

A whooping, wild time at the Brackley Beach Ceilidh



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There's one main reason there are more tourists than Islanders that attend ceilidhs: every other Islander is too busy puttin' on their own ceilidh.

There are now more ceilidhs on P.E.I., in the words of my father, "than you can shake a stick at." (Because everyone knows it's a limited number of any given thing at which one can properly shake a stick.) Yet still, this large number does not seem to mean an overall lowered-quality of presentation in a spreading-ourselves-artistically-thin sort of way. Somehow, every nook and cranny of the Island manages to bring forth, in any given case, what are reported to be great ceilidhs, dotting P.E.I. in all directions. "It's in our blood! That's why!" we say. And, judging from all that comes to life every summer, it's hard to disagree with this statement.

With all the ceilidhs, too, though, one might tend to think that there are just too many for all of them to be well-attended. But, from the ones I've been to recently, none of them are lacking in attendance — even with a summer that was expected to be down in tourism. One such ceilidh that never ever has a small crowd is the Brackley Beach Ceilidh, hosted by Cynthia MacLeod twice a week, every Monday and Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Brackley Beach Community Centre.

This past Monday, I decided to take the sunny evening drive out Route 15 (have you ever driven while eating a footlong veggie sub at the same time? I really wouldn't recommend it) to attend one of the crown jewels of the P.E.I. summer ceilidh circuit. Pulling into the grass parking lot, it was clear right off the bat that this was indeed a tourist crowd. Licence plates from New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maryland, Quebec, Ontario and even as far as B.C. lined the lot.

I came in to the sounds of a reel, Big John MacNeil, being pumped out by the bow of the grinning Cynthia MacLeod, with guitarist/singer Norman Stewart at her side. As I took my seat at the back of the nearly-full room, the crowd was already enthusiastically clapping along, the first tune in. And this is worthy of initial note because, as many ceilidh-goers know, it usually takes a while to warm-up a tourist crowd who might be unfamiliar with typical ceilidh behaviour.

But, there's something about MacLeod that just fires up a crowd immediately. Indisputably she is one of the finest fiddlers on P.E.I. — most are aware of that. And through her years of experience, her touring, and her several successful albums, she's gained a wealth of expertise in the realm of just knowing how to work a crowd.

Yet, it also seems to be something she has always been able to do.

And if you talk to her father, Barry MacLeod, for example, who's obviously been coming to her shows since day one, he will tell you as a witness that "she's got 'em right from the first 30 seconds" every time (a quote from our conversation at intermission).

It really does make such a huge difference as a ceilidh audience member, though, to feel the energy in the crowd right away, feeding back to the musicians on stage. It's what any ceilidh-goer essentially wants, even the ones who don't really know what it's all about yet. And I've been to many ceilidhs where you can sense that the crowd wants to be more into it, but yet feels inhibited in some way.

However, the number of times I've been to a Brackley Beach Ceilidh, I'm always impressed by how freely into it the audience seems, and evidently this night was no exception. Up that ante with even a little on-stage encouragement too: "One thing is, we're pretty loud," smiled Cynthia after a couple of tunes. "But we want you to join in with us. So, on the count o' three, let's all practise a yip, holler, shout, whatever you wanna' call it."

So after three, the hall was filled with "Whoooo!" "Yeeeaoo!" and "Waaaaaow!" all at once. And man did it work: I've never heard the amount of yips and hoots coming out of a crowd as I did all night long.

Highlights from the show included vocal performances by Norman Stewart in songs like Gumboot Cloggeroo and Country Roads, songs by last-minute special guest Eddy Quinn like The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel and Whiskey in the Jar, step-dancing by Celia Keoughan, vocal and guitar work by Myles MacKinnon, including a performance of Peter's Dream, and, of course, the impeccable fiddle work by MacLeod, who never fails to light a fire with any jig or reel she plays.

If you get a chance, make Brackley Beach one of your ceilidh visits in the last couple of weeks of the summer. I guarantee you'll have more fun hoots n' hollers than you can shake a stick at.

At a glance

What: One kickin' Brackley Beach Ceilidh.

Who: Cynthia MacLeod and friends.

Where: Needless to say, Brackley Beach.

When: Monday, Aug. 17.

Why: "Whooo!" "Yiiiip!" "Yehhow!" "Whaaaahhooow!"

Todd MacLean is a local freelance writer and musician. If you have a comment or suggestion for a review, you can get in touch with him at tmaclean@theguardian.pe.ca or at 626-1242. But he won't be offended if you don't.