

# Don Randell: Mistaken Fiddling Dichotomies

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# Don Randell: Mistaken Fiddling Dichotomies<sup>1</sup>

PAULA FLYNN

IN 2003 I ATTENDED A CONCERT in St. John's given by the renowned English revival singer Martin Carthy, during which he performed traditional ballads, broadsides, and tunes. At intermission I discussed Carthy's important role in the folk revival movement in the UK with a group of local musicians, and mentioned the importance of song collection and performance in our own culture. One musician agreed and, in a condescending manner, noted that it was imperative that Newfoundland and Labrador should not be known only for "musicians like Harry Hibbs." Another musician, a singer of traditional Newfoundland songs, asserted that the "trad/rock" band Figgy Duff had tried to raise the status of Newfoundland folk music. In both cases, I was struck by the musicians' apparent desire to distance themselves from what was seen as inferior, less sophisticated or, worse, music tainted by its association with country style and commercial media. "Musicians like Harry Hibbs" have been admired (and sometimes revered) by much of the populace because of their adherence to community constructions of good musicianship. Factors such as "danceability," or rhythm, and familiarity can be assets in a set of traditional tunes. On the other hand, a new sound played with professional polish can get people out to the "shows," a term with dual meanings, as discussed by folklorist Michael Taft in 1981. Traditional music is no better or worse than popular music; they are different, as are peoples' views of what is desirable in a sound or style. Changes in contexts of performance — where we hear music, what that repertoire is, and how it is learned — all affect these musical constructs.

In the last half-century, there has been a constant debate (or controversy) over what constitutes Newfoundland culture and tradition. These are social constructs with meanings that are assigned over time. According to Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, tradition cannot be defined in terms of boundedness (with dis-

inct boundaries) because tradition is a process: its meaning changes depending on social, political, or economic contexts. There is a widespread opinion within Newfoundland musical circles that Newfoundland musical culture is comprised of traditional and popular genres. Underlying this is a false dichotomy between tradition and modernity as discrete entities. In Newfoundland as elsewhere, however, the criteria used to differentiate traditional and popular music are artificial and localized, and dependent on time and place (Connell and Gibson 4). In the early 1960s, some Newfoundland rock and roll groups included traditional Irish and local dance tunes in their repertoires, but later dropped them.<sup>2</sup> Their choice of material changed to suit the times and their audiences. Folklorist Martin Lovelace has noted that even into the 1980s the success of rural Newfoundland dance bands depended on a skillful *mélange* of “everything, from Bruce Springsteen covers, through old fashioned waltzes, to jigs and reels, with plenty of slower country ballads — ‘bellyrubbers’ — for slow dancing” (297; see also Narváez 1978). A performer’s career choice necessitates a blend of musical repertoires, which can be juxtaposed depending on one’s performance context. I will explore how such a blend comes about in the course of one Newfoundland fiddler’s career.

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In 1970, I was an undergraduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Many of my friends were musicians, some of whom played gigs at bars both in and near St. John’s. For the most part, they played contemporary folk music, which included material by Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Donovan Leitch. The father of one of my friends played at some of the same venues, but for a different audience: mostly older people from rural communities. Occasionally, we would gather at my friend’s house to play music, and that is where I met her father, Don Randell, who was always happy to have some of the younger crowd “jam” with him. As we aged, our musical tastes began to converge. I have kept in touch with Don and his family for 35 years.

During Folklore graduate studies in 2002-2003, I began to write about Don Randell’s musical career. By this time his health was fragile, his memory unreliable, and attempts to question him seemed to frustrate or even embarrass him. As a result, I do not have a taped interview with him. We have spoken to each other several times, by telephone and in person. Aside from these primary source discussions, I conducted secondary source interviews with musicians, some of whom were Randell’s colleagues, as well as with people who remember Randell’s playing in the early years. All interviewees agreed to my use of their remarks. The bulk of my research was based on a 1982 interview with Randell by Neil V. Rosenberg (with Ted Rowe).<sup>3</sup> Additional information and photos were supplied by Randell’s wife, Florence.

