

Fiddling with Technology: The Effect of Media on Newfoundland Traditional Musicians

Evelyn Osborne

Volume 22, Number 1, Spring 2007

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22_1art08

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Osborne, E. (2007). Fiddling with Technology:: The Effect of Media on Newfoundland Traditional Musicians. *Newfoundland Studies*, 22(1), 188–204.

Fiddling with Technology: The Effect of Media on Newfoundland Traditional Musicians¹

EVELYN OSBORNE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUND technologies since the late nineteenth century has been as revolutionary for musicians as the printing press was for verbal communication in the fifteenth century. By the late twentieth century, the remotest of villages had access to new sounds and information from across the globe. Not unexpectedly, these processes have had a major impact on folk music traditions around the world, including those in Newfoundland and Labrador. This article will examine how media sources, such as radio, recordings, television, and printed music have transmitted new styles of music to the island and how these, in turn, have influenced the repertoire and styles of traditional fiddle players. I will focus mainly on musicians who began learning in a community context, around or before mid-century, and consider how they used multiple technologies to access and learn new styles. I will draw primarily on field research conducted between 2000 and 2002 throughout the island of Newfoundland, with a particular focus on musicians from Bay de Verde, Conception Bay. All of these fiddlers have learned local tunes from the aural tradition, and media sources have supplemented this repertoire.² As Herbert Halpert noted in his preface to Taft's discography of Newfoundland music:

One point should be emphasized. A vigorous folk culture is not overwhelmed by modern commercial music. It does not feel impelled to absorb all the new musical idioms to which it is exposed. Apparently a strong culture is able to adopt selectively from many styles only those elements that it wants, those that it can adjust to its own way of feeling. (v)

The introduced styles on which I will focus are those of Cape Breton and Ireland, country and western repertoires of mainland Canada and the United States, and that of Don Messer, Atlantic Canada's radio and television star of the mid-century.

During the twentieth century the recording industry turned its microphones on folk musicians throughout the British Isles and North America, committing to tape artists such as the McNulty Family, Michael Coleman, the Bothy Band, Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald, Jean Carignan, Don Messer, Natalie MacMaster, and Ashley McIsaac to name a few. These musicians and many others reached, and still reach, people through their recordings, sometimes producing a profound effect on the musicians who listen to them. For example, Rosenberg contends that Don Messer, in particular, had a major (and, I would argue, continuing) influence on local fiddling traditions throughout Canada (2002, 192). More recently there has been the Celtic revival and the popularity of Cape Breton music on the international stage.

HISTORY OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC RECORDINGS IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Before radio and recordings were commonplace, traditional musicians learned their repertoire from family and community members, as well as from other musicians they encountered while travelling, particularly in workspaces such as lumber camps.³ These oral modes of transmission were the common practice in Newfoundland and Labrador as elsewhere. The instrumental music traditions in the province were enacted and sustained around the community "times," or socials, at which set dances were performed and fiddlers or accordionists (also called "fiddlers" in many places) played traditional tunes they learned aurally. Most musicians observed this music for many years before picking up an instrument themselves. As Ray Walsh of Bay de Verde, Conception Bay, stated, music "was just something that you saw your father doing and you wanted to do it as well. You didn't understand that you were preserving tradition, you just wanted to do something he did" (interview, 2001). Due to a myriad of economic and social factors the traditional way of life has changed dramatically in the last half century or so and the community set dances are not currently a regular occurrence. As Ray's son, Greg Walsh, explained, at family gatherings his family still plays live music on occasion but it is more "natural" now to put on a CD (interview, 26 June 2001).

The majority of immigrants to Newfoundland came from the British Isles, particularly southwest England, and for the most part this immigration took place between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most immigrants were connected to the major industry, the fishery, or to complementary commercial enterprises. The musical traditions followed traditional seasonal cycles of work, with less time for music during the busy summer fishing season, and with more commu-

nity dances and house parties during the long winter months. There were also community-organized concerts showcasing a variety of musics and talents. In some larger centres there were brass bands and classical music, often arranged through church networks. Folksong collectors in the twentieth century focused on old traditional ballads from England, Ireland, and Scotland; they made less mention of recorded repertoire or locally composed songs, and largely ignored the vibrant instrumental traditions.

The instrumental dance music tradition in Newfoundland was primarily a solo tradition thought to consist mainly of tunes that originated in Ireland. Much of the local repertoire does include a significant portion of music related to tunes also found in Ireland. Similar to Cape Bretoners' claim to Scottish identity, many Newfoundlanders look to Ireland for their cultural heritage, despite their personal ethnic backgrounds (Feintuch 78-79). The emphasis on broad Irish musical origins, however, has been debated by some scholars such as McDonald who point out that the majority of folksongs collected on the island were English not Irish (1999). This is supported by my analysis of dance tunes from two regions in Bonavista and Conception bays. While Irish tunes are certainly present, there is also music from English and Scottish sources as well as regionally unique pieces, assumedly locally composed music which passed into the general tradition (Osborne 2003).

