

Fostering Local Identity: Great Big Sea, Trad-Pop and Folksong

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Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador's distinct regional identity, based on historical, economic and social factors, is recognized by Newfoundlanders and Canadians alike. The existence of Newfoundland's distinct and tangible cultural identity is evident in the popular music of the province, which often highlights Newfoundland's distinct heritage. An examination of the Newfoundland band Great Big Sea will provide an example of Newfoundland's popular music and show that it is aurally recognizable and different from other popular music produced in the country. Although, in the context of pervasive North American pop culture, it is remarkable that Newfoundland music currently retains any aspects of traditional "island culture," Great Big Sea anomalously reflects much of the province's early cultural heritage in its music. Indeed, this was the characteristic that made the band successful first in Newfoundland and then elsewhere.

The deliberate fostering of local identity in popular music can be accomplished both musically and lyrically. Newfoundland heritage may be emphasized by the use of provincial place names, phrases and words in a song's lyrics, and local culture highlighted by the use of popular "folk" instruments traditionally used in the province (Narváez 1995). This combination creates a perceptibly indigenous sound, and, as performed by Great Big Sea, is a means to promote regional identity and further a national consciousness of Newfoundland popular music.

Great Big Sea: A Case Study

A nationally successful band, Great Big Sea has been described as "traditional," "Celtic," and "folk based." The combination of folk music with aspects of rock, pop, and country is known to some as "folk-pop," "trad-rock," or "trad-pop" and has been largely successful for the members of Great Big Sea, who by consistently touring, performing in both small and large venues and slowly increasing their fan base, have sold over one million records in Canada alone. The band presently consists of three musicians, vocalist Alan Doyle, bodhran player and vocalist Sean McCann, and multi-instrumentalist Bob Hallett, although bassist Darrell Power had been a band member for ten years, when in 2003 he left the band

to spend time with his family and pursue other interests. On its most recent album, *Something Beautiful*, the band replaced Power with bassist Murray Foster, and added a percussionist, Kris MacFarlan.

One of the main reasons Great Big Sea is a success in Canada is due to hard work and constant touring. The band has performed up to 200 dates per year, and each summer plays at folk festivals in Europe and the United States. It has opened for rock stars such as Sting and The Tragically Hip, as well as for folk giants Sinead O'Connor and The Chieftains. In Canada, Great Big Sea has performed musical collaborations with Blue Rodeo and La Bottine Souriante. The group has achieved the status of "headliner" for both folk and pop shows, and can promote new folk-rock bands such as Cape Breton's Slainte Mhath by choosing them as an opening act.

The popular music of Newfoundland has distinct features that have escaped appropriation by the mass media. Great Big Sea deliberately promotes this indigenous identity as a positive element of its collective sound. By including in their lyrics familiar Newfoundland place names, phrases and words indigenous to the province, and dialect, the band has helped create a national consciousness of Newfoundland. And through the use of popular folk instruments such as the accordion, harmonica, fiddle, tin whistle, bodhran, mandolin, bones, and bouzouki, Great Big Sea has identified a particular aural location to the rest of Canada. The use of bodhran and the lack of the drum kit make the band's sound different from other trad-pop bands in Canada, and its aggressive vocal approach makes it different from other Newfoundland trad-pop bands. Great Big Sea's music-making mentality is also different from most other groups. It expresses the distinct culture of Newfoundland in a tangible and positive way by playing traditional instruments, performing traditional songs and placing a strong emphasis on folk tradition (Casey, Rosenberg and Wareham 1972). Following in the footsteps of earlier Newfoundland folk bands, Great Big Sea has presented a positive image of Newfoundland to Canada and the rest of the world, and it has been crucial in shaping the local music culture in Newfoundland in the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century. As local, regional and national award

winners, Great Big Sea is regarded as one of the most popular folk bands in Canada, and is breaking genre barriers by combining traditional folk music with pop and rock music. The band tours with instruments such as the bouzouki, fiddles, accordions, bodhrans, bones, harmonica, mandolin and tin whistles, to name a few, and only in the recent albums have they added an electric guitar and a drum kit. Fans demand the traditional songs, regardless of where the band is performing. The promotion of Newfoundland is part of the group's mandate, and their songs highlight the province's rich history.

