

The origin of angry Celtic rockers

By **ANDREW HOSHKIW**
The Whitehorse Star

HAINES JUNCTION – The true gem of the Alsek Music Festival was not the time-tested, aging bands that headlined the Saturday night show.

Rather, it was an unknown force of six youth from Whitehorse and Vancouver calling themselves The Whiskeydicks.

Wielding Celtic instruments in a most unconventional manner, they stormed the stage and captivated the audience with a sound that was loud, crazy and at times completely out of control.

Most other bands were only able to inspire a lukewarm reaction from the audience, with some clapping and the occasional lone dancer.

Conversely, by the end of their set, these guys (five boys and one girl) had 50 people dancing in front of the stage and everyone else up out of their seats.

"Having the crowd come up and participate is a big energy burst," Zoe Robertson, one of the band's fiddle players, said during an interview at the Alsek festival. "It's a beautiful community project to have here, and everybody seems quite into it."

Robertson, the lone female in this six-member party posse, is self-described as being the token classical girl. Along with several members of the band, Robertson is a student of music at Capilano College in Vancouver.

The Whiskeydicks are a band which is rather hard to pin down. A Celtic rock sound with strong, unrelenting punk overtones and an undeniable gypsy influence, they capture perfectly the sound of rebellious youth.

As one sound technician put it, "angry Celtic rockers."

Playing popular Irish tunes commonly heard in eastern Canada, they have a musical style that could be compared to popular bands like Spirit of the West or The Pogues.

Making comparisons about a groundbreaking band, however, can be problematic. Though at first hearing, it may seem as if they are only following in the footsteps of other bands, The Whiskeydicks are in fact pushing the style with loud, passionate energy to new levels.

The promoters of the festival were uncomfortable with the name of the group, and so in the promotional material, they were listed as "Whiskeywack". Though sexual references are still seen as taboo, it seems alcoholic connotations remain acceptable.

"We used to be called Pattywack, after the exploits of Pat," guitarist Ryan Enns told the crowd during the show, referring to the band's ringleader, Patrick Ernst. "But then we changed the name to The Whiskeydicks after the exploits of Zoe."

With three band members originally from Whitehorse, The Whiskeydicks, who range in age from 20 to 25, formed in Vancouver two years ago from a group of college and university students.

Since then, they have released two independent CDs and have played numerous performances throughout B.C. The Alsek festival was their first venture as a band into the Yukon.

Ernst, who plays fiddle, grew up in Whitehorse and learned to play at a young age. Currently studying jazz at Capilano College, Ernst also plays with the Vancouver Philharmonic Orchestra and teaches more than 30 students at a North Vancouver music school.

Robertson, the band's second fiddle, is no second-stringer. She began her



Photo by ANDREW HOSHKIW

WE MEAN BUSINESS – Patrick Ernst, ringleader of The Whiskeydicks, always had a stern look on his face as he played his fiddle with a fiery intensity at the Alsek Music Festival.

musical career as a young prodigy in Vancouver, where she very quickly established herself as an artist.

Today, she plays gigs regularly throughout the city with a very diverse assortment of bands ranging from bluegrass to Romani Jazz.

Ernst's brother, Curtis, plays cello. Curtis is an avid musician from Whitehorse.

A rocker at heart, he is able to quickly adapt to just about any style of music. He specializes in playing heavy metal guitar riffs on his cello. He is currently pursuing a musical education at Capilano College.

On drums is Mike Bell. Raised in Prince Rupert, B.C., Bell is as multi-talented as they come, as he also plays guitar, bass and holds a degree in piano. He is currently working on a degree in music composition at the University of British Columbia.

The third and final Whitehorse band member is guitarist Ryan Enns. Best known for playing punk, rock and blues, he is also a prolific recording artist, hav-

ing recorded three solo albums.

In the summer of 2004, he performed at the CBC's annual True North Concert in Haines Junction. In the fall, he will begin work on a Masters degree in music.

Rounding out the band on second guitar is Dave Kornas. The newest addition to the band, Kornas is from Kenora, Ont., and has played everything from bluegrass to the heaviest of heavy rock. Along with Bell, Kornas currently plays in three bands.

"Generally, there's two rules with any performance of this band," said Enns. "We always drink more than we earn, and we cost the establishment more than we're worth."

"In one tour, we've broken one toilet, trashed one truck and been thrown out of four hotel rooms."

This sort of reckless behaviour, along with a generous quantity of alcohol, seems to add fuel to the band's fire as they move forward.

In fact, The Whiskeydicks first started practising together as buskers

outside a liquor store in North Vancouver. It was on St. Patrick's Day this year, a day which many people reserve for their heaviest drinking, that the band had its first big break.

