

## Demons reunite, aim for Guinness record

Outrageous jazz group kicks off a reunion with, hopefully, 500 saxophonists playing *Hockey Night in Canada* in Dundas Square

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TORONTO -- The call has gone out. Saxophonists -- hundreds of 'em -- are required at 2 p.m., May 30, on Toronto's Dundas Square to play the theme from *Hockey Night in Canada*, all in an effort to gain a place in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

If this looks like the old Shuffle Demons writ very large, don't look now, but it is. Those five zany, globe-trotting bop-rapping street musicians are back, reunited for a 20th-anniversary summer tour, accompanied by a new "greatest hits" CD, a retrospective DVD and what just might be the ultimate Demons publicity stunt.

The word stunt is used here with only the greatest of affection.

(Likewise the word shtick, which also tends to come up when the Demons are mentioned.) The thing is, as stunts go, this one's perfect.

Back in the day, the Demons used to busk on the sidewalks around the Eaton Centre, directly across Yonge Street from what is now, yes, Dundas Square. And they often played *Hockey Night in Canada* out there, as well as *The Pink Panther*, *Tequila* and tunes by Thelonious Monk. So, who says you can't go home again? Just bring along a few hundred friends.

Five hundred, actually. That's the number Demon Richard Underhill has in mind, including "people who have that sax from high school in the closet."

(And what key will they be asked to play in? Former high-school saxophonists might want to know *well* in advance. "B-flat baby," says Underhill, coolly; he'll e-mail the music to anyone who signs up at <http://www.shuffledemons.com>.) The Demons, who made their official return on Thursday as the opening act of the Distillery Jazz Festival in Toronto, hadn't bopped or rapped publicly in any form since 1997, much less in their now-reunited form, which dates back to 1993.

Accordingly, they've had a couple of rehearsals, at least with four of the five returning Demons: Underhill, who plays alto saxophone; the band's original drummer, Stich Wynston; and two of its second-wave members, bassist George Koller and tenor saxophonist Perry White. (Koller will split the tour with a still later alumnus, Mike Milligan.) The fifth returning Demon, and another original member from 1984, tenor saxophonist Dave Parker, is now a resident of Quebec City and will be summoning up *Spadina Bus*, *The Shuffle Monster*, *Get Outta My House*, *Roach* and other favourites from memory.

"At the first rehearsal," Underhill says with a laugh, "it was like, 'Okay, what do we play on this tune?' We remembered most of the lyrics, but not where the fingers went. The second time, we started jamming on stuff, playing tunes at slower tempos, trying

different feels, and it was really nice."

As it should be. These are jazz musicians of some standing in the Canadian scene, after all, and jazz musicians never play the same thing the same way twice, right? Right, say Underhill and Wynston, who've met up at Harbourfront Centre late on a sunny May morning to do a little advance work for the reunion.

"We're starting with a solid foundation of the old tunes," Underhill notes, referring to material from the band's first two albums (of six total), *Streetniks* and *Bop Rap*, "and I think people are going to want to hear them. We're going to have to play them, and we *want* to play them, because they're fun. But if some newer things develop, that would be great."

Adds Wynston, "There was nothing ever rigid about the old arrangements. We would change them all the time on tour; that's just the nature of an improvisational band."

Of course, there was always more to the Demons than just music. That shtick, for example -- the rapping, the colourful wardrobe, the Roach Death Dance and such. But Underhill and Wynston are older now, both of them 43.

Too old, perhaps, for such shenanigans? Apparently not, especially not Wynston, who seems pleased as punch to be embracing his old Demon demeanour again.

Indeed, Wynston has more than just the tour on his mind. "I don't want this only to be a reunion, I want the band to start up again, go forward, do new material and be a full-time thing again. Whether I can convince everyone else to jump on my shoulders and come along is something to be determined."

Underhill is diplomatically vague on the subject of the band's future.

His, after all, were the shoulders that carried the band through its first 13 years; he knows too well the strain involved. And he has developed a nice career of his own in the interim, both as a member of Blue Rodeo's Bushwhack Horns and as the leader of a relatively mainstream jazz group (by Demon standards) whose first CD, *tales from the blue lounge*, won a Juno Award in 2003.

All the same, he admits that he was responsible for suggesting the reunion in the first place. "I just thought it had to be done," he explains. "My experiences with Blue Rodeo spurred me on; everywhere we went, every small town, people would always ask me about the Shuffle Demons. That showed me there was quite a lot of support out there."

The Demons probably played most of those small towns themselves at least once in the course of some 15 Canadian tours. They travelled in Europe just about as often. Few bands worked harder; few appeared to have more fun. Once seen and heard, they weren't easy to forget -- try though some folks might.

"It goes back to how you describe what we were/are," Underhill suggests. "Were we a jazz group? Were we a pop-rock phenomenon? I guess we had a foot in both worlds. A lot of people loved the shtick. A lot of people were introduced to jazz that way. And a lot of people hated it, and were turned off by what we were doing to the music. Jazz fans take their music very seriously."

Wynston, who obviously takes the Demons *very* seriously, rises to the band's defence "Maybe there was a lot of shtick," he argues, "but when it came to the music, it was second to none as far as I'm concerned. It was world class and, I think, incredibly innovative."

It's precisely this populist mix of innovation, eclecticism and sheer resourcefulness that made the Demons and Distillery Jazz Festival, which answers to much the same description, such an ideal fit as each other's starting point for 2004. Underhill, Wynston and Perry White will also be appearing with various other bands during the event's eight nights and, like everyone else on the program, taking home a pro-rated share of the festival's revenues for their trouble.

Last year, the proceeds worked out to something in excess of \$100 a musician for each show. That may not seem like a lot, but Underhill is sanguine, pointing to "the tradeoffs in respect, advertising, promotion of local talent and great venues that the festival offers. I just feel really happy to sign on to that. We didn't have to put the Demons there for our first show, but it's out of respect for what the festival's trying to do that we're involved."

Between the Distillery festival, the Dundas Square extravaganza and a Downtown Jazz festival show on June 28, hometown fans will have had three opportunities to hear the band again, two more than its followers in the other 15 Canadian cities on its summer itinerary. Underhill, however, offers a caution to Demonologists at every stop. "I think they should try to see the band when they can," he advises. "If Stich has his way it will keep on going. But who knows?"

*The Shuffle Demons tour includes appearances in Edmonton (June 18), Calgary (19), Medicine Hat (23), Nanaimo, B.C. (24), Duncan, B.C. (25), Victoria (26), Vancouver (27), Toronto (28), Ottawa (29), Kingston, Ont. (July 2), Montreal (3), Waterloo, Ont. (9), Halifax (10), St. John's (11), Guelph, Ont. (Sept. 11) and Fredericton (Sept. 15).*