

Flipper Flanagan's Flat Footed Four

With a musical career spanning five decades, Flipper Flanagan's Flat Footed Four is as culturally significant to Thunder Bay and Northern Ontario as are Persians, The Hoito and George the Porter. Born out of the folk music scene of the nineteen sixties, Flipper embraced Celtic and Bluegrass music. The varied talents of the four flat footed friends allowed them to draw on the influences of several other musical genres with a resulting brew best described as Progressive Pub Music.

The band is well known for it's irreverent sense of humour and high energy performance. "Banjo" Bob Balabuck, who plays banjo on the left and banjo on the right and fiddle up the middle. Jamie Gerow plays guitar, mandolin, mandola and bouzouki along with Brian Thompson who is famous for his musical renderings of various kitchen implements including spoons and washboards. Brian also plays the bodhran, bones, mandolin, bouzouki and guitar. Jack Wall provides unique bass guitar stylings rarely heard in Celtic and Bluegrass circles.

In 1978, the band released a full length recording called "It's Alive". The project was followed up with many commercials for politicians, pizzerias and ski events. A second recording, "The Welcome" was released in 1982. It wasn't until 2005 that the band returned to the studio to record "Damn Big Lake" which captured the band's love of good times and of Thunder Bay. That CD was followed up in 2007 with another good time live recording called "Damn Big Party". In 2010, the band expects to release their third CD of home grown tunes called "Where the Rainbow Ends".

In 1983, the band was presented with an achievement award for The City of Thunder Bay for it's distinguished contribution to the culture of the city. In 2009, the City recognized the band for it Exceptional Achievement. As well, the band has been enshrined in the local music museum and has made significant contributions to music education in city schools.

Individually, the members of the band have been recognized for their talents at various banjo festivals, music festivals and vocal competitions. They have performed from the Isle of Lewis in Scotland to the British Columbia coast, from as far north as Longlac and south into the Midwest United States. Recently, the boys appeared on CBC Radio's final taping of "Basic Black" with Arthur Black at the Thunder Bay Community Auditorium on June 19th, 2002. The show was broadcast to an audience of 650,000 on June 29th, 2002 and as one reviewer reported, "They still have it!" Arthur honoured the band by specifically asking for them for his retirement show.

At your first opportunity, please become one of Flipper Flanagan's Flat Footed Friends, because you, the audience, are the most important members of our band. Without you, the music just isn't complete. So clap your hands, stomp your feet, sing along and just let your hair down as "Flat Footed Friends" for a musical evening.

Arthur Black said: "I don't think any of them are flat-footed, none of them are named Flanagan but there are four of them."

Vicki Gabaro called them: "The Rockers in Walkers!" The Thunder Bay Post said: "They've still got it!"

Like so many others, they were talking about good times with none other than Flipper Flanagan's Flat Footed Four.

Four on the Floor

by Nancy Angus for Bayview Magazine Spring 2011

The Greasy Creases are hot on the heels of Flipper Flanagan. The Creases, a group of talented bluegrass musicians in their twenties have earned the respect of the veteran Flat Footed Four. The boys in Flipper only hope that they've been good role models. "We'll share any advice we can with up and coming musicians," say the members of Flipper Flanagan's Flat Footed Four. And the members of Flipper Flanagan are full of it – advice, that is. They've been performing in the Lakehead since the days that These Boots Were Made for Walking, Love is Blue and The Ballad of the Green Berets were number-one hits on the CKPR Hit Parade. Who would have thought that more than forty years would pass and the fellows would be cheering on a new group of musicians producing a similar style of music?

Flipper Flanagan is a four-piece group with a bluegrass sound created with banjo, bodhran, spoons, guitar, mandolin, bouzouki, fiddle and bass. Their style has been described many ways but they try to sum it up as Canadian Appalachian Celtic Music or Progressive Pub Music. All in all, it's easier to hear Flipper than describe

their unique brand of music. Yet, they are more than just band mates. They are friends who have been through a lot together over the years.

