

Mike Ross's CD Launch a Success

By Brodie MacRAE

The launch of Mike Ross's first solo CD entitled "The Dennis Lee Project," took place on Friday evening, March 29 at the MacKenzie Theatre in Charlottetown. Taking into account the quality of the performances, the enthusiastic audience reception, and the healthy CD sales at intermission alone, it is best described as a tremendous success.

Mike Ross's popularity with Charlottetown audiences has come to the point where he is just about a household name. For several years he was heavily involved with the Feast Dinner Theatre, performing, writing and directing. After he graduated from UPEI with a Bachelor of Music, he became the front man for the swing band The Jive Kings, which won



consecutive ECMAs for jazz in 2000 and 2001. Last year he took a starring role in the Charlottetown Festival's wildly suc-

cessful production of "Fire."

As the name might imply, "The Dennis Lee Project" is an album of songs set to Dennis Lee's poetry. In case you had a terribly deprived childhood and are unfamiliar with Dennis Lee, he is one of the best known poets in Canada, especially for his children's poetry. His most popular collection, "Alligator Pie," has sold over half a million copies since its publication in 1974 and his book "Civil Effigies: and Other Poems," won a Governor General's Award. Lee is currently the Poet Laureate of Toronto, the city's first ever.

The fact that Lee is best known as a children's poet might lead one to think that Ross's songs are also intended for children. But not so. Ross explained that in every Lee collection, there are a few poems snuck in that walk the line between adult and children's poetry and some that are just blatantly intended for adults (such as "Dead Man in Edmonton"). These are the poems that Ross seeks, poems that have the simple cleverness of Lee's children's poetry while simultaneously speaking to "grown-ups."

During the launch, he told the audience that "The Dennis Lee Project" has been in the works for three years. The idea of setting Lee's poems to music came from Bob Nicholson, the founder of the Jive Kings. When Ross was having trouble coming up with lyrics for Jive Kings songs, Nicholson suggested using a poet's words, someone like Lee. The subsequent song using a Lee verse didn't make it on a Jive Kings album, but concept of an album devoted to Lee's poetry started to take shape.

To say that the music is good would be an understatement. The music is really, really great. I can't decide whether Lee poems or Ross song-writing skills

should be given the credit, but regardless, Lee's poems work amazingly well as song lyrics. The music itself is a comfortable blend of jazz and rock, with many influences that I could mention, but are unimportant. What is important is that he has created a sound undeniably his own, truly remarkable for someone so young. There was melodic and rhythmic intelligence and cleverness that you don't hear coming out of many songwriters these days.

In particular, I found his ability to create transitions between musical sections that are incredibly smooth and defy expectations to be the most impressive aspect of these songs. If his song-writing is this strong now, I am anxious to know what he will be writing in ten to twenty years.

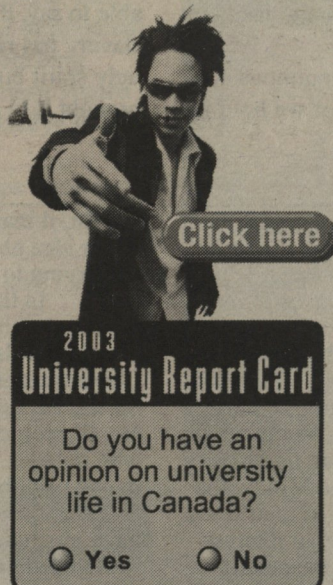
It didn't hurt that Ross's back-up band was fantastic. On drums was Kirk White and on bass Deryl Gallant, both graduates of the UPEI Department of Music, while Carrie MacClellan (UPEI's yearbook editor), Amanda Mark and Beth Gould performed back-up vocals. While I did have issues with the balance in places, the band performed Ross's music quite well.

It is a CD you should buy because you are going to love it. There is a lot of talent on this disc, don't let it pass you by.

As always, Ross himself had the crowd in the palm of his hand. He sang lead vocals, played the piano and even the guitar for a few songs, demonstrating his remarkable versatility. Between songs he talked to the audience, telling the stories behind the songs and how the idea of this album came to fruition, which was great for the audience. (If you've ever heard Mike Ross tell a story, you would understand.) He was sincerely grateful for the support he has been given over the years and for the audience's eager reception of his music.

"The Dennis Lee Project" is currently available at Back Alley Discs and will be more widely distributed soon. This isn't one of those CDs you should buy because people guilt you into buying and supporting local, independent music. It is a CD you should buy because you are going to love it. There is a lot of talent on this disc, don't let it pass you by. Ross intends to perform his music based on Lee's poetry frequently during the summer in a number of different venues.

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