Don Randell, salesman by vocation and musician by avocation, has been a fixture on the Newfoundland musical scene for 60 years. During all that time he has maintained a quiet, but enduring, presence. He has travelled across the island and beyond, playing a diversity of musical styles for a variety of audiences. His music has spanned a continuum of old-time, honky-tonk, Irish, country and western, popular, swing, and, most recently, bluegrass styles and material, all interspersed with traditional Newfoundland tunes. This syncretism of musical styles made him a valued band member and session player. According to one of his peers, country musician Jimmy Linegar, Randell was *the best* at playing fiddle accompaniment. When I asked him to expand on this, Linegar explained that, unlike most fiddlers (“like Rufus [Guinchard] and Émile [Benoit]”), who tended to play only the melody line, Randell not only played melody but, in his accompaniment, also contributed harmony, phrasings, and ornamentation. Fiddler Patrick Moran has observed that Randell’s playing style is “more gentle,” utilizing techniques such as “double stops.” He can do equal justice to popular songs like Hoagy Carmichael’s 1929 hit, “Stardust,” and to more recent material like Neil Young’s “Harvest Moon.” Randell’s versatility as a performer was, in part, based on his career both on and off the road; a sensitivity to and manipulation of various media; his reading of audiences; and his satisfaction at remaining a “medium-sized fish in a medium-sized pond,” to use Rosenberg’s metaphor (1986, 149).

Randell was born 14 January 1924 in Port Rexton, Trinity Bay. Port Rexton’s proximity to the busy port of Trinity gave the community ample exposure to outside cultural influences. Although Port Rexton had been a prosperous fishing and shipping community, at the time of young Randell’s birth it was just entering an economic slump.<sup>4</sup> Randell’s father was the local schoolteacher and justice of the peace; his mother was involved in local theatre and church activities. As a result of their socio-economic status in the community, young Randell reaped benefits which otherwise might have been unavailable: he received some piano lessons from the local minister’s wife, and he heard music on the dry cell battery radio, at limited times with poor reception.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, radio has been both entertainment and life-line. Commercial radio was not developed in Newfoundland until 1932 but by 1939 St. John’s had two stations: VONF (an amalgam of VOGY and VONF) and VOCM (Hiscock 1987). The two stations had programming which resulted in distinct audience preferences: VOCM played more country music than VONF, which programmed more urbane fare (Narváez 1978). Upon Newfoundland’s confederation with Canada in 1949, VONF became part of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC] network. One radio programme which became emblematic of the then-prevailing Newfoundland culture, and whose host was to be future Premier Joseph R. Smallwood, was *The Barrelman*. It was aired by VONF from 1937 to 1949 (when it was cancelled by its successor, CBC, it was taken over by VOCM until 1956). Radio shows such as *The Barrelman* kept people connected with what was happen-

ing outside their communities while simultaneously validating their culture (Narváez and Laba 1986, Hiscock 1994).

In the late 1930s, VONF aired a weekly programme featuring Jack Walsh, who sang and played the guitar. For future musicians like Don Randell and John White, shows such as this were influential. The button accordion was, at that time, the instrument of choice at many Newfoundland “times” and dances. It was louder than the fiddle, it did not require strings, and its tuning was not subject to the vagaries of the Newfoundland climate (Wareham 174). Listening to such music was, in Randell’s experience, “the closest thing to the square dance.” Randell relied on radio as there was little opportunity for exposure to the music that he was “hungry for.” There were no touring musicians in his area at that time, so the radio was the sole source of any “new” music, which for Randell meant any music other than that played locally. He liked the departure from the accordion to fiddles and guitars, saying he was “entranced” by the sound of the guitar, which in the late 1930s was heard infrequently, as it was not yet part of the outport repertoire. By the time he entered his teens, Randell began to try “hillbilly” tunes like “Bile ’em Cabbage Down” on an old broken violin that his father had had repaired for him.<sup>5</sup> At the age of sixteen, Randell moved to St. John’s to attend Prince of Wales Collegiate.

The 1930s outport repertoire consisted of songs, often sung unaccompanied; dances were usually accompanied by the accordion, for increased volume. In earlier times, the dances in some communities were performed “neat,” without instrumentation, or with “mouth-music.” Fiddles were used, for a time, before accordions; later, the accordion player would still be referred to as the “fiddler” (Wareham 1982). Guitars, which were not used until country music became popular, were often introduced to the community by “outsiders.” Musician Ted Rowe relates that this was the case in his community: because it had a large cable station, Heart’s Content had more “cosmopolitan” influences. It had both a doctor (an outsider) and a druggist; and in the early 1940s, each had a guitar.

Around 1930, the music of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers gained considerable popularity partly due to the rapid movement of rural people to urban centres in the United States, and to radio exposure (Rosenberg 1985, 18-19). The diffusion of such music into Canada resulted in future popularity for Canadian musicians such as Wilf Carter and Hank Snow, both of whom were influenced by Jimmie Rodgers. Randell recalls that after moving to St. John’s he listened regularly to country music on VOCM: in his day, this was the “hit parade.” Recently, Jimmy Linegar observed to me how ironic it was that in Newfoundland country music in the 1940s was considered “townie” music, and was only later considered “bayman” music when in the 1970s traditional Newfoundland music gained prominence. Such reversals have been the case in many nativistic revival movements (Pocius 1988, Blaustein 2005).