The boys have music in their blood. Bob Balabuck remembers skipping school so he could watch The Beverly Hillbillies and play the theme song along with Earl Scruggs. It was the folk era and so much was happening in the Lakehead. Bob learned bluegrass in minor keys and always joined in the family concerts featuring Ukrainian kolomeyka music.

Jamie Gerow grew up in a musical family and has played guitar and sung for years. A former elementary principal and a current member of the Lakehead University Faculty of Education, Jamie believes in lifelong learning. He is taking vocal lessons and is working on classical training with local instructor, Mary McGhee. He is also studying theory and harmony with Heidi Strbavy and Bev Carson. The members in the band are also benefiting from Jamie's vocal lessons. "Our harmonies are richer because of the training Jamie is receiving," says Brian Thompson. "Vocal tips like pushing your toes into the ground when hitting notes does make a difference in the sound."

Jack Wall was the reluctant Flipper member. "I didn't like their music then, and I'm not so fond of it now either," laughs Jack, a rocker who was a part of the warm-up band for Ike and Tina Turner's legendary 1972 performance at the Fort William Gardens. "Flipper Flanagan doesn't have a drummer so I keep the beat for the band. I found out years later when I was playing a music festival in Halifax that the style of bass I was playing was called slap bass."

Brian Thompson, a retired social worker, says the reason the group has stayed together so long is because they have fun playing together and they do like each other's company. As for their collaborative song writing process, Brian says a genius keeps a notebook by the bed. "If you think you'll remember the lyric or the tune in the morning without writing it down," he says, "you won't!" They say that Bob's wife is tolerant because Bob wakes up in the middle of the night to play a new tune. But Jamie's wife is more tolerant because Bob will call Jamie at four a.m. to hum the tune to him.

Way back at the beginning, Bob needed a "catchy" name for the group. Bob recalls that in his second year at university he played in a band called the Unknown 5 with Brian Thompson as well as author and broadcaster Margie Taylor. He thought of a new name and came out with Father Flanagan. He mentioned the name to a couple of his friends, Paul Shaffer and Rick Lazar. Paul thought about it and said, "Yeah. That's really flipped!" Drummer Rick Lazar was the one who tossed together Flipped with Flanagan to come up with Flipper Flanagan's Flat Footed Four. That memorable name stuck. The friends who helped find that name are also still making music. Shaffer is David Letterman's music director and Lazar is a percussionist and the founder of the innovative Samba Squad.

Jamie says that they like to try to figure out what makes the audience tick in one or two songs. That way they can aim their songs and the banter in between to the crowd. Playing in a church is a little different than playing in a pub. When they have played the occasional bar job in recent years, the younger crowds seem to really like their music and are typically surprised to find that the band is local. One of their hopes is to broaden their appeal to include a younger audience. "The problem is that the bar scene doesn't start till 10 p.m. and the bands now play 'till 2 a.m.," says Brian Thompson, "and that's way past our bed times!"

But as they reach that "forgetful" age, the lyrics sometimes get lost in performance. "If you listen closely, when we forget the lyrics it will sound like we're singing in another language," laughs Brian Thompson. "We always tell people that the verse that seemed garbled was sung in Gaelic." Flipper considers those lyrics very important because they consider themselves a vocal group first and foremost. Singing is 80% of the performance. "When all the harmonies fall into place, that's magic," comments Jamie. The band has to remember not to let the music overwhelm the lyrics. The sound can get cluttered. (After all, Mozart said that rests are more important than the notes.)

Jack graduated from the first class of the Radio & Television Arts class at Confederation College in 1969. He said that one of the most important lessons he learned was microphone technique – knowing where the microphone is and stepping back from it when performing. The band is made up of story tellers and they want their audience to hear the stories – and sing along, too.

Jamie takes his leadership role seriously and uses modern technology to help the band extend their reach around the world. "I've been checking out iTunes and we've had people from Australia, Texas and Britain download our songs," says Jamie proudly. The group has also been featured on a radio show in Scotland. Since 1997 the group has practiced religiously in Jamie's house. In the early days they even practiced after board meetings at Brian's

office. Those Monday rehearsals are like therapy sessions. The boys have been through a lot together. Says Jamie, "When one of us is in a tough spot in life, these other three guys are there for us."

