

Fifty Years of Bluegrass in Newfoundland

by

Neil Rosenberg and Ted Rowe

Delightful bluegrass sounds were heard on the lawn of Confederation Building last Sunday during the annual kite festival. The music came from a group of musicians who declined to name themselves. "We would," they told the audience, "but we don't know who we are."

Such was the uncertain debut on May 27, 1973 of a yet-to-be-named band consisting of Neil Rosenberg (banjo and mandolin), Ted Rowe (guitar), Ann Milovsoroff (acoustic bass) and Shelley Posen (guitar and Dobro), noted by *The Daily News* of St. John's. The name came a few weeks later at Ted's suggestion – "Crooked Stovepipe," an old-time fiddle tune well-known across Canada.

The newly-named band was well-received and began appearing at local clubs in St. John's, then as now known for its vibrant musical night life, clubs like the Tudor Inn downtown and the Hideaway, a lounge at the St. John's Airport. When Shelley left at the end of 1974 the band began what would become a continuous series of personnel changes while maintaining their core repertoire with Ted as lead singer on guitar and Neil doing vocal harmonies and instrumental leads on banjo, guitar, and mandolin. Together, they led Crooked Stovepipe through five decades of concerts, club work, festivals, radio and TV appearances, recordings and special projects, keeping the sound of bluegrass part of the Newfoundland musical scene.

From the beginning, Neil was the anchor and driving force behind the band. He grew up in the western United States, in Washington, New Mexico and California, moving to Ohio in the late 1950s to go to college and it was there that he first came into contact with bluegrass music.

"Back then college students were just getting into folk music and bluegrass was part of that," he says. "I was really taken by the sound, started playing it with some friends, and by the time I moved to Indiana in 1961 to do graduate studies in folklore, I was pretty well immersed in the music." Bloomington, Indiana is where Rosenberg spent the next seven years. His studies in folklore were not directed toward bluegrass--the topic was considered less than respectable by his professors--but he was able to get a hands-on education in the music another way. Bloomington is not far from Bean Blossom, where Bill Monroe's Brown County Jamboree ran every Sunday during the summer months. As he recalls it, it didn't take him long to get involved. "I played in the house band, hung out backstage to listen to and pick in jam sessions, entered banjo contests (won a couple, too!), shared meals with musicians, taped shows, managed the Jamboree during the 1963 season, and helped run the band contests at Monroe's first two Bean Blossom bluegrass festivals in 1967 and 1968. I got to know a great many musicians and fans." He even played a few times with the founder of bluegrass music, Bill Monroe--enough to put his name on Blue Grass Boys belt buckle #120, given to him by the Grand Ole Opry and Bluegrass Unlimited on Bill's birthday in 1987.

His interest in bluegrass music as a folklorist continued to grow. In 1985 he produced Bluegrass: A History, the definitive book on the roots and development of bluegrass, which established him as an authority in the area. That authority grew with other publications, numerous articles, and interviews over the years, culminating in 2018 with Bluegrass Generation, the memoir of his involvement with the emerging bluegrass scene of the 1960s. Neil arrived in St. John's in early September, 1968. He'd driven 4000 km from Bloomington, Indiana to begin work in the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Earlier that summer he'd been teaching in Texas, and only a few weeks before had been jamming at a fiddle contest near Dallas with great pickers like Byron Berline, Alan Munde, Eddie Shelton, and Sam Bush.

He didn't find many people in Newfoundland who knew about--much less even played--bluegrass music. Eventually he heard about the Bluegrass Mountaineers, a band that had been active locally in the late '50s and early '60s. But at the time the only Canadian bluegrass he'd heard had been on the York County Boys' Arc album. In 1971, after mainly picking bluegrass at home for a couple of years, Neil and his wife Ann Milovsoroff joined with two folksingers, Mary McKim of St. John's, and Shelley Posen, a Torontonion studying at Memorial, to form the short-lived Sneed Hearn and the Smiling Liberators, a group best-remembered in St. John's today for its name. They played some bluegrass, and it was in this context that they met Ted Rowe and began jamming with him.

