

RHINOCEROS PARTY

Winnipeg's hardest-working Celtic band may never get St. Paddy's day off again

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Blair McEvoy scratches his head when he is asked how long it's been since he had St. Patrick's Day off.

Finally, after conferring with his bandmates, McEvoy -- the lead singer and founder of Celtic-flavoured party troupe the Dust Rhinos -- has an answer.

"It would have to be 2000," McEvoy announces. "We were booked for a show in Sloan, Iowa. Except March 17 fell on a Sunday that year, and they wanted us for Saturday. So we spent all of St. Patrick's Day driving home from Iowa."

McEvoy and the rest of the Rhinos will need the luck o' the Irish if they ever hope to get St. Paddy's off again. Already this weekend, the five-man band has performed at the University of Manitoba on Friday and at the Toad in the Hole Pub on Saturday. Tonight, the Dust Rhinos are on stage at McPhillips Station Casino and Monday -- St.

Patrick's Day proper -- the green-tinged ensemble will power its way through four 45-minute sets at the King's Head Pub - a gig they were booked for a full two years ago.

And how does that flurry of activity compare with 1993, the year the group celebrated its first St. Patrick's Day under the Dust Rhinos banner?

"Ha! That year we got a call from a bar owner on Thursday saying, 'It's St. Patrick's Day on Saturday -- do you guys have any plans?' " McEvoy says with a laugh. "If I remember correctly, he paid us in food."

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McEvoy grew up in Souris. His paternal grandmother, Norleen, had a sizable collection of traditional Irish folk tunes, and McEvoy would listen to albums by the likes of the Irish Rovers and the Clancy Brothers every time he went to her place to visit.

McEvoy was 18 when his family moved to Brandon. Like many kids his age, he wanted to form a band. But unlike most young people, McEvoy wasn't overly concerned with styles or genres.

"I was in rock bands, country bands and, at one point, the world's worst blues band," says McEvoy, adding he also led a best-forgotten punk outfit called the Gash, whose logo was a large wound with blood dripping from it.

McEvoy relocated to Winnipeg in 1989. He was shopping at a newly-opened store at The Forks called the Celtic Shoppe that summer when he spotted a book of Irish sheet music. The volume



contained dozens of songs he was already familiar with, thanks to his grandmother's LPs.

As luck would have it, McEvoy was invited to a musicians' party a couple of months later, during which everybody sat in a circle playing songs they were particularly fond of. When it was McEvoy's turn to choose, he opted for a ditty he had just learned from his new book.

"A bunch of people in the room went, 'Hey, I know that one,' and joined in."

McEvoy eventually formed a band with two of the people he met at the party. In October 1992, the as-yet-unnamed trio was busking at The Forks when the owner of the Toad in the Hole caught their act. She invited them to play at her bar and 22 years later, the Dust Rhinos -- who "borrowed" their name from a Far Side cartoon that riffed on dust bunnies -- are still a fixture at the Osborne Village watering hole.

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For the first few years of their existence, the Dust Rhinos were a traditional folk band with a setlist comprised largely of Irish and Scottish standards. That approach changed the night the group -- by then five-strong -- was sitting around in one of the members' basements, enjoying "a few."

At some point in the evening, A Horse with No Name -- the 1972 chart-topper by the band America -- found its way onto the turntable. One of the guys made a joke about how ridiculous the song was, how its lyrics about "plants and birds and rocks and things" made no sense whatsoever.

The Rhinos began rehearsing their own version of A Horse with No Name a few days later, speeding it up some and adding a slew of "hi-dee-di-dee-dies" to the chorus.

The next time the band performed live, they ended the first set with their newly-minted rendition of A Horse With No Name. As they were leaving the stage, a music writer from the Winnipeg Free Press approached them and said, "I love the way you Celtified that song."

The Dust Rhinos have since made a name for themselves for the manner in which they "Celtify" tunes like Peter Gabriel's Solsbury Hill, the Beatles' Dear Prudence and New Order's Love Vigilantes.

"It's become a way of bridging what we do for people who say, 'Sorry, but I'm only into rock and roll,' " explains McEvoy. "When they tell us they don't like Celtic music, we say, 'Well, do you like this?'"

Many of the cover songs the Dust Rhinos perform onstage have found their way onto one of their six CDs. Funny story: after the band recorded Where the Streets Have No Name for their album Sociable!, they mailed a royalty cheque to U2's management in the amount of \$80.

The cheque came back uncashed with a note reading, "We talked it over with the boys and they decided, 'Thanks but we'd rather you to have a round on us, instead.' "

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One of the best compliments the Dust Rhinos receive is when audience members come up to them after a show and ask, "So, where are you guys from, anyway?"

Even after they respond, "Winnipeg," the typical followup is, "No. I mean originally."

"We've had a lot of people from the Maritimes tell us we remind them of home, which tells us we're doing something right," says McEvoy, who works as a video editor and graphic designer for MTS in his "real life."

To date, the Dust Rhinos have brought their variety of "Celtic-assault rock music" as far west as B.C. and as far north as Rankin Inlet, where they shared a bill with Sass Jordan, Kim Mitchell and Trooper. (Ask McEvoy about the time they played Rapid City, and how one of the people at the show was British rocker Billy Idol.)

But one of the Dust Rhinos' most memorable shows was a benefit concert they staged in Antler, Sask., the hometown of McEvoy's grandfather.

"Antler is this little town in the southeast corner of Saskatchewan with a population of maybe 30 people," McEvoy says. "At the time, my aunt lived there and was in charge of raising money to keep their tiny social hall open. One day my grandfather gave me a call and said, 'Blair, I want you to take your orchestra to Antler and play a fundraiser.'"

McEvoy was more than happy to do the show gratis, but his grandfather insisted on footing the bill for the group's expenses.

"Unfortunately he got sick right before the concert and couldn't go himself," McEvoy says. "But we ended up drawing almost 300 people to this little town of 30. Not only that, we sold every last T-shirt and CD we brought with us, with all proceeds going to Antler."

"Honestly, it turned out to be one of the best nights we ever had."

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