

## RECORDING REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS D'ENREGISTREMENTS

Ryan's Fancy. 2017. *What a Time! Vol. 2*. MMaP and SingSong Inc. Compact disc, 22 tracks. Liner notes by Holly Everett and Meghan Forsyth, 12 pp.

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From the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s, Ryan's Fancy was an important part of this reviewer's musical environment. I first discovered them through the television show *Tommy Makem and Ryan's Fancy*, produced in Hamilton, Ontario. VCRs had not been invented, so I used a cassette recorder to capture songs performed by Makem, Denis Ryan, Fergus O'Byrne, and Dermot O'Reilly, and guests. Ryan's Fancy LPs soon joined those of The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and the Eagles in my record collection. The songs I learned from these records got me through many coffee houses, variety shows, house parties, and camp fire jam sessions over the years. Their music was infectious and accessible, and its combination of rollicking sing-alongs and sensitive ballads appealed to a younger audience who would have been turned-off by the old-fashioned renderings of Irish and Scottish music of their parents and grandparents.

Dermot, Fergus, and Denis made excellent recordings, but to fully appreciate their musicianship, wit, and charm, one had to experience Ryan's Fancy live. Irish, Newfoundland, and Maritime music in a live setting can often deteriorate into predictable three-chord sing-alongs. But Ryan's Fancy brought a

new level of professionalism to the live scene. In the course of the evening they would perform on long-neck banjo, six and twelve-string guitars, tin whistles, mandolin, and fiddle. Although I was a "mainlander," I was lucky to see them perform in bars, at festivals, and at university dances. The first time I heard of — and heard — Cape Breton songwriter Allister MacGillivray was at a Ryan's Fancy show in a New Brunswick nightclub. A friend bought a bodhran from one of the members and I was once part of an amateur folk group that performed "Banks of the Ohio" on the back of a flatbed trailer — with Ryan's Fancy singing along. I was privileged to hear one of their last performances in 1983, the year they disbanded, in Montague, Prince Edward Island. The three men remained involved with music to varying degrees. Dermot, sadly, passed away in 2007. After the break-up, Denis focused his energies on business but produced three solo CDs, and has performed for charities. Fergus, who was the producer for Volume 2 of *Ryan's Fancy: What a Time!*, has continued to perform and record, both as a solo act and with others, notably as part of A Crowd of Bold Sharemen.

Although the three Irishmen first started performing in Toronto, in the early 1970s they relocated to Newfoundland where their music resonated with the local population. They had toured the province in the past but moved there to study folklore at Memorial University. What they found was a home away from home. Through live performances, recordings, collaborations with local singers and

instrumentalists, and television shows and specials, Ryan's Fancy had a huge impact not only on Newfoundland, but also on the rest of Atlantic Canada (for a detailed exploration of their impact on changing senses of Newfoundland identity, see Evelyn Osbourne's 2015 contribution to *MUSICultures*). Celtic music had been performed in the region in the past, but the 1970s saw an explosion of live performance in Atlantic Canada fuelled by the Baby Boom, the lowered drinking age, the expansion of licensed premises, and increased spending power. It was also the tail end of the North American folk revival when many young people carried guitars and went to parties where singing was the norm. The Irish, English, Scottish, and Newfoundland traditional and contemporary folk songs performed by Ryan's Fancy became part of the cultural fabric of the region in the 1970s and 1980s. This CD not only helps preserve that legacy, but also introduces the group to a new generation of traditional music fans.

The tracks on this CD reflect the eclecticism and musical evolution of this group of transplanted Irishmen. The 12-page liner booklet includes an essay by Holly Everett that explains the group's Newfoundland career and its impact on Atlantic Canadian musicians. The detailed notes by ethnomusicologist Meghan Forsyth provide background on each of the tracks and, based on interviews with Ryan and O'Byrne, explain how they were

added to the Ryan's Fancy's repertoire. There is also a list of sources and a Ryan's Fancy discography. According to the notes, only seven of twenty-two songs are "traditional" (such as "The Galway Shawl" and my favourite Ryan's Fancy cover, "The Boston Burglar"). Three recognizable folk club standards are Tom Paxton's "Leaving London," Pete St. John's "Dublin in the Rare Old Times," and Ewan MacColl's "The Manchester Rambler." "Harbour Le Cou," thought to have been composed by Jack Dodd, is a well-known Newfoundland ballad. A more modern composition by a Newfoundlander — about a Scottish shipwreck — is "The Wreck of the Anna Maria." Nova Scotia content is provided with "The Bluenose," composed by David A. Martins. "Farewell to Carlingford" is a nod to its composer, Tommy Makem. One particularly interesting track is a version of "Glimpse of Heaven" by the progressive British rockers the Strawbs. Congratulations are in order to SingSong Inc. and Memorial University's Research Centre for the Study of Music, Media and Place for bringing out this collection. 🍀

## REFERENCES

- Osborne, Evelyn. 2015. The Most Irish Place in the World? "Irishness" in the Recorded Folk Music of Newfoundland and Labrador. *MUSICultures* 42 (2): 79-102.