Up to then, Ted's exposure to bluegrass was modest. He grew up singing and playing Newfoundland and country music in Heart's Content, an outport town in Trinity Bay about 140 miles from St. John's, discovering folk music when he was in his teens. He heard bluegrass as played by the Bluegrass Mountaineers on radio and TV and saw them perform at a St. John's club in the 1960s while he was a student at Memorial. His introduction to the wider world of bluegrass came from a 1960 recording of Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys (Columbia Harmony HL7250) that he bought around the same time.

In 1968 (just weeks before Neil arrived) Ted left Newfoundland for graduate work in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Alberta, and along the way had occasion to jam with a couple of banjo players. In 1972 he returned home to join the faculty at Memorial University, where he taught Psychology. His specialty was human memory, which may help explain how he's been able to remember the lyrics to the many old country, bluegrass, and folk songs that he's sung with Crooked Stovepipe through the years. Ted eventually left teaching to become a real estate agent, and in the early 1980s brought the Re/Max franchise to Newfoundland. He became well-known in the province not only for his business activities, but also for his volunteer work in the arts and heritage community.

For Ted, joining Neil in Crooked Stovepipe was like taking a master class with a “walking encyclopedia” of bluegrass (his words) as he became familiar with a wide range of bluegrass styles and repertoire. Ted sings with a mellow baritone lead voice (some reviewers have compared it to that of Virginia bluegrass pioneer Bill Clifton) and he plays both rhythm and lead on his Collings D1A. Three of his sons have been members of Crooked Stovepipe at different times; son Dave started as the band’s bass man while he was in high school, and now plays mandolin.

Crooked Stovepipe performed actively in Newfoundland’s folk and country music scenes from 1973 onward but didn’t begin commercial recording for nearly twenty years. In the early 90s, when folk festivals were happening in many Newfoundland communities, they decided it was time to head for the studios.

They began with *Newfoundland Bluegrass*, a cassette project, in 1992. Four tracks were added to the cassette’s thirteen for a 1994 CD release. The band included fiddler Don Randell, who joined in 1976. Don had been playing country and bluegrass throughout Newfoundland since the late ‘40s and was well-known from his appearances on the CBC-TV show “All Around The Circle”. Mandolinist Scott Swindon, a native of Nova Scotia who’d come to St. John’s to study geology, came on board in the early ‘80s, as did bassist Jim Rillie, who’d arrived from Montreal on the road with a country band. The album included a number of tracks featuring the 3-row button accordion of Baxter Wareham, the virtuoso famous for the song “Rubber Boots,” giving their music a familiar sound for local ears.

In 1997 they returned to the studio with producer Gary O’Driscoll, whose project with The Irish Descendants had been a popular local hit, to create *Pickin’ On The Rock*, a 13-track sequel to *Newfoundland Bluegrass*, with the same personnel.

The band had changed considerably by 2005 when it released their third album, *Just In Case*. Following Don’s retirement, young Newfoundland fiddler Patrick Moran joined. He’d worked with Irish, country and folk-rock groups including the Punters. Mandolinist Scott Swindon had returned to Nova Scotia; his place was taken by Rex Yetman, who’d been with

Canada's first recorded bluegrass band, the York County Boys. A native of Jamestown, Newfoundland, he'd retired to his hometown in the '90s.

Bassist Jim Rillie had also moved on, so Ted's son Dave, who'd been playing with local rock bands, took over at that spot. During his quarter century tenure with the band since then, Dave moved through high school and university, playing bass in a number of bands. In 2015 he took over St. John's oldest music store, O'Brien's. Founded in 1939 by his grandfather, the store has been a mainstay of the Newfoundland traditional music scene; Dave grew up working there. Today he also plays with the High and Lonesome Ramblers.

At the East Coast Music Association's 2006 Awards Show *Just In Case* was named "Bluegrass Recording of the Year." Crooked Stovepipe wasn't in Charlottetown to accept the award, so Tom Power, then Neil's banjo pupil, and later the band's bassist, stood in for them. Today Tom is well-known as the host of "Q" on CBC national radio.