Other instrumental compositional practices have been examined by Quigley in *Music from the Heart* (1992). Quigley investigates the best-known folk composer in Newfoundland, Émile Benoit (1912-1992), a fiddle player from the Port-au-Port Peninsula whose compositions reflect his local tradition as well as inspiration from other musics he was exposed to through recordings and travel. Another famous fiddler, Rufus Guinchard (1899-1990), from the Great Northern Peninsula, also composed a small fraction of his own repertoire (Russell 1982).⁴

As in Ireland and other parts of North America the instrumental music of Newfoundland is regionally diverse. While Smith (2003a, b) feels that there are four regionally distinct styles within the province, my own fieldwork suggests that there are perhaps six or more. In general, there is a mixture of influences throughout the island, which are connected to original settlement patterns. Scottish and Cape Breton music is found most conspicuously in the Codroy Valley and, traditionally, there was a heavy French influence in the Port-au-Port Peninsula, as exemplified by Émile Benoit's music. The Great Northern Peninsula has an interesting mixture of French and English fiddling influences, which results in many "crooked" tunes or uneven beat structures. Rufus Guinchard was famous, even infamous, for these (see Smith, this issue). The style of music of the east coast of the island is varied but fiddlers generally recognize it as being different from the music of the west coast. For example, the east coast style is played in a more straight-ahead unornamented manner. The Southern Shore of the Avalon is noted for its Irish traditions and St. John's is also heavily influenced by Irish music. Although these areas are influenced by Old World styles, I, and many other fiddlers, believe that the combinations of these

styles and repertoires thereof have resulted in unique regional styles. I have also found the use of media-transmitted styles strongly influential. It is possible that the degree of acceptance or rejection of media-transmitted styles also contributes to the delineations of local styles. While I am also presently conducting ongoing discussions and research on local styles, the imported media styles are the focus of this article.

Despite the island's apparent geographical isolation from the rest of the continent, new technologies still made their way to Newfoundland. In 1891, there was a cylinder phonograph demonstration in St. John's, and these machines were commercially available by 1898 (Wadden 44). In 1897 the first gramophone, using discs instead of cylinders, was being used to provide a soundtrack for a cinematograph film (Wadden 46). These gramophones became available for sale the following year alongside the phonograph (Wadden 47).⁵ Both cylinder and disc technologies were used for public presentations of lectures and music. They did not catch on immediately; in 1904 when Newfoundlander Georgina Stirling recorded in Italy, there were not enough machines on the island to make it viable for a musician to market recordings solely to Newfoundlanders (Taft x). These machines obviously soon became popular, since by the 1920s and 1930s folksong collectors such as Greenleaf and Karpeles were frustrated by Newfoundland singers' penchant for learning and enjoying new songs from radio and recordings, alongside their more traditional repertoire (Karpeles 1971; Hiscock 2; Webb 335; Narváez 1995). Greenleaf also commented that many singers owned songbooks and broadsides (Greenleaf iii). In his discussion of Karpeles's field diaries, Lovelace noted that she was unimpressed when she was brought to hear jazz in Spaniard's Bay, Conception Bay, one of the communities in which she hoped to find what she considered to be true "folksong" (Lovelace 292). It is plain that the musical tastes of Newfoundlanders have long been varied and diverse. Contrary to popular fears, and as discussed by Katz, there were occasional hopes that recordings would discourage people from bothering to learn an instrument; however, Newfoundlanders appeared to have thrived on new material and were eager to learn what they could from recordings (Katz 467-477).

Throughout the 1920s, radio stations from the Maritime provinces and the United States were easily accessible to Newfoundlanders with radio sets. Stations even further abroad could also be accessed; Webb notes that local stations in the Maritimes would often limit their air time so that international stations could be heard. For example, my grandfather, Joliffe Lloyd Quinton of Princeton, Bonavista Bay, was an avid amateur long-wave radio enthusiast and sent letters to the stations he heard from around the globe. In return, he received postcards from stations as far away as Europe, South America, Africa, and Japan. A partial list, which has survived within the family, is found in the endnotes.⁶

Stations based in Newfoundland did not start until the 1930s. Of the seven which were in operation by 1934, only VOGY was strong enough to provide ser-

vice to most of the island (Webb 162). Other stations based in St. John were connected to commercial enterprises, such as VOAS for Ayres and Sons Ltd. department store, private radio stations such as VONF and VOCM, or church organizations including the Seven Day Adventists and Wesley United Church (Webb 162-163). Of these, VOCM and VOWR are still in operation. In 1939, the Newfoundland Broadcasting Act was passed and the Newfoundland Broadcasting Commission, later the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, was established (Webb 189, 197).

When radio and recordings were introduced, folk musicians, already adept at learning by ear, were often excited to hear a new style and new tunes. In the case of vinyl records, the process was even easier, as records could be played over and over, until the tune became well known. Elsewhere in Canada and Europe this shift in source material has been of interest to scholars who study folk music traditions, but it was a frustration to early collectors. While some have dismissed media-influenced repertoire as inauthentic, others see it as a valid new twist in the modern tradition. In her work on Métis fiddling in Manitoba, Lederman identified two styles, the “old” and the “new,” the latter being the repertoire learned and influenced by recordings since the 1940s (40). She does not, however, focus on how this media-influenced repertoire, emphasizing instead the older style passed on through the aural tradition.

While many scholars and performers have lamented the influence of recordings, they recognize that recordings can re-stimulate tradition. Reiss explains the apparently self-contradictory role of sound technology in Ireland. He states that early twentieth-century Irish traditional music “suffered the effects of the media” once radio broadcasting began and residents were “no longer sonically isolated.” He suggests that this diminished the uniqueness of some regional styles, while others retained their distinctive qualities (2003, 147). At the same time that recordings were diffusing the music they also helped to revitalize it, through recordings from diaspora populations abroad, particularly those of Irish-American musicians, which became of interest in Ireland (Reiss 151). Recordings of county and western music have also rejuvenated the Ukrainian language in the prairies, as that community has taken to recording country-styled songs in Ukrainian and have developed their own niche recording market (Klymasz 1972). Bayard, who claims that his Pennsylvania collection *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife* is pre-recording-era repertoire (1928-1948), laments that it is now hard to find players who have learned the majority of their tunes from their local area, rather than from the media (1-2). While early twentieth-century scholars often looked for tunes learned through the aural tradition, contemporary ethnomusicologists consider it unjustifiable to ignore music which is learned from media sources and equally enjoyed by fiddlers.