Great Big Sea prepared its first recording in 1992, an independent self-titled album that sold over 30,000 copies. The band's regional popularity was noticed by Warner Music, which signed a deal with the band in 1995. Its label debut, *Up*, sold over 100,000 copies, and became the first Newfoundland recording to gain Canadian platinum certification. In 1997 the band's third album, *Play*, debuted in the top ten nationwide, achieving gold status in only four weeks. This was a first for a folk-based album and for a Newfoundland band. Later recordings were equally successful, five of the band's albums having gone platinum in Canada. The band continues to release new albums, consistently obtains gold or platinum sales, and is continually featured in articles in the popular press. This is a feat for any band, especially a Newfoundland band that fills its performances with sea shanties and traditional Newfoundland folk songs.

Great Big Sea has achieved success on many levels. The quartet broke the top forty on Toronto's Mix 99 FM radio station with "Lukey", their arrangement of the well-known folk song "Lukey's Boat." As lead singer Alan Doyle enthusiastically noted, "This has to be the first time a Newfoundland traditional song has even broken the top five hundred... in the history of the country" (Roberts 2000). What is more notable is that the arrangement of the traditional folk song was aired on a popular music radio station unaccustomed to playing traditional folk tunes. This groundbreaking mix of traditional folk with pop music is one of the reasons that Great Big Sea is ideal for a study of regional success. The band has kept its local sound despite moving into national and international realms. By many standards, it is performing music that is not considered "popular," yet the band has performed sold-out shows in stadiums across Canada and it has also toured the United States and many other countries, including Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Scotland. It has record deals with various major labels including Warner Music Canada, Rounder

Records (US) and Cooking Vinyl (UK). The album *Rant & Roar*, released by Sire Records, was the first from a Newfoundland band to be released by a major label in America. So why is Great Big Sea able to achieve this kind of success?

Newfoundland Identity

The musical identity of Great Big Sea is centered on its members' cultural identity as Newfoundlanders. The name of the band is an old Newfoundland phrase meaning a rough sea with heavy waves and swell. The lyrics of the songs are filled with other traditional Newfoundland phrases having to do with the ocean, such as "Great Big Sea hove in Long Beach." Other songs performed by the band, such as "Jack Hinks," "Donkey Riding," "Ferryland Sealer" and "Boston and St. John's", speak of the lives of the traditional fishers and sealers of Newfoundland who made their living on the dangerous waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Whether traditional items or original material composed by the band, these songs act as a form of maintenance of the traditional Newfoundland identity of old, and as a form of identity building for a younger generation of Newfoundlanders.

The deliberate promotion of a specifically local image has worked for Great Big Sea. The band promotes the Newfoundland economy by encouraging their fans to vacation "back home" and by using custom-made instruments from the province. The members proudly speak of being first-generation Canadians because their parents were born in the Dominion of Newfoundland before Confederation with Canada took place. Their Canadian nationality, in fact, takes a back seat to their identity as Newfoundlanders. In interviews with the popular press, Great Big Sea is eager to promote the province and its music as distinctive and valuable. As Doyle proclaimed, "We're playing a form of music that is greater than ourselves. Long after we're dead and gone, we'd like to think we introduced the world to a culture everyone should know about" (Bergman 1999: 64).

Newfoundland as "Musical Landscape"

The perceptible and coherent distinctiveness in the sound of popular music created in Newfoundland expresses the unique culture and society of the province. As musicologist Jody Berland noted, listeners can relate to and identify with local music as they recognize it and place it within its distinct musical location. Although national listeners may also respond to local sounds, the emotional claim by local listeners is much more prominent because the

province has a distinct soundscape that represents a unique local position in relation to other provinces in Canada (Berland 1991). Local listeners are often able to identify Newfoundland trad-pop music by aural signifiers such as accent of the performers, familiarity with lyric place-names, and style of the music.

Great Big Sea has further promoted Newfoundland identity in its music by performing songs that are familiar to local audiences. The perceptible difference in the province's music could, in fact, be considered part of a "musical landscape," which Stephen Thirlwall identifies as "a cultural landscape of musical institutions, performance locations and regional differences of sound" (1992: iv). Newfoundland is one example of such a musical landscape in which local folk traditions are emphasized and valued in popular music and culture. As a study by Newfoundland folklorists Casey, Rosenberg and Wareham indicates, the criterion for categorization of a song to be a "Newfoundland song" is that it have "specific significance to Newfoundlanders and [is] believed to be about people and occurrences within the province" (1972: 398). This is important because many Newfoundland songs have been passed down from older generations and are used to give modern audiences a chance to understand the local music as it existed decades ago. Also it gives the contemporary musician a chance to interpret these songs in a new manner, saving some aspects of the song, whilst adding new aspects.

