

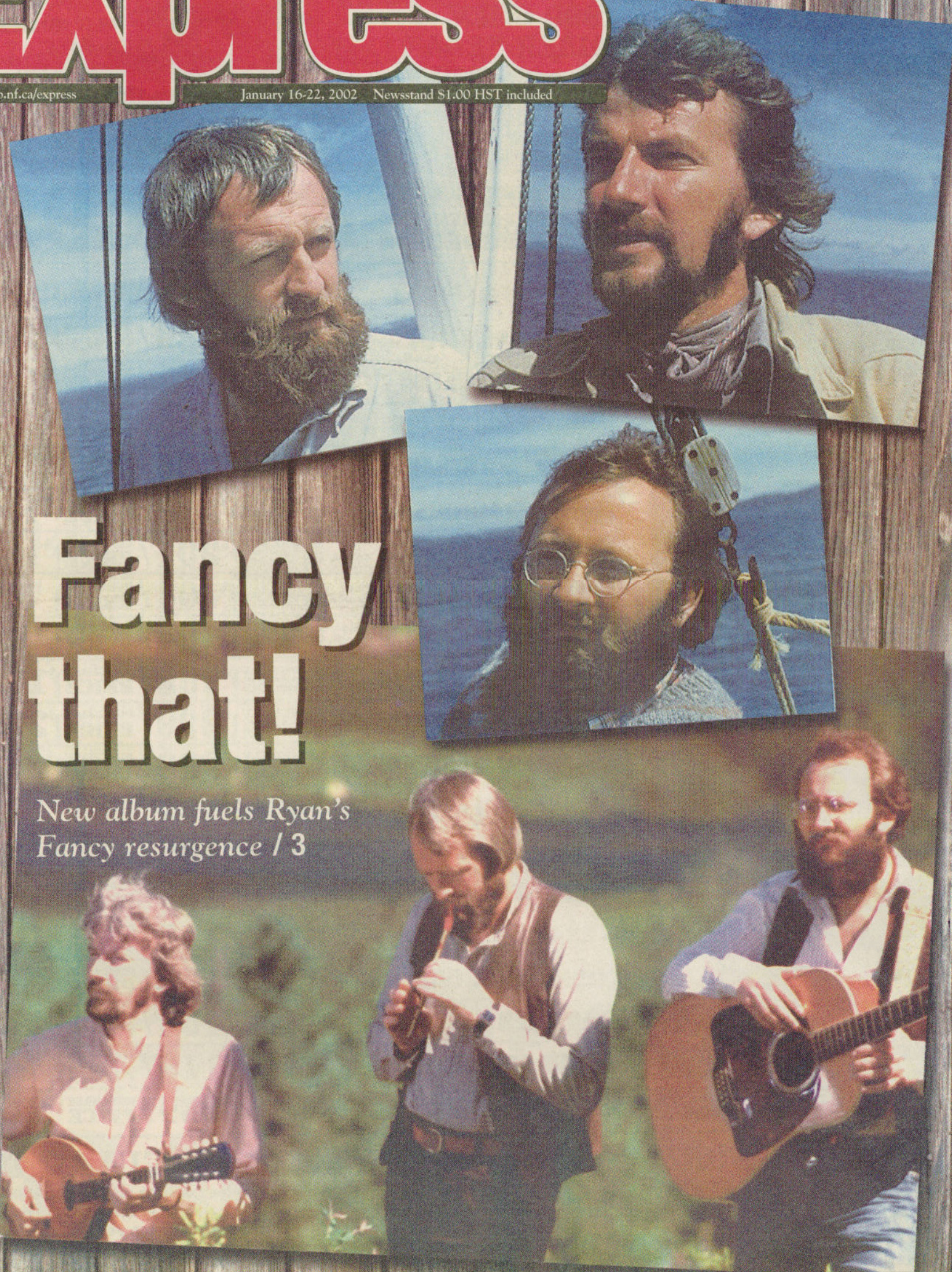
Byrne shuffles in

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the Express

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Fancy that!

