

Newfoundland is an isolated, eccentric place. Often referred to as “The Rock,” it’s mostly known for its fishing industry and its deep musical tradition, which is second only to Appalachia in North America. More recently, however, Newfoundland has become known, far and wide, as the home of Canadian band Great Big Sea.

Hailing from small harbor towns in and around the capital of St. John’s, the band’s three members—they were a foursome until bassist Darrell Power left in 2003—Alan Doyle, Bob Hallett and Sean McCann, grew up in a land that was more like Europe than North America, and which had only shed its independence to become a Canadian province in 1952. “Kitchen parties” were the main form of entertainment. Today Great Big Sea is set on bringing its kitchen parties to venues around the world, and is known as much for its eclectic mix of up-tempo traditional tunes and poppy, folk-infused originals as for their rollicking live performances that encourage total crowd participation.

For the past 13 years, Great Big Sea has done everything in its power—from selling over a million albums to playing 200+ yearly shows—to spread Newfoundland’s music to the world. In fact, when GBS formed in 1993, its goal was “to educate the world on how entertaining folk music could be by performing traditional in a contemporary style.”

They’ve practically swept Canada’s East Coast Music Awards a handful of times, and they’ve been nominated for several Juno Awards, Canada’s top prize for music, including two times for Group of the Year. Their latest album, *The Hard and the Easy*, made up entirely of traditional songs, has already gone multi-platinum, and sales aren’t slowing down. AV spoke with Bob Hallett, Great Big Sea’s multi-instrumental wunderkind—he plays guitar, fiddle, button accordion, tin whistle, mandola, concertina and, allegedly, lowland pipes—just in time for their upcoming tour stop in Buffalo.

Without singing a song, paint a portrait of what Newfoundland is like, and what it was like growing up there?

“When we grew up, we had one TV channel, and



most of the shows on it were locally produced. We had two radio stations...a place like Toronto was unimaginably distant and troubling, so most of the entertainment was very homogenous. The island culture was as isolated and self-contained as it had been for 400 years. So music, in our homes, was something that people did. It wasn’t novel for people to sing or play instruments. That’s how they entertained themselves, they didn’t listen to music or play DVDs or video games. People actually played and sang songs. So, what we realize now, in a North American context, was a very unusual way to grow up was just something we took for granted.”

A lot of the music you learned was passed on from family members, correct?

“For us, it was never a formal thing; it wasn’t like taking swimming lessons. It was just there. People in my family played and sang. They didn’t see what they were doing as important in a folkloric sense.

“Like every kid, I always wanted to stay up late and listen to the adults talk and joke and sing and play and whatnot. It was important to learn to do what they found interesting. That was kind of a motivating factor more than anything else.”

It seems like those formal lessons are the ones that kids don’t carry on into adulthood anyway.

“My father was a great folk singer, but he also loved Herb Alpert, the trumpet player. It was an enormous disappointment to him that I didn’t play the trumpet (laughs). I couldn’t stand it, ya know. I think he could’ve cared less about the accordion or anything like that. He would’ve been really happy if I’d been Dizzy Gillespie or something.”

How would you describe your music?

“We just play Newfoundland music. There are Celtic things in that, but also tons of French influence and west coast English influences. Unless you know where to look, you don’t necessarily hear it, but if someone points it out to you, it becomes more obvious. As soon as you pick up a tin whistle in a bar, you’re Irish, ya know? But it’s not a word or a term or a genre that we’re comfortable with.”

What part of your music is traditional vs. original?

“It’s almost half and half. *The Hard and the Easy* is a bit of an anomaly in that it’s all traditional music. Our goal is always sort of to create pop music, but instead of using blues and country and jazz or ’60s

rock ’n’ roll, we wanted to create pop music out of the tools that we had, which were the traditional instruments and melodies and rhythms of Newfoundland music.

“We learned this huge body of music that we wanted to bring to the world, so the idea was this blurred line between those two things, so our pop songs sound like folk songs and our folk songs sound like pop songs. We kind of deliberately forced pop patterns on folk songs, these verses and choruses and hooks—(laughs) and cut out 70 of the verses.”

Do you notice a difference between your Canadian and American audiences?

“Yeah, actually. They look alike, they’re the same kind of people with the same kind of age group spread, but in America most people know the band from the *Road Rage* album (2000) after. What in Canada is considered the second half of our career in America is the first half of our career. So the sets can vary a lot, for one thing. It keeps you on your toes, because people are going to see two different bands from night to night.”

What’s a kitchen party?

“Traditionally the biggest room in the house, and the warmest room in the house, was the kitchen. Even though that’s no longer the case, parties in Newfoundland tend to gravitate toward the kitchen. You go into the house and the living room and the dining room are empty, there’s no one in the yard, and there’s 50 people squeezed into the kitchen. It’s where the stove was, I guess. Every important conversation, every song, every good eatin’, every fight takes place in the kitchen.”

So that’s where you learned your songs?

“Yeah, definitely. When I think of playing this stuff for people, I think about sitting at someone’s kitchen table. Even now, if someone comes to your front door, you know they’re trying to sell you something. Your friends and neighbors always come to the back door, to the kitchen.”

Great Big Sea will play UB’s Center for the Arts at 8pm next Wednesday, April 19. For more info and to buy tickets, visit www.ubcfa.org.

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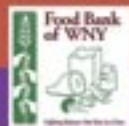
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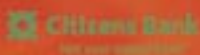
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