In 2010 singer-songwriter Colleen Power, a popular folk-rock musician based in St. John's, whose daughter Clare had fallen in love with the music on the *Newfoundland Bluegrass* cassette, approached Crooked Stovepipe with an idea to create an album of bluegrass style music for children. The result was *For Little Ones*, which Power recorded and produced. Rex Yetman had passed away in 2009, and Dave Rowe had moved to mandolin (he also played bass on this project); the fiddle was provided by Charles Cook.

In 2013 Ted and Neil went back into the band's collection of live appearance recordings to pull together 17 earlier performances in celebration of their 40th year together and released them on *Live 'n Pickin'*. It included nine tracks from a 1983 CBC radio show produced by Glen Tilley, who also played bass on tracks recorded at the Newfoundland and Labrador folk festival. In addition to the various band members already mentioned, the project included guest appearances by famous Newfoundland singer-songwriter Ron Hynes, and the duo of singer John Lacey and guitarist Gordon Quinton.

When this album was released, bassist Matt Hender had just joined the band. A graduate of Memorial University's School of Music, when not teaching or performing Matt works on the family farm in Conception Bay South. Crooked Stovepipe is not his only musical

gig, he also plays bass with St. John's award-winning speed-folk Ukrainian band, the Kubasonics, and the High and Lonesome Ramblers. He recently released his first solo album as a singer-songwriter.

In 2015, fiddler Carole Bestvader, a native of Saskatchewan, became the newest member of the band. She'd moved to Newfoundland a few years earlier to do a music degree at Memorial and decided to stay. Carole performs with the Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra, the Strong Harbour Strings Collective, the Sizzle Sisters, and the High and Lonesome Ramblers -- to name a few. She also works as a teacher in the Suzuki Program and with individual pupils. Conversant with tunes and styles associated with several genres, including bluegrass, Irish, Newfoundland, Scandinavian, and Appalachian folk music, Carole still considers the Old-Time fiddle music she grew up with to be the essence of her playing.

In 2018 Crooked Stovepipe's latest album, *Hand-Picked: Bluegrass Music from Newfoundland*, produced by Nashville veteran singer-guitarist Craig Young, was released. This is the first album to feature the band's current lineup of Ted, Neil, Dave, Carole and Matt. They've also appeared on two song tracks in the Memorial University Resource Centre for the Study of Music, Media and Place's "Back On Track" album series.

The band today continues to perform an eclectic repertoire developed over its 50-year history, anchored in classic bluegrass with a sprinkling of old-time country and folk, Newfoundland music old and new, and fiddle and banjo instrumentals. Artists like Bill Monroe ("Blue Moon of Kentucky"), Flatt and Scruggs ("Cabin in Caroline"), The Stanley Brothers ("Riding That Midnight Train"), and Mac Wiseman ("I Still Write Your Name in the Sand") are well represented. "It's hard to improve on the original sounds that gave bluegrass its unique feel," Ted says. "I was drawn to it by Lester Flatt's smooth vocals backed by the punch of Scruggs' banjo, and for me it still doesn't get much better than that." Material from other performers over the years that has found its way into Crooked Stovepipe's set lists, such as the Seldom Scene, J. D. Crowe, and James King, retains the flavor of the classic bluegrass sound.

Old-time country songs have always had a place in the band's shows and recordings. Their first performance at that kite festival in 1973 had two numbers made popular by the

Carter Family - "Keep on the Sunny Side" and "Bury Me Beneath the Willow," (the latter done as an instrumental), and the tradition continues on. Recent shows, for example, have had versions of Lefty Frizzell's "Long Black Veil" and the country standards "We live in Two Different Worlds" and "Banks of the Ohio." Folk music showed up in the band's initial repertoire as well, with grassed-up renditions of Woody Guthrie's "Do-Re-Me," the Newfoundland folksongs "The Old Polina," "Star of Logy Bay," and "Tiny Red Light."