In the early 1940s, after taking a business course, Randell found a job in accounting and then as a travelling salesman. He kept this job “on the road” until a few

years before retirement; it enabled him to meet, play with, and exchange ideas with other musicians across the island. Unlike many full-time musicians who have had to leave the island to gain access to sufficient markets for their music, Randell's full-time job let him fulfill his avocation, his music. At this time, Randell played fiddle in a band which employed guitar, piano, and ukelele in playing old-time standards: the Reveliers were playing a regular, albeit unpaid, radio gig on VOXM. Randell also began a long-term radio gig (1946-1951) on VONF, along with Ralph Bishop and, later, Bob MacLeod. Oddly enough, this programme replaced the Jack Walsh show which Randell had listened to in his youth. Because there were few touring musicians in the outports before and immediately after World War II, radio exposure earned them much attention. Randell said in 1982 that "If years ago ... if a group had come in that could play guitars, fiddles ... you would have thought you were in heaven."

During the war, Newfoundland became home to thousands of military personnel who were stationed at bases in and around St. John's, across the island and in Goose Bay, Labrador. At the height of the occupation in 1943, there were 6,000 Canadians and 10,000 Americans, 4,000 of whom were stationed at Fort Pepperrell Air Force base, St. John's, until Fort Pepperrell was de-commissioned in 1960 (Cardoulis 1990). Civilians reaped the benefits of wartime military spending as infrastructure was put in place: jobs on the base paid relatively high wages. The "invasion" resulted in both economic and cultural development. Randell would be one of the many musicians who became exposed to a new culture.

Originally, Randell played violin only; around 1941, he began to play guitar and sing along with others. The guitar was a departure from the accordion or fiddle frequently used for musical accompaniment. By the 1940s, bands in Newfoundland emulated the American pattern and adopted instruments such as the guitar, both flat style and dobro, that is, "steel" or Hawaiian guitar (Narváez 1978, Hiscock 1994).<sup>6</sup> Playing and singing was an anomaly for Randell, who thought of himself as rather shy. But Randell enjoyed performing: he was never *just* adaptive to the artistic tastes of an audience or "culturally absorbent," to use a term discussed by Peter Narváez (1982).

In the late 1940s, Randell, his brother, and two friends were doing live radio work at VOXM. Its new station manager, Canadian Mengie Shulman, had fresh ideas at a time of great social change. He also had a name for Randell's evolving band: the Happy Valley Gang. Possible sources could have been the Happy Gang, a radio musical group in Canada popular from 1937 to 1959. A more likely source was the influence of American groups like the Happy Valley Boys, and songs such as "I Was Born in Happy Valley" and "Happy Valley Special."<sup>7</sup>

Randell's years with the Happy Valley Gang included gigs at American Forces bases. After the war, Fort Pepperrell remained a hub of musical activity: it had its own radio station (VOUS), which broadcast the current music from the United States (Webb 1994), and it had a full concert band and glee club, whose assistant conduc-

tor was a young “Johnny” Williams, later of the Boston Pops. However, for Randell a more important musical influence was Loyd Wanzer, a young army corpsman from Oklahoma, who played left-handed style on a homemade fiddle with no finish. Randell learned many tunes from Wanzer, who did not teach actual lessons but had Randell play along with him. Although he did not receive formal instruction in bowing, for example, Randell absorbed both style and material. In a 1983 article by Celia Schoeffler in the trade journal *Bluegrass Unlimited*, Wanzer noted that his own style was informed by exposure to old-time music.<sup>8</sup> When Wanzer left Newfoundland in 1945, Randell bought his fiddle, but he could not have bought what Wanzer gave him in technique through aural transmission.

In 1945, Randell met his future wife, Florence Verge, who was familiar with his music from his radio shows. They married in 1948 and, since they shared a mutual interest in music, they often joined musician friends to perform in private and public contexts. Sometimes they recorded these sessions on reel-to-reel recorders. The repertoire ranged from Al Dexter’s 1943 hit, “Pistol Packin’ Mama” to the tune “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” which Randell learned as a youth in Port Rexton. This tune appeared in a 1925 songster compiled by Newfoundlander James Murphy (Mercer 1979). In 1992, this same tune would be played by Randell on a bluegrass recording.<sup>9</sup> By the late 1940s, Randell had access to print media, he embraced evolving electronic technology, and he was musically literate. This last point is significant because during the war years the importation of military personnel from all over Canada and the United States resulted in exposure to outside influences and the transmission of a musical canon that without musical literacy many would not have been able to absorb (Rosenberg 1986).

