



# On with the show

*Musical impresario Brookes Diamond believes that East Coast music is what the world needs now*

“It was somewhat late in life, in my mid-20s, that I discovered that there was some real music happening out here,” says Brookes Diamond, the producer of DRUM!, a musical extravaganza featuring the four major cultures of Nova Scotia. “It was a great revelation for me, like an unveiling. I really turned a corner then and felt an enormous urge to be a part of that music.”

A slew of events conspired to launch Diamond’s career in the music business, coincidences that a fatalist could easily construe as divine scripting. Shanghaied into organizing a Dalhousie University winter carnival while taking a bachelor of education degree in 1971, Diamond met popular Halifax-based Irish band Ryan’s Fancy at a fraternity party and remained fast friends with the musicians. The winter carnival was a success, and contacts made during that time served him well. “I took to it,” says Diamond. “I felt the call to pitch in and help East Coast music become something the world would recognize.”

Between 1970 and 1971 the CRTC was enforcing new regulations, and such artists as Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLauchlan, Valdi, and others began getting serious radio play. Their managers needed someone to promote their concerts on the East Coast, and Diamond had met as a result of the winter carnival. The Rebecca Cohn Auditorium had just been built and hadn’t hosted any kind of concert other than classical. Diamond began booking tours for the new Canadian stars and, at the same time, working with Ryan’s Fancy.

The Irish culture that Ryan’s Fancy exemplified, and the Toronto approach to doing business that Bernie Finkelstein, the manager of Cockburn and McLauchlan, and Bernie Fiedler brought to the table were very different points of view. Diamond says that all were valid and instructive, and their lines of thought continue to influence the way he looks at things. Since those early days, Diamond has managed East Coast stars Rita MacNeil, Bruce Guthro, Bette MacDonald, and Aselin Debison.

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## **DISTINCTIVE RHYTHMS**

The idea for DRUM! came to Diamond in 1995 while on a family vacation to the Fortress of Louisbourg in Cape Breton National Historic Park. Diamond learned that drums were an integral part of the French soldiers’ daily life. On the way home, while thinking of the other predominant cultures in Nova Scotia—aboriginal,

Black, and Celtic—the proverbial light bulb came on. “Each one these cultures are so rhythm based and each have such a distinct sound,” says Diamond. “I thought, wouldn’t it be something to be able to combine and feature each of these cultures in their own right on a stage but also bring them together variously and altogether at once to achieve some rhythmic harmony.”

Putting together a show like DRUM! invited several challenges, both artistic and financial. The idea lay dormant for a few years before Diamond proposed it to the Atlantic Canada Tourism Partnership (ACTP) as a platform for that group’s travelling entertainment package that is performed at tourism trade shows. The ACTP loved the idea, and money and a mandate was given to create the production. That was in 1999, and the show has since evolved into a production that continues to be successful for promoting tourism. “When it got in front of an audience, there was a huge reaction—even more than we had imagined,” says Diamond. “It worked. I knew then that we had to go on a quest and turn it into a live touring production for the general public.”

One of the great challenges of DRUM! has been the use of native music in the production. In the beginning, it was difficult to figure out how to use that sound while keeping all music equally represented. “Their particular rhythm, that straight steady beat, is one that everything else can be built around,” says Diamond. “In a physical sense, the aboriginal drum is at the centre, and in a musical sense, the aboriginal rhythm is at the centre. In a



Keeping the home fires burning: Brookes Diamond wants to create an environment in which our greatest resource—people—can stay and be productive.

SANDOR FIZLI

philosophical or spiritual sense, the [aboriginal] ethos is at the centre of the production.”

While there may have been questions about why one culture is central to the production, Diamond says that simply didn't happen with DRUM! Everyone involved felt it was right. In fact, one of the goals of DRUM! is to promote understanding of the native sound and help it gain popularity.

The unique music that comes from the East Coast is a double-edged sword. Diamond relates a story of a record-company executive in Toronto saying that new music from around Canada typically sounds like what's current in the United

States, but that East Coast music sounds like East Coast music. As a record company, you have to try to figure out what to do with it, whether it's going to translate to the rest of the world. Diamond believes that because East Coast music has stayed true to its roots, that authenticity can be traded on mightily in future, as it has in the past.

For Diamond, Nova Scotia is a magical place. “Where we're from is totally critical to who we are,” he says. “That's a very special thing, and it's an increasingly rare thing.” After years of touring the country with East Coast musicians, Diamond says it's heartbreaking to see all of the Maritimers attending shows and repeating the constant refrain of how

much they miss home. He believes that our greatest challenge is creating an environment where our greatest resource—our people—can stay and be productive.

“We're shipping all these wonderful people out to the world, and it's doing the world a lot of good,” he says, “but I'd like to be selfish and keep them home.” Diamond is in distant repose when he talks about the East Coast diaspora, but the glint of his namesake returns to his eye when he addresses the situation. “If working in an industry that can create more jobs, more pride of place, more desire to stay here, work here, and live here is the effect of it,” he says, “then let's get on with the show.” — JOE FITZGERALD