CHANGING PERFORMANCE CONTEXTS

The traditional dances, based on square set cotillions, lancers and reels⁷ are not currently an active part of life in Newfoundland and Labrador, although many are maintained by dance troupes such as the Penny Dancers of Burin. Thus, there has been a shift in performance contexts for traditional Newfoundland musicians from dance to stage and for audiences from active participation to a listening role. In my own fieldwork I tended towards a young scholar's penchant to help "preserve" a tradition. Although interested in each fiddler's entire repertoire, I was most interested in the older repertoire used for dancing. I found, however, that as a fiddler myself, when my informants and I played together, we often played newer, more widely known tunes in our common repertoire, purely for the enjoyment of playing with other musicians. Through this experience, I came to understand that these mediated tunes hold an important place in a fiddler's repertoire, that of playing for oneself or with others, rather than for dancing. Dance music was viewed as functional and has only recently started to be adapted for a listening audience.⁸ As one fiddler stated, "you're not going to sit down in your kitchen and play for no reason!" (Osborne 9). Interestingly, during the time period that dances and recordings co-existed, few fiddlers used tunes they learned from outside the province for dancing, but primarily employed tunes already accepted as "Newfoundland dance music." At the same time, however, musicians insisted that it is technically possible to use any tune for dancing as long as it has the correct beat even if they did not put this into practice. With the decline of dance traditions, fiddlers were forced either to stop playing entirely or to find a repertoire which suited their new performance contexts. Music heard on the radio or recordings, obviously produced to engage listeners rather than dancers, provided fiddlers with a repertoire to be played in new performance contexts outside of community dances. Bayard calls fiddlers who play primarily for themselves "home" fiddlers, and he claims that they often have larger repertoires than professional dance fiddlers. Home fiddlers are unrestricted in their choice of repertoire since this music is purely for listening and playing enjoyment, rather than meeting the strictures of dancing (Rosenberg 2002, 24).

The majority of my interviewees were not full-time professional musicians but had held a series of jobs consistent with outport life, over the course of their lifetimes. The fact that it is difficult to make a living entirely from traditional music, even in a vibrant tradition with international attention such as Cape Breton, has also been discussed by Feintuch (88-92). The possibility of working solely as a musician is a recent phenomenon. The majority of the musicians with whom I spoke learned to play in a traditional context and/or played for dances. At the time of my 2002 fieldwork and subsequent research, few of these musicians had found other public venues in which to perform. A few have adapted to playing in traditional music bands, and in St. John's pub sessions. These sessions are open to everyone but they are primarily attended by the post-dance generation of musicians. While some

traditional Newfoundland dance music is played in the sessions, the tunes are mainly drawn from the international Irish session repertoire, which becomes localized by each group of musicians who play together over long periods.

STYLE CHOICE AND MUSICAL IDENTITY

Non-dance musics held a place in outport Newfoundland, and was often showcased in variety concerts. Musicians who played these concerts were identified by their style of music. For example, two violin playing brothers from Bonavista were never considered as dance musicians since they played a lot of Stephen Foster music. They performed in concerts instead (Mifflen interview 2002). Certain members of my own family were not dance musicians; as classical music teachers they were thought by fiddlers not to have the right feel for dance music (Quinton interview 2000). This distinction in identity, according to musical style preference, was also made elsewhere. I will discuss the case of Kevin Broderick, who preferred Irish music he learned from recordings, as well as musicians who were particularly noted for playing in the manner and repertoire of Don Messer.

In Bay de Verde, Conception Bay, the Brodericks became well known for playing Irish music, learned primarily from 78 rpm recordings and radio. Kevin Broderick's preference for Irish music distinguished him from other musicians in Bay de Verde. Greg Walsh stated: "Dad Walsh played kind of the Newfoundland style. It's pretty safe to say that Kevin Broderick played Irish and Scottish. So that was kind of two distinct polarities. He plays Irish and Scottish stuff and the Walsh guy plays kind of Newfoundland" (G. Walsh interview 2001). Broderick's choice to play Irish music learned from recordings also impacted his professional musical status in Bay de Verde. While his fellow musicians paid him great respect by acknowledging his adeptness at the Irish style, stating that Kevin would fit in at a session in Donegal or on stage with the Chieftains, he was never hired as the primary dance musician for a community "time," but was called on to "spell" or relieve the hired musicians instead (Broderick interview 2002). That said, Broderick takes great pride in his ability to play with "real" Irish musicians he has met.

