

Traditional music and songs of
Newfoundland

HISTORY

Off the east coast of Canada, battered by wind and sea, lies a huge island, shrouded in mist and mystery. Peopled for the last five hundred years by hardy, independent folk who wrested a living from the rocky soil and the dangerous Atlantic, the Island fostered among its inhabitants a unique culture. While the roots of this culture without doubt lie in the British Isles, the flower is purely Newfoundland; salt-soaked, weathered, hardy and ruggedly beautiful, terms which also serve well to describe its distinctive music.



THE GIRLS

in question, Jean Hewson and Christina Smith, are both native Newfoundlanders dedicated to the preservation and performance of Newfoundland music. Their long-standing friendships with the older generation of singers and musicians such as the late fiddlers Emile Benoît and Rufus Guinchard, singers Gordon Willis and Tess Murphy, and accordion players Frank Maher and John Joe Pigeon have given them a repertoire of unique songs and tunes that are rooted in the rocky coast of this Island. With voice, guitar, fiddle and cello, they shape this material into unusual and engaging arrangements.

Although they have performed together since 1985, it wasn't until 1996 that they decided to concentrate their musical energies on performing as a duo. Since then they have won two mainstage showcases at the prestigious North American Folk Music & Dance Alliance annual conference (Toronto 1997, Nashville 2003) and toured extensively in Canada, the US and Great Britain, playing concerts and festivals. Their album **Like Ducks!**, released in 1998 on Canadian folk music label Borealis, was chosen by Crossroads Magazine Awards for the Roots/Traditional album of the year (second place went to Woody Guthrie and third to Pete Seeger, both Smithsonian Folkways re-releases). The album was also a finalist for both an "Indie" award from the Association for Independent Music, and an East Coast Music Award. In addition to **Like Ducks!**, they each have a solo recording to their credit, and are about to release a new duo effort, also on the Borealis label.

They sum things up best themselves: "We have a strong commitment to passing on the tradition and believe very strongly in preserving the idiosyncratic dance music of Newfoundland, and in making our traditional songs and tunes accessible to Newfoundlanders and folk music lovers everywhere."



THEIR MUSIC

beautifully illustrates the Island's unique musical heritage; with a driving rhythm but often an unusual meter, and an extra beat or two added to occasional bars. Instead of dancing to polkas, jigs or reels, Newfoundlanders "have a scuff" to "singles," "doubles" and "step-tunes." The mix of cultures which settled the Island (English, Irish, French and Scottish) each brought their own tunes and dances. These mixed, changed and influenced each other, in the Newfoundland schooners and woods camps, until the music sounds, in the words of Emile Benoit "a little bit of Irish, a little bit of Scots, a little bit of French" — and a whole lot of Newfoundland! Rural Newfoundland still has an oral tradition. Many very old and beautiful songs were brought over by the settling cultures; some still have currency in Newfoundland but have long since died out in the Old Country. In addition, many wonderful local songs have been composed about shipwrecks, fishing, and local events, as well as lyrics containing "pilot" verses that served as aids to navigation.



WORKSHOPS

and teaching are an important part of passing on traditions, and Christina and Jean believe that traditional culture lives in the people that cherish it. They are both well-respected teachers of their respective instruments and have individually, and as a duo, taught group and private classes to people of all ages. Jean teaches guitar and voice and Christina directs the STEP fiddlers, a group of 25 young musicians aged 6 to 18, who have recorded one cd, entitled "Galing for a Storm." She also teaches the course in Newfoundland Fiddling at Memorial University Department of Music. They are both in demand to teach at summer folk music camps and have given workshops on the following:

- ▲ Newfoundland songs
- ▲ Newfoundland instrumental music
- ▲ Square sets and cotillions: Newfoundland traditional dancing
- ▲ The Newfoundland fiddle: Emile Benoit and Rufus Guinchard
- ▲ Newfoundland fiddle and guitar: how to accompany the oddest tunes
- ▲ Mummering and Christmas traditions in Newfoundland
- ▲ Basic, intermediate and advanced fiddle
- ▲ Basic, intermediate and advanced guitar
- ▲ Arranging folk music
- ▲ Vocal technique



WHAT TO EXPECT

when you attend a performance: beautiful old ballads backed up by **guitar** and **cello**, ditties or funny **songs**, and songs sung in the **traditional** Newfoundland manner — unaccompanied. Vocals are set off by a selection of quirky and unusual Newfoundland **fiddle** tunes and waltzes, accompanied by Jean's trademark guitar arrangements. One or two original numbers, composed in the Newfoundland style, complete the mix. Music is interspersed with humorous **anecdotes** and **stories** about Newfoundland in general, and in particular, about the people from whom the duo learned the material. Jean is fluent in both of Canada's official languages (**English** and **French**) and easily interacts with audiences of both persuasions. Although their repertoire is appreciated by people of all ages, the two can tailor the concert to suit **younger children** or **teenagers**, and they enjoy the opportunity to turn kids on to traditional music.