In autumn of 1949, Randell played a week-long engagement as fiddler for the Newfoundland leg of the Hank Snow tour. At the end of the gig, he was invited to join Snow in Nashville. At the time, Florence was pregnant with their first child, and so he refused, opting to remain at home in a “small pond” (Rosenberg 1986). The echo of this decision (“What would have happened if Dad had gone to Nashville?”) became a family narrative for a generation afterward. When I asked him in late 2005 if he was sorry he had not gone to Nashville, Randell replied, “No, I certainly wasn’t!” But he acknowledged that it made for a good story, one that is recorded in a scrapbook compiled by his wife and devoted to Randell’s musical career.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, internationally known musicians such as the Doc Williams Band, John Cash, and Kitty Wells toured Newfoundland. Doc Williams was broadcast on WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia. At night, these broadcasts were received with clarity in St. John’s, as well as in many rural communities. As a result, the popularity of country music increased dramatically during the 1940s (Narváez 1978). In September 1952, Williams was on tour and appeared at the drill hall in Buckmaster’s Field in St. John’s: Randell heard him play (Figure 1),

and 16-year-old Jimmy Linegar (known as “Kid Ranger”) was invited onstage to sing and play Williams’s Martin guitar.



Figure 1. Doc Williams and his band, Newfoundland tour, September 1952.

Randell had great respect for those touring musicians who organized and delivered music to the outports and major centres of Newfoundland. He tried to learn some aspect of technique from each of them, noting for instance that Kitty Wells was “the best at working a microphone”; he would then utilize these techniques in his own bands.<sup>10</sup> For him, it was not just infatuation with popular culture: it was a transmission of new performance techniques at a time when media forms and artis-



tic tastes were in flux. Randell embraced technology in both private and public performance contexts. When he played or recorded, there were definite standards, which was not always the case with some Newfoundland country musicians.<sup>11</sup> The issue of performance standards is problematic in a discussion of country and traditional music because standards differ depending on the genre. There are not better or more refined standards for one genre or the other; there are particular standards for each performance context. Randell and his band adopted Western-style clothing in their onstage appearances, even in the 1940s with the band, The Reveliers, they were aligning their image with an increasingly more popular genre of entertainment: country and western music.

In 1951, the Happy Valley Gang (or Boys), had a repertoire that included old-time tunes, Celtic jigs and reels such as “Miss McLeod’s,” and popular North American songs of the 1940s such as “You Are My Sunshine.” The band, heard weekly on VOXM, would eventually be heard on-air from St. John’s to Port-aux-Basques. In 1952 the band went on tour, sponsored by India Beers (made by Newfoundland Brewery Limited), and recorded radio shows in several towns across the island. Unusually for the time, the band travelled by air from St. John’s to Gander, and from Stephenville back to St. John’s (Figure 2). At this time the band (which broke up in 1953) was paid to play, not only in kind (a radio sponsor’s food item or



Figure 2. Happy Valley Boys on tour, 1 August 1952. Left to right: Ted Blanchard (who replaced Don’s brother, Mac), Don Randell, Cecil Lawrence, Eric Dicks.

clothing) or as a rare Christmas bonus, but in cash. Even today, the receipt of remuneration marks the point at which practitioners of traditional or popular music know they are “legitimate”: they have made it.<sup>12</sup>

The venues at which the band appeared were sometimes challenging. Randell recalled the dubious job of providing entertainment at places where square dances became rowdy (especially if alcohol was involved). For instance, in Petty Harbour, just outside St. John’s, the band regularly played there accompanied by two police officers, at the parish priest’s behest. “One time this guy was thrown over a balcony; landed on his feet, still fighting. They used to tell us, ‘Keep her goin’, b’ys, keep her goin’.” Given such audiences, it was paramount to keep them entertained!

Over the years, Randell played pick-up gigs with other musicians, often overlapping in several groups with eclectic repertoires.<sup>13</sup> In the mid-1950s, he joined the Dipsy Doodlers, a band which included an American serviceman. They had the distinction of playing on Newfoundland’s first television variety show (Figure 3). The Dipsy Doodlers also recorded both a 45-rpm and a long-playing record (Rodeo RLP-87). Randell continued to play for television throughout his life (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Dipsy Doodlers, ca. 1957. Left to right: (top) Joe English, Don Randell, Doug Mawer; (bottom) Brian Johnston, Cy Brown, Danny Behannon (USA).



Figure 4. Cavaliers at CJON, late 1950s. Left to right: Daphne Hiscock, Jack Gordon, Don Randell, Bill Locke, Gerry Horlick, Doug Haye.