"We got a show at the Commodore this year, and that's what really made our band," said Ernst.

The Commodore, a large, popular club in Vancouver which can pack in up to 2,000 people, is a place where many small bands have their first break.

It happened like this. Ernest gave a copy of their CD to another band called The Town Pants, asking if his band could open for them.

The Town Pants then passed it on to the organizers of Celtic Fest, a large Vancouver festival promoting Irish culture. They liked the CD so much they asked The Whiskeydicks to play a show at the Commodore on St. Patrick's Day, after the original act, Spirit of the West, cancelled.

They were ecstatic and, despite having already agreed to play two other shows that night, could not refuse.

To deal with this situation, they first played the show at the Commodore. It was an enormous success, with 1,800 people on their feet for the entire performance.

The band sold out all their T-shirts and CDs at that show. Then, they added another drummer and split the band, sending three members to one gig, four to the other. With equally impressive showings at both gigs, the band was thus able to pull it off and successfully play three shows in one night.

Currently, the band is back in Vancouver and concentrating its efforts on producing a better edition of their CD while madly playing as many gigs as they can throughout southern B.C.

They have not ruled out the possibility of returning to the Yukon this summer. As they are still independent, to obtain a CD or find out more information, visit their website at myspace.com/thewhiskeydicks.

Asked where the band is headed, Ernst said, "Hopefully: back to the Commodore. More likely: the drunk tank. Almost certainly: purgatory."

If The Whiskeydicks, despite their name, are able to spend a little less time drinking and a little more during this crucial stage concentrating on their plans of self-promotion, there is no doubt their success will blossom and we will all be hearing more from them in the years to come.



Photo by ANDREW HOSHKIW

PUTTING THEIR ALL INTO IT – Ryan Enns and Zoe Robertson show a little more emotion than their leader does during the performance at the Alsek Music Festival.

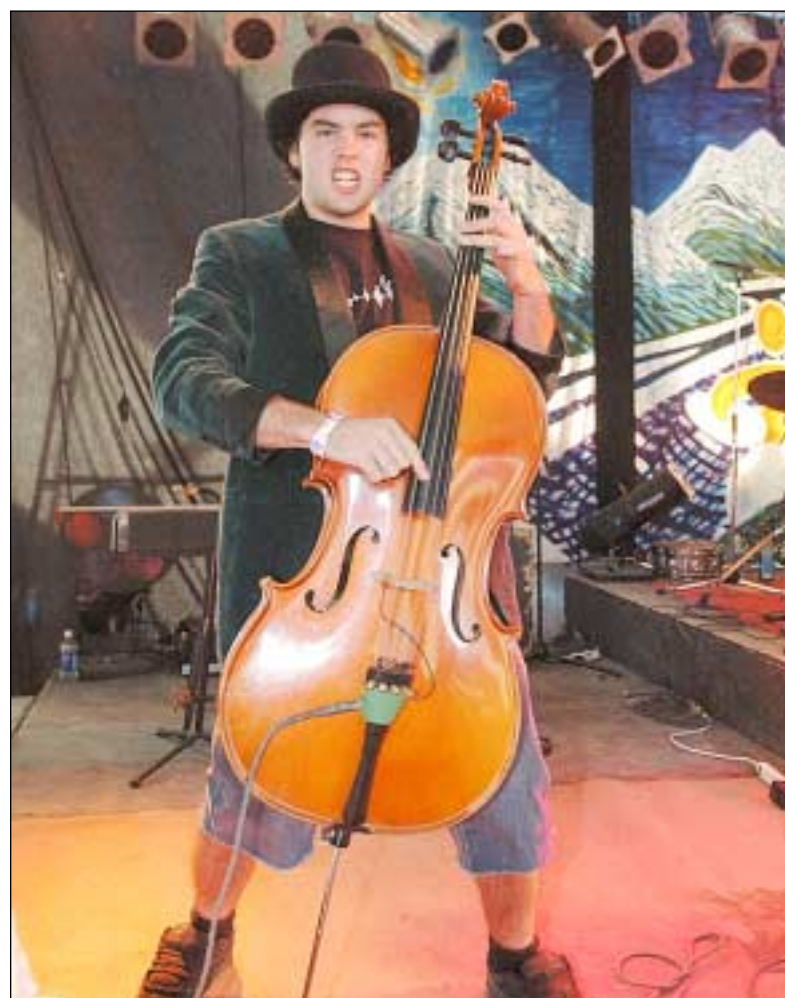


Photo by ANDREW HOSHKIW

SOUND COMPLEMENT – Though an unusual instrument, the cello makes a fine addition to a Celtic rock band.