn't trade all the record sales in the world for the situation we've got now."

The BathHouse, as the Hip have dubbed



NO TROUBLE AT THE HIP'S HOUSE: The Tragically Hip's lead singer, Gord Downie, erupts into verse during a past performance here in Fredericton. The Hip are bringing their extremely popular live performance to Saint John's Harbour Station, Saturday, December 7. Inset: Hip bassist, Gord Sinclair.

their studio, provides more than just seclusion and isolation; it enables the band to indulge their creative nature at their own discretion. Much of the mood and design of *Henhouse* stemmed from the relaxed and expressive atmosphere provided by The BathHouse. "It's totally spontaneous," Sinclair enthused. "That's the beauty of working at your own

pigeonhole by its fans or critics. "It's certainly nothing that we're consciously trying to do," Sinclair mused. Focusing on the song writing aspect, he stated, "For me as a music fan and as a songwriter I think it's really important that a song can work on a number of different levels. It's gotta be able to move your ass and make you want to tap your toe and get into the primal aspect of it. ... [There's] certainly the ambiguity of the lyrics and the level of interpretation that they're open to. I take some measure of pride in that because I don't write them — Gord Downie does — and he's a good friend of mine and I'm proud of his achievements there. But once you sit down and start taking apart the lyrics or listening and really getting into it, it's important that it be provocative enough to encourage it a little more, and think, 'Well, that means this to me...'"

Sinclair paused to summarize his feelings. "I guess we are proud of that because over

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the years we've made a lot of fans, and you talk to the kids and stuff after the show and eight of the ten people you talk to have different favourite songs. Like a different song of one of our records has touched a chord with them, or means something to them. People will tell you stories like, 'This is the song I met my girlfriend to,' or even the other side of the spectrum. ... It's cool to be able to touch people on a deeper level."

While hundreds of thousands of listeners curiously and furiously attempt to describe what makes the Hip tick, Sinclair easily breaks the creative process down to its simplest element: teamwork. "We don't

restrict ourselves to each guy bringing in a song, saying, 'Here is my contribution. Let's make it a hit so I can send my kids to Harvard,' or whatnot. I start off with a cool little idea and if I have ideas that work along with it, I'll work on it. If I don't, I know nine times out of ten that someone else in the band will have something that's going to complement it. ... That's the real beauty of being in this band."

Sinclair continued to endorse the meticulous and inventive approach each band member puts into the birth of each song, citing the band's latest single, "Gift Shop," as a classic example. "It's a different

team. And, to be perfectly honest, we've had some success and we're happy with the first few records we did, but we've been a lot more pleased creatively with the results we've been getting since we've been honing our ensemble approach to song writing. I think that's yielded our strongest material. For me, yeah, we're still moving in the right direction. We haven't completely perfected it yet, but we've got a routine going now that's basically non-stop song writing and it seems to work."

In fact, Sinclair stated that the band's creative endeavours haven't actually ceased since the finished product of *Henhouse*. "We started recording *Trouble at the Henhouse* about

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process for every song. ... Paul sort of brought me the riff for "Gift Shop" and I said, 'I've got just the ticket for that.' The heavier stuff was something I had on the back burner, and then off it goes! We've been writing songs like that for about three of four years now and we've found it the most rewarding sort of process. Once we get that ball rolling and we start jamming or working ideas out with the five of us in the room Gord starts adding on lyrics and melodies then that, of course, suggests new directions and new turns and off we go from there."

Of course, the "Gord" that Sinclair speaks of is none other than the charismatic vocalist, Gord Downie. The tall, well-built, glassy-eyed singer is notorious for bursting into spontaneous rants about anything from killer whales to Clint Eastwood — or, quite frequently, even conversations with himself — during live performances. Possessed with the ability to elicit eeriness and honesty in his voice and lyrics all at once, Downie's mysterious mindset undisputedly contributes tremendously to each song. Sinclair said that as the band jams, Downie will suddenly

this time last year, so we've been writing for quite a while now. We're hoping that once this tour winds up about mid-December that we're going to put our feet up for a couple of weeks and then probably get back into our studio and start working on the next one. ... We're actually kinda in the process of putting together the next one right now."

A bona fide fan would seriously consider trading his or her entire Tragically Hip CD collection for a chance to witness live renditions of the recorded music, and Sinclair strongly realizes this as he's saddled with the responsibility of selecting the set list for each evening. "That's been kinda my gig for the band for the last ten years. [Laughs.] The guys kinda leave it up to me. The only criterion we have is that it's different every night. It's gotten a lot more fun putting the sets together — particularly on this swing — because we have five full-length records to draw from now."

Sinclair admitted that choosing what the audience will hear each night is entertaining, but also done with a purpose in mind. "A lot of our songs are written with space for improvisation in them, so it's different every night. ... We acknowledge that a lot of our fans may be seeing us more than once, so it's really important for us that if a guy or gal is gonna lay down sixty bucks to see us two nights in a row that they get 30 or 35 different songs in the course of the two nights. There's nothing that irritates me more than going to see a group and then you see them later on in the tour and it's the same pace, the same songs, the same in-between song banter. If that was us, we would get incredibly bored with it after a very short period of time. This way it keeps us on our toes."

