

EXPECT THE BEST.



NATALIE MACMASTER & DONNELL LEAHY: FAMILY, FIDDLES & BEING THE BEST YOU CAN BE

by DUNCAN FLETCHER

To take a step into the home of Canadian Celtic music duo Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy is to step into the heart of the music itself. Fiddles, piano, bag pipe chanters, drums and voice fill every room as the younger Leahy-MacMasters pick up the tools of their parents trade and begin to forge their own legacy.

In fact they are well on their way. The younger clan – now numbering six, from 16 months to 9 years of age, are already a fixture in the rollicking, foot-stomping, step-dancing, down-home Ceilidhs that people have come to expect of Leahy-MacMaster shows. That seems to be a natural progression to anyone acquainted with the legacies of Leahy and MacMaster both of whom have music and family at the heart of what they do.

But for MacMaster, the “natural talent” everyone seems to attribute to her and her family is not nature’s magic, but rather the result of old-fashioned practice and dedication. With a laugh, she explains, “everyone says ‘oh they must come out playing.’ Well, no they don’t” she corrects, adding that a well-placed push is often in order.

“You just shove a fiddle in their hand,” she begins. Once they gain some ability, “they extract their own enjoyment” that, in turn, motivates them to go further on their own – even in the face of a competing nature to go out and play instead.

What does seem natural for the clan is the inclination to promote a collaborative environment that focuses on making the best music possible – the kind of environment that both Leahy and MacMaster come from.

Platinum Blonde on having fun and never growing up

by DUNCAN FLETCHER

For those who remember the 80s first hand, it’s hard to have memories that don’t include a soundtrack with Platinum Blonde hits. From the searing guitar intro of *Doesn’t Really Matter* on the hit-laden 1983 *Standing in the Dark* album, to the opening harmony of *Crying Over You* and the catchy *Situation Critical* from 1985’s *Alien Shores*, they were everywhere.

It was quite a ride for the young trio of singer-bassist Mark Holmes, guitarist Sergio Galli and drummer Chris Steffler, who rocketed out of the Toronto club scene to international prominence. The addition of a fourth member, Scottish ex-pat Kenny MacLean in 1985, did nothing to slow their rising star.

Holmes credits MTV, *Much Music* and other video programs for much of their sudden fame, offering tongue-in-cheek, that “a whole generation of teenagers got to see us in tight trousers.”

Mass media video allowed a larger, closer, more intense connection with fans who could not only hear their songs, but experience their energy, flashy style and swagger.

The band ultimately went separate ways in 1990. But with Electronic superstars Crystal Castles backed by *The Cure*’s Robert Smith released a hugely popular version of *Not in Love* in 2010, a new generation of fans began to clamour for their unique sound.

But Holmes steadfastly refused to rely on past laurels, and was determined to bring new material to the table. While conceding they still play their hits in concert, he says, “I’m not into glorifying the past. It’s not where we’re at.”

The newer material includes the 2012 release *Now & Never* that turned out to be a huge success with hits like *Beautiful* and *Valentine* becoming concert staples that are as embraced as fully as the old hits – especially by younger fans, who Holmes notes comprise the bulk of modern day Platinum Blonde concert attendees.

Fans old and new can look forward to a new album coming this fall, tentatively titled, *Symphony Orchestra*, that Holmes promises will be a relevant expression of what Platinum Blonde

Before they joined forces, both MacMaster and Leahy were already Celtic music royalty in their own right. MacMaster, the Cape Breton Girl – a prodigy of sorts herself, learned from and inspired by masters like her uncle, Cape Breton legend Buddy MacMaster and others. She began performing as young girl in community centres across Nova Scotia, beginning her recorded career at 16.

Embraced for her musical prowess, boundless energy and love of her home, she not only helped to bring the “Cape Breton sound” to millions but also sought out and incorporated contemporary and international influences creating a sound and audience all her own. Appearances on high profile television shows like *Good Morning America*, *Conan O’Brien* and even *Sesame Street* only heightened her appeal.

Similarly Donnell Leahy, the elder sibling in the award-winning Leahy family, came to the realization early that he was meant to play. Having a fiddle put in his hand at the tender age of two by his fiddling parents, he says, “I knew right away. I wanted to be like my dad and play like my dad.”

That meant being very good, and he was. He and his siblings brought their Ontario blend of traditional and contemporary fiddle music to international acclaim. With the Leahy trademark, thousand-notes-a-minute pace and Donnell’s technical mastery, they broke out big with their 1996 album, *Leahy*. Anchored by the incendiary *Call of the Dance* single and video, they wowed a whole generation of fans that had no idea they liked the fiddle. They went from filling halls on their own, to playing stadiums backing up Shania Twain for almost two years. Along the way, they continued to pick up influences that show in their music today.

That natural, collaborative tendency is found in the couple’s long-awaited, new album, *One* – their first together. Released earlier this year, it encompasses styles from across the world, but always imbued with the Ontario and Cape Breton “accents” that each has become famous for.

“Making this record is something people always expected,” relates Leahy. “We always expected it, but it was always delayed because it was never the priority.” “But when it did happen,” adds MacMaster “it was a monumental big deal.”

“I’m a big fan of Natalie and she’s a big fan of mine,” says Leahy. “So we’re also cheerleaders for each other. It’s a great environment, a great spirit to work in.”

The delay also allowed some big name talent to get on board in the form of famed, Juno award-winning rock producer Bob Ezrin who is also a fan. Introduced by Scottish-Canadian country star Johnny Reid, Leahy relates that far from forcing his rock side on the project Ezrin turned out to be a true collaborator who “broadened” and “affected” the music but did not change it. Any rock influences, like the addition of some electric guitar in parts, Leahy says is his doing. He relates how Ezrin reacted. “He shook his head and started laughing and said ‘I love it, but they’re going to blame me for this.’”

Life doesn’t promise to become any less busy for the duo, who bring their multi-media show to the Flato Markham Theatre, where they will perform at the 30th Anniversary Season Gala on October 17 with special guest Heather Rankin. Their appearance also sets the stage for a number of other high profile Canadian and international performers that also include a few other Celtic inspired evenings including Leahy: *The Next Generation* – a performance by Donnell’s brother, Doug, and his talented family on December 19, as well as Canadian Irish music icons, the Irish Rovers on November 5 and *Celtic Nights* – a spectacular presentation of Irish music, dance and art from Ireland’s most talented performers, March 12.

MacMaster and Leahy, will also receive one of the first Markham Performance Awards, an annual presentation to those who have contributed to the performing arts in that city. September 25 will also see them starring in Canada’s Walk of Fame celebrations headlining a Massey Hall show, which MacMaster describes as a career highlight, knowing that once again they have the opportunity to make great music and be the best they can be. If they can do that, concludes Leahy, “everything else will look after itself.” Naturally.



was and is – a band that has always embraced creative energy, new sounds and technology.

“Once you make the fatal mistake of growing up, your art is over,” says Holmes. “But we’re still doing relevant things and I’m still having fun.”

Luckily fans don’t have to wait for the new album to get a sneak peek of the new material and hear the hits as Platinum Blonde rocks the Flato Markham Theatre, Fri. Sept. 25th. Get tickets at the theatre box office or www.markhamtheatre.ca