

# Richard Gillis and *Rhymes*

*Canadian and Icelandic musicians team up for CD launch in Iceland*

It was the chanciest of chance encounters.

President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson was visiting Vatnabyggð in 1999. Richard Gillis, a jazz musician and associate professor in the University of Manitoba Faculty of Music, was visiting his parents in Yorkton. They suggested he accompany them to the reception in Foam Lake.

“The President was also touring Bob Eyolfson’s farm near Leslie. I went there with my parents, too, and was able to meet the Icelandic Consul, Svavar Gestsson. Svavar asked me to help organize a tour for “Guitar Islancio” who were planning to play a few jazz festivals in Canada in June 2000. I did that and things took off from there,” Gillis said.

He didn’t actually meet Bjorn Thoroddsen until 2000 when the Guitar Islancio trio, made up of guitarist Björn, guitarist Gunnar Thordarson and double bass player Jón Rafnsson, were featured entertainers at the INL of NA convention.

Fast forward to 2011, and *Rhymes*, the music of Björn Thoroddsen and Richard Gillis, backed by the Reykjavik Big Band and guest vocalist Egill Ólafsson. The release concert for the CD is slated for March in Kópavogur.

The birth of the CD also called for a series of chance happenings. “A couple of years ago, Björn asked me to arrange some of his music for a concert with the Reykjavik Big Band. That concert was supposed to take place in 2008, but the financial crash put things on hold for a while, which was OK because it gave me more time to write,” said Richard.

“Because it was so well received ... the concert was later named one of the three most interesting jazz concerts in Iceland in 2009 by the daily newspaper.

“We decided to make a CD out of the concert material,” said Richard. “The recording took place in June, 2010. I informally released the CD in Winnipeg in November, 2010, but Björn decided to wait for the new year to make an official release in Iceland.”

Richard’s background is Vatnaabyggð



*Richard Gillis on trumpet*

in Saskatchewan. His paternal grandparents, Hans Gislason and Stepania Haldorson, were born in Iceland and eventually farmed around Elfros. His dad, Joe, last name changed to Gillis, was born at Kristnes, near Leslie, and his maternal grandmother, Salborg Solvason, grew up outside of Wynyard and met her husband, Richard Mercer, while she was teaching at Theodore. Richard’s mother, Thelma, remains an icon in the Foam Lake/Theodore area, credited for establishing the tradition of fine vocal and instrumental music in the area.

“I was born in Theodore, SK on a very cold day in October in 1955,” Richard says. He grew up on the farm southwest of Theodore and his earliest memories are of sitting on the floor while his mother practiced piano for her Toronto Conservatory exams. She also had Richard singing in festivals and at other events while he was still young. Thelma started teaching piano to Richard but turned him over to another teacher. However, he discovered trumpet in school, where band was offered beginning in Grade 6. He had found his instrument. He is a performer, an arranger, band direc-

tor, professor of music. In 1990, he graduated from the U of Michigan with a Doctor of Musical Arts in trumpet performance.

It’s a musical family. His sister Margaret teaches music in a school in Vancouver, and his brother Glen teaches in the music department at the University of Saskatchewan. Richard’s wife, Joan, works for the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra and has been studying Arts Management. Their three children, Jennifer, Jonathan and Michelle are very involved in music, Jen and Jon are studying music at the U of M and Michelle is a Grade 11 percussionist.

Richard played in The University of Michigan faculty brass quintet and is active as a performer with several groups, including the Metalmorphosis Brass Quintet and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. He is also co-founder and Artistic Director of the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra, and is an associate professor in the University of Manitoba Faculty of Music where he has taught the trumpets and music education classes and was asked to develop the jazz ensembles and jazz education classes. “Big band jazz turned out to

be a real interest/passion of mine and in 1997 I extended “research” in that area by forming the “Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra” along with co-founder Sasha Boychouk. This group, which I have had the opportunity to direct since 1997, is made up of the best jazz musicians in Winnipeg and presents a yearly concert series, various school concerts, and has recorded two CDs,” said Richard who, over the last several years, besides playing in & directing the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra, has performed in brass quintets, small jazz groups, as an extra in the WSO, and recitals.

Björn and Richard connected in Gimli in 2000. Richard helped organize Guitar Islancio performances at the Winnipeg and Saskatchewan jazz festivals in June, 2000, with a hastily arranged side trip to Foam Lake for a performance that included Richard as guest performer.

“In July, 2000 I went to Iceland to perform some concerts with Björn, and returned in March, 2001 to record a CD with Guitar Islancio,” Richard said. “In the years following I have performed with Björn in Minneapolis, Washington, DC, Edmonton, Toronto, Fargo-Moorhead, New York City, and many locations in Iceland, and have performed in jazz festivals in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Toronto and Reykjavík. Since 2000 we have

recorded five CDs together and have recorded for broadcasts on CBC, Icelandic radio, Edmonton TV and Icelandic TV.”

Björn’s interest in guitars and music developed from an early age. On completing his training in Iceland he continued his studies in Los Angeles where he graduated from the Guitar Institute of Technology. Originally a rock musician, his attention turned towards

jazz. He performs as a solo artist and as a member in several bands, including Cold Front with Richard Gillis and America’s Steve Kirby, and the popular Icelandic band Guitar Islancio, the first Icelandic jazz group to have a gold certificate album. Björn is one of Iceland’s foremost jazz guitarists and has released a number of critically acclaimed albums. He was honoured in 2002 when he was named Official Artist in Garðabær.

at 4:00 p.m. at City Hall in Reykjavík.

“No introduction is needed when it comes to the Icelander Björn Thoroddsen, who has, along with a few others, led the Icelandic jazz-scene since 1978,” said an Icelandic reviewer. “It was about time that his songs were arranged for Big Band, and no one is better suited to do that than the conductor of Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra and Björn’s partner in Cold Front for many years,



Storsveit reykjavíkur is the Reykjavík Big Band

Guitar Islancio was named “Musical Group of the City of Reykjavík” in 2000 and 2001. Björn was named the “Jazz performer of the year 2003” in the Icelandic Music awards.

Richard arranged eight of Björn’s pieces for the Reykjavik Big Band, most of which featured Björn in some way. The performance of the Reykjavik Big Band, which Richard conducted took place on Sunday, October 11

Richard Gillis, and his arrangements worked very well.” (from *mbl.is*)

What is in the future for the duo? Richard and Björn plan to continue to perform and record.

There will perform at festivals in Iceland between June and August, 2011. Richard is planning to arrange music so that he and Björn can perform with chamber orchestras.