Local Tradition/Oral Tradition

The Newfoundland folk musician is often aware of the ownership of traditional songs, and traditional folk singers often have unique repertoires, distinct from other folk singers (Casey, Rosenberg and Wareham 1972: 401). The musicians of Great Big Sea are faithful in crediting the appropriate song "owner," whether or not the song was learned by a band member or from an outside source. In the band's newsletter, they noted that previous band member Darrell Power performed a rare lead vocal on "Jakey's Gin," because "it was his family's song, so it is only right that he be the one to sing it" (Great Big Sea 1997a).

Local tradition is highly regarded by Great Big Sea and the band members place importance on the aural tradition of learning songs from esteemed local and regional folk singers. As Doyle noted, "there are lots of old folk around who know the original versions of the old tunes. That's important because some songs go through amazing changes" (Stoute 1995). By

preserving the lyrics and sound, the band has made a point of placing value on traditional Newfoundland songs from the outports.

Because in the past many areas of Newfoundland were isolated from mass media, the tradition of local people singing and performing for their own entertainment was quite strong. This facilitated the aural transmission of folksongs, a tradition that Great Big Sea is careful to emulate. The band encourages its fans to learn songs aurally by announcing that, whereas it will post the lyrics of its original compositions on its website, no traditional songs will be found there because "for the most part, these songs were transmitted orally in Newfoundland, and we would prefer to keep it that way. If you can't figure out a particular word, sing what seems right! The spirit of these songs is more important than perfect lyrics and there's no such thing [as] the 'right' words anyway!" Band member Séan McCann explains this assertion by claiming that "We didn't learn our songs from lyric sheets. We didn't even learn them from albums. We learned them from people singing. I think the oral tradition is what defines folk music. Listen to the songs. If you don't get all the words, fine, change it a bit, go right ahead. That's what it's all about." (Clarke Wawrykow 1997: 20).

Lukey's Boat

Three different versions of "Lukey" as recorded by the band highlight various differences between performances, and demonstrate the variety of performances that a folksong can have, even when performed by the same band. Differences exist depending on factors such as recording context, audience participation, and the natural evolution of a band's sound. Great Big Sea's first recorded version is from *Up* (1995), their second is from the compilation album *Fire in the Kitchen* (1998) and the third is from their live album *Road Rage* (2000). A comparison of the recordings shows a variety of verses, tempo, commentary to the audience, lyric interpretation and instrumental lines.

"Every Great Big Sea show is different," says McCann. "We never play anything the same way twice. [For the live album] we didn't want to record a note-perfect imitation of our studio albums. We wanted to capture spontaneity and energy and you can't plan for that" (Great Big Sea 2005). Each of the versions has a distinct feel; "Lukey" on *Up* is slower, and the most serious of the performances. "Lukey/Lukaloney" from *Fire in the Kitchen* is the most instrumental, including extra verses to highlight

the extraordinary musicianship of The Chieftains; and because of its rock interpretation, the version on *Road Rage* strays the most melodically from the traditional folksong. Ironically, the live version is also the most like the traditional performance of a folksong in a group setting, by being the most casual and by including the audience as part of the activity. Although the version with The Chieftains is the most

instrumental, and therefore the most “folk”, of all the versions, it was that recorded version which was played on top-ten rock radio in downtown Toronto. “Lukey/Lukaloney” was made into a music video, and the merry interaction between the two bands clearly shows the style of music-making that is favoured by the folk musicians.

