

Flying On Your Own recalled

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Collaborator heard MacNeil's hit decades ago; now he leads orchestra in tribute



Late Cape Breton songstress Rita MacNeil will be honoured this weekend in two Symphony Nova Scotia concerts Flying on Your Own: A Tribute to Rita MacNeil. The singer died last April at the age of 68. (FILE)

Scott Macmillan thinks he was the first person to hear Rita MacNeil's classic ballad Flying On Your Own.

"There was a wonderful group of us that would play at the Middle Deck," recalls Macmillan, a longtime collaborator of the late Cape Breton songstress.

"We did several nights at a time. The band was hot — Allie Bennett on bass, John Alphonse on drums, Ralph Dillon on keyboards and myself on guitar.

"One night, Rita came in early and said she had some songs she wanted to sing for me. The four songs were all good, but Flying On Your Own stood out."

Released nearly 30 years ago, Flying On Your Own was the biggest hit for the beloved Big Pond singer-songwriter, who died April 16 at the age of 68.

She sang it in her last performance, on March 9, 2013, with Symphony Nova Scotia, in a concert that was part of the East Coast Music Award celebrations.

A year later, Symphony Nova Scotia will honour the three-time Juno Award winner with Flying on Your Own: A Tribute to Rita MacNeil. Shows are tonight at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium; tickets are extremely limited.

Macmillan will conduct the orchestra and has written an overture, a medley of Rita's songs, for the orchestra to play. Lucy MacNeil of the Barra MacNeils and Rita's niece, Katriona MacNeil, will sing Rita's songs in the first half of the show.

The Men of the Deeps, a choir of working and retired coal miners from Cape Breton who sang with Rita many times, will perform in the second half. The evening will wrap up with everyone joining in a finale chorus of Working Man.

Speaking by phone from her Sydney Mines home, Lucy MacNeil says she is nervous "about performing Rita's songs for her beloved fans."

She'll sing six tunes. Katriona, who sang at Rita's memorial last year, will sing My Island Too.

"Rita's songs get right to the heart of things. She can relate to so many people. Her songs can touch you and give you hope," says Lucy, noting she didn't see Rita up close till Expo '86 in Vancouver.

"There was a frenzy for Rita. Her concerts were always sold out. We sang at a Nova Scotia Day concert with Men of the Deeps and the RCMP band, and it was a nice memory to be part of."

Later, the Barra MacNeils were guests on Rita's TV show and TV specials, including Rita MacNeil's Christmas. They did backing vocals on For Mary, For Joseph, from her 2002 Christmas album, Late December, and included the song on their 2013 Christmas album, O Christmas Three.

"In 2006 and 2007, she asked us to be a part of her Christmas tour and we toured with her and her band. One morning I had the opportunity to have breakfast with Rita, and she was a delightful woman with lots of encouragement," recalls Lucy.

"She had such an amazing way for all her hard times. She's quite a woman to have accomplished all she did."

Lucy says she'll try not to look at the audience this weekend for fear she'll see them crying, which might make her falter.

"Reason to Believe is a wonderful song, about her mother. When I got through the words, I feel how she felt for her mother. I tend to be emotional and romantic. It will be hard not to get emotional and teary-eyed."

Macmillan, who did many orchestral arrangements for Rita, says the show will include the lesser-known Dream Forever from A Night at the Orpheum, one of several albums he produced for her.

Also on the set list is Old Man, "a song about Rita's father that is beautiful and very emotional," says Macmillan.

"Weary Travelers will feature the backup band — John Alphonse will play drums, with Bruce Dixon on bass, Kim Dunn on keyboards and Chris Corrigan on guitar — all longtime band members for MacNeil.

"The songs are beautiful. The songs stand on their own. They'll be flying on their own. I know Rita will be thrilled."

And he thinks it's fate that the one day everyone was available for the show was March 8, International Women's Day, as Rita was a staunch supporter of women's rights.

"It's like Rita came down and said this is the date we had to do this."

CELEBRATING RITA

Flying on Your Own: A Tribute to Rita MacNeil

When: Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium.

Presented by: Symphony Nova Scotia. With special guests Men of the Deepes, Lucy MacNeil, and Katriona MacNeil.

Conducted by: Scott Macmillan

Tickets: Range from \$30 to \$57 (HST included). Call 494-3820 or visit www.symphonynovascotia.ca (<http://www.symphonynovascotia.ca>). Tickets for tonight's show are extremely limited.

For more information, go to www.ecma.com (<http://www.ecma.com>).

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