In those early years of playing in bars on Simpson Street, the guys would only have to watch out for injuries that could be caused by the old guy who would come into the pub every night at 11 p.m. to throw a chair. But as time went by, health issues have presented many challenges. Jack and Brian have both battled cancer. Bob developed focal dystonia and was told by his doctor that he wouldn't be able to play the banjo. Undeterred by the diagnosis, he learned how to play the banjo left-handed as well as right-handed. His band mates claim that he is the only ambidextrous banjo player in the world! As the 1984 Canadian bluegrass banjo champion, it would be very hard for Bob not to play the instrument.

For Bob, their most memorable gig was when they played at the sod-turning ceremony for the Thunder Bay Community Auditorium. "I'll never forget Jim Ferguson of the Irish Rovers telling us that where this chasm is now, you'll be sitting in a proper place for concerts." Flipper has indeed performed in that magnificent building as part of the Thunder Bay in Concert series.

I'm sorry that I missed the heyday of Flipper's legendary performances at the Lakeview Lodge and the Neebing. My first Flipper Flanagan concert was the launch for their 2005 album, *Damn Big Lake*. The concert at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church assisted the congregation in their efforts to raise funds for Shelter House. Our youngest, 11 at that time, had just started taking guitar lessons. I vividly remember that night, when Jack was too sick to perform with the band but sat near the stage in a wheelchair. We sat in the balcony and our son had a bird's-eye view of the stage. He watched with fascination as the band performed, changed instruments, laughed and interacted with the audience and each other. I swear that was the night when music came alive in his eyes. He picked up the guitar after that concert and has played it with gusto ever since. To this day, he and his sister can still belt out the lyrics to many of the songs on *Damn Big Lake*.

Over their four-decade long career, the band has produced and recorded four albums: one LP and three CDs. The deadlines they set for themselves when putting an album together ensure that the project gets wrapped up in a reasonable amount of time. Otherwise, the perfectionism and tinkering of the band members would continue to delay the release and marketing of the new recordings. The band members say it's great to listen to the recordings because they can hear the growth in each one. Jack says when he talks about the band's latest CD *Where the Rainbow Ends*, "Our music has finally grown up."

All of the fellows have now retired from their primary jobs, but the music is still a major part of their lives. They're now adding a musical to their repertoire. They are working with playwright Heather Esdon on a musical project that will be called *Feargal Flanagan's Wake*. It's an education piece that looks at the emigration of the Irish to Canada. In Ireland, they would have wakes before people left because one in three would die on the ocean crossing and one in three wouldn't survive their first year in Canada. The Irish experience in Canada was much different from that in the United States. The boys want to put that story to music.

Flipper has already sought musical inspiration in the history of Northwestern Ontario. One of Jamie's favourite songs is *Outlaw Bridge*. It tells the story of the old highway border crossing on the Devon Road that was a famous partying spot in the 1950's. After Jamie wrote the song, he found pictures of his relatives at the bridge in 1919. "We have a genuine love of this area," says Jamie. "*Damn Big Lake* is about Lake Superior and *My Hometown* is a tribute to Thunder Bay."

Jack says that it's never too late to learn to play an instrument. The boys' advice for some of their contemporaries who want to take up music in retirement is that there is no substitute for practice. Brian cites the violinist Itzhak Perlman who said that if he doesn't practice every day, he notices it. If he doesn't practice for two days, his wife notices it and if he misses three days of practice, his audience notices it. It helps when you love the music because it makes the practice fun. For people learning music, the boys suggest trying out a music jam session at one of the local community centres. "It's a great way to learn and to hear some great local performers," says Bob.

Flipper Flanagan's Flat-Footed Four are troubadours who continue to make music together. But be forewarned – if you have an opportunity to attend a concert, they like a lively audience. Sing, dance and shout but please don't throw any chairs!

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