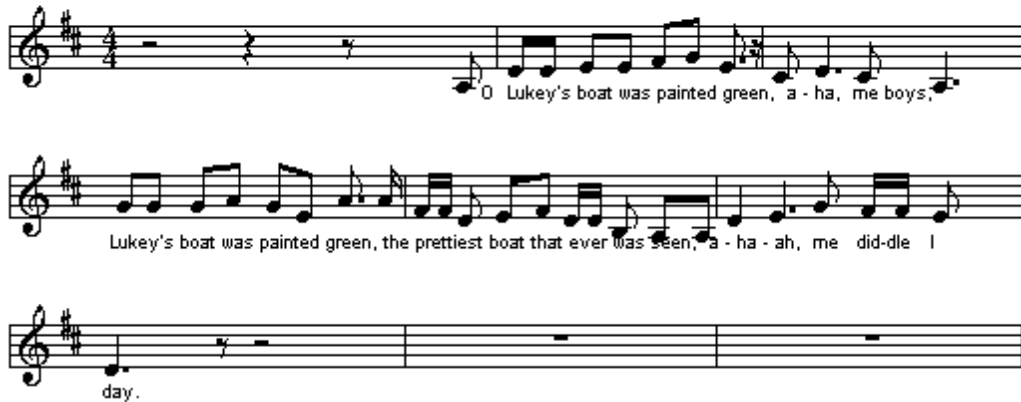
Table One: Three versions of “Lukey” by Great Big Sea

- Featured instruments - Verse included in version

	<i>Up</i> “Lukey” (3:05) tempo: * = 114	<i>Fire in the Kitchen</i> “Lukey/Lukaloney” (3:54) tempo: * = 126	<i>Road Rage</i> “Lukey” (4:15) tempo: * = 128
Introduction	# (bodhran, fiddle, guitar)	<input type="checkbox"/> # (tin whistle, accordion)	Comments by Doyle, audience participation (clapping, cheering and singing) <input type="checkbox"/> # (guitar solo with unusual bass line) “one, two and give it up!”
Verse one	<input type="checkbox"/> # (fiddle)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> # (accordion) “Come on!”
Verse two	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> # (fiddle)	<input type="checkbox"/> (laughter by Doyle/McCann) “Come on!”
Verse three	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> # (tin whistle) “Sing it!”	<input type="checkbox"/> Vocal introduction: “Next one is by yourself so sing it loud!” Audience participation “Everybody jump around!” # (bass, accordion, bones) “Vertical movement!”
Verse four	<input type="checkbox"/> # (guitars, fiddle, bodhran)	<input type="checkbox"/> # (fiddle and tin whistle) “Just sing it now”	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instrumental verse	<input type="checkbox"/> (2x) (guitars, fiddle, bodhran with tipping for percussion)	<input type="checkbox"/> (accordion, bones, bodhran, guitars, bouzouki, fiddle) “hup, two, three, four”	<input type="checkbox"/> # (accordion, bass, guitars, bones, bodhran) “Maximum bass and all frequencies, man!”
Verse five	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> # (tin whistle, fiddle)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Verse six			<input type="checkbox"/> Special verse from “Great Big Sea/ Gone by the Board”
Verse seven	<input type="checkbox"/> # (guitars, fiddle, bodhran)		
Instrumental verse			<input type="checkbox"/> # (accordion)
Verse eight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> # multiple instrumental verses	<input type="checkbox"/> # (accordion) Audience participation

Lukey's Boat

Anon



The setting of the “Lukey” video clearly indicates a casual performance, as the bands are performing together in an Irish pub, and are laughing and exhibiting obvious delight in performing with each other. The making of the video was, as McCann noted, the highlight of Great Big Sea’s career. “We actually sat down in a pub and played with The Chieftains, for like four hours, in a pub, acoustic, in Killarney. And Kevin Conneff didn’t show up, so I got to play the bodhran.” (*Great Big Sea* 1998). “Lukey” as performed in the live version contained on *Road Rage* shows Doyle’s vocal style as more of a rock-style “bawling,” a term that he uses in the liner notes of one of his albums, while the overall style of the live version is in the folk tradition. The band talks to the audience, encourages audience participation by singing, clapping and dancing, and Doyle laughs a few times during the performance.

The Music

Trad-pop is becoming a national popular music, in that more Canadians are identifying with grass-roots local music than they are with music that seems more standardized. Just as many Cape Bretoners support the Gaelic stronghold of the music industry in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland audiences are inclined to support music that sustains the local traditions of Newfoundland. The coexistence of different styles of music in Newfoundland, such as Celtic, pop, rock, folk and country, influenced the province’s music audiences, who were accustomed to hearing a variety of songs in different contexts.

