



# “Rockin’ the blues...”

## *An East Coast love story*

STORY BY MARJORIE SIMMINS

When music legend Matt Minglewood and Barbara (“Babs”) Donovan met at the Vogue Theatre in Sydney, NS, back in 1969, they had no idea they would become lifelong partners. He was the young rock ‘n’ roller, cowboy hat on his head, guitar slung low over his hips, and she was the equally young music fan, just home from New York City to visit family, and introduced to him after the show by a mutual friend.

From that first shared smile, their lives changed for ever.

“Love at first sight, for sure!” says Babs, who along with three older brothers, was raised in Glace Bay, or “The Bay,” as locals call it, as were both their parents, Annie and Art Donovan.

Matt says his wife is “more fabulous now,” than when they married in Kodiak, Alaska, in 1972, during a three-month gig for him and his band of the time.

“Kodiak is beautiful,” says Babs. “And the wedding was a quaint Catholic ceremony in a log cabin church in the middle of nowhere.”

One of Matt’s most common expressions of affection over the years has been to pen Babs a love song. The most recent of these is “Amsterdam,” from his 2017 release, *Fly Like Desperados*, which was selected as an East Coast Music Award

Blues Recording winner last year. (Matt also won ECMA Performer of the Year in 2018, as voted on by fans, an award he particularly cherishes.)

“When I first heard the song,” says Babs, “it brought a lump to my throat.”

Small wonder. The lyrics are killers. (*See link below.*)

“And it’s not even a ballad,” smiles Matt. Instead, the catchy tune is reminiscent of the American rock band, The Eagles—all melody, story, and rocking delivery.

That phrasing could describe the couple themselves, who at 71 (Babs) and 72 (Matt) are blessed with excellent health, and full of energy and drive. They are always excited for the next musical performance. They are also still touring, though on a reduced scale from the 325 live shows a year they would have done in the 1980s.

“Matt did a bit of touring in the U.S. and Europe back in the 80s, too,” says Babs, who travelled with her husband and his bands, working as the bookkeeper for eight years, before their two children, Aynsley, 41, and Shane, 38, came along. She has been band manager for the past 20 years.

“Matt’s performed from coast to coast to coast,” Babs continues, “including in Iqaluit and in Yellowknife—at 40 below zero! We also lived in Newfoundland in the late 70s in Outer

For lyrics to “Amsterdam”: <http://www.mattminglewood.com/lyrics.html>

Video performance of “Amsterdam”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZZsrK8u2os>.





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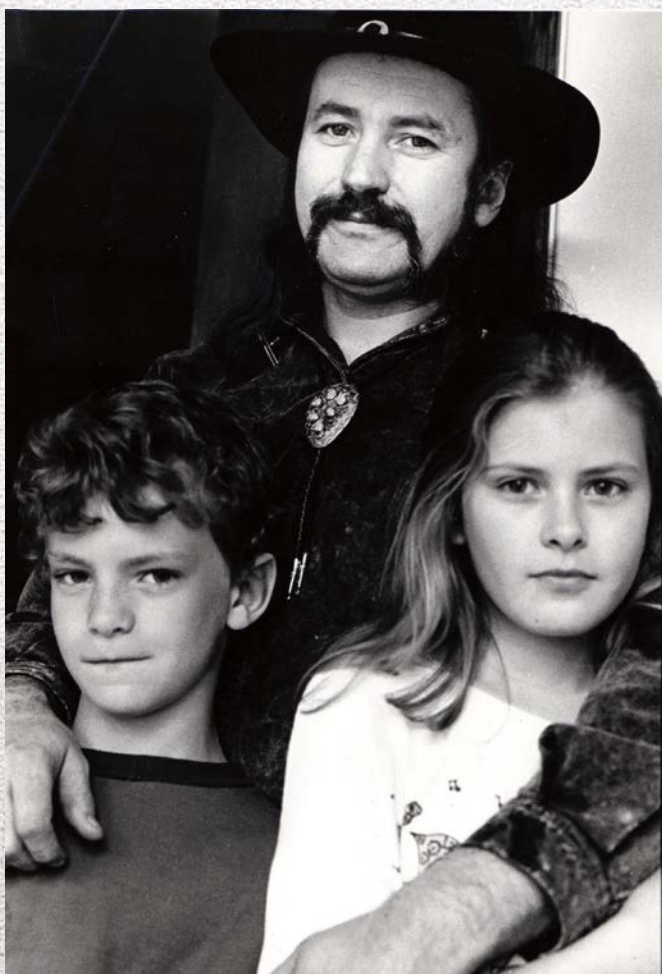
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Cove, outside St. John's, so the band performed there often. We've pretty well covered the country!"