Sometimes a musician will not even consider himself a traditional player, despite being accepted as one by the community, due to the fact that his repertoire contains both traditional dance music and media sourced tunes. Ned Mifflen of Catalina is an example of this. He cites several sources for repertoire acquisition, including his father, other musicians, radio, long-playing records, and fiddle books. He owns several tune books, including one of Don Messer's collections and two small books from a series called *Fiddlers Tune Book* edited by Peter Kennedy and published by Gale Music Press.⁹ Although he did learn tunes from his father and other local musicians, he feels that he plays in a different manner and with a different repertoire than either his father or grandfather, whom he terms "traditional"

players. I tried to draw out how he differentiated a “traditional” player from another type of fiddler but he seemed unsure how to describe this. From the overall tone of the interview, I’ve inferred that he defines a traditional fiddler as someone who primarily plays tunes popular in the area, that were handed down aurally, such as “The Grandfather’s Clock,” “Pop Goes the Weasel,” “I’se the B’y,” “Little Brown Jug,” “Off She Goes,” and “Irish Washerwoman.” In other words, Miflen considered a traditional fiddler to be a musician who did not learn tunes, as he did, from media sources. It is interesting that although he played for traditional square sets, he does not consider himself a traditional player (Osborne 110-111).

Radio, recordings, and published music books offered new and varied sources of repertoire for fiddlers in the often isolated outports of mid- and late twentieth-century Newfoundland. The effects of these media on the local repertoire vary from fiddler to fiddler, but, in general, there is a great respect and admiration for recording artists. Some musicians learned the new material alongside their local tunes, while others adopted the new music completely. Everett Russell, now of Bonavista, views the media as his main source of new repertoire. Television provides a broad spectrum of music for him:

I’ve heard so many playing from the mainland some, you know, anything. I’m searching the television all the time, the channels getting all kinds of music ... So many different players you can [hear], you know. If I get a chance, if I really get a chance to hear a program on television I tape it, you know, at the same time. So I really got a lot of tapes here. (Russell interview 2002)

Some of the tunes he has learned from media sources are “The Liberty Two-Step,” “Crooked Stovepipe,” “Fisherman’s Breakdown,” “Ragtime Anne,” “Golden Slippers,” “Mauri’s Wedding,” “Maple Sugar,” and “Red Wing,” as well as a few he could not identify other than to say that a particular tune was a Scottish tune or that Don Messer played it (Osborne 101). At the same time that he sees the value of recordings, he is often frustrated at the comparative lack of Newfoundland tunes available as he has rarely the opportunity to learn personally from other fiddlers in recent times:

Where are you going to get those Newfoundland tunes to [...] that’s not played very often? Unless you just happen to strike someone who knows them and they just hums them for you, or something like that. You don’t have the same opportunity to learn them as you do the tunes you hear on television or radio. You can go anywhere up to Clarendville, you can buy, at the Wal-Mart and can pick up fiddle tapes, you know, Canadian fiddlers and that kind of stuff. (Russell interview 2002)

Radio, the first transmission medium, came to Newfoundland in the 1920s and 1930s, but was not widespread until the 1940s. One can consider four major off-island broadcasting influences on traditional Newfoundland fiddlers. The first

were radio stations from Nova Scotia which featured Cape Breton fiddlers; the second, “The Don Messer Show” which began airing in the 1940s on CBC radio and then television; third, the ubiquitous country and western music of the 1950s; and fourth, Irish music recordings spanning much of the twentieth and early 21st century. There was a push in Newfoundland radio to promote its own music, notably in the late 1930s and early 1940s, by the eminent radio personality and politician Joe Smallwood, also known as “The Barrelman.” Narváez discusses the Barrelman’s influence and promotion of Newfoundland culture through folkloric stories and music from “real” Newfoundlanders (Narváez 1986, 47). There was then, as now, a productive tension between “local” culture and music “from away.”

CAPE BRETON STYLE

Popularized worldwide in recent years, Cape Breton music has its greatest influence in Newfoundland in the Codroy Valley area of the west coast. The original settlers to this area came from Cape Breton in the late nineteenth century and brought their Scottish-based traditions with them. Present fiddlers there are very aware of Cape Breton recordings. For example, Gus MacDonald, who was 91 in the summer of 2001, played for me several tunes he learned from radio and television, and asked if I had learned the latest version of a particular tune from then most recent Natalie MacMaster CD (MacDonald interview 2001). In the Codroy Valley, recordings and radio serve to keep the locals in touch with a musical tradition of which they feel a part. They also provide a source of new repertoire and reconfirm the value of tunes which they already know. Although the musicians of the Codroy Valley are aware that their musical influences come from outside the province, through travel and recordings they connect to their roots, Joe Aucoin argues that their music (i.e., Cape Breton) should be considered Newfoundland music, as they have been playing it in Newfoundland for at least a century (Aucoin interview 2001).

In other places in Newfoundland, the allure of the ornamented Cape Breton style heard over the airwaves has essentially replaced the local tradition. One fiddler, originally from the Port-au-Port Peninsula, commented that once he heard the fiddlers on the radio he knew he had been “playing the fiddle all wrong all these years!” (Formanger interview 2001). He claimed to have never played his local repertoire again. The Port-au-Port Peninsula, in fact, is a good example of the influence of radio on musical style. This small windswept triangle of land which protrudes into the Gulf of St. Lawrence off the west coast of Newfoundland is one of the last French speaking areas on the island. Born in Black Duck Brook in 1913, Émile Benoit was one of the most famous fiddlers from this area, and possibly one of the last generation to regularly play the old French dance tunes. Quigley explained in *Music from the Heart* that although Émile did learn some tunes from records in the early 1930s, “Émile’s musical identity was firmly established within ...

the local tradition as it existed before the arrival of the influences carried by various media” (10-17). This was not true for the subsequent generation of musicians, however, and my experience with four fiddlers from the Port-au-Port is that they now play, almost exclusively, Cape Breton style. Even Benoit picked up the distinctly Scottish birl, a short bowing ornament, which he referred to as a “squibble.” Newfoundland musicians sometimes refer to him affectionately as “the thief” as, although he composed in a traditional style, there were certainly strong influences of Irish and particularly Cape Breton tunes in some of his music.