In 1957, VOCM's Mengie Shulman suggested that Randell, along with some former Happy Valley Gang band members, cut a long-playing record of old-time tunes and jigs and reels. This was a commercial recording, on the Banff Rodeo label, made at the VOCM radio studio. Randell remembers that each band member was given twenty dollars and that he thought no more about it until he heard it on the radio: "They sent it away and that's all we knew about it ... we got our twenty dollars." It was released as *Newfoundland Old Time Fiddle Music*, with the band The Shamrocks; Randell and the Happy Valley Gang were not credited. The repertoire was a band decision, though, and included standard fiddle tunes such as "Rock Valley Jig" and "Irish Washerwoman." Shulman had the record distributed widely and it could still, in 2005, be found in used-record "bargain bins."

In 1957, CBC radio in St. John's launched *Saturday Night Jamboree*. The regular cast eventually included Randell, singer John White, accordionist Ray Walsh, and the host, Harry Brown. They formed the nucleus of the 1964 CBC television variety series *All Around the Circle*, which in later years was picked up by the national network, making Randell "recognizable on the street, to people from as far away as Alberta" (Figure 5). In its heyday, the *Circle* had a hectic schedule: at one point, thirteen shows were recorded in seventeen days (Westcott 1989). The early shows included Newfoundland and country music interspersed with comedic epi-

sodes, a format that had become popular on 1950s American television. By the 1970s, there was more folk (as in “hootenanny,” rather than Newfoundland folk-song) and contemporary music, especially when the programme went national. At first, Randell and the band exercised musical control over the selection and retention of ideas and styles. Now, the producer chose what was to be performed based on central Canadian directives for national consumption (Rosenberg, “Modern Canadian Fiddle Canon”). *All Around the Circle* lasted thirteen years; like *Don Messer’s Jubilee* (cancelled in 1969), it was still popular when it was dropped in 1977.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 5. *All Around the Circle* house band, ca. 1970. Left to right: John White, Ray Walsh, Don Randell, Evan Purchase, Ted Blanchard, Carol Brothers, Doug Laite.

Neil Rosenberg has said that “the interplay between tradition and change is acted out by local people” (1981, 6). But who defines local tastes? Not only were Newfoundland’s musical trends decided by outsiders, but “by the close of the 1960s a younger generation of Newfoundlanders was critically examining the impact of Confederation on their culture. In this climate a new generation of singer-collectors sought fresh traditional music of more acceptable authenticity, and began to reject the old familiar canon” (Rosenberg, “Canadianization” 67). By the 1960s, professional musician Jimmy Linegar encountered great economic diffi-

culty when radio stopped playing live country music; the same fate, however, would not befall Randell.<sup>15</sup> Newfoundland youth were turning their backs on music once considered popular but now viewed as “hokey.”<sup>16</sup> Country music did not “rock,” and contemporary music was becoming an eclectic blend of rock, folk, and something else.

In 1967, the St. John’s drummer Noel Dinn formed the Philadelphia Cream Cheese Band, with guitarists Wayne Brace, Bryan Hennessey, Sandy Morris, and Derek Pelley. In the early 1970s, Dinn established Figgy Duff (including Pelley, and Morris as a temporary member). An innovative band, it melded traditional ballads with rock instrumentation. This was a time of resurgent interest in Newfoundland cultural heritage, and Dinn, Neil Murray (a Rhodes scholar who had been exposed to British revivalist groups), and singers such as Laverne Squires and Anita Best, all helped to redefine local musical tastes (Saugeres 1992). They emphasized Newfoundland identity by performing ballads, some of which they collected from around the province, based on peoples’ experiences with the land and the sea. In this spirit of revitalization, later bands like Irene B. Mellon (the name a homage to a local 1930s radio show) evoked, perhaps unwittingly, an idealized past while playing straight rock (Hiscock 1987, 151).

The revitalization movement was reinforced by the Irish folk group, Ryan’s Fancy, whose members emigrated to Canada in 1967 and settled in Newfoundland in 1971. The group’s repertoire included both local and Irish material, and their frequent appearances at St. John’s pubs, in outport communities, and on television specials attracted attention to traditional music, and encouraged the practice of folk music. As band member Fergus O’Byrne said, “We straddled the commercial [representation] of traditional music while remaining true to the folk roots.” He further noted that by coming to Newfoundland “at an opportune time,” the group was “able to make a living” (2005). However, as traditional music gained prominence, purists deemed some Newfoundland folksongs inauthentic or over-performed, for example “ditties” such as “I’s the B’y” (Casey et al. 399; Rosenberg, “Canadianization”; Hiscock 2005).<sup>17</sup> Some musicians in the 1980s would not perform such material, which they derisively termed “diddly-diddly.” However, Ryan’s Fancy recorded “I’s the B’y” in 1971 and re-released it on CD in 1995. Old standards may have elicited contempt in some circles, but their popularity reflected the taste of the day.

