

Mar. 16, 2006



Greg Quill
Entertainment Columnist, Toronto Star

Songwriting 'good therapy'

January was a dismal month for Ron Hynes.

He had a new self-titled album in the can, 14 of the best songs he has ever written, recorded late last year by veteran Toronto roots music producer Paul Mills, and his first songbook, *The Songs Of Ron Hynes Vol. 1* — a collection of 26 pieces culled from the beloved Newfoundland troubadour's classic compositions of the 1970s and '80s, published by Vinland Music — ready to be shipped.

"And I had to sit and wait for a month or more for things to get into gear," Hynes said earlier this week over the phone from Corner Brook, where he was taking part for the second year running in that city's March Hare poetry, spoken-word and music festival, a local institution for the past 19 years.

"This was the best work of my life, before and after I sobered up, and waiting to get out on the road and start playing it ... well, it nearly killed me."

It has been just over three years since the release of his East Coast Music Award-winning *Get Back Change*, and about as long since Hynes, one of Canada's most critically acclaimed musical poets, finished a 80-day residential addiction recovery program, an experience he chronicles with painful honesty in the songs "Dry" and "My Name Is Nobody." Those tracks are arguably the most compelling and personal pieces on the new CD, which will be launched by Borealis Records with a concert Sunday night at Hugh's Room.

"I haven't been particularly prolific in that time, just 11 new songs, one co-written with my daughter, Lily, and three older tunes — 'Movie Scene,' which I wrote while I was with Wonderful Grand Band in the 1970s and which Valdy recorded; 'Sorry, Lori,' a co-write with (WGB producer) Declan Doherty; and 'Piccadilly Sand Farewell,' which I wrote with (Newfoundland fiddler and composer) Emil Benoit," said Hynes, adding that his addiction to the adrenalin boost that comes with songwriting is almost as powerful as his addiction to alcohol and drugs.

"My counsellor told me I had to stop writing while I was in the program because the rush of creativity might impede my recovery," he explained. "But I had to write. I couldn't stop. I'd do it under the covers at night. I was writing myself out of addiction ... it was good therapy for me."

Four songs on the new CD were recorded live — just Hynes and bassist Dennis Pendrith in concert last April at the former Longshoreman's Protective Union Hall in St. John's, now a theatre and cultural centre — for broadcast on local CBC Radio. The performances reveal Hynes at the peak of form, kinetically attuned to his hometown audience, in need of nothing more than his powerful narratives, soaring voice and wry humour. Their inclusion on this landmark recording makes it indispensable.

The Hynes songbook, already hailed by cultural nationalists as a long overdue addition to the Canadian canon, includes guitar-and-voice transcriptions of such masterpieces as "Sonny's Dream," "Atlantic Blue," "St. John's Waltz," "Back Home On The Island," "Leaving On The Evening Tide" and "Godspeed," songs that transcend their Newfoundland origins and were long ago absorbed into the international folk repertoire.

Noting that this is the first in a series of Hynes collections proposed by his publisher, the songwriter is particularly proud of the book, though he had no hand in its production.

"I can't read music worth a damn," he confessed. "Reading and writing music is too exacting for someone like me. I just write a lyric and wait till it starts singing back at me. But I've wanted to have a book of my songs for a long time. I used to look at others in music stores, the collected works of Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and the like, and I'd think, 'Where's mine? I like the idea that these songs are now available in libraries and schools, new Newfoundland songs for young people to learn. These songs are who I am — not a country singer, but part of a small community of farmers and fishermen living on the edge of the world.'"

And now that he's out on the road again, busier and more content than he has been in years — yet always wary, he said, of the demons that almost consumed him — Hynes finds he has the peace of mind to take on another load. He's writing additional songs for a stage musical he and former Wonderful Grand Band partner, comedian Mary Walsh, wrote in 1984, and which is about to be remounted.

"It's called *High Steel*, and it's about Newfoundlanders who helped build New York's skyscrapers in the 1920s and '30s," he said. "I'd forgotten all about it, and when Mary played the original songs for me, I couldn't believe how good they were".

"I can do this. I'm good now. I feel great. I'm glad to be out there, glad to be doing it ... one day at a time."