



ARTS & CULTURE

AN IN DEPTH LOOK INTO THE ECMAs

ECMAs: Fireworks, music and loads of fiddles

BY KAREN PARKER AND SARAH HOFFMANN

Last weekend proved that Haligonians really know how to put on a party, as the city hosted the tenth annual East Coast Music Awards (ECMAs). Over the weekend Halifax saw everything from great live concerts to political controversy.

The festivities kicked off on Thursday night with a concert at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium. The first two acts — the Punters and the Quigley Ensemble — were plagued by sound system problems. The Barra MacNeils then gave what may have been the most electrifying performance of their career — the soundboard had a small meltdown midway through their set.

After the problem was fixed, the concert continued as planned with an appearance by Holly Cole, who closed the show and brought the crowd to its feet.

There were fireworks of a different nature at the ECMA Industry Awards Brunch on Friday morning. Mid-way through the event, FACTOR representative Heather Ostertag introduced a surprise guest — ECMA founder and director Rob Cohn. Mr. Cohn gave a lengthy speech praising some colleagues and condemning others.

He produced a letter of resignation, handing it over to a very surprised Tony Kelly (the

current ECMA Chair), and then concluded in Judas-esque fashion by dropping a bag of thirty coins onto the podium before storming out of the building.

"Whoever had the bright idea to ask for it a year ago... here's your reward," Cohn said of his resignation.

There were all kinds of musical events around Halifax over the weekend, and one of the best took place spontaneously on Saturday night. Cape Breton's Slainte Mhath hosted a show at 42nd Street. After playing a set on their own, the talented young band invited other performers who were present to join them on stage. Several of the Barra MacNeils took them up on their offer, as did Irish musician Steafan Hannigan. The session, which was scheduled to run from 7:30 to 9:30 pm, went on well past one in the morning.

On Sunday, daytime activities were few and far between, giving everyone time to recover from Saturday night and prepare for the gala awards show. There was one event of note in the early afternoon; several East Coast songwriters participated in the SOCAN songwriters' circle at the World Trade and Convention Centre. A large crowd gathered to watch as Bruce Guthro, Tara Maclean, Dave Carmichael, Rita MacNeil and many others took turns singing some of their best compositions and telling the



A CBC camera operator pisses off Sloan's Jay Ferguson. The guitarist later chased the man off the stage. (Photo by Ryan Lash)

stories behind them.

Capping off the weekend was the much-hyped awards gala at the Metro Centre. The show started at 7 pm, and by 9 pm most of the seats in the Metro Centre were filled and the CBC's national broadcast began with a lively song from Lennie Gallant, which included some audience participation as the crowd was asked to sing the "horn section".

However, the performer of the night was Bruce Guthro, who received a standing ovation from the crowd of 10,000 after performing his touching ballad, "Falling".

The biggest success story was Great Big Sea. The band took home five awards, including the fan-voted "Entertainer of the Year", which they have now won three years running. Sarah McLachlan,

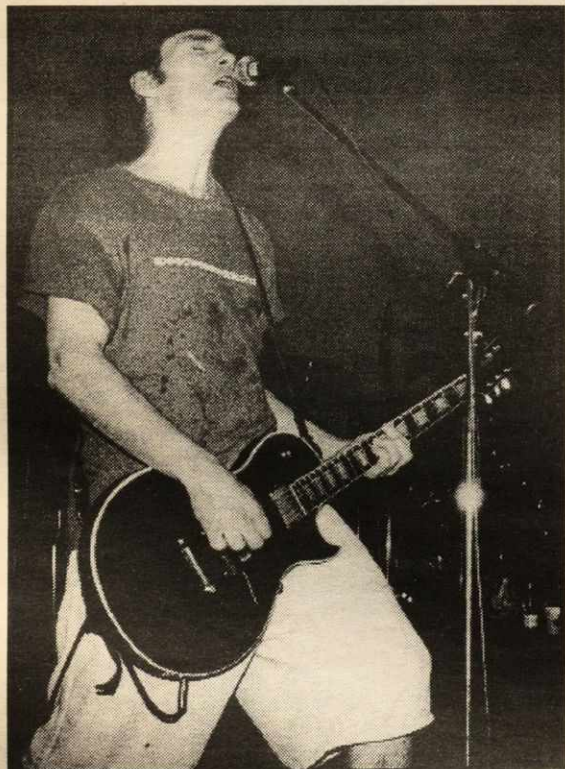
who was too busy to attend the awards show, picked up only three of the seven awards she was nominated for. Upon the announcement of her second award, her generic pre-taped video acceptance was shown. Prince Edward Island fiddler Richard Wood, also absent due to tour commitments, was another multiple recipient, taking home two ECMAs.

Cult acts and popularity

PF Station bigger than their status

BY GREG MCFARLANE

The catchiness of a band's sound ultimately determines its



Rusty headlined Locofest on Wednesday. PF Station and Mir also appeared. (Photo by Luke Dobek)

ability to land a record deal. If a song isn't sugary, or under three-and-a-half minutes, or sung by five scantily clad women, chances are it won't be played. In the Pop-land we live in today, musical proficiency isn't taken into account anymore.

PF Station is a case in point.

Possibly people don't want to hear solid, hard hitting, danceable funk, but PF Station is as creative a band as there is around. Just watch one of their many local gigs, and you're sure to

be impressed.

Wednesday's performance at the sparsely-populated Halifax Train Station featured their varied and unique repertoire, which ranges from their trademark funk, to rock and even delves into pop. Mike MacDougall's muscular basslines provided the foundation for Craig Mercer's sharp guitar and timely, intelligent solos. Mercer doesn't abuse his instrument, but rather elevates each song to higher level.

PF Station opened the show for Rusty and Mir, but those who filtered in near the tail-end of the band's set had to be disappointed that they arrived late. Serious musical craftsmanship is hard to find, but with PF Station, it's all but guaranteed.

Unfortunately for them, however, long rambling jams are the makings of cult bands instead of commercially successful acts. And in Halifax, the cults are pretty small.

Dismantle the shrine

It's time for the ECMAs to drop the fiddle, and let all musicians play on an equal field.

BY GREG MCFARLANE

The East Coast Music Awards are probably the most inconsequential awards in the world. As I waded through a plethora of sub-par bands, looking for anybody to catch my ear, I realized that our scene is just too small (and too small time) to warrant an event like this.

Where have the ECMAs gone wrong? How, since the inception of the awards ten years ago, has the event become a temple for celtic musicians and their fiddles? Why are innovative and skilled musicians, as well as the truly popular musicians, relegated to bar shows instead of being allowed to share the stage with fiddlers who can't cement their own popularity without this event?

Bar owners must have been happy with the event, that's for sure. There was great music being played, but not Sunday night at the Metro Centre. The great music was being played at bars and other smaller venues, and that meant money.

Anyone who walked into the Blues Corner on Saturday evening to see Isaac, Blewett and Cooper saw the blues being played at its best. Anyone who watched Chris Colepaugh and the Cosmic Crew or listened to their CD, *Mazes and Mirrors*, listened to skilful, creative musicians playing powerful songs.

If you were lucky enough to catch the Cobequid Education Centre Jazz Band, a high school ensemble that blew away most other bands, it became clear that excellent young musicians are being bred in this province. The Freedom Jazz Band (including Dalhousie professor Harvey Miller) were as lively and proficient as a band could get.

What do all these bands have in common? They don't use a fiddle, and they aren't heavily promoted by the East Coast Music Association.

The association is missing the boat, plain and simple. The new waves of music in Atlantic Canada are rooted in jazz, funk and the blues. And the ECMA is

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