Cape Breton Fiddle Music: Making and Maintaining a Tradition
by Glenn Graham

Editor's Note:

All selections were recorded live—mostly home recordings—because this best represents the "natural" setting in which Cape Breton fiddle music is played. In other words, these are traditional tunes in traditional settings, rather than studio recordings. The use of home recordings (as opposed to commercial) emphasizes the author's views about the making and maintaining of this musical tradition. The home recordings presented here are from private collections kindly provided to assist the reader to understand and appreciate the tradition.
We are grateful to the performers, composers and those who hold the original recordings, for allowing their inclusion here. The CD is included with the book for the purpose expressed and not for commercial use—it is not to be sold or copied. All rights reserved.

Track Listing:

1. Glenn Graham / Cape Breton Fiddling Techniques
2. Mary MacDonald with Mary Jessie MacDonald / Strathspeys and Reels
3. Angus Chisholm with Mary Jessie MacDonald / Clogs and Hornpipe
4. Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald with Mary Jessie MacDonald / Air and Reels
5. Donald Angus Beaton with Elizabeth Beaton / Strathspeys and Reels
6. Theresa MacLellan with Marie MacLellan / March, Strathspeys and Reels
7. Buddy MacMaster with John Morris Rankin / Reels and Hornpipe
8. Kinnon Beaton with John Morris Rankin / Reels and Hornpipe
9. Howie MacDonald with Mac Morin and Dave MacIsaac / Jigs
10. Ian MacDougall with Mac Morin / Air

Liner Notes:

If such a thing is possible, what follows is an analysis of the playing styles of various players in the Cape Breton tradition. There are many Cape Breton players that I could have chosen—I merely picked those whose music I had easy access to, were most prominent in the book and who, together, reveal a wide range of styles. Although there is a recognizable general style, individual performers can be distinguished from one another. These selections provide good examples of techniques used in traditional Cape Breton music. I do not claim to be an expert musical theorist, and my descriptions are meant to be accessible and understandable to readers with even a passing interest in the music. For a more in-depth theoretical analysis of Cape Breton Music techniques, I recommend that the reader seek out the various works of Kate Dunlay and David Greenberg.

1. Glenn Graham

Cape Breton fiddling techniques as described in the book.

2. Mary MacDonald with Mary Jessie MacDonald

“Lady Ann Hope Strathspey,” “Allowa Kirk Strathspey,” “Sir Harry’s Welcome Home Strathspey,” “Tullochgorm Strathspey,” “Lord MacDonald’s Reel,” “Miss Johnstone’s Reel”

“Little” Mary MacDonald is playing strathspeys and reels in the key of G here. Mary used a lot of ornamentation and drones in her playing. Grace notes can be heard in the first strathspey. Also, when she plays on the D string, she simultaneously plays subtle, underlying G drones. The same can be heard in the second and third strathspeys which also seem to provide for more placements of grace notes.

She then goes on and plays one of her specialties—an older version of “Tullochorm” (most fiddlers who play the tune play the J. Scott Skinner version with his composed/arranged variations). Mary can be heard masterfully executing shakes of the bow, “cutting up” the strathspey. She also produces a “bigger” sound by playing two strings at once, often hitting notes on separate strings at harmony with each other, giving the sound of a chord. For instance, at the end of a tune-ending in G, she would also play a B note on the A string, beefing up the melody. This is a common feature of accomplished Cape Breton fiddlers. She then makes a smooth transition into the first reel, bringing the strathspey tempo into the beginning measures and then increasing the tempo to consistent timing. Again, one can hear her playing on two strings and implementing grace notes.

3. Angus Chisholm with Mary Jessie MacDonald

“Moonlight Clog,” “The Cuckoo Clog,” “The Galway Hornpipe,” “The Western Clog” (partial)

This clip is classic Angus Chisholm, one of the most technically proficient players ever in the Cape Breton tradition. Note that his style is somewhat cleaner than Mary MacDonald’s. This is not to say that he’s applying more difficult ornamentations and bowings, but his gracings are lightening fast while he plays with ease here tunes of notable difficulty. More attention is paid to purity on the melody notes as opposed to extensive droning in this instance. We also hear him masterfully bow quick, complex note combinations, ending his tunes with quick, pure vibrato.

