

# jigs & reels

## Songs for the season

*Phillips's tunes inspired by plight of aboriginals and islanders*

BY DANETTE DOOLEY

For The Express

**J**ohn Phillips describes a move to Davis Inlet six years ago as "culture shock."

However, the experience of living in the northern community has helped moved along his career in the education system as well as his songwriting talent.

Several of the songs on his recently-released CD, *Through the Eyes of a Child*, reflect not only the spirit, but also the culture of both Newfoundland and Labrador.

"I had virtually no dealings with aboriginal people up to that point, so it was a big transition. There's no question," says Phillips.

"And I began to look more seriously at the human condition. We're all trying to live the best way we can here on this planet, as we breathe and speak here now, and a lot of times it's a struggle."

Because of the knowledge he has gained through his studies of aboriginal people, through songwriting, Phillips paints a picture of the Newfoundland experience in relation to Christmas. He wrote, or co-wrote all the songs on *Through the Eyes of a Child*, his third CD.

"The connections there are the same as with the aboriginal context. Aboriginal people are closely defined by their language and culture, and Newfoundlanders are very similar — the way that we talk and how different our culture is. And Christmas is a time when Newfoundland culture shines and that's what I've tried to capture in the CD."

Phillips readily admits songwriting is hard work. However, the St. John's native looks at his craft as a form of therapy.

"I used to believe in inspiration but it's more like perspiration now," he says.

"But it's like anyone who's interested in playing golf. When you're engaged in these activities, it's hard to think about anything else."

### 'PRIORITIZING'

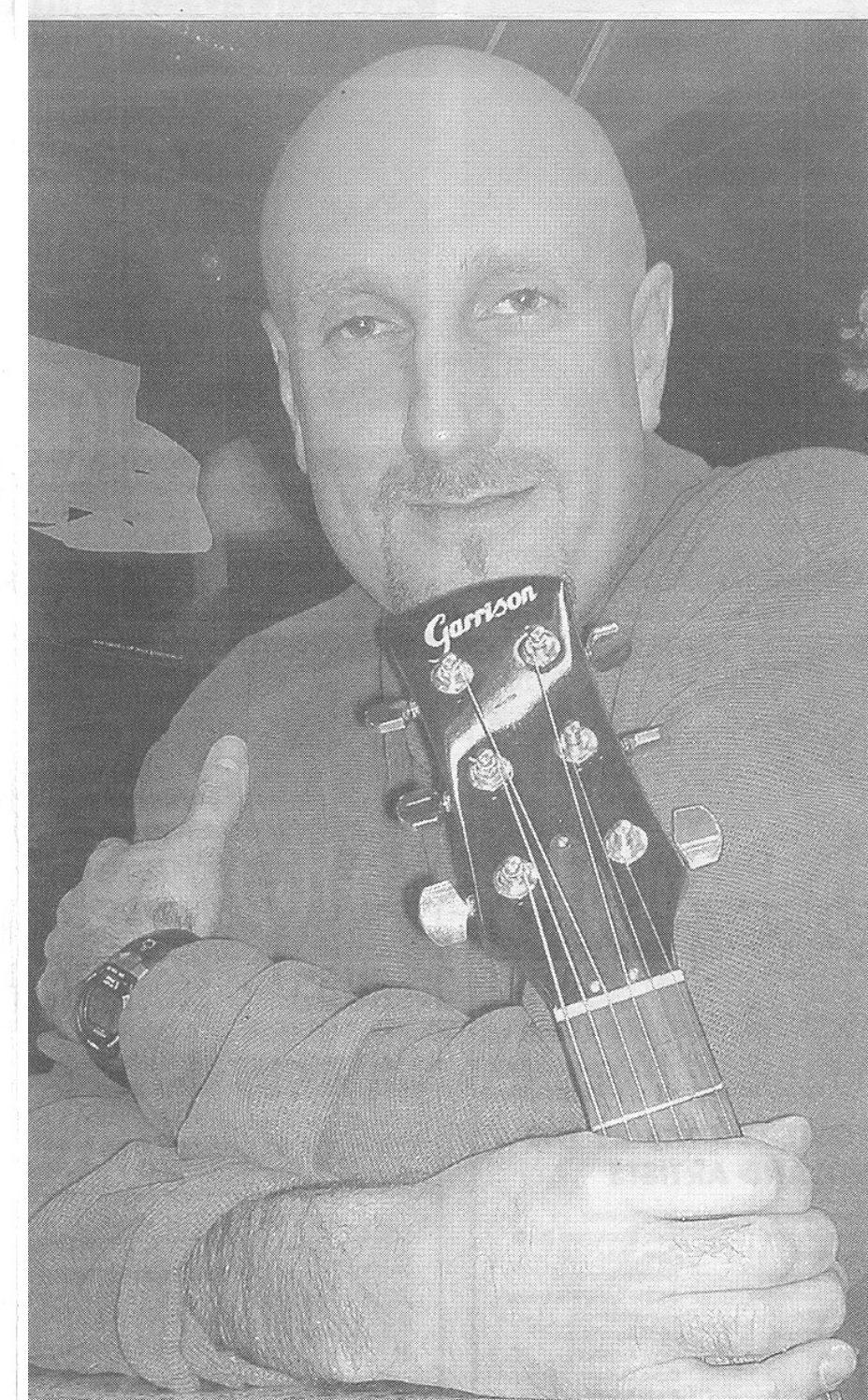
Phillips completed a masters degree in educational psychology in 1997. He then accepted a position with the Mushuau Innu Health Commission in Davis Inlet, a community that has since been relocated to Natuashish. His work involved assessing troubled children such as those who were sniffing gas and abusing alcohol.

