



PhD candidate turns homeward for inspiration



As a boy, Dale Boyle was influenced by country greats like Hank Williams, and began playing guitar at the age of 13.

CLAUDIO CALLIGARIS

BY MIKE MURPHY | It is sometimes said that the apprenticeship of a musician is the process by which he comes to discover his own unique style. For Dale Boyle, a PhD student in the Faculty of Education who also writes and performs award-winning folk/blues songs, finding a distinctive voice was largely a matter of recognizing the beauty in his own backyard.

The 34-year-old Boyle, who hails from the small Gaspé town of Belle-Anse, said that his first, adolescent forays into songwriting invariably ended in frustration because the heavy metal bands he was unconsciously emulating usually sang about "dragons and dungeons," subjects he didn't find particularly inspiring.

"I came to a realization a few years back: that to stand out and be different was the easiest thing, the answer was right in front of me and it was just to go with what I knew, to sing about what I knew," said Boyle, who plans to release his third album, *Small Town van Gogh* in June, and to complete his doctoral studies in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education by December.

Like his previous album, 2004's *In My Rearview Mirror: A Story from a Small Gaspé Town*, his new release will reflect the Gaspé culture in which Boyle grew up. The album's title refers to Tennyson Johnson, a little-known painter from the Gaspé to whom Boyle pays a fond tribute on the record's title track.

"[Johnson] was a guy who always painted what he saw. He painted our community. But I don't know if our community as a whole, myself included, really appreciated it to the degree that we should have," said Boyle. "That's why I was writing the song about him."

Sadly, following a battle with cancer, Johnson died in the spring of 2005, before Boyle could record the song. While this is clearly a disappointment for the musician, he said he's glad he at least got the opportunity to sing "Small Town van Gogh" to Johnson before the artist died.

Just as Johnson and other Gaspé personalities have significantly influenced Boyle's evolution as a musician, so too have many of the people he has met at McGill, including psychology professor and music and cognition expert Daniel Levitin, who runs the Laboratory for Music Perception, Cognition and Expertise. Levitin, who has worked as a record producer with artists ranging from the Blue Öyster Cult to Chris Isaak, has now contributed his services to the production of each of Boyle's three albums.

"We started chatting and I passed him along one of my first demos. And he liked it." Boyle said, explaining that he made Levitin's acquaintance while taking his introductory cognition course as an undergraduate student in psychology. "I don't know if he felt sorry for the production quality of it, but he offered to help me out and that's what he did," he joked.

Levitin has played a major role not only in Boyle's music, but in his studies as well. In fact, the PhD thesis on which Boyle is working is partly an analysis of Levitin's teaching methods.

"In a general sense, I'm looking at how music can be integrated across the curriculum," he said, adding he'd someday like to work as an educational consultant helping instructors incorporate music into their teaching. "Specifically, I'm looking at how Dan Levitin integrates music into his course and what it means for students—their motivation, their understanding of material."

On the musical side of things, being at McGill has enabled Boyle to collaborate not only with Levitin, but also with behavioral neuroscience PhD student Susan Rogers, who has recorded Prince and the Barenaked Ladies, not to mention Schulich School of Music visiting scholar and rock production legend Sandy Pearlman.

Levitin, Rogers and Pearlman are heady company, indeed. But as Dale Boyle will be the first to tell you, it's amazing what you can find in your own backyard.

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Page last updated:

May. 17, 2007 at 7:55 AM