And, undoubtedly, the Hip embrace that opportunity, seeking any challenge possible to raise the group's quality to another level. "When the band is really digging in, I believe that translates to the audience," Sinclair stated. "And that's the beauty of live music."

Inarguably, it's also the beauty of the Tragically Hip.

Know where to go?

ARTS

• The Beaverbrook Art Gallery.
Jack Humphrey: *Compartmentalized Space*
Now - Jan. 5/97
Saturday Fields: *Colourfield Painting in the Permanent Collection*
Now - March 16/97
Exotic Foreign Locations
Now - March 16/97
Info: 458-2024.

• *Exfoliation* at Gallery Connexion. Donna Nield. Now - Dec 15. Info: 454-1433.

• Capital Film Society presents *The Celluloid Closet* at Tilley Hall 102. Dec 2, 8 pm. \$3 members, \$5 non-members.

• Theatre UNB presents *Kringle's Window* at The Playhouse. Tonight until Dec 7, 8 pm. Matinee on December 1 for hearing impaired. 2 pm.

MUSIC

• Big Fish Eat Little Fish at Rye's Deli. Saturday, Nov 30. FREE.

• The Mahones at The Dock. Tonight.

• The Tragically Hip and Rheostatics at Harbour Station in Saint John. Saturday, Dec 7.

HOLIDAYS

• Channukah. Dec 6-13.

• Christmas. Dec 25. Anytime, anywhere, 'cause Santa knows his way.

Big Fish Eat Little Fish swim by for some 'T'

ENTERTAINMENT STAFF
BRUNSWICKIAN ENTERTAINMENT

Big Fish Eat Little Fish formed their three-piece original rock band in 1995, then proceeded to move into a house together in December of that year to get their talents. The band, at an average age of 21, consists of members Jordy Walker (guitarist/vocalist), Corwin (Corey) Fox (guitar/vocalist) and Larry Graves (drums) have spent the past year touring Canada, and the group has discovered a pocket of popularity here on the east coast, most notably in Saint John. To promote their performance at Rye's Deli on Saturday night the band dropped by *The Brunswickian* and chatted at length with Peter J. Cullen and Chuck Teed.

PART I - THE CRAZY GUY

PETER: So have you guys met a lot of crazy wackos on your tours?
CHUCK: They met the big fat guy in Saint John.
PETER: I know him. He eats quarters and stuff.
COREY: He eats quarters?
PETER: Yeah, he thinks he's a jukebox. He says, 'Give me a quarter and I'll sing!' And people give him money and he eats it and sings.
CHUCK: Well, he gave them a cookie.
PETER: He just walked by and gave you guys a cookie?
COREY: Well, no. What happened was that I was walking around King Square with the megaphone — we have a megaphone, y'know — announcing our gig down at Backstreet Records, and then this guy is going, 'Come over here! Come over here!' So I go over and he says, 'Hey, can I try the megaphone?' I say, 'No problem, as long as you announce our gig.' I

just walked along and he announced the thing and we walked all the way down to the show. He hung around, listened to the music for a while, went in the cafe next door, came out and gave us the cookie.
PETER: Wow.

PART II - THE JELLYBEAN SAGA

CHUCK: Did you guys ever run out of jellybeans?
PETER: Is that what you guys eat all day is jellybeans?

LARRY: Yeah.

PETER: Like jellybean sandwiches and stuff?
COREY: Well, we didn't bring the candy machine along for this tour.

PETER: You have a candy machine that you guys put in your van?
COREY: Of course.

PETER: Did you steal it?
COREY: We 'borrowed' it. Yeah, we borrowed it from the gas station I used to work at.

CHUCK: Oh, you don't work there anymore?
PETER: No, 'cause he 'borrowed' it.

LARRY: Well, we're gonna give it back.

COREY: Yeah, my boss is still kinda shaky about it. He's a very moral guy. Not that we're immoral.

PETER: But when jellybeans are in question...
COREY: Well, it was just to make gas money.

One night over the Christmas holidays we'll take it back and put a ribbon on it or something.

PETER: Do you only have jellybeans in it, or do you put macaroons and stuff in it as well?
LARRY: Well, we had cashews but they went rancid so we dumped them in the parking lot.

COREY: So we ended up eating all our profits anyway.

• SEE 'CHATting WITH BIG FISH' ON PAGE 14



BIG FISH EAT LITTLE FISH: The members of Big Fish Eat Little Fish — Larry Graves, Jordy Walker and Corey Fox — and friend Anthony Davis take exception that Chuck Teed and Peter J. Cullen picked Macgyver to beat their idol, Mr. T, in a game of Trivial Pursuit.