Folksong remained an integral part of Crooked Stovepipe's performances and recordings, especially the music of Newfoundland and Labrador as represented by songwriters like Omar Blondahl ("Concerning Charlie Horse"), Peter Narváez ("Just in Case" and "Vitamin C"), Dick Gardiner ("Labrador Rose"), the prolific pen of Ron Hynes ("Captain John" and "Get Back Change") and more recently Sherry Ryan's "Stop the Trains." Newfoundland audiences love hearing the music of their homeland and Crooked Stovepipe has made it a point over the years of including selections from the "Newfoundland songbook."

From the beginning, Neil says, 'we've always included some gospel pieces in our recordings and performances. Our audiences appreciate the close harmonies on songs like 'Turn Your Radio On' and 'This World is Not My Home.'"

It all comes together in a fast-paced show, pushed along in the bluegrass style interspersed with a few songs of slower tempo (but not too slow!). Most of the material will be familiar to the audience but the band likes to introduce a few new gems they've come up with from time to time. Old-time fiddle tunes keep the pace going, along with some upbeat banjo instrumentals including Neil Rosenberg originals like "Queenstown" or "Blind Sugar Hill." Ted and Dave handle most of the lead vocals with backup harmonies by Dave, Neil and Matt. You might hear a novelty song or two like "The Prison Dance" or "Mama's Nightmare," a parody of Ron Hynes' "Sonny's Dream". The show usually wraps up with either Ron Hynes' rouser "Take a Chance on Love" or Roy Payne's "There's no Price Tags on the Doors of Newfoundland," a song identified with the band from the beginning.

With 50 years under its belt, it's no surprise to find that Crooked Stovepipe has played a broad range of venues, from dimly-lit bars to open-air festivals and most everything in

between. Some settings have been more memorable than others, like the time we were performing at one end of a large arena housing the Bakeapple Folk Festival in L'Anse au Loup, Labrador. There was a crowd of people there milling around the exhibitions and displays with no one except for two or three lost souls paying any attention to the band. Then Neil finished a high-octane banjo instrumental and the place went up. Well, we thought, that worked pretty well. It took a minute to realize that the wild applause was for an event at the other end of the arena – the town mayor going in the dunk tank!

We encountered our most appreciative audience ever in the band's first year when we were asked to play at Her Majesty's Penitentiary in St. John's. The scene was highly-charged from the get-go, the place packed with inmates (men at the front, women ushered in at the rear after the men were seated), prison guards all around the hall. It didn't really matter what we played – we got an energetic ovation, along with whoops and hollers, after every number. If you've heard the 1968 album *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, you get the picture.

In October 1976 Memorial University hired the band to entertain at a special dinner. It turned out to be special for us in a couple of ways. On arriving at the dining hall we peeked in through the door we saw the guest of honor Dame Vera Lynn, recipient that day of an honorary degree, seated at the head table. Don Randell, our first-class fiddler but a meek and bashful man, said "That's Vera Lynn! I'm not playing in there." It was his only case of stage fright in 25 years with the band, and it took some convincing to assure him that we had to play, regardless. So in we go and set up on a little makeshift stage at the back of the room. Though Ted and Neil were both teaching at Memorial at the time and had jammed informally at a few office parties, the band was still not well-known outside folk circles in St. John's. At least we weren't well-known to the person introducing us who, after long drawn-out comments on traditional Newfoundland folk music proceeded to present us as a prime example of same. Our few Newfoundland numbers got us off the ground, but the rest of the evening was bluegrass and country, and blank stares.

In 2004 we were part of a group that started up a Bluegrass and Old-Time Country Music Society, sponsoring jam sessions, concerts, and an annual festival before folding in 2019.

The open mic jam sessions lived on and multiplied, well-supported by the old-time country musicians. Several are still ongoing at a number of communities in eastern Newfoundland and at the present time there is an informal monthly Bluegrass Jam at the Ship Pub in St. John's. The bands that formed during the festival years have largely disappeared, but the High and Lonesome Ramblers have since appeared on the scene with core players Dave Rowe, Carole Bestvater, Matt Hender and Matt Hornell.

Over the years Crooked Stovepipe has had occasion to play all over our province, reaching others through radio and TV, and we've spread the "Newfoundland Bluegrass" sound through appearances in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, and Alberta. At home in 2023, we're still performing in our fiftieth year, honored to be the longest-running bluegrass band in Canada.