DON MESSER

The Don Messer broadcasts were a strong influence across the island, particularly on the east coast. The fiddlers with whom I spoke generally preferred either Cape Breton fiddling or Don Messer’s style to others. Overall, the Cape Breton style is held in higher favour on the west coast and Messer on the east. Don Messer became an icon in Canada through his show *Don Messer’s Jubilee* which aired from 1959 to 1969 on CBC television and on radio starting in the 1940s. Rosenberg states that Messer’s style established “a national canon of repertoire and performance practice” (1994, 24).¹⁰ According to Rosenberg, Messer stressed a “proper” technique likely based on his musical literacy and early experience with classical violin lessons in Boston when he was sixteen (24). This elevated Messer’s status and his variants are often considered “correct” by musically non-literate players. While Rosenberg’s statements about technique seem to hold true for Newfoundland, Perlman notes less enthusiasm in his book on Prince Edward Island. There the Cape Breton styles influenced the technique of fiddlers while they learned repertoire from Don Messer (203). Rufus Guinchard, another famous fiddler from Daniel’s Harbour on the Great Northern Peninsula, picked up several of Messer’s tunes through radio and recordings, notably “Rambler’s Hornpipe,” “Blackberry Quadrille,” and “Country Waltz” (Russell 2000, 5, 17, 33). Most of the fiddlers to whom I spoke counted tunes they learned from Messer’s shows or books as a portion of their repertoire.

COUNTRY AND WESTERN MUSIC

During the 1950s, country and western music strongly influenced young adult musicians around the middle of the twentieth century. Many fiddlers recalled listening to a radio show in the 1940s and 1950s called “Western Roundup,” broadcast from Antigonish, Nova Scotia. This half-hour program featured the country and western music of Hank Snow, Wilf Carter, Ernest Tubbs, Billy Arnold, and perhaps one or two pieces from a Cape Breton fiddler (Osborne 2003, 100). This music encour-

aged many young men to play guitar and this instrument gained popularity, rapidly being favoured over the traditional fiddle or accordion. Ray Walsh, of Bay de Verde, explained:

And when I was growing up in the fifties, in the late fifties, by the time I got to be twelve, fourteen, fifteen years old, I wanted a guitar. And I wanted to be able to play guitar like the fellow who played for Johnny Cash, Luther Perkins ... I wanted to play guitar like that. I didn't want to play fiddle. I didn't want to play accordion. I wanted to play guitar like Luther Perkins and we wanted to sing Hank Williams tunes. (Interview 2002)

IRISH MUSIC

Long-playing records and other recordings also had a large part in bringing Irish music to fiddlers' repertoires and overall styles. Kevin Broderick from Bay de Verde is a good example: The Broderick family was fortunate enough to have both a radio and a record player and Kevin's father bought records from the "jewelry men" who plied their wares around the outposts at the time. Broderick, who has a strong Irish background, was drawn to the music of Irish and Irish-American artists. He describes listening to the family radio:

I got a lot of tunes off of "The Irish Hour." We had a great big old high radio, two or three or four bands and I used to get this station WMEX and I think it used to be every Wednesday night, the Irish hour would be on. The way it was back then, if I heard the tune once I had half of it, if I heard it twice I just about had it. Sometimes they'd play an extra tune. I got a lot of tunes from that, Paddy Clancy, Jackie Coleman and all those. (Interview 2002)¹¹

These recordings influenced Broderick's repertoire from the beginning of his fiddling career. He drew tunes from his father's 78s of accordionist John Kimmel. He describes his early years:

between the jigs and the reels I picked up the fiddle and I kept at it until I got [it].... I didn't have any particular style, not all that much versatility I suppose, but, listen to the tapes and the right chords and the old 78s. I can remember now, John Kimmel, he was of German descent, and I think he was one of the pioneers of the button accordion in, in all of North America. We had old 78s, I can remember the "Connaughtman's Rambles," and "Healey's Favourite" and all those he used to play them. So I tried to play the accordion first and I got half decent at it and then when I got fooling with the fiddle I forgot all about it [the accordion] (laughter). (Interview 2002)

Broderick's vinyl and cassette collection is very broad, with recordings of John Kimmel, Paddy Cronin, Johnny Muldoon, Joe Dryan, Jerry O'Brien, Conny Fooley, John McCormack, the McNulty Family, Paddy Clancy, Jackie Coleman, Michael Coleman, Seamus Connelly, Kevin Burke, Joe Maclean, Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald, Lee Cremo, and Buddy MacMaster (Broderick interview 2002; Osborne 131-132).

Due to his ability to play Irish music, Broderick had the opportunity to play with visiting musicians, particularly those who specialized in Irish music. He played with John Goodman, a flutist from Cape Breton; Patrick Keenan, an Irish piper; Amon Corran, a piper from county Monaghan; Carin Carim, a fiddler and maker from Dublin; Shawn Keenan, brother of a Chieftains' member; and Gordon Maclean, nephew of Joe Maclean; Figgy Duff; Tim Ginn, a fiddler from Birmingham, England; and Jerry O'Brien, a champion Irish accordion player whom he holds in high regard. Broderick stated that it reached the point that "you didn't know who you were going to see next!" (Interview 2002).