As country music faded during the 1970s, Randell’s ability to adapt to juxtaposed musical styles enabled him to survive the folk revival. He had always had catholic tastes in music, and took well to the folk repertoire. He even made forays into semi-classical music, playing in private performance contexts with a local magistrate, Hugh O’Neill, who organized small, informal chamber ensembles (Rowe 2005). Randell’s musical literacy, versatility, and economic security allowed him to make a transition that many other entertainers could not.

Through his late middle years, Randell’s playing became even more diversified. In 1973, the bluegrass band Crooked Stovepipe was formed by Neil Rosen-

berg and Ted Rowe, and Randell joined the group in 1978 (Figure 6). This was not an entirely new genre for him, since he had played some gigs with Newfoundland's first bluegrass band, The Bluegrass Mountaineers (Frank Thorne and Reg Whitten), in 1963-1964. Randell retired from his day job in 1980 and was, by then, playing an even wider musical repertoire.



Figure 6. Crooked Stovepipe members, 1983. Left to right: Ted Rowe, Neil Rosenberg, Don Randell, Scott Swinden, Jim Rillie.

In 1976, Randell, John White, and Jimmy Linegar were the opening act at the first Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival, an opening act that continued until White's death in 1998 (Figure 7). Randell and Linegar continued to play at the festival until 2000. Randell's music, which bridged folk, popular, and traditional idioms, was widely appreciated. He influenced at least one young fiddler who "grew up" with the St. John's festival, Patrick Moran, who today plays a varied repertoire in several bands: "I always knew who he was; [he was] a much more smooth player ... not flashy [but] with a nice, warm sound. I tried to copy a lot of his style: [it was] simplified, but not simple. Don could play in five notes what others played in twenty" (Moran 2005). Randell also played at bluegrass festivals from Nova Scotia to Alberta; and it was in Alberta, in August 2001, that he made his final festival appearance. In 2002 he stopped playing in public.



Figure 7. John White and Don Randell, 25 April 1998, at the All Around the Circle Reunion Concert, Arts and Culture Centre, St. John's. White died 31 May, one month later.

Ted Rowe has remarked on Randell's confidence in embracing any musical challenge: "He was never afraid to try anything new and he wasn't intimidated by the size of an audience." Randell, like Rufus Guinhard, enjoyed playing, whether it was for "ten or ten thousand" (Rowe 2005). In 1997, Randell was inducted into the Hall of Honour at the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council Awards. In 2003, Randell was the Newfoundland and Labrador recipient of the Stompin' Tom Connors Award at the fifteenth annual East Coast Music Awards [ECMA],<sup>18</sup> an award that goes to "unsung heroes" for contributions over a lifetime to the musical fabric of their region (ECMA 2005).

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Unlike the more famous fiddlers Rufus Guinhard and Émile Benoit, Randell has not won national attention as a "Newfoundland fiddler." Apart from the ECMA Stompin' Tom Connors Award in 2003, he has received little notice outside his province. This may be because the "cultural gatekeepers" do not consider him an authentic Newfoundland musician because his repertoire has not been limited to "traditional music."<sup>19</sup> But music is not the property of any one gatekeeper, and it cannot be fixed in any one place, at any set time.

Ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman has challenged the notion that the development of popular culture and expressions of musical syncretism will eventually lead to cultural homogenization. His view is that "modernization encourages new ways of looking at old styles and different repertoires and thereby sets the stage for revivals and revitalization" (124). Randell's career confirms Bohlman's argument. Even when he no longer had the marketability of his early (in contrast to his later) career, Randell adapted to change, and plied his trade for 60 years. He helped to prepare the way for future fiddlers just as certainly as Rufus Guinhard and Émile Benoit had. He was not "discovered" in his elder years by young, middle-class revivalists, whose ideas about music were tied to the way they thought about place, and who may have been creating a "constructed tradition" (Ben-Amos 115), which did not include Randell's versatility. However, tradition is not static: it is the creation of the future out of the past and, as such, is always open to reinterpretation. Randell, in his expression of culture, did exactly that: he helped to transform culture as he adapted to evolving trends.

Toru Mitsui (1993) has written about Japanese musicians who, through their performance of American bluegrass music, choose to embrace other versions of tradition without constraint. In this context, Randell can be compared with Omar Blondahl, who performed traditional Newfoundland songs "without constraint." Blondahl arrived in Newfoundland in 1955, and worked at the VOXM radio station in St. John's. The manager had him sing, on air, songs from the Gerald S. Doyle songbook, using guitar (still rare for folksong accompaniment). These folksongs had circulated in oral culture, but were still generally unknown in arranged versions



(Rosenberg 1991). Blondahl made several recordings of his own compositions and traditional songs during his nine years in the province, becoming “the voice of Newfoundland” for the rest of Canada, and popularizing the songs that are now identifiable as the “canon of Newfoundland song” (Rosenberg, “Canadianization”).

