

Tiller's Folly raises a toast to Robbie Burns

Celtic music band bring their rich folk-tale tunes to the Gateway Theatre

Michelle Hopkins

Richmond News - Wednesday, January 14, 2009

While most teens in the seventies were listening to disco and rock 'n' roll, Bruce Coughlan was jamming to Celtic music.

Celtic music? The high spirited, foot-stomping folk jigs that hail from Ireland and Scotland that most think of as music for the older generations?

Coughlan laughs and agrees, "Some people might think that."

Of Irish descent, Coughlan had a born affinity to Celtic music. Growing up, he can't remember a time when it wasn't wafting through his house.

He does recall clearly the moment he knew that Celtic music was his calling.

"My parents took me to the Queen Elizabeth Theatre when I was six to see the Clancy Brothers and I was hooked," Coughlan says. "I knew right there, there was no doubt in my mind, that this was what I was going to do when I grew up."

Self-taught at 14, he was playing those rich folk tales handed down through generations on the corner of Granville and Georgia streets. Coughlan soon began penning his own tales of home, family and what he calls: "Interpersonal and reflective sort of stuff."

Coughlan and his band mates Nolan Murray and Laurence Knight make up Tiller's Folly, known as "virtuosic ambassadors of song" by many in the local Celtic music movement.

Coughlan, the lead vocalist and guitarist, Murray, fiddler, five-string banjo and mandolin player, along with Knight on bass and vocals, bring their unique brand of Celtic music to the Gateway Theatre on Saturday, Jan. 17.

Laurence Knight says there's a brotherhood amongst Celtic performers -- "a strong bond, if you will."

Born in England, Knight moved here in 1959 with his family.

"I have had a history in the Vancouver music industry, playing with everybody from Roy Forbes and Shari Ulrich," Knight says. "Then, Bruce met me at a concert in Powell River and he asked me to record with his then-band Bare Facts.

"Bruce brought me on board with Tiller's Folly a few years later after I spent a few years producing albums instead of performing."

Tiller's Folly has been touring for more than a decade and performs between 150 to 250-plus shows a year.

"We have performed in 25 states and seven or eight provinces," says Knight. "As well, we have toured three countries in Europe ... that's just what we do."

"I like to say our backyard is the I-5 corridor," says Coughlan.

Both believe there's resurgence in popularity for the genre.

The musicians believe the rich history and storytelling behind their songs are what appeal to both young and old.

"Our presence on stage is a good mix of storytelling, great music and fun," says Knight. "Nolan won the International Bluegrass World Championship in 1997 and has been nominated and has won awards as best instrumentalist of the year by the Canadian and the B.C. Country music associations many times."

The trio has garnered great reviews, including one from Yvonne Zacharias from the Vancouver Sun.

"There is something reassuring and timeless about their music which follows in the footsteps of singers like Gordon Lightfoot, Stompin' Tom Connors, and the late Stan Rogers," she writes.

Coughlan believes it's the "strong and honest" quality of the music that appeals to so many.

"Our fan base runs from our age group (fifties), their parents and their children... I think it's because the acoustic nature of it makes it timeless and it's intelligent music."

The band has released seven CDs so far. Its 2003 release A Ripple

in Time won top CD by the Indie Acoustic Project.

Last summer the band toured across the province in support of its newest CD, Stirring-Up Ghosts, a compilation of songs and stories about B.C.'s history.

"Part of what we do is write about local history, European and colonial history ... a lot of it came out of the fur trade, which was dominated by Scots," says Knight.

"Look at Simon Fraser, another Scot. We were commissioned to write a song to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Simon Fraser's voyage."

Although, the guys identify themselves as a Celtic band, they also see themselves as representing B.C.

"For B.C.'s 150th birthday last year, we toured extensively across the province," Knight says. "We were considered cultural ambassadors for Canada when we performed on Parliament Hill on Canada Day for a crowd of a more than quarter of a million people." One of the highlights, he adds, was to hang out with the guys from Blue Rodeo.

The trio is also proud of its 2004 release, A Fine Kettle of Fish, filmed and recorded in Steveston, which a live concert has been featured many times on the Knowledge Network in 2006.

"We were also invited to perform at one of the biggest highland concerts in Scotland called Speyfest," Knight says.

"When we returned, we were inspired to write songs for our CD Buchan Bluegrass (2005), an ode to Scots ballads and idle music."

During its Gateway concert, Coughlan says: "We will tip our hats to Robbie Burns but we will perform a good cross section from all our CDs."

Knight pipes in: "We will also perform a very tragic song called When Jaime Comes Home," says Knight. "That song is about a gentleman who is looking at the graves of all his sons killed in the Catholic war, when the Stewarts were thrown out."

Meanwhile, when not touring, both Coughlan and Knight, are putting the final touches on solo projects.

"We also have a Tiller's album in the works, we are just heading into the studio to record," says Coughlan. "It's really important to keep fresh and keep writing new tunes."

The Richmond Concert Association presents Tiller's Folly, a Robbie Burns Special, on Saturday, Jan. 17 at 8 p.m. at the Gateway Theatre, 6500 Gilbert Rd

For more information or for tickets, call the theatre box office at 604-270-1812 or visit www.richmondconcertassociation.ca.

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CREDIT: Photo Submitted
Tiller's Folly band members, (left to right) fiddler and mandolin player, Nolan Murray, Bruce Coughlan, lead vocalist and guitarist and Laurence Knight, bass player and vocalist. The trio performs Saturday at the Gateway Theatre.