On piano, is Mary Jessie MacDonald, daughter of Little Mary MacDonald. Her bass-hand playing has always been deep and strong while she masterfully played/plays the melody line along with the fiddler without being too dominant. She was also more exploratory with her chords than other players of her time, probably because of some background education in jazz.

4. Winston “Scotty” Fitzgerald with Mary Jessie MacDonald

“Bovaglie’s Plaid”–Air (J. Scott Skinner), “The Red Shoes Reel” (Dan R. MacDonald), “The Snowplough Reel” (Dan Hughie MacEachern), “St. Kilda’s Wedding Reel,” “Trip to Windsor Reel” (Dan R. MacDonald)

The late Winston Fitzgerald is another revered exponent of technical proficiency on the violin. His playing was clear and crisp, up-tempo with lightening-fast ornamentation. In this slow air we hear a free-flowing approach with controlled bowing, examples of staccato bowing, the rarely used in Cape Breton slide ornament and a pure, clean tone. In the reels we hear crisp grace notes with the slight drone of the open strings above and below those

on which the melody is played—a classic performance feature of many Cape Breton fiddlers that gives the music a full textural sound. Open string drones can be heard applied above melody notes played on the A and D strings. Winston also graces the open E note in this instance. Strong cuttings and grace notes on the high A note can be heard in “St. Kilda’s Wedding Reel.” Open string drones and gracings on the high A melody notes can also be heard on his rendition here of Dan R. MacDonald’s “Trip to Windsor Reel.” The tempo builds in the reels towards Winston’s recognizable lively swing. Mary Jessie MacDonald accompanies, again, with her powerful piano bass lines.

5. Donald Angus Beaton with Elizabeth Beaton

“Maids of Islay Strathspey,” “Lucy Campbell Strathspey,” “Elizabeth’s Big Coat Reel,” “MacKinnon’s Other Rant Reel,” “John of Badenyon Reel,” Hamish the Carpenter Reel”

Donald Angus Beaton’s specialties were the Gaelic dance tune types—strathspeys and reels. He was a popular dance player while both musicians and listeners describe his playing as having the Gaelic flavour. There was a noticeable rollicking and driving rhythm, in the Mabou Coal Mines fashion: a little extra force and accent on the beat of the tunes. His playing was thick and highly ornamented with various ornaments such as grace notes and “warbles” (a pressure-release-pressure of the finger applied to a note; another Greenberg and Dunlay term), as heard in the sample strathspey. Also, as the melody is played on the A string, a slight E string drone is heard throughout. As the melody is played on the E, a subtle A string drone can sometimes be heard. Both techniques mimic the Highland bagpipe. In the reel, Mabou Coal Mines-style wild notes can be heard—at the pick-up/first introductory note and at the beginning of the third measure (halfway through part one). He often utilized the driven bow. Also note double up-pushes on the bow, creating added accent for extra lilt, instead of a common smoother sounding up-bowed slur. His cuts/cuttings were prominent and emphasized in his playing while more “lift” was added to his reels by dotting (“strathspeying,” as I’ve heard it termed by Kinnon Beaton) his reels. The result: extra snap and rhythm.

Accompanying Donald Angus is his wife Elizabeth. Her approach is in the old style, using a lot of lower bass keys with basic bass lines. In this cut, listen to a lot of right-hand syncopation on the strathspey with added matching force with the fiddle on emphasized beats, a lot of the time—those most often being the first and third beats (first and second foot tap in each measure) in the reels. This complemented the emphasis that Donald Angus often placed on the same beats, creating a driving Mabou Coal Mines sound.