New album fuels Ryan's Fancy resurgence / 3

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COVER STORY

The legacy continues

Ryan's Fancy, which helped define Newfoundland music in the '70s and '80s, has a new recording that is selling well. But despite that, and all the fond memories, don't expect a reunion.

BY STEVE BARTLETT

The Express

When Neil Rosenberg reflects on Ryan's Fancy, he thinks of the band's famed performances at the old Strand Lounge.

"You couldn't get into The Strand when they were playing there. It was blocked," says the Memorial University folklore professor who specializes in Newfoundland folk music.

From the early-to-mid-'70s, Rosenberg continues, the trio from Ireland had a cult following in and around St. John's.

"They were pop stars really," he says in a convincing tone.

Well, just like the music of other '70s pop stars (think Neil Diamond) the sounds of Ryan's Fancy appear to be making a comeback.

In December, Avalon Music released *songs from the shows*, a compilation of 15 tunes Ryan's Fancy recorded for its popular CBC television show.

In the first month, the album sold over 2,000 units in Newfoundland alone and climbed the province's music sales chart.

Lyle Drake of Avalon Music is thrilled with the response and sees potential. In the coming weeks, he plans to grow sales locally, nationally and internationally. Simply put, he thinks this CD — with its raw and real sound — has legs.

...

The life of a CD recorded by a band that parted ways in 1983 is unknown, but there is no denying that Fergus O'Byrne, Dermot O'Reilly and Dennis Ryan took Ryan's Fancy places.

Rosenberg says the three-piece band was important in a number of ways and it left a legacy.

Along with contemporaries such as the Sons of Erin, the educator continues, Ryan's Fancy was responsible for putting Newfoundland's Irish sound into context during the 1970s. He says that influence continues to this day.

"Great Big Sea and The Irish Descendants are, in some ways, beneficiaries of that legacy."

Great Big Sea — the latest local act, most would argue, to enjoy 'pop star' status — doesn't deny or hide that influence. In fact, the band promotes it and even has a link to *songs from the shows* on its popular web page.

"(Ryan's Fancy) can take a large part of the credit for the strength of the Atlantic Canadian music scene," reads a statement from Great Big Sea at the top of that link. "It is their energy that we have striven to capture... We were lucky to have such an example."

The members of Ryan's Fancy get this type of feedback from current bands all the time. It humbles them.

"They always thank us," says Ryan, who lives in Halifax, where he has found success in the investment industry. "I tell you what, that's the nicest compliment of all; that you've left something so positive."

