

# Musicians find a distinct home in the blues

*Diversity and originality is the key for New Brunswick artists Isaac, Blewett and Cooper*

BY GREG MCFARLANE

A distinguishing mark about good musicians is their ability to adapt to any genre of music while



Jim Blewett impresses at th Blues Corner on Saturday. His band, Isaac, Blewett and Cooper held a release party for their new CD, *Walk On*. (Photo by John Cullen)

still implementing their own signature style.

Blue Rodeo can play pop with the best of them, and they can play down-in-the-dirt roots as well. Babyface is just as comfortable playing the blues with Eric Clapton as he is behind a production board for numerous hip-hop artists. But you can always recognize Blue Rodeo, and you can always recognize Babyface.

The same can be said for New Brunswick blues artists Isaac, Blewett and Cooper. The band has three musicians, all with different backgrounds, who have formed to create a more polished version of traditional blues.

Jim Blewett is the

band's rhythm guitarist. Instead of playing typical blues rhythm, Blewett incorporates 1940s big band chord phrasings into Isaac, Blewett and Cooper's texture. While the songs may sound a bit more refined, Blewett's skill and musical sensibility make it a treat to listen to him.

"I love jazz," Blewett said from his home outside of Moncton. "I love European Gypsy music, and I'm really into 1940's rhythms. I put it into the blues, and it gives it a unique twist."

The unique twist usually comes in the form of a more up-tempo blues than what is normal for traditional acoustic fare. Lead guitarist Al Cooper, who is also a poet with his own publishing company, Owl's Head Press, plays electric slide. He and Blewett had been together for a couple of years playing jazz standards. Their break came after Tim Isaac joined the band and their sound gravitated towards the blues.

Isaac, for those who are unaware, plays a cello. Not only

does he play a cello, but he attaches it to a Wah-Wah pedal (remember Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze"?)

"Tim is into the effects a little," Blewett said of his bandmate. "He's working with a glass slide that makes some weird elephant sounds. He's a creative cat on the instrument. We can push him, and he'll just take off."

The diversity of each member's background allows the band to add their own touches to many blues stand-bys. Blewett's rambling rhythms add spice to Robert Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago", while Isaac's cello adds melancholy and bitterness to Booker T. Jones' "Born Under a Bad Sign". Half of the tracks on their debut disc, *Walk On*, are renditions of classic blues tracks, and in each cover one can sense the band's varied musical histories.

However, when the band members bring their styles together, it is very much in the tradition of old Mississippi blues men.

"One guy plays something that

he's got, and, if we like it, the idea sort of grows. Sometimes we have scenes at my place where we're hanging off the roof," said Blewett of the jams that the band has at his home.

*The images are miraculous. If you close your eyes you can almost see three musicians, sitting on shaky wooden chairs in an undecorated, sparsely furnished room, playing tunes; each one reacting to the others' instruments, each one taking the lead at various times. If you cast your eyes upward, you'll probably see an unprotected light bulb, hanging from a small hole in a water-stained ceiling, shrouded in smoke from cigarettes below. If you glance down again, you'll see three smiles stretched across three worn faces. It's four in the morning, but no one cares. In this moment you could hear the most honest, perfect music to ever fill your ears.*

An Isaac, Blewett and Cooper show is as close to this Utopia as most of us are ever going to get.

# Laughing and crying: emotion at the opera

BY LILLI JU

If you thought opera was stuffy, boring, and hard to understand, you should be thinking twice.

inconsiderate and flirtatious Duke of Mantua (music alumnus Alan Porter). Unbeknownst to all, the jester has a beautiful daughter, Gilda (3rd year student, Melanie

made even more moving by Jason Davis. The anguish that Davis emotes through every part of his performance, from his beautiful voice to the lines on his face, is so strong that it reaches into you and tears you apart. I got choked up just seeing him again during the curtain call.

The music of *Rigoletto* is appealing. I still have the ever-popular tune of "La Donna E Mobile" running through my head. Of course, this aria takes on new meaning for me now that I know its English meaning: women are wayward, mobile, changing like the weather...geesh, that Duke was sure

husband who, in a violent mix of frustrated love and anger, confronts the young man she has fallen in love with.

I thoroughly enjoyed my opera experience. Each opera pulled me in a different emotional direction. Everyone involved should be commended for an outstanding job. The calibre of singing was impressive, showing great potential for many of the students. Everything from the set, costumes, to the accompaniment (by Dean Bradshaw) was great.

Opera combines music with strong stories and strong characters in such a way that not only entertains you, but evokes emotion from you. Yes, it is true that you'd probably be a little lost at first if you didn't read the programme notes before the show, and yes, some might say that the English translations take away from the beauty that the traditional opera language, Italian, brings. But I would argue that both of these things make opera more accessible to all.



Some of the talented actors from this year's Dal music department opera workshop. (Photo by Hannah Thomson)

Dal's music department opera workshop once again packed the Dunn Theatre for its presentation of three opera masterpieces last week, clearly showing that opera is still in style.

This year, they presented English versions of Giuseppe Verdi's *The Rigoletto*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Impresario*, and Giacomo Puccini's *The Cloak*.

"As is every year, the operas were fabulous!" said Dr. Gregory Servant, artistic director for the opera workshop. According to Servant, operas are selected each year based on the vocal needs and challenges of the students.

I started my opera feasting with *The Rigoletto* on Thursday. *Rigoletto* (4th year student Jason Davis) is an old hunchback who works as a jester for the

Marchand on Thursday's performance), who has secretly fallen in love with the Duke, disguised as a student.

*Rigoletto* plots to have the Duke assassinated, seeking revenge for having been treated so cruelly by the Duke for so many years, and for breaking his beloved daughter's heart. The plot is complicated by Gilda's continuing love for the Duke, so much so that she would sacrifice her own life for him. In the opera's tragic conclusion, the jester finds himself holding his dying daughter in his arms, realizing that his desire for vengeance has caused his own daughter's death.

I enjoyed this opera immensely. Although all the performances were strong, the tragic story of *Rigoletto* was

a slimy fellow.

I laughed hardest during *Impresario*, Mozart's comedy about an ailing opera company, a morally righteous impresario (like a manager) who just wants to raise chickens on a farm, his sidekick, and a rich, older businessman wishing to woo two singers at the same time by bribing the impresario to hire them both. I'm not sure if it was the whole silly story or the actors' non-stop slapstick improvisations, but whatever it was, it worked for me...and obviously for the kids behind me who couldn't stop laughing either.

I was most disturbed by the darkness of the human spirit exposed by Puccini's opera about a tense relationship between an unhappy wife and her brooding

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