

An Interview with the Rude Mechanicals

by Alec O'Hanley • A&E Editor

Having played many a Friday at the old student union Barn, the Rude Mechanicals had become a UPEI institution. By 2001, however, the barn had been demolished and the Rudes had moved out to Toronto in pursuit of a larger fan base. February 2004 has seen the return of the Rude Mechanicals to their old Atlantic Canadian digs with a new LP produced by Canadian rock icon Moe Berg called *Checkin' For Squirrels*, and a fresh sound to boot. Alec O'Hanley caught up with guitarist Peter Forbes for a brief talk about the new album and the band's relocation.

Cadre: So you guys just released *Checkin' For Squirrels* recently. What prompted the band to turn to a more alt-country sound?

Peter: There are several factors that went into that. A couple of years ago Dennis Ellsworth, our lead singer, who writes the majority of our material, was in a band called the Tuesdays. They put out an album, it was a great album and it was kinda the alt-country thing. Dennis wrote probably around 70% of their material as well, and at the same time he was writing for us, so it was just the same thing that was coming out of him. All of that ended up being a little more folky and country, so that was probably one of the main things that did it.

The other thing was when we started working with Moe, we had about forty songs and we wanted to pick from those and put the ten best ones on the album, and Moe ultimately had the final say in what went on the album, and so he picked these ten tunes. That was his decision and we agreed with it --

we all thought it sounded good, it had a good focus and everything, so that's another variable that went into it.

Matt, our bass player, plays in a country band in Toronto called the Kensington Hillbillies so that's another factor that went into it. In that band, also, James Gray, who plays with Blue Rodeo, plays keys for the Kensington Hillbillies, so that's how we got him on our record. Then Moe kinda pulled a few strings and got a couple extra players, Bob Egan, Damhnait Doyle. So all these factors came together and we had a little folkier sound going, and we've been playing these songs for years now so it's not that new to us. For people who are just starting to hear this new stuff now it sounds like a big change, but to us it's not really a big change at all.

Cadre: A resounding theme on the album is moving on and relocation. How did the idea of moving to Toronto come about and how has it affected the band?

Peter: Well, if I can cast my mind back.... we just wanted a change - something different. It was more of an exploration. We wanted to see what we could do in Toronto, having already seen what we could do on the East Coast. It was more of an adventure than anything else. We had a lot of confidence that we could hook up with some pretty cool people and have some good times and check out a different music scene: the biggest city in the country compared to the smallest province in the country. It was totally a learning experience,

what we were going for.

In terms of how it's changed the band, we're a lot different than we were before in terms of looking at things from a professional viewpoint. Nothing's really changed personality-wise. We're all the same guys; we're just in Toronto. We like to hang out with our PEI friends in Toronto, we have a "little Charlottetown" up there, and it's a good support group. We've got a couple of side-projects going; like I mentioned, Matt's playing bass for the Kensington Hillbillies, we have

another band we found people who called the Little Pilgrims which helped us out a lot and we discovered a completely different er with a couple of other PEI folk music scene."

Cadre: What have you guys been listening to lately?

Peter: Personally I've been listening to the Smiths a lot. I just bought *The Queen is Dead*, which is a wicked album. The Shins new record, *Chutes Too Narrow*, is a band favorite. We all love it.

We're totally engrossed in that album. We listen to a lot of Wilco, I just bought a new Dennis Brown disc. A lot of Johnny Cash, Charlie Pride these days. We're kind of all over the place in terms of influences.

Cadre: Aside from family and friends, do you find there are things you miss about PEI?

Peter: It's really different in terms of being able to walk to a beach in the spring or the summer and be away from everybody. I really miss that. I really like the community vibe here in terms of music. In Toronto, it's so big... it just happens that in the past couple

of months we've started to meet up with some pretty cool bands that have our same interests and sound in mind, so that's pretty cool, but I think what I miss about PEI is that you have that really closely knit musical community that has these festivals in Cymbria out in the middle of these wide open spaces and it's just a great vibe all around.

Cadre: Are there things you don't miss?

Peter: (Laughing) There are definitely things I don't miss. I don't miss the fact that there are only X number of venues to play. There are definitely a lot more venues when you get to a city like Toronto. But that's a minor thing compared to everything else.

Cadre: Did you feel limited by the scene here at all?

Peter: We felt like that a little bit, definitely it was a factor. I don't like to harp on it too much because then it seems like "you can't do anything here" and I don't believe that - you can do a lot here. But we definitely wanted to move somewhere, whether it was Halifax, or Toronto, or Montreal or Vancouver. Toronto just happened to be the one that won out of those cities. For us, it worked out really well. You look at someone like Nathan Wiley, he doesn't have to go - he went straight to the record deal. We found people who helped us out a lot and we discovered a completely different music scene. So now we're still working the East Coast, which we love to do, but now we have something else in addition to that. That's ultimately the benefit that we reaped.

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