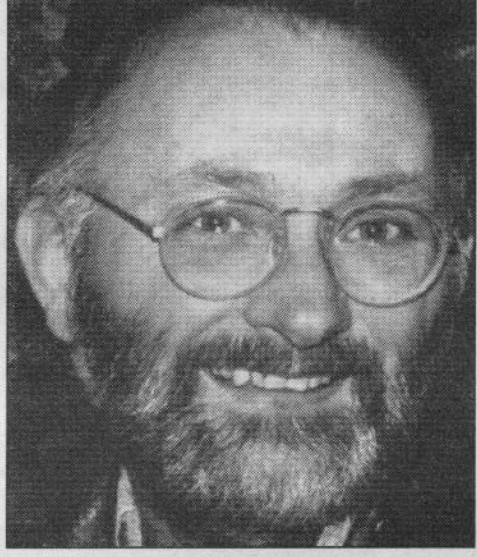
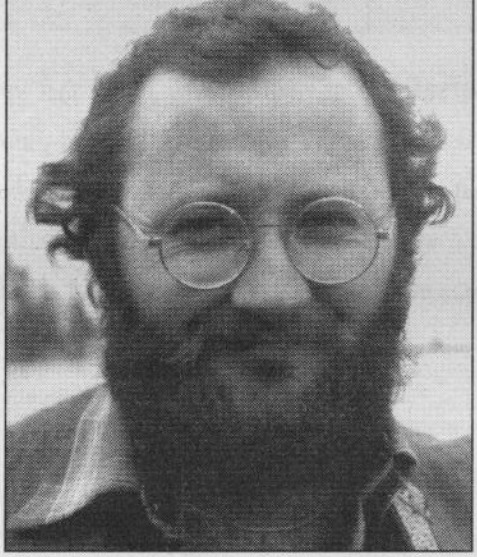
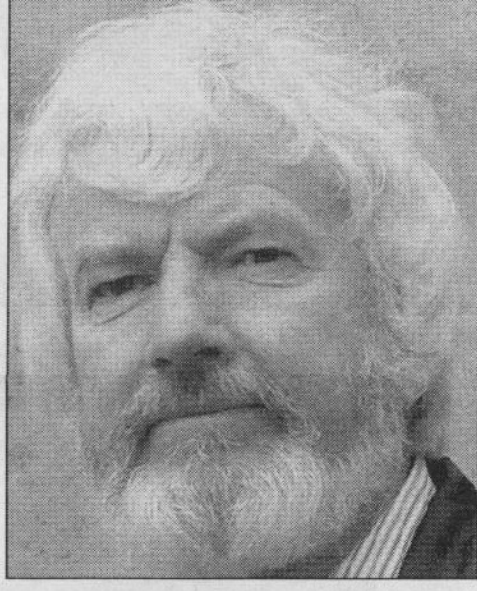
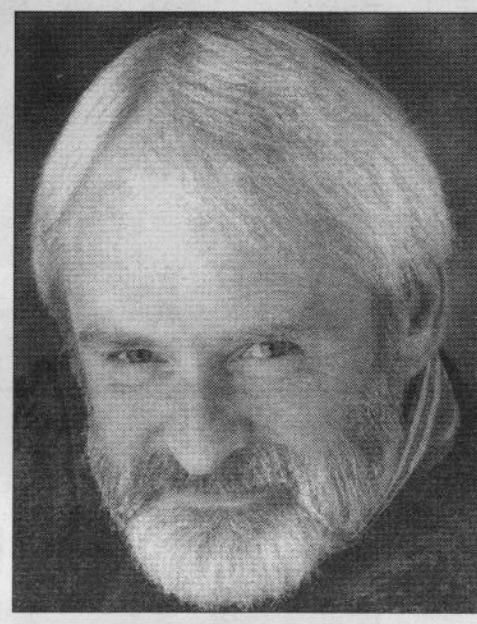
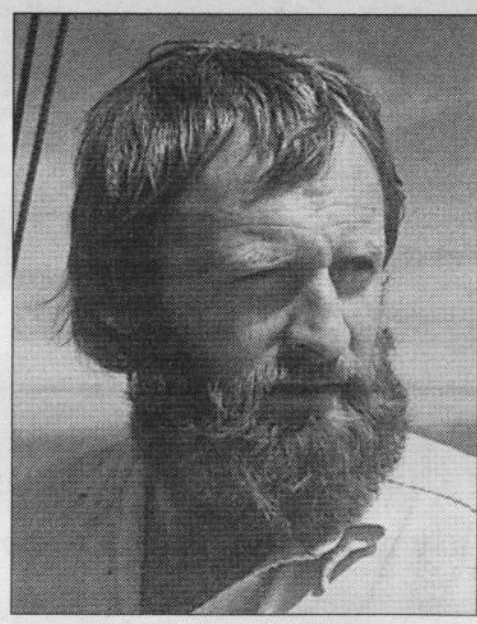
But while proud of the legacy, O'Byrne cautions that Ryan's Fancy was only passing along music it got from other sources.

"To me, the all-important thing is the song," he says.

...

When O'Byrne returned to Canada from Ireland in the late 1960s, he had every intention of being an accountant, not a musician.

