

FOCUS



Music, long nights and the heart of St. John's

Schmoozin' the scene at the East Coast Music Awards

BY KAREN PARKER

Thursday February 11

I arrive at the St. John's airport late in the evening, having travelled from Halifax on a plane full of delegates, musicians, media, and music fans destined for the 1999 East Coast Music Awards.

I share a cab with a man from Iceland who is in Newfoundland on business. He asked me if anything was going on in the city because he couldn't find a hotel room anywhere.

First stop is the Delta St. John's hotel — the hub of ECMA activity. I pick up my pass and information package at the registration desk and head down the hall to check out the media room. I meet up with my friend Sarah, who is putting me up for the weekend.

After dropping off my luggage at Sarah's we headed down to the Ship Inn to catch the talented Newfoundland singer-songwriter Ron Hynes, the place is absolutely packed. We amuse ourselves watching Rick Mercer tear up the dance floor, grooving to Ron's tunes.

Friday February 12

I get to the Delta in the afternoon and camp out in the media room. The main floor of the hotel is once again crawling with

music industry types, and I stroll around, chatting with Richard Wood and getting a quick interview with Melanie Doane, who was up for five awards. There are live CBC radio broadcasts happening from a makeshift stage set up in the hotel bar, so I watch those for a while.

I meet up with friends and we find a nice little pub to have dinner. Our waiter is a bit late taking our orders and apologizes profusely, telling us that because he took so long, our first round of drinks is on him. I'm really starting to like St. John's...

After dinner we head off to a Cape Breton 2000 Bash at O'Reilly's, located on infamous George Street. The party is a preview to next year's millennial ECMAs, which will take place in Sydney.

We arrive at O'Reilly's just as Slainte Mhath are finishing up on stage. They are followed by a host of other Cape Breton entertainers, including Michelle Boudreau-Sampson, PF Station, Natalie MacMaster, Gordie Sampson, and Cyril MacPhee. Bruce Guthro closes the party with a few newer songs, as well as a performance of his hit single "Falling".

We file out of the pub and walk to the Delta again to catch some of the ECMA showcases that are happening there.

The showcase stars of the night are, without a doubt, Cape Breton's Slainte Mhath. The young band offers an exciting mix of talent and energy, and the crowd eats it up. They use their allotted showcase time to its full potential, jamming in as many tunes as they can and closing with an exotic-sounding percussion piece that turns into a blast of bagpipe reels.

The showcase ends in time for us to catch hometown favourites The Punters at a bar called the Loft. We get there just before 1am. The band goes on shortly after that, and the music doesn't stop until well after 3am.

well since its October release and, as expected, his set also goes over incredibly well.

Once Gordie's done, those of us who have been lucky enough to score much-coveted passes to the Tidemark party hurry over to the Cornerstone Pub.

Tidemark is a distribution company which helps many east coast artists get their music all over Canada. They also throw one hell of a party.

People are lined up outside the door of the Cornerstone, apparently they gave out over 700 passes for a venue that holds under 500 people.

We arrive just as Slainte Mhath takes the stage, and the crowd goes wild dancing and shouting — and of course drinking. Slainte Mhath give the amazing performance they're known for, and by the end of their set we're absolutely exhausted, but we only have a few minutes to rest ourselves before the Fables are up on stage churning out more high energy tunes.

The dancing continues well into the wee hours of the morning, and we leave the Cornerstone around 4am, during the Fables' last song.

also have to rush over early to participate in the dress rehearsal.

After doing some primping of our own, my friends and I head over to the Civic Center. We decide to take a cab — big mistake. Traffic is at a standstill, with a huge line-up of cars waiting to get into the parking lot.

So we get out and walk the rest of the short distance to the building.

I say goodbye to my friends, who have reserved seats in the stands, and go to set up camp in the media room. This is where the artists will go after they win their awards, to answer questions and pose for photos.

The broadcasted portion of the gala doesn't start until 8:30pm, but there are several awards given out before it goes on air. The drill is basically the same — presenters go up to the podium and after presenting a list of nominees, they announce the winners. There is even some pre-broadcast musical entertainment.