6. Theresa MacLellan with Marie MacLellan

“John McColl’s Farewell March,” “Sportsman’s Haunt Strathspey,” “Calum Crubach Strathspey,” “Kay Girroir’s Reel” (Joey Beaton), “Muileann Dubh Reel”

In this selection, we hear Theresa playing a march, the tune form for which she is most recognized. Theresa has also been noted by many as having a “Gaelic” sound to her music. She plays slight and quick vibrato throughout the march with various gracings. Listening closely, one can hear a drawn-out ornament common to the old style whereby a melody note is broken up into what sounds like three notes. The melody note is played, then quickly the finger above hits the string, then the melody note hits again, all keeping the same value of time as one melody note would hold in a written transcription. So, instead of the sound going like this: ___, it would be heard like this: _-_. The result is a tasty guttural sound. She can also be heard subtly playing two strings at the same time, creating a thick sound and, at times, harmonized undertones.

She’s accompanied by her sister, the late Marie MacLellan. Again, as with most older-style Cape Breton pianists, Marie often used and stayed with the lower keys with the bass hand, and at times can be heard expertly

playing the melody line with her right hand. She had a distinguishing “galloping” rhythm that she often used toward the further right upper keys on the piano with her right hand.

7. Buddy MacMaster with John Morris Rankin

“Dusky Meadow Strathspey” (Donald MacLellan), “Devil in the Kitchen Strathspey” (J. Scott Skinner), “Margaree Reel,” “Traditional Reel,””Miss Stewart of Glentully Reel,” “Magnetic Hornpipe/Sean McGuire Reel,” “Put Me in the Box Reel”

As stated earlier in the book, Kate Dunlay has noted that Buddy is a great example of a player bridging the old and the new styles. He uses lots of quick grace notes, has a sweet (yet not overwhelming) vibrato and uses long, powerful and dynamic bow strokes. His playing is widely described as correct and precise. It has a lovely lilt and steady drive, while his tone is sweet, warm and thick. Buddy can be heard here playing strathspeys for a step-dancer. Note the rich tone and technical prowess as he plays the quick sixteenth notes in the last phrase of the first strathspey, “Dusky Meadow.” He can be heard “doubling” with his pinky finger placed over the A string to create a closed E note—very important to the Cape Breton style. The beat is steady, exhilarating and builds into the second strathspey, “Devil in the Kitchen.” Strong emphasis is placed on the cuts. Various gracings can be heard in this tune, for example, on the beat of the lower octave third part of the tune. In the “Margaree Reel,” Buddy graces his high A notes and again can be heard “doubling” (closing with the pinky on the A) the open E notes. Grace notes are applied throughout “Traditional Reel” and can also be noted in the second part (turn) of “Miss Stewart of Glentully Reel.”

Buddy is accompanied by the late John Morris Rankin, often noted as a leading figure in bringing Cape Breton piano accompaniment into a “newer” stylistic era. His style was busier than those of the older style, yet didn’t distract from the leading instrument. As noted earlier in this book, John Morris was a leader in using more bass lines, “walking” up and down the keys with his left hand, adding more chords within the tune structures and being more creative with added right hand rhythmic variations. Note steady bursts of syncopation followed by flowing right hand rhythmic touches in the strathspeys.

8. Kinnon Beaton with John Morris Rankin

“Celtic Ceilidh Reel” (Dan R. MacDonald), “Miss Smallness House Reel,” “Leventine’s Barrel Hornpipe,” “The Hughie and Allan Reel” (Kinnon Beaton), “Master McDermott’s Reel,” “Derrick Beaton’s Reel” (Donald Angus Beaton)

Kinnon Beaton is thought of today by many musicians and dancers in the Cape Breton tradition as the consummate dance player. Kinnon, like Buddy, is a fine example of combining the old and the new. His bowing is reminiscent of the Mabou Coal Mines style with varying pressures applied, the bow being dug into the strings in one instant, then let off the next—adding lilt and “danceability” to his music—as heard in these reels played in the 1980s. His tone is sweet and warm; his timing and application rock steady and smooth. Kinnon will occasionally add tasteful drones, vibrato, wild notes, bowing variations, gracings and dotted reel notes (“strathspeying” the reels) while he “cuts up” some strathspeys and has strong “up bow” pushes. He, too, is recognized as a correct player.