THE PRESTIGE AND AUTHORITY OF "MEDIA" TUNES

It lends prestige and validation to a local musician when he can play the same repertoire as a musician who has been recognized by the wider world through a recording contract, radio broadcast, or television show. This is especially true if a fiddler does not have an environment that provides feedback on his playing. In that case, being able to play music worthy of recording provides a standard to which to aspire. Most Newfoundland fiddlers can identify the source of their media tunes and will state clearly when they learned a particular tune from a recording. Just as other fiddlers were often cited — as in "this is John's tune" — now recordings are acknowledged as teachers. When community dances were prevalent, then approval was found through acceptance as a dance musician. As one musician pointed out, if you performed for a dance then you were "not popular, but noted" (R. Walsh interview 2001). Media tunes, however, provided validation for fiddlers who did not play for, or no longer played for, dances.

I believe print sources mainly influence the younger generations, but, ironically, printed variants also influence older people, even though they are less likely to read music notation. Many fiddlers were more interested in learning my versions, instead of playing their own, as I had "got it from the sheets." This idea of better or "correct" versions also extends to recordings; if it is good enough to be on a recording, then it must be the "right way" to play the tune. Although there are many variations to most popular songs and tunes in the greater European/North American based folk music tradition, when one rendition is recorded or written down, it is often viewed as the "expert" version rather than as simply one of many ways of playing that music. As discussed earlier, Don Messer used this thought pattern to his

advantage in the construction of his musical identity and it was extended to those thought to play as well as him. Everett Russell held a man he knew in high regard because he performed a great number of Messer's tunes: "He'd sit down and play it, right down to the fine point [and] get every note" (Russell interview 2001). Of course, as discussed in a review of a recording by Jean Carignan, who had prided himself on imitating and accurately portraying top Irish players such as Michael Coleman, Krassen demonstrates that Carignan does not succeed in his quest precisely but is influenced by his background as a French Canadian fiddler (Krassen 41-42).

The recording process is a selective one:

what gets played on the radio and what gets recorded is the commercial type stuff. If it doesn't sell we don't record it. And a lot of the old traditional music, it's not saleable. It's not commercial. It was designed for one purpose only: that was to dance to. It wasn't meant for listening. (R. Walsh interview 2002)

Another aspect to consider is that in the mid-to-late twentieth century, local music fell into disfavour and not only was media-sourced music considered prestigious but Newfoundland music was its opposite. Even Anita Best, a well-known and respected traditional singer, confessed in the introduction to the book *Come and I Will Sing You* that, as teenagers she and her peers were appalled by the "Newfie" music on the radio and ended up later rediscovering these songs through recordings of the 1960s folk revival groups from the UK and the US and the written records left by the great Newfoundland collectors (Best xi). With the help of Best and many other musicians, there has been a revival and subsequent rise in the stature of Newfoundland traditional music, leading to many successful Newfoundland traditional music bands who are known both on and off the island.

So where does all this leave the younger generations of fiddlers in Newfoundland? As the traditional way of life has changed greatly in the rural areas of the island, there are very few traditional dances, or "times," held today. The contexts of hearing and learning music from elders has been essentially discontinued and is rare and, with little reason to play dance music these tunes are heard less and less. The majority of music heard by young people today is recorded, and heard either on the radio or on compact discs. A musician interested in folk music learns the craft from recordings and books. At the same time that there is a plethora from which to choose, recordings can be restrictive.

The necessary filter for choosing what is recorded, impacts on the repertoires of musicians for whom recordings are a primary educational source:

but most of the tunes that people learn now, a lot of them are learned from recordings. They are not learned from traditional people at all so, in many cases the scope of what many people are playing is becoming narrower and narrower all the time, because all you're hearing is what gets played on the radio and what gets recorded. (R. Walsh interview 2002)

For some, “the session” has become the social music setting which provides the impetus to learn and play music. If one goes to the folk music sessions in downtown St. John’s, most of the tunes are Irish based, and the musicians can regale at great length by whom, when and on which albums a tune has been recorded. While players are learning tunes from many different sources and regions, in some ways, as Walsh observed above, the cultural diversity of sources is narrowing.

NEWFOUNDLANDERS ON RECORD

Taft states that the first music recording directed to a Newfoundland audience was Arthur Scammell’s “Squid Jigging Ground,” a private recording made through RCA in Montreal. Scammell estimated that he sold approximately 15,000-20,000 copies (xiii). According to Taft’s discography, the earliest recordings of traditional dance repertoire produced by Newfoundlanders was Wilf Doyle in 1950 on accordion and Don Randell and Ted Blanchard on violin as part of the Shamrocks or The Happy Valley Boys in 1957 (8, 47).

Traditional Newfoundland music is maintained by a small, but vibrant, recording industry and many of the popular traditional tunes were recorded by artists such as Harry Hibbs and Figgy Duff. Newer bands have continued to play and adapt music recorded by earlier bands. As Taft discovered when he moved to Newfoundland in the 1970s, there was a “blend of styles and materials, in which Irish and country and western music are combined with traditional Newfoundland music, which seemed typical of the popular music of the islanders” (vii). While the dance music was losing its original function, it was being adapted to the new styles that musicians encountered. Since this time there have been other examples of traditional Newfoundland music meeting styles such as North American popular music as in the music of the internationally known band, Great Big Sea.