I miss most of the actual televised portion of the show. There is a TV in the media room, but it's off most of the time. There are microphones, cameras, and tape recorders galore as press people from across the country quiz the winners.

"How does it feel, winning this award?"

Bruce Guthro must be sick of hearing that question by now. He wins big, picking up a total of five East Coast Music Awards. Great Big Sea are also major winners. They only garner two trophies, but one of them is the fan-selected Entertainer of the Year, which they win for the fourth year in a row.

So the gala is over. But that doesn't mean the weekend is over yet. EMI is having a big bash back at the Delta St. John's, complete with food, drink, and live entertainment.

I wander around the EMI party for a while, congratulating any winners I run into, but eventually some friends and I decide that the jam happening in the hotel lobby is more our speed.

Several members of Slainte Mhath (they're everywhere) start up a session, and it doesn't take long for other musicians and dancers to join in.

As the music picks up, I find myself in a Cape Breton square set. A crowd of us has a wonderful time, spinning, two-stepping, and step dancing up a storm.

After it's finally over, I decide to take a break and join the growing number of people sitting down on a ledge behind the group of jamming musicians.

A few of us find ourselves there still as the clock passes 4am.

The Morning After - Monday February 15th

I wake up at noon and it's sunny and warm. I wish I could've spent more time in St. John's. I get to the airport at 1:30pm. There are lots of instruments being checked at the baggage counter, and even more people sitting in the airport restaurant drinking coffee.

As we move through the security check and towards the departure gate, friends and acquaintances wish each other well.

See you next year in Sydney!

Saturday February 13

Today is the day the real schmooze-fest happens. A series of seminars that cover everything from touring to music videos are taking place at the Delta. Attendees can ask questions of a panel of music industry experts.

We drag ourselves out of bed in time to get to the 12 noon workshop about management. Among the panelists are Louis Thomas, Great Big Sea's manager, and Sheri Jones, who introduces herself by telling the crowd her claim to fame.

"I managed Ashley MacIsaac for two-and-a-half years and survived."

One Toronto exec on the panel, however, causes quite a stir when he tells everyone that the big labels are only looking for one hit wonder.

"As long as you're good for a song on Letterman or a music video, that's all they care about."

I then take a look at the industry trade show. Booths are set up in rows, promoting everything from recording studios to photographers.

After a short nap, (all that schmoozing takes its toll), I'm once again back at the Delta to catch more showcases, as well as some of the live action going on in the lobby. CBC's *Radiosonic* is broadcasting with several artists performing live on the air, including SOL and The Punters.

The showcase to see tonight is Gordie Sampson — an accomplished studio and back-up musician for many east coast artists who has recently released his own solo debut, *Stones*.

Stones has been doing fairly

Sunday February 14

After far too little sleep, I get to the Delta in the late morning to look in on one last seminar - a "Song Shop." A panel of songwriting "experts", including Bruce Guthro and Shirley Eikhard, listen to submissions from several artists and give them some constructive criticism.

As the song shop is ending, crowds are lining up in the main hallway of the Delta, waiting to get prime seats for the Songwriters' Circle, which begins at 1pm.

There are actually two circles. The first one is led by Bruce Guthro, other participants include Maureen Ennis, Doris Mason, Dave Carroll, and Gordie Sampson. Gordie, like many others, looks a bit worse for wear after a long night of partying.

"I can't even take off my sunglasses yet."

They take turns performing songs they have written and exchanging witty banter.

The second circle is hosted by Ron Hynes, and includes Alan Doyle, Melanie Doane, Chris LeDrew and Larry Gowan. Once again we get to hear a lot of fresh material - Alan Doyle does two new songs. Hopefully they'll be on Great Big Sea's upcoming album. This circle gives rise to some interesting collaborations - Gowan accompanies Melanie Doane on piano for her hit single, "Adam's Rib," and she returns the favour, fiddling on "Dancing on My Own Ground Again".

The crowd disperses quickly after the second circle has ended. They're headed home to primp for the main event - the Awards Gala at the Civic Center. Some artists