COMMENTS

"Christina and Jean form one of the most accomplished and most inventive musical partnerships to emerge from Canada's traditional folk scene."

Grit Laskin, President, Borealis Recording company

"There's no better pair of musicians to have around if you want a lively set of tunes and traditional songs."

Steve Winick, Dirty Linen Magazine

"Jean and Christina are the Xenas of Newfoundland Music."

Dugg Simpson, Artistic Director, Vancouver Folk Music Festival

"Like Ducks!.....WOW!!"

William Crawford, Highlander Record Company, Scotland (for their album Like Ducks!)

"Getting lots of airplay south of the border, this CD is going to take these two women places they never dreamed of before. Their musicianship is excellent, the singing is clear and beautiful, the songs are punctuated by tunes, never leaving a dull moment." **Steve Fruitman, Great North Wind, CIUT-FM, Toronto**

"I know it's still early in the year, but I feel pretty confident in saying that Like Ducks! is the finest album of 1998, and one of the best recordings I have ever had the pleasure of listening to."

Mark Vaughan-Jackson, The Evening Telegram, St. John's

"WOW! BRAVO! Great voices! Great instrumentals!"

Gerry Taylor, New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal



HIGHLIGHTS

Jean and Christina have performed across Canada, in the U.S. and in the British Isles, at festivals and venues too numerous to list here. A few of their performances are listed below.

performances

Vancouver Folk Music Festival (BC)
Lunenburg Folk Harbour Festival (NS)
Goderich Celtic Roots Festival and Celtic College (ON)
Woods Music & Dance Camp (ON)
Celtic Colours (Cape Breton)
Flying Cloud Folk Club (Toronto)
La Grande Rencontre (Montréal)
Festival Mémoire et Racines (QC)
Sidmouth Folk Festival (England)
Warwick Folk Festival (England)
Champlain Valley Folk Festival (VT)
Pinewoods Folk Club (NY)

honours

Crossroads Awards, Gold Award, Roots/Traditional
Album of the Year, 1998, for Like Ducks!

Indie Award (Association for Independent Music) nomination,
Traditional Music category, 1998, for Like Ducks!

East Coast Music Award nomination,
Traditional Music category, 1999, for Like Ducks!

North American Folk Music & Dance Alliance Official Showcase Artist,
(Toronto 1998, Nashville 2003)



RECORDINGS

their own recordings

Like Ducks! (Borealis, 1998)

Fiddle Me This (SingSong, 1995)

Early Spring (Pigeon Inlet, 1993)

Galing for a Storm: The STEP Fiddlers play Newfoundland Tunes (ind. 2000)

on other folks' albums

Sue Lothrop & Bill Garrett: Red Shoes (Borealis, 2003, Christina)

Buddy Wassisname and the Other Fellers: 100% Pure (Christina)

Irish Descendants: Look to the Sea (Christina)

Shirley Montague: Our Labrador (Christina)

Jim Payne: Empty Nets (Christina)

Jim Payne: State of the Nation (Christina)

Emile Benoit: Vive la Rose (Christina)

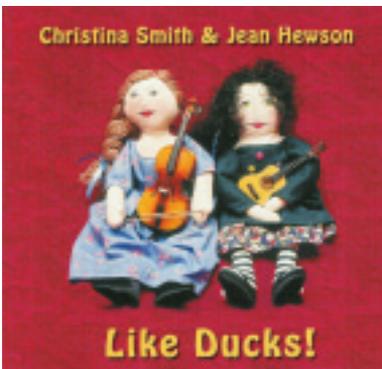
Pigeon Inlet: Another Time (compilation, Christina)

Pigeon Inlet: All the Best (compilation, Jean)

Pigeon Inlet: Close to the Floor (compilation, Jean)

other activities

Jean and Christina also perform as half of the group **Maher's Bahers**, featuring Frank Maher, one of Newfoundland's best-known accordionists, with Rick West on bodhran, in addition to touring with Aoife Clancy and Anne Hills as **Faire Winds**. Christina's **compositions** and arrangements can also be heard on several award-winning CBC radio documentaries, short films and videos.



NEWFOUNDLAND is the fifteenth-largest island in the world. Affectionately dubbed "The Rock," it is located off the east coast of Canada. Discovered by John Cabot in 1497, it became a fishing station for the English, French and Portuguese. Claimed by Britain in 1583, settlement was discouraged as West Country fishing interests wanted no competition. People did settle, however, hiding in remote and rocky harbours, (some of which are accessible even today only by water) fishing from small boats and salting their catch. During the 18th and 19th centuries, West Country and Southern Irish fishing servants populated the coast. One can still hear those dialects in the speech of their descendants. Until 1905, France owned fishing rights to the west coast of Newfoundland and still owns the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, off the south coast. Today, fishing is not the mainstay it once was; the decline in fish stocks has forced many people to emigrate. As modern industries such as oil and IT increase, the rural ways of life in the "outports" are changing quickly and dramatically.

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