There are a number of efforts to preserve dance music through recordings and printed sources. Kelly Russell has published several small but invaluable volumes of music and two larger anthologies through his company Pigeon Inlet Productions. There are also several recordings of the traditional fiddlers, Rufus Guinchard and Émile Benoit which are quite influential for those who wish to learn Newfoundland music. Solo traditional albums on fiddle, accordion, and bouzouki are becoming more common. Both Christina Smith and I have been recording and collecting material from fiddlers and accordion players around the island in an effort to preserve this music.

It is easy to paint media sources as the devil which killed local traditional music, and in many cases fiddlers did undermine their own personal traditions when they took to these prestigious sources. As with most media and globalizing forces this process, however, can work both ways. It is undeniable that much valuable and unique music has been lost, due to the changing life in Newfoundland, but the influ-

ence of radio and recordings and the amount of traditional material available to new fiddlers has contributed to revitalization and maintenance of tunes as well. Media sources can help preserve traditions. As Dunlay and Greenberg suggest, a recording industry can result in a “healthy tradition” as it will allow for both new innovation as well as preservation of an older style (5).

This said, many traditional tunes are still being lost as the line of transmission has been essentially broken between generations. Even when there is the opportunity to teach children within a family setting, the will is not always there. For example, in one family I met, the grandfather knew a great number of old and rare tunes. Yet his granddaughter, who learns violin and fiddle through private and group lessons showed no interest in his music. Most are not fortunate enough to have a tradition-bearer living next door and as suggested earlier, it is often easier these days to learn from recordings than to find traditional fiddlers from whom to listen and learn.

Although learning the traditional music of your culture from a book or compact disc arguably lacks the richness of learning from an elder or absorbing it through your environment, it is still valuable. For those young musicians who do not have access to older tradition-bearers, media is the only source.¹² The traditional settings for music in Newfoundland and other marginalized musical cultures are certainly threatened. There are many reasons for this threat, in which media plays a large part. The fiddle tradition in Newfoundland and Labrador has been slowly undergoing a metamorphosis so that it can survive, in part, through the very media which threatens it.

evelyn_osborne@yahoo.com

Notes

¹A version of this paper was presented on 3 May 2003 at the Modes of Globalization: York Political Economy Conference held at York University, Toronto, Canada.

²I plan to return to this issue at a later date in relation to the younger generation of players who have had little opportunity to learn from the “traditional” setting and whose primary repertoire source are recordings and tune books.

³For an introduction to the lumber camp song tradition in Newfoundland see Ashton (1986).

⁴Until recently local composition has primarily been discussed within the song tradition; Greenleaf noted that if one were to collect all of the native songs it would likely provide a complete history of the island (xxxvii).

⁵The first gramophone owners in the country were a Mr. J. Callahan and the famous balladeer Johnny Burke. Burke, in particular, advertised to rent his machine so that citizens could listen to American music as well as local songs (Wadden 47). Presumably, Burke recorded the local songs himself.

⁶Postcards were received from the following stations and locations: Voice of Guatamela, Radiofusora nacional TGW 1520 Guatemala 1939; W2XE Columbia Broadcast-

ing System Inc. New York City, 1939; W1-SWL Providence, USA; CHNX Halifax, Nova Scotia; WBOS Boston, Massachusetts; New Orleans 1940; Radio Salas, Havana, Cuba, 1940; Syracuse, New York USA; San Francisco 1940; Argentina LRA, 1939; VONF, VONG Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland 1940; W3XL Radio City, New York; Switzerland; radio Hilversum, Holland 1939; CJCB Sydney, Nova Scotia 1941; HCJB Ecuador, The Voice of the Andes; JOK HPSK Panama, 17 February 1940; Japan 1940; Hungary; Madres, Spain; CKCW Moncton, New Brunswick 1940; ZRL South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) 1939; W3XAU Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA, 1939; XEAW Dallas, Texas, 1940 (Station at Renosa, Mexico, offices at Dallas, Texas); W1XAL Boston, Massachusetts; Radio Martinique, 1939; SWL-WY Georgia, 1941; W2XAF Schenectaday, New York 1939. This list was provided by Sylvia Ficken.

⁷There are two definitions of reel — the 2/2 time piece of music and the dance; to distinguish I have spelled the dance title as “reil,” a common alternative spelling.

⁸The ways in which traditional music have been adapted to the now popular traditional band context is very interesting. I hope to delve into this transition in future research, as several musicians who work in traditional bands have admitted that to integrate the traditional dance music with drums and bass, subtle changes must be made.

⁹Although I noted carefully the publisher, the only similar documented reference I can now find is *Fiddler's Tune Book*, ed. Peter Kennedy (New York: Hargail Music Press [Belwin]), 1951.

¹⁰Although I did not watch Don Messer's Jubilee, I was well aware of his onstage mannerisms, as I was often instructed by family friends to “smile like Don Messer” during performances musical or otherwise.

¹¹“The Irish Hour” and “WMEX” are the name of a show and the radio station as Broderick remembered them.

¹²I have come to realize since the writing of this paper in 2003 that recordings can play a part in putting young people back in touch, sonically, if not physically, with the older generations. Now players have the opportunity to learn “directly” from the masters of the traditions they chose. This, of course, has many implications which I intend to discuss at a later date.