It is necessary to remember that music created in Newfoundland is not entirely excluded from the widespread influence of transnational market popular culture. It is impossible for the local music to retain

a completely indigenous sound when Newfoundland radio stations play a majority of American music, allowing for only thirty-five percent for Canadian music, and only a percentage of that for Newfoundland music. Thus, for Newfoundland musicians, it is hard not to be influenced by the sounds of American popular music. Great Big Sea is an exception in the sense that it has kept many of the original aspects of its music that made the band successful in Newfoundland in the first place.

Traditional Music and Identifying with Fans

The *Great Big Newsletter* provides a way for the members of Great Big Sea to keep in touch with their fans and also acts as a means to answer fan questions about their performances. In *Issue 3*, for example, the band offers an explanation of “rhyming,” a guitar layering sound it often utilizes in its arrangements. “One guitar will play the song in the standard chords of the song’s key. Another will be played with a capo on a harmonic fret, playing the song using different chords. A third part will double the guitar line on bouzouki or mandola.” The newsletter goes on to advise that the lead lines of “Lukey,” “Buying Time” and “Irish Paddy” are played on the mandola and mandolins. “They are almost impossible to play on guitar, unless you grow another finger” (*Great Big Sea*: 1997a).

The members of Great Big Sea are different from many popular musicians in Canada in that they have a traditional mentality about their music-making. A response to a fan question in *Great Big Sea Newsletter: Issue 5* explained that because Séan and Bob do not read or write music, they often improvise their whistle parts on the spot. A later comment clarified

the band's distinct flavour and approach to the performance of traditional songs:

Playing traditional tunes definitely requires more of a "by-ear" approach than other forms of music. For example, in Newfoundland tunes, one important fiddling quality is "humouring." This is the ability to elaborate grace notes and melodic variations over the core melody. It is impossible to notate humouring, but it is just one of the elements which separates fiddlers from classically trained violinists. There are other intangibles, as well. For example, on the bodhran, there is a rhythmic quality known as [the] "lift," which is equally difficult to describe in musical terms. The best advice we can give is to find some older players, and watch, as well as listen. Good luck (*Great Big Sea*: 1997b).

The band has never been shy about acknowledging the musicians who have influenced its style, and its members frequently comment that watching experienced players and listening to records by older Newfoundland artists was a way for them to learn the traditional instruments. One example of their regard for Newfoundland musicians is in the credit that they give to their colleagues, The Irish Descendants, The Fables and Rawlins Cross. They also cite older Newfoundland bands such as Wonderful Grand Band, Ryan's Fancy and Figgy Duff as groups who helped to pave the way for their success. The influence of these Newfoundland performers is very important to Great Big Sea, especially for learning traditional songs. The band has drawn on the expertise of Pamela Morgan, once a member of the band Figgy Duff, and Fergus O'Byrne, from the band Ryan's Fancy, for assistance in researching Newfoundland traditional songs. As McCann explained, "When you go to the library and see the songs on paper, it's pretty dry. Fergus and the others are a big help. We'll take some of the songs, maybe rework some melodies or parts of a chorus, and see what we come up with" (Stone 1996: 123).

In Newfoundland, traditional music is considered popular music, and that is one of the reasons that Great Big Sea has been able to flourish as popular musicians in Newfoundland. As band member Bob Hallett explained,

It's not uncool because in that part of Atlantic Canada... traditional music is to some degree, popular music. Even mainstream radio stations would often play traditional-influenced music. The Wonderful Grand Band were extremely popular, as a top ten Friday night dance slot... a lot of kids growing up in Newfoundland at that point in time [were] lucky enough to see traditional music as acceptable as mainstream

music and it saved us from that whole idea that you have to do one or the other. When you hear it on the radio then it becomes legitimized. It is cool (Bliss 1997: 38).

The influence of the Newfoundland "kitchen party" has also been substantial for Great Big Sea. The mix of traditional folksong, the original song, and the cover song was a big part of the music heard at kitchen parties, and Great Big Sea adopted that variety for its performances. Says Doyle,

You'd hear a Hank Williams song, then you'd hear a 700-year old traditional song, then a song that somebody wrote last week, and then someone would do a recitation, and everything would have equal value. And I liked the way our kind of music was applicable. I don't think we'll ever do a record that's all originals because that's not what Great Big Sea's about. Great Big Sea [is] about the songs (Bliss 1997: 41).