At a sold-out concert 22 November 2005, several of Newfoundland’s finest musicians assembled in St. John’s to perform the music of Omar Blondahl in country, blues, traditional, and contemporary styles. Judging by the audience’s standing ovation, they were not worried by questions of authenticity. To some, Blondahl’s music is exactly what some purists would have guarded us from: hokey, Burl Ives-style singing, with an affected Newfoundland accent. Yet, if Blondahl had not had the perspicacity to record the folksongs that he and others collected, we might have remained unaware of parts of our rich musical culture. Randell, like Blondahl, embraced other versions of tradition.

If Randell has not achieved the same degree of prominence as Guinchart and Benoit because he is deemed less culturally authentic, purists would do well to remember that ideas about authenticity have changed since the days of Cecil Sharp, when scholarly judgments were usually text-based (Atkinson 144). Thanks to collectors like Alan Lomax, the 1940s saw more attention being paid to elements of performance style, as well as musical and verbal texts, and, since the 1960s, tradition has been considered to incorporate text, style, and context (Rosenberg 1993, 16). The fact that Randell played popular music does not make him any less authentic in his own musical canon than traditional musicians such as Guinchart and Benoit. Randell played (mostly) popular music which originated outside traditional Newfoundland culture, but his musical canon has evolved with changing performance styles and political, cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Neither traditional nor popular music is exempt from commodification. Both Guinchart and Benoit gained prominence from skillful marketing achieved through an alliance with younger, musically literate persons who were also technologically aware.<sup>20</sup> In his long musical career, Randell achieved “journeyman” status, to use Rosenberg’s (1986) phrase, through juxtaposition of musical repertoire based on performance contexts. His career was necessarily subject to commodification: he enjoyed playing, and he played what was considered desirable by the audiences of the day. To many Newfoundlanders who heard him on radio from the 1940s onward, he was a musician who was enjoyed and even “idolized” (McHugh 2005).

A quiet, unobtrusive man, who generally stood at the rear of the *All Around the Circle* house band, Randell has been referred to as “the rock, the pillar” of that group (Rowe 2005). He was always dependable; a non-drinker, he often drove the other musicians to and from gigs. Notable among Randell’s passengers were John White and Joan Morrissey. Morrissey had sung on *Saturday Night Jamboree* in 1963-1964, and had become prominent in the 1960s due, in part, to the political edge in her song material and her effervescent nature (Figure 8). In contrast to

buoyant performers like Morrissey, Randell's personality was a contradiction: self-effacing, yet confident. His versatility and manipulation of media enabled him to attain a "celebrity" status, based not on charismatic personality or superior talent, but on the embodiment of a musical tradition (Rosenberg 1986, 157).



Figure 8. Hamming it up with Premier Joseph R. Smallwood at the Royal Canadian Legion, Pleasantville, St. John's, 1969. Left to right: Ted Blanchard with double bass, Mr. Smallwood "playing" Don Randell's guitar, Wilf Barbour, Joan Morrissey, Don Randell.

Those who attempt to embed music in place run the risk of "fixing authenticity" (Connell and Gibson 19). But authenticity cannot be fixed any more than time itself can be fixed; as Dan Ben-Amos has noted, "Tradition constitutes a canon that fosters the social and cultural definitions of a group" (116). Part of the cultural definition of Newfoundland is its practice and love of music, both popular and traditional. We are not diminished by our association with popular culture; nor should we try to stay fixed in some idealized past, within a constructed tradition. Music, both traditional and popular, is a dynamic process, not a survivalist artifact. In our world, musical genres are becoming blurred: the idea of "cultural grey-out," or homogeneity, is an anachronistic concept. So, too, is the perception that Newfoundland music should be elevated to some ivory tower, wherein traditional forms remain "untainted" by other genres. Career musicians, of any canon, cannot isolate themselves from the trends of the day if they expect to stay solvent. In evolving social and economic contexts, Randell has remained a constant: vital, connected to

place and community, and representative of both cultural continuity and artistic growth (Figure 9).

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Figure 9. Don Randell at a CBC recording session, mid-1990s.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this article was read at the 2004 meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada. Although I borrow the term “mistaken dichotomies” from Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett’s 1988 theoretical discussion of academic and applied folklore, my article is more personal in nature. I am especially grateful to Philip Hiscock for his scholarly insights and to Neil Rosenberg, who inspired me to write about Don Randell.

<sup>2</sup>This common practice was occasionally reversed. The Du-Cats, from western Newfoundland, who recorded Chuck Berry tunes in the early 1960s, later recorded “Cock of the North” and “Mussels in the Corner” (1969), as they adopted a country repertoire (Taft 1975, 12).

