

Michael & Els Schutte

From Holland to Vancouver Island

by David Morrison

For myriad reasons Vancouver Island acts as a magnet, especially to creative types. There is such a rich arts culture in this region (including the Gulf Islands) that in the seven-and-a-half years I have lived here I have met more painters, sculptors, writers, ceramicists, glass workers, woodcarvers, potters, poets and masters of manifold other artistic pursuits than I had previously met in my lifetime. A lot of these talented folks relocated here from elsewhere in Canada or somewhere farther flung, drawn not only by the obvious natural, climatic and lifestyle appeal, but also the unique West Coast island ambience, so conducive to creativity.

Just over a year ago (on February 7, 2013, to be precise) we had the pleasure of welcoming Michael and Els Schutte, artists and musicians who immigrated here from The Netherlands after falling in love with Vancouver Island on painting holidays. "It's a very nice place with lots of space, fresh air and very nice, friendly people," gushes Michael, with accuracy and a smile. "And we made some very good friends before we moved here, so they have helped us and been very supportive. Such very sweet people!"

The Schuttes came here all the way from Egmond aan Zee, a small coastal village around 30 km northwest of Amsterdam, historically known for artists' colonies and as a popular vacation spot. Now settled in French Creek, they are really going for it in their efforts to establish their names in the local arts scene. "We are working very hard,



Els Schutte • submitted photo

about fourteen hours a day at the moment, but it is slowly building up," says Michael.

As well as creating beautiful art to sell locally, Michael and Els also teach. "In the morning it's painting lessons; in the afternoon and evening it's music lessons," Michael explains. "I am lucky to have got some students right away, as they liked my paintings. I have a lot of experience as a teacher and techniques to share, so it's going along well."



Michael Schutte • Photo by David Morrison

Michael describes his style of painting as 'romantic realism', but within that genre there is no pinning him down to any given subject matter. Michael is a commercial painter, so will paint anything and enjoy doing so. When given a tour of his and Els' expansive home studios, trading under the banner of Practicum Art and Music, Michael showed me a range of his exquisite paintings that included fantasy castles, beach scenes, various birds and wildlife and, oh yes, fairies!

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Fairies are big news in ancient European folklore, so for Michael were always an easy sell back in The Netherlands. Of the bird paintings, I was particularly taken by a beautiful depiction of the North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre's most famous resident, Sander the bald eagle, face to face with "his wooden brother," based on an eagle totem in Duncan. I also enjoyed examples of Michael's ongoing 'Hidden Treasures' series, in which beach or undersea scenes feature a 'lost' piece of jewelry, a watch, key or other trinket hidden in plain sight.

While just as impressive, Els' art is extremely different to her husband's work, yet in some ways as wide ranging. As Els was feeling under the weather upon my visit we had only a couple minutes to chat, even then at distance across the studio lest she pass on her flu to me! But I did get to see some of her lovely creations, including a parliament of 3D 'owl nurse' Get Well Soon cards (which apparently take just half an hour each to make), and some striking statuettes of African tribal women. Since she was very young Els' talents have shone in the crafts area of artistic creation, especially with paper, a field in which she is so skilled that she has won awards and had her work featured in many dedicated publications. At Practicum Art and Music she holds weekly classes in scrapbooking and how to make greetings cards, but will also happily take commissions.

The other side of the Schuttes' world is music. For many years the couple has performed together, specializing in easy-on-the-ear 50s, 60s and 70s classics and country cover versions. Their latest and fifth CD, 'By My Side', features their renditions of such as Eagles' 'Tequila Sunrise', Patsy Cline's 'Walking After Midnight' and Lynn Anderson's 'Rose Garden' alongside a clutch of originals. It's a very polished sound, but then with a hi-tech home studio set up and storied musical history like Michael's this should come as no great surprise.

Back in high school, Michael founded a band destined to ultimately become one of the most famous of all Dutch pop outfits: The Nits. Showing me the handwritten set list from the band's first ever performance, he says: "As well as playing covers we wrote our own songs and we were picked up by a broadcasting company called AVRO (for the Dutch meaning of 'General Association of Radio Broadcasting'). They started

playing our songs which was ridiculous luck because we were just 12- and 13-year-old boys! From there we became more and more professional. The band has existed for over forty years and is still going on with my friends Henk Hofstede, Rob Kloet and others, still playing in theatres. The name 'The Nits' was an answer to 'The Beatles...an itchy insect to their beetle!'"

(At this juncture it is important to note an amazing coincidence connected to this story via my other work in a Nanaimo music store. On the day after I received the assignment to pen this profile of the lovely Schuttes, a regular customer from Gabriola Island came in to ask if we had any CDs by 'The Nits! "Wow!" I thought, relating the coincidence to the equally stunned customer. He was looking for two titles in particular: 'In the Dutch Mountains' and 'Urk' which I consequently obtained for him from a Montreal distributor. True story!)

"After my period in 'The Nits I was in Robert Stanley and the VIPS," continues Michael. "It was a very commercial band, like KC and the Sunshine Band, with fancy suits and crazy boots. We were lucky enough to have a hit in Austria and Germany, and in Vienna we met ABBA, which was really wonderful. We were in the same hotel and the same television show, but at that time nobody knew that they would become so huge!"

The next musical project for Michael was The Holland Quartet, a noted jazz outfit that attained a fair amount of domestic success, both in their own right and as the backing band for touring singers. But the road cannot go on forever, so Michael had an eye on the future. "As a professional musician I played gigs almost every day, and it was a very nice life, but you are away all the time, on the road. When I was home I started to build up my music and painting studios, to teach people music and art, and have now done this professionally for more than twenty-five years."

With so many years' experience and obvious glowing talent, Michael and Els are very welcome additions to our embarrassment of creative riches! For further information about Practicum Art and Music, please visit www.michaelschutte.blogspot.com (art), www.musiccoachmichael.blogspot.com (music), and www.elschutte.blogspot.com, or else call the studio on (250) 586 6370. ~

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Cone Zone

It's not a secret ... locals and visitors have always loved the Cone Zone in Qualicum Bay. Cones over-filled with frozen delights from Island Farms, and an outdoor patio with an ocean view that ripples across the Salish Sea from shore to shore! What could be better on a hot summer day ... or on any day, for that matter? We've heard through the grapevine that the Zone has a new operator this year! Bowser resident Andy Maguire and his family are taking up the reins and re-opening our favourite 'cool zone' in April. As well as our favourite ice cream flavours, we're hoping for a return of the tasty Hot Dogs and gourmet Smokies smartly introduced by most recent operators, James and Sandy. The new Zone may even feature tunes from Andy's "Dusty Hand Reggae Band" ... we hope so! ~