A devoted family man, and supporter of Canada's armed forces, Matt has also twice been to Canadian Forces Station Alert at the North Pole, during Christmas, to entertain the troops stationed there. He travelled overseas to do this as well.

"The trips were a part of a Canadian military entertainment tour to raise the spirits of the soldiers," says Babs. "Matt performed in Israel and Egypt, and went twice to Afghanistan, and also to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, entertaining multi-national

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troops." She adds that he has also played in most of Canada's penitentiaries.

Nowadays, the couple mostly stays in the Maritimes, except for the occasional festival or event in Ontario, and an annual trip to Western Canada, usually Alberta. In October 2018, in Red Deer and Calgary, Matt was proud to play onstage with his son, Shane, who works in the oil industry. Daughter Aynsley works as a guidance counselor and teacher and lives in Falmouth, NS. Matt and Babs have two granddaughters and a grandson.

Fifteen records, hundreds of songs, and thousands of performances, including a sold-out birthday bash at the Membertou Convention Centre, on February of this year—it's been a joyful and hectic ride for a kid from a big family in northern Cape Breton, who was supposed to be a tradesman.

"I went to technical school to become an electrician," says Matt, "but (ultimately) chose a music path." Apart from a year or so of fiddle lessons from Professor Jim MacDonald in North Sydney, he says, "I'm a self-taught musician."

Matt also spent the last two years of high school at a religious institution in Monastery, and considered becoming a priest, which his parents encouraged. "That place took the religion right out of me," he says.

While it's easy to see how hard performers work on stage, it's not so obvious how much work goes into being a band manager.

"For every show, I book quality hotel rooms, arrange the logistics, deal with the venue manager/promoter to make sure all our contract needs are met," says Babs. One of the critical aspects, she says, is contacting the professional production company immediately after the show is confirmed, to make sure they have all the band's technical requirements (stage, sound, and lights), and that everything is in place, along with arranging a sound check.

"Sound checks are so important and can take anywhere from one hour to two, to make sure the sound is right for the night, and the sound technician is on the same page as the band," she says.

Matt, who has long been a hybrid performer, commonly blends blues, country and rock. But he's no stranger to folk music, had an early introduction to Celtic music, and by age four, was performing Gaelic songs, taught to him by his grandfather. Now, he's as happy singing Cape Breton anthems such as "Out on the Mira," as the much-loved "East Coast



Blues,” or his hugely popular cover of the Toy Caldwell tune, “Can’t You See.”

In his 70s, says Babs, “His voice has never been better.” Fellow musicians have stories about the power of Matt’s voice.

“I had always heard Matt work his magic in smoke-filled bars,” says Cape Breton singer and songwriter Delores Boudreau. “His technical team always blared his much-loved music on 10, or maybe louder. The beer flowed, we danced our feet off, we sang to the top of our lungs. The next morning, we were greeted by hoarseness and a headache, all worth 10 times the price of admission.

“And then one day, Matt lost a beloved uncle. After communion, at the funeral, Matt had a very special parting gift for that relative: he sang an *a cappella* (no musical accompaniment) version of “Amazing Grace.” I cried. His voice was pure and strong and filled with emotion. The gift he left his uncle is etched in my mind as the best vocal performance I’ve ever witnessed.”

