

Brett Ryan's New Inspiration

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Nova Scotia recording artist Brett Ryan has explored several genres during his 20-year career in the music business. An early winner of one of the first East Coast Music Awards for Best Male Vocalist, the Halifax-based songwriter--and audio post facility owner--has recently released his latest album, a 13-song collection entitled *St. Cecilia Soul*.

Anyone working in the entertainment sector these days must be prepared to weather the ups and downs of the business, finding inspiration in parallel careers. Ryan found his latest inspiration in the restoration of a tiny Purcell's Cove Church--aptly named St. Cecilia's, the patron saint of musicians--which he turned into a warm, compact and inviting recording studio co-operated with Nova Scotia audio legend Hayward Parrott.

I should admit that like Hayward, I've been lucky enough to be a collaborator of Brett's, having worked on song lyrics with him for almost as long as he's been recording. Back in 1987, the lanky musician played bass and managed the briefly sensational Halifax modern alternative rock trio Little Ministers. The group released a single album on vinyl and cassette, juggled record contract offers from three majors, and then disappeared into the enveloping mist of Nova Scotia's rich musical history.

Brett Ryan took this experience forward to build a solo career which eventually netted him a worldwide deal with Canadian Indie outfit Attic Records in 1991. His first disc, *The Answer's Electric*, went Top 20 in this country and Top 10 in Australia and New Zealand. The album and hit title single still get played on radio in various parts of the world to this day, from Japan to Belgium to Norway.

The gutsy roots-rock sound of *The Answer's Electric* gave way to a denser, more polished sound on his second album, *The Babylon Mask*, released independently after amicably parting from Attic a couple of years later. Working again with producer Terry Brown--who helmed the first twelve Rush albums, along with handling production chores for groups such as The Cutting Crew and Blue Rodeo--Brett Ryan carved out some more substantial territory on his sophomore effort.

The Babylon Mask also sported two supporting music videos from then-rising East Coast motion-picture genius Mike Clattenburg, who at that time was a few years away from inventing his hit Showcase TV series *The Trailer Park Boys*. Clattenburg's intense and fluid visual style matched Ryan's material just about perfectly; they may be most impressive music videos ever to have come out of the Atlantic Region.

The mid-1990s, however, saw the East Coast's days in the international music industry spotlight reach an eclipse. Brett responded by releasing an EP entitled *A Place At the Table*. He also appeared on an episode of CBC TV's acclaimed music program *Up On the Roof*. Penning tunes for groups and artists such as The Irish Descendants and Wayne Nicholson, Brett kept one foot in a declining business while taking up a new passion, the restoration of run-down Victorian buildings in and around the Halifax region.



Another full album followed in 1998. Called *Escaping Gravity*, it re-united Ryan with Terry Brown and a quizzical cast of guest stars including The Cutting Crew's Nick Van Eede. The disc had a lighter tone with whimsical undertones, bringing lushness back to Brett's primary pop palette.

As the music business began to stall out right around the world through the turn of the century--the seven major companies merged to four, and then three--the square-jawed Halifax-based musician turned most of his energy to raising a young family and his continued passion of building restoration.

Flash forward to 2004, when Brett stumbled upon an abandoned de-consecrated Catholic Church embedded in a hillside in Purcell's Cove, just across from Halifax's beautiful Point Pleasant Park. Finding musical inspiration in the old choir loft of the former house of prayer and praise, Ryan felt the urge to return to recording.

Transforming the tiny church into a modern recording and post-production sound facility while retaining its profound spiritual warmth--he even had his father make new stained glass windows--Brett Ryan embarked on a new path towards a tight, passionate soul sound that recalled the great days of pop/soul on the radio in the early 1970s when the likes of Curtis Mayfield and Van Morrison ruled the airwaves.

Consorting with one of Canada's greatest arrangers, Doug Riley--the man rang up a string of hits as the head of a giant conglomerate known as Dr. Music in the '70s and was one of Ray Charles' pool of musical point-men in the '60s--Brett Ryan moved towards a cool, concise soul/pop sound that summoned up the enduring spirit of Stax and Motown.

The result is *St. Cecilia Soul*, his new album, a 13-track slice of concise, passionate Rhythm-and-Blues-influenced material that sounds like heavenly salvation for music fans weary of today's narrowcast universe.

It's a welcome return to the East Coast recording milieu indeed for Brett Ryan, one determined survivor of an up-and-down Atlantic music scene that certainly seems--with the release of *St. Cecilia Soul*--to be on the rise once more.

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