Bibliography

- Ashton, John. 1986. “The Lumbercamp Tradition in Newfoundland.” *Newfoundland Studies* 2.2: 213-231.
- Bayard, Samuel P. 1982. *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife: Instrumental Folk Tunes in Pennsylvania*. University Park and London: Pennsylvania State UP.
- Best, Anita. 1985. Introduction. *Come and I Will Sing You: A Newfoundland Songbook*. Ed. Genevieve Lehr. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dunlay, Kate and David Greenberg. 1996. *Traditional Celtic Violin Music of Cape Breton*. Toronto: DunGreen Music.
- Feintuch, Burt. 2004. “The Conditions for Cape Breton Fiddle Music: The Social and Economic Setting of a Regional Soundscape.” *Ethnomusicology* 48.1: 73-104.

- Greenleaf, Elizabeth Bristol and Grace Yarrow Mansfield. 1968 [1933]. *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates.
- Halpert, Herbert. 1975. Preface. *A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador 1904-1972*. St. John's, Newfoundland, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. iii-vi.
- Hiscock, Philip. 1984. "The Mass Media in the Folk Culture of Newfoundland." *Culture and Tradition* 8: 20-38.
- Karpeles, Maud. 1971. *Folk Songs from Newfoundland: Collected and Edited by Maud Karpeles*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Katz, Mark. 1998. "Making America More Musical through the Phonograph 1900-1930." *American Music* 16: 448-475.
- Klymasz, Robert B. 1972. "'Songs You Never Before Heard': Ukrainian Country Music in Western Canada." *Ethnomusicology* 16.3: 372-380.
- Krassen, Miles. 1974. "An Analysis of a Jean Carignan Record." *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 2: 40-44.
- Lederman, Anne. 1991. "Old Indian and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba: Origins, Structure, and Question of Syncretism." *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 19: 40-60.
- Lovelace, Martin. 2004. "Unnatural Selection: Maud Karpeles's Newfoundland Field Diaries." *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival and Re-Creation*. Ed. Ian Russell and David Atkinson. Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen. 284-289.
- McDonald, Terry. 1999. "Where Have All the (English) Folk Songs Gone? Newfoundland's Rejection of its Dorset Inheritance." *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 14.2: 180-192.
- Narváez, Peter. 1986. "Joseph R. Smallwood, The Barrelman: The Broadcaster as Folklorist." *Media Sense: Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum*. Ed. Peter Narváez and Martin Laba. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. 47-64.
- . 1995. "Newfoundland Vernacular Song." *Popular Music — Style and Identity*. Ed. Will Straw, Stacey Johnson, Rebecca Sullivan, and Paul Friedlander. Montreal: Dufferin Press. 215-219.
- Osborne, Evelyn. 2003. "'We Never Had a Bed Like That For a Violin: We Had a Bag!' Exploring Fiddlers and Dance Music in Newfoundland: Red Cliff, Bonavista Bay and Bay de Verde, Conception Bay." MA thesis, Carleton University.
- Perlman, Ken. 1996. *The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition*. Pacific, MO: Mel Bay.
- Quigley, Colin. 1995. *Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler*. University of Georgia Press.
- Reiss, Scott. 2003. "Tradition and Imaginary: Irish Traditional Music and the Celtic Phenomenon." *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*. Ed. Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman. Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford: Scarecrow Press. 145-170.
- Rosenberg, Neil V. 1994. "Don Messer's Modern Canadian Fiddle Canon." *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 22: 23-35.
- . 2002. "Repetition, Innovation, and Representation in Don Messer's Media Repertoire." *Journal of American Folklore* 115: 191-208.
- Russell, Kelly. 1982. *Rufus Guinchard: The Man and His Music*. St. John's, NL: Harry Cuff Publications.

- . *Forty Favourite Fiddle Tunes: Selected and Transcribed by Kelly Russell*. St. John's, NL: Pigeon Inlet Productions.
- . *Close to the Floor: Newfoundland Dance Music*. St. John's, NL: Pigeon Inlet Productions.
- . *Rufus Guinchard: Fathers of the Newfoundland Fiddle*. Volume 1. St. John's, NL: Pigeon Inlet Productions.
- . 2000. *Kelly Russell's Collection: The Fiddle Music of Newfoundland and Labrador, Volume One, Rufus Guinchard and Émile Benoit*. St. John's, NL: Pigeon Inlet Productions.
- . 2003. *Kelly Russell's Collection: The Fiddle Music of Newfoundland and Labrador, Volume Two, All the Rest*. St. John's, NL: Pigeon Inlet Productions.
- Smith, C. 2003a. "Fiddling Around Newfoundland: Part One — Codroy Valley and Port-aux-Port." *Newfoundland Quarterly* 96.1: 21-23.
- . 2003b. "Fiddling Around Newfoundland: Part Two — Great Northern Peninsula and East Coast." *Newfoundland Quarterly* 96.2: 49-51.
- Taft, M. 1975. *A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador 1904-1972*. St. John's, Newfoundland, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive.
- Wadden, R. 1987. "Early Demonstrations of the Phonograph in Newfoundland." *Newfoundland Quarterly* 83.3: 44-48.
- Webb, J.A. 1994. "The Invention of Radio Broadcasting in Newfoundland and the Maritime Provinces, 1922-1939." PhD diss., University of New Brunswick, Moncton.

Unpublished Personal Interviews

- AuCoin, Joseph. 12 July 2001.
- Broderick, Kevin. 17 March 2002.
- Formanger, Ron. 13 July 2001.
- MacDonald, Gus. 14 July 2001.
- Mifflin, Ned. 12 March 2002.
- Russell, Everett. 16 July 2001.
- . 10 March 2002.
- Quinton, Adrian. 29 December 2000.
- Walsh, Greg. 26 June 2001.
- Walsh, Ray. 26 June 2001.
- . 19 March 2002.