Great Big Sea is distinct from other bands in Canada in the musicians' extreme pride toward the music of their home province, and they make a point of embracing their Newfoundland heritage as significant and meaningful. Doyle proclaims: "We're playing a form of music that is greater than ourselves. Long after we're dead and gone, we'd like to think we introduced the world to a culture everyone should know about" (Bergman 1999: 64). They continue to stay in Newfoundland because they know that they need to be touched by local music, and that wouldn't happen in bigger cities in Canada. "There are masters of Celtic folk music in Newfoundland that you just can't find in downtown Toronto. We couldn't get people like The Barra MacNeils to show us how to play Celtic tunes if we lived in Toronto" (Veitch 1997).

The band deliberately promotes Newfoundland songs by combining aspects of both traditional and contemporary music. By "collecting" new folk songs and interpreting them in a new way, Great Big Sea has created a national consciousness of Newfoundland and identified a distinct aural location for audiences in the rest of Canada. The acceptance of traditional music as popular music enabled Great Big Sea to take its music on the road, and share it with other Canadians. Doyle firmly believes that Great Big Sea could have started and become a successful pop band only in Canada. "We're lucky to be in the country we're in, where Our Lady Peace, Susan Aglukark, Celine Dion and Great Big Sea are on the same radio stations – bands that have absolutely nothing in common, not a thing" (Saxburg 2000: n.p.). As a band member later remarked, "We're proving that Newfoundland has a world

music. This is not some in-joke between six or eight communities in Atlantic Canada. This is just as viable as a blues band from Toronto” (*The Telegram*, 9 August 1997:1).

Great Big Sea’s performance at the 2002 Juno Awards perfectly accented its mandate of promoting a national understanding of the Newfoundland experience. The addition of Newfoundland fiddlers, percussionists, dancers and singers to the opening number highlighted the value and importance Newfoundland places on its traditional music, and showcased the pride Newfoundlanders have in their culture of musical vitality. While the music of Great Big Sea has helped to create a national consciousness of Newfoundland popular music and has fostered local and regional “identity”, perhaps its most important achievement is to have reclaimed Newfoundland culture and heritage, and placed it in the mainstream of the Canadian music industry. As Doyle proclaims on the Great Big Sea website, “Some of the music we play is hundreds of years old. If you are going to write songs to compete with that, you have got to work really hard. Plus, standing on a stage listening to a crowd of people sing along with you is the greatest feeling in the world. You never get tired of that” (*Great Big Sea* 2005). While the band is hugely successful, the band members are down to earth and continue to support the Newfoundland outport mentality of the everyday. Laughs Doyle, “It doesn’t take very much to get brought back down to earth very quickly in a small town...It’s like, yeah, you sold a million records. Whatever. Big Deal. It’s your family’s turn to do the bingo next week. It’s excellent” (MacIvor 1999: n.p.).

Conclusion

The unique nationalism that Newfoundland has built for the past five hundred years has created a national identity separate from other perceived national identities in Canada. The local culture of the province, historical features and geographical space combined to construct this particular identity for Newfoundland, which is inherent in the cultural production of the province. Because of these factors, popular music produced in Newfoundland is different from the national standard. The success of Great Big Sea is an indication that Newfoundland music is becoming more and more accepted in the national music industry and by nationwide audiences. Not only is the band appreciated by fans who are familiar with the heritage referred to by their music, but it is also appreciated by people who are unfamiliar with the cultural history and tradition associated with the province. Great Big Sea’s music has distinct features

which have, in many ways, escaped appropriation by the mass media, and thus provides a critical framework for the analysis of local identity within the national cultural sphere. Although the rural, traditional and outport ways of life are decreasing in the province, traditional sounds continue to be experienced and explored. Local and national audiences, therefore, are embracing Great Big Sea in part due to their deliberate promotion of local music and culture as valuable and important.

It can be argued that the success of Great Big Sea in the local and national popular music scenes is still something of an anomaly. Other local bands from Newfoundland, however, have now entered the mainstream in the same manner as Great Big Sea. By placing Newfoundland identity in the mainstream, Great Big Sea has done much for the identity of traditional Newfoundland music as a positive entity in Canada. The aggressive fostering of local identity when giving interviews and playing in national and international venues has allowed the band to demonstrate that regional musicians can survive in the highly competitive international popular music industry. Great Big Sea’s success is an indication to other local and regional musicians that listeners are prepared for representation of the local in the national popular music scene.

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