

Songs from the Spindle City

Folk Singer Michael Troy uses his native Fall River for inspiration

By Rick Foster
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Most successful musicians hit the road early in life and tend to have their most productive years in their 20's and 30's.

Troy, a 50 year old overnight success on the New England folk scene, is widely hailed for his lyrical songwriting, spirited guitar style and strong insights into working class life.

The Somerset resident put out his first CD in 1998 after singing and picking most of his life. He's now patiently building up a reputation as a singer-songwriter.

"I don't have high expectations," said Troy, who recently won the annual singer-songwriter competition put on by the Rose Garden Coffee House in Mansfield, "so I'm not easily disappointed."

But Troy's smashing first album, "Whispers in the Wind," created a sensation among followers of folk music that's still reverberating.

He rapidly became favorite on the region's widely scattered folk radio stations. Bill Morrissey, a folk singer of no uncertain accomplishment, once sought out Troy at a concert to announce his devotion as a fan.

He has since opened for such folk luminaries as Bill Staines and Vance Gilbert.

Troy's solo career began during a series of open mike performances at Passim's in Cambridge several years ago. Many of the songs that evolved during that period, some written as long as 20 years ago, make up the core of the album.

If Troy waited awhile to get serious about music, it may have been because he was so busy collecting gritty life experiences that would later show up in his songs.

Over the years he worked as a laborer, sweated in Fall River textile mills and even crewed on a fishing boat for a few years.

His songs are filled with references to the mills, the fishermen and the once-vibrant young men who gradually wore themselves out on the docks, in bars and on factory floors.

Songs like "Talk Radio" and "Dear Walter" tell of Troy's attachment to such men, whose lives seem as noble as they are ordinary. "Fishboat" is a paean to the scruffy Fall River captains who chase crabs up and down the New England coast, while "Charley Pike" is a rollicking tribute to that bluegrass legend.

On "Lizzie," Troy renders an accurate 3 and a half minute version of Fall River's most chilling urban legend - the ax murder of Lizzie Borden's mill-owner father and stepmother.

It's entertaining without being either flip or unnecessarily morbid, and probably will remain a piece of Fall River Americana for years to come.

Troy's gravelly voice and true-to-life lyrics invite comparisons to Bob Dylan, but it's clear that Troy is marching to his own drumbeat. And why shouldn't he?

The Fall River native has no illusions of following in the footsteps of Dylan or becoming famous beyond the coffeehouse circuit.

"Hey, the music business wants young guys," he said. "I'm happy when I see people enjoying my music. That's a reward for me."