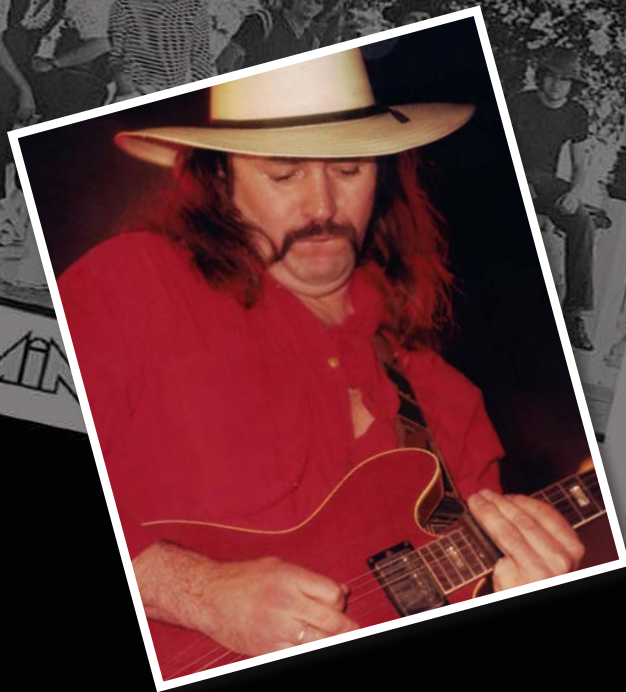
Matt Minglewood was born Roy Batherson in Moncton, New Brunswick. But like Babs, his pedigree is pure Cape Breton. His father Hugh Batherson was from Troy and his mother Anne Elizabeth MacEachern (“Annie Lizzie”) was from Judique. When Matt was six, he moved with his parents and six siblings—five brothers, one sister—to North Sydney.

Early in his career, and at the suggestion of a band member and friend, he changed his stage name to the more melodious “Matt Minglewood.” He also updated his look, dressing mostly in black, and changing his straw cowboy hat to his signature black, signature black, flat-topped Australian-made Akubra—stockman’s hat. On stage, Matt is a theatrical dynamo, engaged with both the audience, and his band members.

Halifax-based show promoter Brookes Diamond, who has showcased Atlantic Canadian musical talent for five decades, has known Matt and Babs since 1971. They first worked together to do an extended tour in Prince Edward Island, along with another beloved Cape Breton musician, Sam Moon, who was a key part of the band for eight years.

“There’s nothing as dynamic as Industrial Cape Breton blues,” says Diamond, who calls himself a “friend and a fan” of Matt and Babs. “It’s all balls-to-the-wall, and giving ‘er. Matt is hard-edge that way. I love his passion.”

Diamond, like many others, loves the scope of Matt’s music. “*A cappella*, one-man shows, unplugged or with a band—Matt does it all. He also performs a lot of story songs. It goes with



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that 'hard road,' touring kind of life style." Diamond is quick to add that while the touring life can be demanding, it's obvious that Matt and Babs thrive on it, and remain grateful for it.

"It's that mutual support system that they work with," says Diamond. "They're 'lifers,' in the true sense of that word. They are wedded."

Diamond admires Matt's enduring talent.

"I am not a singer," says Diamond, "but I was on-stage with Matt and his band one time down in Guysborough. They were performing "Caledonia." It was like being on a freight train."

It's that overwhelming rush that keeps Matt performing.

"My passion is playing," he says. "It's like a drug. When the band locks in (on a tune), there's no feeling like it. It's magic."

For the first time ever, the Matt Minglewood Band (or, more simply, "Minglewood") is comprised entirely of "Capers," men and women who hail from Cape Breton. Emily Dingwall, 30, plays bass in the band and sings. Jeff Stapleton, 40, plays piano/organ/keyboards and sings. Brian McInnis, 50, plays drums and sings. And Nicholas McInnis, Brian's son, 19, plays guitar.

A happy marriage of nearly 50 years is an accomplishment for anyone, let alone a couple raising a family and living the itinerant rock 'n' roll lifestyle of a touring musician.

"For years," laughs Babs, "we didn't own a knife or a fork!"

Let alone a house or any other stationary possessions.

What they did have, they both say, were fine examples on both sides of their families of long-lasting and successful marriages.

"Give or take a year or two, we both come from parents who stayed together for over 65 years," says Matt. The couple began married life with the unshakeable belief they'd be in it for the long haul. As important, they were living the life they wanted, in the place they wanted.

"The best things about life in Cape Breton are health care," laughs Matt, "the natural beauty of the place, the ocean and the people. It has my heart."

"Pretty well sums it up about life here," agrees Babs.

And yet with all these blessings, there are so many ways for rock 'n' roll marriages to falter or fail, such as overuse of drugs and alcohol. How did they steer clear of these shoals?

"Who says we did?" says Matt. Both he and Babs laugh.

But really, how did they keep emotionally close all these years?

"Laughter," says Matt.

"Loving the music," says Babs.

And finally, what did the lifestyle give them which was so important to them both?

"Joy," says Matt.

"Him," says Babs.

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