

SWEET SOUL MUSIC

Converting church into recording studio inspired [Ryan](#) to make *St. Cecilia Soul*
By **STEPHEN COOKE** Entertainment Reporter



FOR SINGER-SONGWRITER Brett Ryan, getting the inspiration for his first CD in nearly a decade was truly a hands-on experience.

Working with producer Hayward Parrott, Ryan had spent the last couple of years converting an old chapel in Purcells Cove into a state-of-the-art recording studio, but at the time he didn't realize he was also laying the foundation for some of the most intimate, soulful music of his career.

The result was *St. Cecilia Soul*, a sparkling collection of organic grooves that takes its name from the church, which was in turn named after the patron saint of music. It's the kind of full circle experience that seems to mark Ryan's return to the East Coast music scene.

"(My wife) Lara always says that the same thing that took me away from music brought me back to music," says Ryan, relaxing on a

leather couch in the main room of the wood-paneled studio. "By the mid-'90s the arse-end had fallen out of the industry, and I realized I had to do something. . . . Luckily, through osmosis, I learned to be handy and how to restore things. I bought some Victorian buildings and restored them and found I could feed my family. Then when we bought this church, during the restoration process I got the bug to write again, it was like being on automatic pilot, waking up in the middle of the night and then being in my home studio until four in the morning, whispering these songs into the microphone.

"It wasn't like I was planning this big comeback or anything; I just wanted to make a really good record."

Unlike the modern rock sound of Ryan's previous albums like the chart-climbing *The Answer's Electric* and *Escaping Gravity*, *St. Cecilia Soul* has a loose, horn and Hammond B3 organ-driven soul sound, mirroring the Stax and Motown sides his dad played around the house when he was growing up. The record features the ace sax section of Chris Mitchell, Kenny MacKay and Jeff Goodspeed, with bassist Jamie Gatti, drummer Dave Burton and percussionist Geoff Arsenault handling the rhythm parts. Bernie LeBarge and James Logan played the guitar parts, while Canadian music legend Doug "Dr. Music" Riley brought his four decades of skill to the keyboards and arrangements.

"When we started doing this album, it was like a lightning rod," says Ryan. "I had no intention of making an R&B/soul/gospel record, 'cause I don't know anything about that; I'm just a blue-eyed pop songwriter. But as soon as I started working on the studio here, I'd come home at night and wake up at two o'clock in the morning and it'd be like taking dictation, the songs would start writing themselves.

"Then it came time to do it, and I had to start thinking about putting the band together. Doug's name came up because he's such a great R&B player and he's the king of B3. Paul Schaffer said he was one of the top three B3 players on the planet. . . . then we got all these great players from Halifax, and it turned into an R&B/soul/pop record."

The addition of a gospel vocal trio in Toronto made the sessions complete, inspiring Ryan to really step up to the plate vocally, delivering a performance reminiscent of Van Morrison's horn-driven recordings of the early '70s. Writing again with lyrical collaborator Ron Foley Macdonald, Ryan considers their work on previous records "more calculated" in terms of constructing a sound and mapping everything out with an eye on the music marketplace.

On St. Cecilia Soul, they decided to let the album's titular muse guide the music and the players through to each song's conclusion.

"This time, it was just 'Let's get some great musicians, give them these songs to play, and see what happens,' "says Ryan. "It was as close as I've come to magic, in terms of getting a chill while doing the tracks."

The next step for Ryan is getting back on stage and reconnecting with a live audience. "We can do a stripped down version of the band with five members, the songs hold up. I can do the whole record on acoustic guitar without all the embellishments, and it still stands up. But we also want to get the right venue and have the complete over-the-top production."

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