"There was a lot of paperwork involved and prioritizing the cases so that the kids could be sent out to treatment facilities."

There was also a community development slant to his duties in Davis Inlet. Working with others, Phillips helped put in place an interagency approach within the community and the school system.

"We had help from the Commission, the nursing station, the school, the RCMP, social services and the band council itself."

Phillips now works in the school system as an itinerant counselor, which is like a guidance counsellor. Much of his



Danette Dooley/For The Express

**Singer/songwriter John Phillips on his just released disc: "Christmas is a time when Newfoundland culture shines and that's what I've tried to capture in the CD."**

work involves assessing the requirements of special need students.

He is currently completing his doctorate in native studies from Trent University in Ontario. His study is focused on teachers who teach or who have taught in Davis Inlet.

In spite of offers to work at universities in other provinces, Phillips' plan is to stay rooted in Newfoundland and continue researching and writing on aboriginal and Newfoundland issues.

He has come to realize how crucial culture is to aboriginal people and to their survival. He says it is so important, it will keep those people in their communities

rather than see them leaving like is happening on the island. It's a culture, he says, that needs to remain intact.

"The Indian Act seems to impose a legal framework how people are supposed to be defined as aboriginal which aboriginal people don't necessarily agree with and never have."

Phillips' research has left him asking the question — how did the Canadian state come to be so powerful over aboriginal people and over Newfoundlanders? He sees a lot of connections between both groups in their search for their place in Canada.

"How aboriginal people are perceived

■ **"There is a lot of similarities between the province of Newfoundland and how we exist in the Canadian federation."**

— John Phillips

and how they function within the Canadian federation — their relationship with the federal state — and there is also a lot of similarities between the province of Newfoundland and how we exist in the Canadian federation."

### 'GENERALLY SPECIFIC'

Phillips says it's Newfoundlanders and Labradorians' belief in their culture that keeps ex-patriates longing to return home, especially during the Christmas season. It's a theme that ties many of the songs on his CD together.

For example, *Christmas on the Island* tells the story of sending gifts to friends and family who no longer live at home. It speaks of the plight of Newfoundlanders who have to move away to find work.

*Home for Christmas* is the story of a man who is very ill from working in the mines. Like Newfoundlanders everywhere, the man wants nothing more than to return home to see his parents one last time.

The singer/songwriter has captured the history and culture of this province in his song *Fishin' Days*. An old man reminisces about the days when fish were plentiful and fishermen were allowed to take to the water.

Phillips has been writing songs for 15 years. While he says he is neither a superb singer nor guitar player, his songs have garnered him nominations for several Music Industry Association awards, including country artist of the year, songwriter of the year and male vocalist of the year.

With each CD, Phillips has tried to hone his songwriting craft. While some tunes on his latest recording are light-hearted, the majority brings out the core human element and what makes Newfoundlanders and Labradorians so unique.

"There's a saying that the song should be specifically general and generally specific, so that when (listeners) hear the song, they can apply an element of the song to their own lives. So it becomes more personal to them."

Phillips is already busy working on his next CD. Two songs inspired by his time in Davis Inlet will be on it. He hopes to release that recording this spring.

danette@roadrunner.nf.net