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Rita McNeil: Flying on Her Own?

By Melissa Buote

Rita and Friends is an entertainment establishment presented to the Canadian public by CBC Television every Friday at eight o'clock at night. The show features Nova Scotian folk singing super star Rita McNeil and a bevy of other Canadian musicians, each performing one or two songs in the run of an hour.

Over the years, this show has brought the cream of the crop of Canadian musicians to its viewers -- these acts ranging from Quebecois heart throb Roch Voisine, to country's Prairie Oyster, to pop megastars Sloan and the quirky Barenaked Ladies. With a rating that is proportionate in Canada to the combined total of viewers for both *The Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman* (which combined is 10 million viewers in the USA), *Rita and Friends* is a powerhouse in the field of entertainment.

"The show is a process with both Rita and the producer [creator and executive producer Sandra Faire] and myself," stated Associate Producer Millan Curry-Sharples, who is in charge of the performers on *Rita and Friends*. "[The show] appeals to a broad based audience -- from kids to their parents. It is intended to expose different genres of music to people who will only listen to one type."

Contrary to the popular belief that this show is taped in front of

one audience on a single day, it is not.

"We got there at 7am and left at nine and it was all way too early to rock," said Brad Barker, bassist for The Pursuit of Happiness during an interview on CIMN radio in October of 1995. "And there was no Rita and no audience," added TPOH front man, Moe Berg.

"They only do a few with the whole audience there and then they do a few where they just get like people from their offices to sit in the front row, so when they shoot [the camera] from behind, it looks like there are people," continues Barker, "but she was nice enough to have us on her show."

"We were on it [the first time] and there was no audience. We shot it at like seven in the morning. This time [the second time] we were on at like ten in the morning, and there was a small audience," stated Laura Stein of Halifax pop band Jale. "There wasn't all the cheering they pretended was on it."

She adds to her thoughts that "the less people have heard of you, the less mainstream you are, and the less records you have sold, the earlier you are [in the studio recording]."

At first Curry-Sharples did not want to comment on the taping of the show because, as he commented, "I don't want everyone to know how it's done." Eventually he

conceded that the audience is generally made up of fifty to sixty people and that the bands are taped all through the day with only one act taping at night along with Rita.

"[It is] a fact. They are coming in at seven, but they can go home and sleep. In order to make it look and sound as good as it does, we have to devote as much time as possible to each band. I don't like the seven o'clock starts either, but they are a necessary evil."

Having bands play at seven with a sparse audience, however, is not ill treatment in the eyes of the Associate Producer. "They [the bands] are so pampered and taken care of that they can't believe it. That is so important to me. I don't care if you've sold two million albums or if this is your first independent record. We want people to come band to the show, so we don't want them to have a bad time."

"To tear one band down and set up the next takes thirty to forty minutes. You can't have an audience sit there for that long. We are doing the equivalent of 4 Juno [award shows] every night because we have four acts a night. For us to pull off what we do is pretty astounding but we have one of the top technical crews in the Country."

The presentation of the acts on the show is not thought of as misleading the audience to believe it to



Rita McNeil

be a live music variety show in Curry-Sharples' opinion. "That's just people who don't know about the entire recording process. I don't think most people care. [It is done this way] to make the artist come across to the viewer the best they can look and sound. Everyone who comes on the show sees an increase in record sales the next weekend."



Construction underway at Cass Building.

Production and album sales aside, the noted absence of Rita McNeil at tapings was also mentioned in both interviews. "She wasn't there. She probably wasn't even up," stated Stein.

"I don't think it is a majority of people who don't see Rita," counters Curry-Sharples, "if they want to see her, she always says to have them come over."

With the dubbed in applause and questionable number of people in any given act's audience, it makes one question the validity of *Rita and Friends'* presentation to the average Canadian viewer. Content is not everything when it comes to a show like this. Although the content is very high quality, the pretense with which *Rita and Friends* is shown undermines it.