

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO ASHLEY MACISAAC

Fiddling With Disaster is the name of Ashley MacIsaac's autobiography, and the title couldn't be more apropos.

The former child prodigy of the blistering Cape Breton fiddling scene electrified the world stage, wowing audiences with his acclaimed marriage of gritty Gaelic playing to punk, electronica, hip hop and grunge, until the world was left to watch in shock and dismay as a tumultuous series of public disasters finally led to a hard and nasty fall from grace.

It wasn't the kilt or the army boots or the combat pants, nor was it the fact that he was gay. Those details just made him more interesting. But when his penchant for watersports was made public knowledge in an infamous magazine story it was the beginning of the rough bout of MacIsaac mayhem which included bitter disputes with record executives, the flashing of his kilt to the cameras on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (his American tour cut short after), and a cocaine habit. Followed by reckless spending and other financial fiascos, the superstar fiddler with everything going for him then finally found himself bankrupt.

He is now twenty-eight years old.



And giving it another go. Besides his autobiography, his new cd, *Ashley MacIsaac*, has also just been released. But, as he told me on the phone recently while on tour, he'll be okay even if it's a flop. This attitude may sound suspiciously mature for a guy famous for onstage temper tantrums (including the infamous Y2K rave rant that lost him a record deal). And he's also looking suspiciously cleaned up on his new cd cover. With a come-clean book and a new look, one couldn't be blamed for wondering maybe the wild child MacIsaac has decided to keep his edge in check for his second time 'round.

Until you talk to him. Because as soon as our conversation began it was clear the edge hasn't gone anywhere and Ashley MacIsaac still has a lot to say.



Hey, Ashley, for a former *enfant terrible* you're appearing in the media looking pretty sanitized.



There's the title for your piece: new look, same goal.



Which is what?



I'm still trying to thrill people with my fiddle, sing songs and sell cds, just like I was doing at 17. With a little more packaging and preparedness to deal with things.



Things like?



The fact that I made this record knowing I could be a complete failure and I'm fine with that.



What about your image – the watersports stories and your on-stage rants?



With the peeing *Macleans* got that all wrong.



You're not into it?



Sure I am, but I had a young boyfriend at the time so it comes out sounding like I like to pee on young guys.



So you'll pee on guys of all ages?



Yeah! Not 15-year olds or anything, but pee on older guys, younger guys. *Macleans* misreported it. Fucken bullshit.



Now what happens if you're on *Conan O'Brien* again and get the urge to flash what's under your kilt?



The only urge I have now is to flash my finger. I don't give people the time of day to get on my nerves. But there's a few people who deserve the finger: press who wish I was living in a ditch, a few record label execs...they deserve the finger. I still lecture on stage though. I entertain them for forty minutes and then pause and say: did you guys know that all these people dying of SARS get it because they spent the last 20 years stigmatizing gay people who had AIDS? I want them to go home thinking, 'Hmmm... Well maybe I shouldn't be so rude to gay people.'



That must go over well.



Then I do a heavy-metal version of a song called 'I hope you catch the SARS'. I like that straight people are getting to understand the fear. Like any gay, I've lived saying I'm gonna do my best to be HIV negative, be promiscuous but try not to catch anything. Knock on wood I'm fine. But SARS doesn't scare me at all after that and I love seeing the mainstream being scared like this. Fear is the worst part of it.



We've covered peeing and ranting – what about drugs?



I really, really need to go get some.



What would you get?



Wait! I've got some hash here!



Excellent. Life is good.



This is from some boys in B.C. I went to some town and a club owner met me. Everyone knows I love the pot there, so the club owner gives me this bubble hash – EXCEPT!



Except what?



Except he made it into a beautifully shaped cobra. Fangs and everything. For me my drug is pot. No more crack. Not waking up to a joint this morning is fine, but I am the biggest pot smoker in the country. I'm so happy about the decriminalization of pot. I smoke thirty grams every few days. I spend more on pot than I do on food: \$300 a week for pot. I've spent \$120,000 at least on pot – too bad they didn't charge me tax on that. The U.S. is irked. That's very nice.



Your autobiography *Fiddling With Disaster* is out – in it you address these issues.



I tell my side of the story. With drugs, people provided cash flow when I needed it when I was addicted to cocaine. Where did that cash come from? Record company people. I address that, sure. The book has my side of all these things. I continue to do what I want no matter how bad I look publicly. It's like the gay thing and the music thing. I'm not playing for anyone. Just myself. And every day I wake up gay and every day is gay. Am I going to bed with someone I wanna be in bed with? That's important to me. My gay side and my musician side? I work hard on both. That's the book.



The gay aspect is that important?



The gay everything is. What gay press I speak to is – I'm picky now. Being out is important because I am gay. And other young gay people, especially with issues, need icons and heroes and people they look up to.



Do you want to be one of those people?



I would like to be like that. I know what it was to be gay in a small town. And look at Marc Hall, how proud we were of him. I was in Halifax airport and the TVs were on when they decided he could go to the prom. Everyone stopped and watched the news on TV in the airport. And looked at me. And looked at the TV. I wasn't allowed to go to the prom with my boyfriend. I'm also thankful to be Canadian and gay. Elsewhere you'd get your dick cut off.



Ashley MacIsaac will no doubt be billed by some as a comeback cd. As an artist isn't this just your next album - period?



You know what it is? (whispers) You're gay media so I can tell you. It's the heterosexual Ashley record. A half a million dollars from a major label who will see if people will buy me again. Radio friendly – what I was born into kind of music. It's fun artsy and will get the money from the hetero people. Very friendly, like the Coors. My sister is on it. It's most accessible.



You said earlier that if it fails you are okay with it.



Yeah. I had a lot of money when I was 20 and paid too many people and got nothing left for myself. If I don't make money for myself doing this by February 24, 2005 then it's over.



What's the significance of that date?



I turn 30. And by the way I just want to make the money I need to make. No more. If I don't I will decide to go into another business.



Like what?



Selling water.



Seriously.



Or orange trees to Floridians. Gotta go! Thanks Shaun! (hangs up)