He attended night school. But shortly after he started, a singer needed a back-



BEFORE AND AFTER— Dennis Ryan (top photos), Dermot O'Reilly (middle) and Fergus O'Byrne (bottom) enjoyed immense popularity in the heyday of Ryan's Fancy. They packed houses, recorded and had a successful TV show.

up and asked the 19-year-old to play mandolin. "I soon found myself going to night school of a different sort," recalls O'Byrne.

He quickly became a performer in Toronto's thriving folk music scene.

One night his band was short a guitar player and enlisted a guy from Hamilton. It turned out to be O'Reilly, another young Irishman who had moved to Canada.

"He came in with his guitar," O'Byrne recalls of the chance meeting, "and I said, 'What do you do that in?' He told me what he sang. I told him what I sang. I said, 'What key do you do that in?' And up she went. We've been doing it ever since."

"Through osmosis" O'Byrne, O'Reilly and another immigrant from the emerald isle named Dennis Ryan formed a group called Sullivan's Gypsies, which later became Ryan's Fancy.

Around 1970, they took their act on the road. They toured Newfoundland and fell in the love with the place. They could not believe the similarities to their native country. Conversely, audiences loved the music and could not believe the similarities to their own songs.

Enticed by all of this, the trio soon moved to Newfoundland. The plan was to attend Memorial University, and ease their way

out of the music business.

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In autumn 1973, during a chance meeting at the Royal Canadian Legion in Pleasantville, the members of Ryan's Fancy met a CBC-TV producer from Toronto named Jack Kellum.

He wanted to do a program that reflected Newfoundland and *Ryan's Fancy*, the show, happened.

"Things sort of rolled into each other," says O'Byrne. "There was no major sit down to say this is our business plan for the next six years, as seems to happen today... You were basically pushing yourself."

From 1974 to 1983, there were three incarnations of the *Ryan's Fancy* series. The shows took viewers throughout Newfoundland, Atlantic Canada and beyond. The band would often sing songs from the bays and harbours they were visiting. People loved it.

"I remember somebody explaining to me that, even though the show didn't have the mass appeal, the enjoyment level of the people watching it was among the highest level of its time," says O'Byrne.

According to Rosenberg, the success of Ryan's Fancy was largely due to the natural talents of band members.

"The voices were really at the centre. What made them great was they had three great vocalists, all different. That's how I think of them."

...

Songs from the shows highlights the raw power of those voices. The tunes on the album — 13 of them previously unreleased — were recorded for TV at the CBC television studios. Some of them were done over two decades ago and were never meant for audio release.

The push to release the collection on CD came after the feedback re-runs of *Ryan's Fancy* received a couple of years ago. As part of a series called *Rewind*, the CBC re-broadcast the program, and a number of other Newfoundland classics, during the National Hockey League play-offs.

"Where it will go? I don't know," says O'Byrne.

While a successful release is desirable, the members of Ryan's Fancy acknowledge that they've already gained a lot from the band and the TV program.

Each relates many memories and highlights — from singing the *Rocky Road to Dublin* in an igloo, to interviewing a rum runner in Bay D'Espoir, to having a lobster boil on Ingonish Beach.

"It was a special time for us all," says O'Reilly. "It was fun, fun, fun. Doing something we really liked. There is nothing like entertaining."

But despite all the good times and the early response to the new album, there is almost no chance of a Ryan's Fancy reunion. This even though they remain friends and are still active in the music business to different extents. (O'Byrne and O'Reilly remain professional partners and occasionally perform together.)

"I think we've done enough," says Ryan, who had nothing to do with the new CD and credits his former band mates and Drake for releasing what he considers an excellent recording.

"I'd love to (reunite) in many ways," he continues, "but like Michael Jordan coming back to play basketball... some people can come back and get away with it, but I prefer to leave the mystery."

"They were pop stars really"
— Neil Rosenberg