



Stirring up Ghosts

An interview with Bruce Coughlan of Tiller's Folly

By Rosemary Phillips

*Take tales of ghosts, battles, bootleggers, fur traders, gold rushes and unrequited love mixed with original high-energy, toe-tapping, hand-clapping, acoustic roots music with a very hip historic nature – and you have **Tiller's Folly** – appearing in Festival Nanaimo's double-header concert, **Canadian Songwriters**, Saturday, March 7 at the Port Theatre, Nanaimo.*

It's back to Canadian roots for Tiller's Folly. This dynamic, well-seasoned and award-winning Celtic trio (cum-historians) – featuring singer-songwriter Bruce Coughlan, fiddler Nolan Murray and bassist Laurence Knight – has recently returned to the folds of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest, and is spreading tales (long, tall and short) to audiences of all ages, with their unique brand of acoustic roots music. “We spent the last three years touring the southern states in the US while under contract in

Atlanta,” said Bruce, during a lunch break between performances for Victoria schools and while making preparations for the launch of their ninth CD **Stirring up Ghosts**.

Music as culture: “We now have an Americana repertoire as a result of that tour,” added Bruce. “People identify with music as culture. We were capturing the essence of the music scene there in the South. It's so alive. They tag their identity to it, like Kentucky bluegrass, and take a lot of pride in it.”

British Columbia's identity: “We are such a multi-cultured society in British Columbia; we don't have a one-type of cultural offering, and no one-type of music that says this is BC music. Tiller's Folly likes to be inclusive so the representation of the various cultures comes in the stories, in the lyrics.”

Storytelling: “Before history was written it was passed down by word of mouth through music and stories. Communities and cultures gathered around their storytellers and musicians. By continuing that ballad tradition we are preserving the glories of British Columbia's past deeds and passing them on to upcoming generations. The songs aren't just about railways and wooden sailing ships; there's *Twenty-Three Camels*, *The Ghost of Kitty O-Reilly* and *Water at the Bar*, songs telling tales of heroes, heroines and villains, of shantytowns, engineers, and traders. What we are doing is establishing the West's place in the identity of the North American mosaic.”

Stirring up Ghosts: Released on Friday, February 20 in British Columbia's capital city, Victoria, this double CD is the largest collection of original historic-based music assembled by a band and composed by a single writer. “I've been nursing it along for two decades,” explained Bruce. “A first 'special' edition was released in 2008 for British Columbia's 150th Anniversary and Simon Fraser's bi-centennial. It quickly sold out. We expanded the 12-song collection and added two new songs and three instrumental tracks. The idea is to intrigue listeners with the mystique and mystery of British Columbia's past and present, and to invoke an interest in our history. Our website (www.tillersfolly.com) has become a great resource by giving introductions to the songs and their historical references. You can also listen to the songs as you read the lyrics – which are the stories.”

The ensemble: The unique and original sound of Tiller's Folly comes from musicians who have years of experience in different genres. “We have become a tight, finely-tuned trio, and our music is so much more expressive,” added Bruce whose songwriting and musicianship originated with British Columbia bands Bare Facts and Hightops. Bruce writes all the original songs for Tiller's Folly from extensive historical research, and also has a growing list of commissioned works and soundtrack credits. “My main influences have come from musicians I have admired like Stan Rogers and Gordon Lightfoot with his *Railroad Trilogy*. They are my inspiration.”

Meanwhile bass player Laurence has performed for over 40 years with top entertainers including the bands of Bo Diddley, Jim Byrnes and Long John Baldry. Nolan has played fiddle and mandolin with just about every top Canadian performer and with US talent like Brenda Lee, Loretta Lynn and Randy Travis.

Always evolving: “What started as a Celtic group 18 years ago has become much more – it’s a whole new kind of Canadiana folk. The Maritime influence is there, but with Celtic and old-time. There are solos, as in the jazz tradition, some improvisation – a lot of interplay that way. And by adding multi-media we have been creating a new frontier of artistic expression – a bold new movement in progressive roots music. Since our return our calendar is filling up fast. We have already been invited to perform for Canada Day in Ottawa for the 150th Anniversary of Confederation in 2017.”

*Tiller’s Folly is performing in Nanaimo at the Port Theatre on March 7, at 7:30 p.m. for Festival Nanaimo in a double-header concert titled **Canadian Songwriters** which also features Juno nominee Royal Wood at 9 p.m. To hear music, see videos and more information visit www.festivalnanaimo.com and get your tickets (\$44) directly from the web site or by calling 250-754-8550, where you can also get Festival Passes for \$108.*