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# SADDLE RIVER STRINGBAND

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Prince Edward Island's Saddle River String Band began life as a 'party' band essentially: playing get-togethers and informal jams, and quickly became a working act, regularly performing at such popular PEI establishments as The Landing in Tyne Valley, the Churchill Arms in Charlottetown, and the 40 Knots in Victoria-By-The-Sea. The original members, Mike Dixon, Troy McArthur, James Phillips and Catherine MacLellan, drew on a rich heritage of North American songs and styles ranging from Bluegrass (Bill Monroe and Flatt & Scruggs), Old-Time Country (the Carter Family and Jimmy Rodgers), Prewar Blues (Son House, Robert Johnson, Leadbelly and Charlie Patton), and even more modern 'folkies' like Gillian Welch, Steve Earle, John Prine and Neil Young. The band found an audience and public hungry not only for the music of the past that they offered but, in particular, the group's own interpretations and faithful performances. They had the privilege of playing the Evangeline Bluegrass Festival two years in a row (2004-2005) and were quickly being regarded as the up and coming traditional folk-bluegrass act on PEI.

After Catherine parted ways with the boys, Troy, James and Mike decided to put all other projects on hold and focus entirely on the beast that would become the Saddle River String Band. One of the missing elements in the original incarnation of Saddle was that oh-so-important 'low end' of the bass which adds so much to the percussive propulsion of traditional acts. They didn't need to look far for that missing element: Summerside native and bassist Tommy DesRoches had played an impromptu jam with the group a year prior and was so impressed with the quality of the band's performance and the passion of the traditional music they played that he bought a stand-up bass in hopes that someday the group would call asking for his services. In the summer of 2006 that call came. Tom not only brought the necessary rhythmic element to the quartet but a strong sense of harmony singing which he had developed from years playing in many bands across PEI and the Maritimes.

Along with a new member came a new agenda to produce their debut album. Although the band had been happy to play the music of the great pioneers of their North American musical heritage, they now wanted to start tapping into their own wealth of writing skills which they had honed over the years in many other original bands. In the fall of 2006 recording sessions began in the home of group mandolinist James Phillips and the songs started pouring out: songs about betrayal ('I Don't Think You Love Me Anymore'), about the lure of work away from PEI and their love for their home province ('So Long Blues' and 'Bye Bye PEI'); songs about poverty and relationships ('Nashville Junky', 'Grenadine' and 'Swagger & Sway') and a handful of off-the-beaten-track covers from greats like Son House, the Carter Family, Mississippi John Hurt and Charlie Patton. By the summer of 2007 the project had been completed and mastered by their good friend Paul Milner of Shell Lane Studios in Malpeque.

In the spring and summer of 2007 Saddle River began booking local PEI halls in hopes to break away from a bar scene that seemed to be losing interest in folk and original music. The change of venue proved to be a success and the boys enjoyed a busy summer playing with such acts as Nudie & the Turks, Sheesham & Lotus, and Ron Hynes in historical halls and theaters like the Britannia Hall in Tyne Valley and The King's Playhouse in Georgetown. They were invited to play the Evangeline Bluegrass festival once again and were voted the Top PEI Act at the mother of all PEI bluegrass events, Rollo Bay. Their diverse sound got them invited to the 3rd Annual PEI Jazz & Blues Festival where they wowed an unsuspecting audience with their renditions of delta blues and ragtime, receiving several standing ovations and local press. In November of 2007, the band took part in the PEI Music Awards festivities including showcase and gala awards performances that brought the respective houses down. To top off their already successful weekend the boys took home two awards for Best New Artist and Best Bluegrass Recording.

At the 2008 ceremonies in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Saddle received an ECMA for Bluegrass Recording of the Year and performed an official ECMA Roots Room showcase as well as several other showcases over the weekend. They had a successful summer of gigging, being the first 'Bluegrass' style act to ever play the Fredericton Jazz & Blues Festival. They headlined a prestigious ECMA winners/nominees show at the famous St. Mary's Indian River Church (considered in the top ten acoustic music venues in the world). They were also involved in the Rollo Bay and Evangeline Bluegrass & Old-Timey music festivals, and the Charlottetown Jazz & Blues festival for another year, and were happy to be part of the newly-formed and very successful 'Small Halls Festival'. At year's end they earned a spot on the Grammy Bluegrass preliminary nominations list alongside such heavyweights as Ricky Skaggs, Earl Scruggs and Del McCoury.

The future is bright for these seasoned four musicians from Western PEI. The last year having spent building their home base and making connections in the eastern music scene, the Saddle River String Band's goal is to reach a wider audience outside of PEI and the Maritimes, and spread the Saddle gospel to the four corners of Canada and beyond.

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