

Cape Breton, Nova Scotia - One of the last remaining Celtic satellite communities of the world - a transplanted Scottish highland that has carried within its bosom a two hundred year old tradition of the finest fiddle playing. Down all the days the music has essentially remained the same. That is until the coming of Ashley MacIsaac - a precocious pioneering upstart who began presenting it in a different way, doing new things with the old music of the highlanders.

MacIsaac, a native of Cape Breton, who began playing fiddle at the age of nine and has since become a local legend, is flagrantly challenging tradition to re-create, messing it up until it's unclear then forging ahead with his version - a new age fusion of Celtic soundscapes interwoven on a symbiotic tapestry with contemporary forms. The result is HITM HOW ARE YOU TODAY? MacIsaac's major label debut. "I have something that I enjoy and that I come from," he pronounces, "and now I'm developing a whole other thing around it because of media and culture." What MacIsaac is doing for the Celtic music tradition is, in essence, what rap artists have been doing for the urban soul music of America. MacIsaac agrees yet "I would parallel it a lot closer to, say, if Robert Johnson was in a time machine and got thrown into the 1990's and put his music in with what's happening now." Certainly, there is evidence of this on the multi-textured HITM HOW ARE YOU TODAY? Traditional music is shaking hands in some very new circles, from grunge (Rusty D-con- STRUCK-tion) to industrial (Beaton's Delight) to new age Celtic mantras (Sleep Maggie).

For MacIsaac, however, the album is laden with one overriding influence - television. "What I'm doing musically on this album is not any different to what I would have done playing the fiddle without any of the

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arrangements. So what I bring into the music is the TV culture of America that I've been exposed to only over the last three years of my life really. For me America is TV."

HITM HOW ARE YOU TODAY? reverberates as much commonality (at varying times) with the voices of The Clash and The Ramones (The Devil in the Kitchen), with House & Industrial dance rhythms and with new age as it does with the age old echoes of the Scottish foggy dew. It is vulgar rhythm and groove music-gritty, unsentimental, bastardized, but always retaining the integrity of the fiddle tune (Brenda Stubbert).

"I wanted to do a hip hop track and I wanted to do a more Ramones sounding fiddle track or quartet sounding solo track but

these were just my ideas. To be completely honest the stuff came up because I was around people who could do it. They worked around my structures and we said 'How would you make a dance tune, like I'd heard in the New York clubs, out of a fiddle tune. But it's the same kind of hook. Fiddle tunes are just 16 bars of dance hooks" (look no further than Wing-Stock)

He continues, offering further insight into his rather eccentric muse; "The reason I don't mind wearing platforms and bell bottoms and basically being a fiddle slut is because I still do play in a structured way and it's totally fusion because of that. So I'm not a grunge fiddler, and I'm not a rock fiddler and I'm not a slow Celtic fiddler...I'm just a Cape Breton fiddler who's learned to put things other ways. It's multi-media to music."

Ashley MacIsaac has a somewhat daunting presence for a fiddle player. His image and aura are such that he would not be found out of place as an extra on the movie Braveheart. He wears a kilt, a pair of scruffy army boots and bleached hair. His look and his music are barbaric and devilish, stubborn and proud, tawdry and threatening. When the fiddle players from the old country played in the sitting room they didn't sound too


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polite. MacIsaac offers little to alter this celtic custom. His music sounds at times like voodoo fiddle-carrying down a tradition of hundreds of years of celtic suppression, oppression and rage. This truly is heart music

. "My father once said to me "If you want to play the fiddle get mad at it or don't play it at all," MacIsaac recalls, adding "When I go out and do my live show I present the image of angry young man when on stage. It's angst or punk and that's what the Celts were, punks. But it's also about romancing because the Celts were also about that."

MacIsaac's success has been received with some ambivalence by the natives of Cape Breton, some of whom claim he has abandoned the inheritance he has received from the fiddling ancestry. "I sort of love that" he exclaims, clearly confident in his ability to push the limits of his music, himself and his people's native culture. Just because he comes from a small town doesn't mean he has to be a perpetual extension of it. Ashley MacIsaac has a bigger world vision. Doubtless, though, this ambivalence will soon be counter-balanced with wide acclaim when HITM HOW ARE YOU TODAY? is unleashed on an unsuspecting American public of the multi-media age. Quite a prospect lies before us of screaming teens step dancing in the mosh pit, an erstwhile outlandish thought. For someone who loves to be the center of attention, how does Ashley feel about such jig inspired gymnastics? "I'm here to entertain and to invite people into my tradition. I think it's completely insane and utterly absurd that people do it and yet it's not because there's no reason they shouldn't. It's about energy."

The US release of HITM HOW ARE YOU TODAY? which took over two years to come to fruition, arrives following a whole learning experience by cultural osmosis for MacIsaac. It combines tracks that appear as 'around the

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kitchen table' productions (Spoonboy, What an idiot he is) with more embellished musical mergers (Sleepy Maggie, Rusty D-CONSTRUCK-tion, The Devil in the Kitchen) while graciously genuflecting before the tradition that this exciting experimental hybrid came from in the first place (Mac Dougall's Pride, Sad Wedding Day). This is a traditional record for the 1990's delivered in an uncompromised yet untraditional way.

HITM HOW ARE YOU TODAY? has already gone Platinum in Canada. He has impressed upon the stage, stomping the boards with Paul Simon, Edie Brickell (also guesting on Brickell's album Picture Perfect album), David

Byrne, The Chieftans and avant-guard composer Philip Glass. So where does his ultimate vision lie for this celtic fusion movement he has cultivated? "I have no problem in fusing it with anything. My influences are very broad because of TV and range from wanting to do 'Danny Boy What A Girl' with Ru Paul and get dressed in drag to whatever takes flight."

There remains little doubt about MacIsaac's character though. He, more than anyone, realizes where his music has and always will continue to grow from. "People who have really got attached to my whole image thing have also come to respect what it's all about in the first place. I do plan on continuing to live in Cape Breton and playing for square dances. I don't want any other label except 'Ashley MacIsaac, from Cape Breton, playing the fiddle."

THE ASHLEY MAC ISAAC HOME PAGE

