



Local Music from the Fringe: Big Noise from NOTL

Niagara-on-the-Lake is best known for its theatres, wineries, restaurants and boutiques which cater largely to the tourist trade. Few visitors—and not many locals—think of the old town on Niagara's north-east fringe as the hotbed of popular music that it has become, with several distinctive bands, state-of-the-art recording studios and its own “world music” scene. A tasty sample of NOTL's musical gumbo is served up about once

each month at the Angel Inn when Steve Goldberger and the Fringe Locals play their southern-fried cover versions and trans-cultural originals.

Founding member and bassist for “nugrass” rockers Black Creek in the 1970s, subsequently a freelance musician and member of several Toronto-area cover-bands, Steve Goldberger bought a house in Niagara in 1995, originally as a weekend retreat from Toronto. In their early days in town, not living in Niagara full-time, he and wife Dory were dubbed “fringe locals” by a resident wag. While the term no longer befits their status in the community, it lives on as the name of his band.

After heart surgery in 1998, Goldberger devoted more time to songwriting and recording. In 2000, with the Fringe Locals, he released the live CD, *Come From The Heart*, an eclectic mix of covers of songs by artists as diverse as Jackson Browne and Louis Jordan, Nanci Griffith and Charlie Parker.

That same year, Goldberger was commissioned to produce a promotional CD for a drinks company. Recruiting as co-composers and musicians various Fringe Locals and others with whom he had played in recent years, he set out to create an “all-acoustic world music type of thing.” Ontario's arcane liquor regulations forbade the company's distribution plans, but Goldberger, fortunately, maintained copyright over the music. The nine original tracks and four new ones, all instrumentals, were released on CD in March 2002 as *The Niagara-on-the-Lake Rhythm Project*.

It's still a "world music type of thing," though no longer "all-acoustic," extending from the Anglo-Celtic "St Valentine's Ayre" (with fiddle, mandolin, tin whistle and bodhran) to the klezmer-meets-reggae of "Russia-mon" (mandolin and guitar simulating balalaikas, over loping reggae bass-lines). From the upbeat Caribbean-influenced "Tin City" (with steel drum) to the meditative "Chakra #1" (with didgeridoo and rainstick), Goldberger and his multi-instrumentalist colleagues conjure up a cosmopolitan mix of sounds and sensibilities.

One other *Rhythm Project* track particularly worthy of note is "Friday at Cuvee," one of several compositions on the disc by Eric Mahar, the Fringe Locals' regular guitarist. The opening accordion suggests Parisian nightclubs or Hungarian gypsy music, later rhythms hint at Andalusia, bracketing fine acoustic and electric guitar-playing by Mahar. Romantically pan-European, it is one of the CD's highlights. In October 2002, a new version, now called simply "Cuvee," with added lyrics and vocals by Goldberger and local poet/musician/performer Maja Bannerman, appeared on the Fringe Locals' second CD release of the year, *Gumbo Dreams*.

Recorded and mixed "on the fly" at Goldberger's Shed Studio, *Gumbo Dreams* has the sound of an "indie" CD, reproducing the textures of live performance, although the Fringe Locals' usual five-man line-up is supplemented by additional musicians and back-up singers. All but two of the songs are written or co-written by Goldberger—the exceptions are "Hooray for the Weekend," a sing-along, bluesy (and possibly boozy) celebration of a Friday night date, and "Help Me," Eric Mahar's reconstruction of a long-lost previously-unrecorded song by guitar legend Lenny Breau.

Goldberger's own songs reflect, lyrically and musically, his own experiences and his musical influences. In "Back on My Feet," he exploits multiple evocations of the heart as metaphor in a song about survival, while "Play Something Good" will resonate with any band that has ever faced a critical audience. Elsewhere, he pays homage to west-coast folk-rock, reminiscent of Jackson Browne or the late Warren Zevon, on "Paying the Price" (featuring Mahar on David Lindley-style slide guitar) and "We Gotta Stop," while the title track appropriately samples the musical *mélange* that is New Orleans, with Mark Lalama's accordion and Ed Kopala's slide guitar adding tastes of zydeco and delta blues to the swampy mixture.

In August 2002, Goldberger's studio was severely damaged by fire. It has since been rebuilt and he and the band are now in the process of recording a new CD, while continuing to perform their local version of world music at regular live dates in Toronto and the Niagara region. Meanwhile, *The Niagara-on-the-Lake Rhythm Project* and other Fringe Locals CDs may be ordered through **www.stevegoldberger.com** or e-mail **steve@stevegoldberger.com**.

Better yet, catch these "local fringe" artists performing live and buy your copies off the stage.

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