<sup>3</sup>Except where noted otherwise, comments attributed to Randell are from my transcription of a 1982 interview with Don Randell, conducted by Neil Rosenberg (with Ted Rowe), in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive [MUNFLA] under accession numbers 82-091-C5676 and 82-091-C5677.

<sup>4</sup>*Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, s.v. “Port Rexton.”

<sup>5</sup>Such country music, originating in the southern United States, was termed “hillbilly” music ca. 1930 to 1945; more recently, many North American musicians prefer to use the word “old time” in reference to such music.

<sup>6</sup>In his foreword to Cahill and Withers (1995), Philip Hiscock notes that Ted Coleman “played the Hawaiian guitar, probably the first such widely heard in Newfoundland” on *The Irene B. Mellon Radio Programme*, which ran from 1934 to 1941. The guitar was generally used to accompany country music. In 1955, Canadian Omar Blondahl used the acoustic guitar to accompany his recordings of Newfoundland folksongs.

<sup>7</sup>My thanks to Neil Rosenberg for pointing this out to me.

<sup>8</sup>Lloyd Wanzer would later comment on how old-time fiddling styles became re-invented as modern fiddling contests featuring revitalized forms of traditional music (Blaustein 2005, 66).

<sup>9</sup>In October 2005, Newfoundland’s Great Big Sea released its ninth CD, entitled *The Hard and the Easy*. Most of the tracks are traditional songs, many of which were in songster collections such as those indexed by Paul Mercer in 1979. Comparatively recent compositions are Omar Blondahl’s “Concerning Charlie Horse” (1956) and Shel Silverstein’s 1966 re-write of “The Mermaid,” Child ballad 289. This internationally popular band has recorded trad/rock to pop since 1993. Such adaptation to change is often the hallmark of successful, full-time musicians. While Randell was not a professional, full-time musician, he did play all his life: his music was his avocation, if not his vocation.

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of authenticity in field-recording techniques, see Rosenberg (1993), 12-13; also Brady (1999).

<sup>11</sup>It has been noted by Taft (1981), Rosenberg (1985), and Blaustein (1993) that country musicians emphasize adherence to form and accuracy in performance. Musicians Patrick Moran and Ted Rowe have commented on Randell’s smoothness of form.

<sup>12</sup>The phrase “not bad for local,” a measure of performance level in a particular canon, was employed by certain Newfoundlanders, myself included, in the early 1960s; it implied that some aspect of legitimation was bestowed on musicians either because of their external recognition (e.g., by mainlanders) or receipt of remuneration. Rex Goudie’s Canadian Idol success in late 2005 mirrors this form of legitimation; however, in the early days of Newfoundland music, commercial success was more elusive.

<sup>13</sup>This is a common practice with successful full-time musicians: in the early 21st century, for instance, guitarist Sandy Morris plays in traditional, country, rock, folk, and show bands; in addition, he is a musical director and producer. In an earlier period, Randell played in popular, country, folk, and bluegrass groups.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of cultural representation by industry power-brokers, see Rosenberg’s 1994 “Modern Candian Fiddle Canon.”

<sup>15</sup>Folklorist Michael Taft’s 1981 monograph article on Jimmy Linegar is an insightful commentary on the interdependence of social, economic, and political factors and popular culture. By 1956, Linegar had fallen on hard times with the demise of country music. In comparison, Randell was able to diversify.

<sup>16</sup>In the late 1960s, I was a teenager who considered the music of John White to be definitely “uncool”; others of my generation shared this opinion.

<sup>17</sup>To illustrate the fickle pattern of traditional performance, Great Big Sea released “I’s the B’y” (a song viewed by some purists as “inauthentic”) in 1993 on their debut CD; in October 2005, following great commercial/pop success, their ninth CD, *The Hard and the Easy*, was released. It marks a return to older folksongs, such as “Old Polina” and “Harbour LeCou.” All of the above were sung by John White, among others.

<sup>18</sup>In 1993 Stompin' Tom Connors was the recipient of the Dr. Helen Creighton Award. He accepted it on one condition: that each year, another deserving musician would receive an award. Each year since, an award has gone to a musician in each of the Atlantic provinces, an "unsung hero," who has made a lifelong contribution to the East Coast music industry.

<sup>19</sup>As an example of cultural gatekeeping, Martin Lovelace (2004) refers to Maud Karpeles, who in 1929-1930 conducted fieldwork in Newfoundland, recording song types she deemed "authentic" (that is, sufficiently "English"). She was a "song picker" who practiced cultural selection.

<sup>20</sup>Many "traditional" Newfoundland musicians now have commodified their product to appeal to the summer tourist trade; traditional music concerts, pageants, and festivals (such as the annual folk festival sponsored by the Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Arts Council) are major economic concerns. Does that make them any less authentic?

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