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# BUSINESS



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## Music to his ears

*Lyle Drake came home and made a business from his two loves*

**BY ASHLEY BURSEY**

For The Express

It's mid-morning as Lyle Drake sips coffee and carries a briefcase. He's ready for a day of interviews, radio shows, and business meetings — what one would expect on a typical weekday.

But this is not a weekday. Today is Sunday; even now, his schedule is jam-packed. For Drake, weekdays and weekends have melded together.

"There's not a lot of separation between working and not working, because I'm working most of the time," says Drake. "There are very few days, very few nights that I don't work."

Drake is one half of the duo that comprises Avondale Records, a Newfoundland-based multipurpose record label.

"It's just me and my wife," he says with a laugh. "We do everything. It's quite intense. There are no days off, let's put it that way...and it helps that I'm a workaholic."

### 'BUSINESS SCHOOL'

A native of St. Lawrence, Drake left the province years ago to work on the Mainland. Starting low, he has been a steady climber in the music industry since his late teens.

"My business school was basically on the job. I started working in the business when I was 19, in Toronto," says Drake. "I worked in a warehouse, packing records, and I did every job until basically running a \$400 million operation (A&A Records) with 250 retail stores and about 2,500 employees."

A keen interest and love of the industry has fueled Drake to become a key player in national corporations. His years of insight and ambition have flown his career high.

"You had to prove yourself. We were at a company that was privately owned, and you got ahead based on whether or not you were better, not because there was a union and you got ahead based on seniority. So, you got ahead based on how well you performed."

However, the hectic atmosphere and constant pressure of the frenetic business world forced him to take solace where he felt most comfortable — back home.

"The reason I left what I was doing is that I got tired of the rat race," Drake explains. "We moved home years ago. We decided it was time to do our own thing, and that's what we did."

### 'LITTLE PIECE OF HOME'

Newfoundland has always had a strong pull on Drake's heart. Even after years spent living in Mainland metropolises, he had certain affection for the island of his birth.

"Obviously...when you were a kid, it wasn't cool to like a country song, or something that was traditional," says Drake. "But I think, once you get away from home sometimes, you look for that little piece of home."



Ashley Bursey/For The Express

**Lyle Drake: "Sometimes they say that's the test of whether you enjoy what you're doing — if it doesn't feel like working, it's a good job to have."**

"We would seek out shows in Ontario that were doing that type of Newfoundland stuff."

Returning to the island was like a breath of fresh air, and a chance to blend Drake's two loves — Newfoundland and the music industry — into a profitable, enjoyable career.

"I love the business...I've been in it for 36 years, and I've really never considered it having a job," says Drake. "I enjoy getting up every day and going to work. Sometimes they say that's the test of whether you enjoy what you're doing — if it doesn't feel like working, it's a good job to have."

### 'PARTNERSHIP WITH ARTISTS'

Even with the late hours, early mornings, and seven-day workweek, Drake insists: "Why retire? I love what I'm doing!"

Avondale Music has had a successful nine years. After a slight kaffuffle with the name — it used to be Avalon Music, but a registered label in Ontario had chosen the name first — it has seen the sales of thousands of records and ushered dozens of popular local artists through its front doors.

"Really, our signing of the artist is more of a partnership with artists... We try to do

it almost as a joint project, where we both share in the project," says Drake. "We try and make it very fair."

Artists such as Shanneyganock, Pat Moran, and, just last week, the 8-Track Favourites have released records with Avondale.

As a jack-of-all-trades, Drake is comfortable working double — and even triple — duty for each group on the label.

"Avondale Music is a record label that also performs other functions. We do distribution; we do everything from signing the artist or creating the idea for a CD, and then we do the recording, all the packaging, the marketing, promotion, and the distribution," Drake explains. "We really do every function except for retail, so it's quite an extensive undertaking."

### 'A NICE ADD-ON'

As a secondary role, Avondale has become a national record distributor, placing local records in shops across the country.

"We do distribute some titles that aren't our own, but for the most part we specifically develop our own products... It's a nice add-on to what we do. It doesn't really take

up the same amount of time that the rest of the business does."

Great Big Sea, the Ennis Sisters, the Cormiers, and even Snook have found themselves in the distributing arm of Avondale Music.

"Every case where we've been with a distributor it's been a bad experience," Drake admits.

Becoming independent as a label and distributor has helped the company hundred-fold.

As a label, Avondale Music has found a successful niche. Traditional Newfoundland music is high priority; however, Drake has discovered a goldmine: compilation records.

"The good thing with a compilation is, you tend to get more and better value, based on the fact that it's not all one artist," he says.

### 'LIKE A SNAPSHOT'

Variety is the spice of life. Several long-running projects — including the *Homebrew* and *Our Songs* series — have found success in provincial record stores and homes on the shelves of many locals and tourists alike.

The latest installment of *Homebrew* proves its popularity; it is number six in as many years.

"It's like a snapshot of what's happening in traditional music in any given year," says Drake, adding the discs have sold over 50,000 copies.

A new project — the relatively young *Our Songs* compilation — is now on its second record.

"We took standard Newfoundland tunes — the old classics — and had some of the more popular artists of the area doing them," Drake says. "Instead of jazzing them up and making them really contemporary, we went back and did them in the old style they would have been done in."

Spotting the commercial value of *Canadian Idol*, Drake has also removed this music from the professional stage to bring it somewhere else entirely — the comfort of people's homes.

Emblazoned proudly with Newfoundland tartan and the pitcher plant, the disc *Newfoundland Karaoke Kitchen Party* — yes, a traditional karaoke CD — includes a slew of old favorites to sing along with. Songs such as *The Northern Lights of Labrador* and *Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's* provide ample practice material for the next open mic night or family get together.

With familiar flavors and memorable tunes, Avondale Music has made this province's traditional sounds as accessible as the 'Play' button on the stereo. As people's rooms fill with shanties and familiar refrains, one is struck by the veracity of Drake's words:

"No place like home, you know?"