I want the listener to recognize the connection between the music and the dancing from this square set third figure of reels. You can hear the feet treepling of many well-known Mabou dancers in the background complementing Kinnon’s steady driving dance playing. Again, John Morris Rankin provides the piano accompaniment with his moving bass, varying right-hand rhythms (syncopation, etc.), superb chord choice and impeccable timing. Also, listen closely for Kinnon’s syncopated foot tap that gives a “thump-slap” sound—the

heel (thump) rocks to the toe (slap). Like his father Donald Angus Beaton before him, Kinnon also does a toe tap in between each “thump-slap” for a one measure percussive sound that goes: Thump-Slap-ah/Thump-Slap-ah. It can be heard slightly near the end of the selection, complementing the feet of the dancers doing the “hop” (the main dance step for the reels).

9. Howie MacDonald with Mac Morin and Dave MacIsaac

“Betty Matheson’s Jig” (Howie MacDonald), “Cherish the Ladies Jig,” “Tatter Jack Walsh Jig

This selection is a fine example of the growth of jigs within the Cape Breton tradition since the introduction of square dancing. Here we see an example of Irish and locally-composed jigs added to the repertoire as Howie MacDonald starts with his own composition, followed by a tune that Howie learned from influential Irish fiddler Sean McGuire and then finishing with another traditional Irish jig. Jackie Dunn-MacIsaac has described Howie’s playing to me as “sassy,” a good description. It is fun, in that he is open to using his technical proficiency adding personal variation to tunes and occasionally playing tunes not too common to the tradition. However, his interpretation as a traditional fiddler is also superb, employing the common ornamentations like grace notes, cuts, drones, etc.

One can also hear the influence of such players as Jerry Holland, Buddy MacMaster and Winston Fitzgerald in Howie’s clean tone and application. In the first jig, Howie can be heard playing the melody on the D string and playing an open A string in unison, especially in the last measure and a half of each part of the tune, producing a thicker, more melodic interpretation than if he had simply played on one string. One can also hear him employing grace notes. He tends to use his “pinky” finger for lightening fast gracings that sound “chirp-like,” similar to those of Winston Fitzgerald. (My father tells me that Dan R. MacDonald noted that Winston’s “pinky is like a snake’s tongue,” providing a mental picture of what this technique looks like when applied.) The same types of techniques can be heard in the next two jigs. While a bow stroke forming a cross-beat type of slur with a gracing occurs in the second jig, a down-bow is employed at the end of a measure/bar and the commencement of another. This bowing application is often heard in Mabou Coal Mines-playing as well. Howie’s driving consistent timing is notable in these jigs.

Mac Morin, one of Cape Breton’s most popular piano players is accompanying. His playing exhibits the influence of players like John Morris Rankin and Tracey Dares-MacNeil, employing wide rhythmic variation, extended chord use and knowledge, use of dynamics, and moving/climbing bass hand playing. Accompanying on guitar is Dave MacIsaac, well-known for his tasty use of bass lines on the guitar complemented by some percussive rhythmic strumming, dynamics and a sensitivity that avoids overriding the approach of the pianist and fiddler.

10. Ian MacDougall with Mac Morin

“Heavy is My Fate”– Air

Ian MacDougall is often described as having the old style. His first influential teacher was the great composer John MacDougall, who I’m sure enforced to Ian the importance of the fourth finger for “doubling” the open string notes. This, combined with extensive use of drones, grace notes and driving, consistent bowing, can be heard in Ian’s performance of dance tunes. However, Ian’s old style can be heard on this slow air known by some as “Heavy is My Fate” on the recording From Foot Cape. The tune begins with a tasty introduction by Mac Morin, one of the best examples of evolved, knowledgeable piano accompaniment and notably a top proponent on the “slow stuff.” Mac’s approach here is gentle, decorative and creative. The third note Ian plays is a doubled E. The first A note on the second beat is applied in true traditional fashion with Ian dragging a first

finger (low E) note into the doubled A instead of just playing the melody A note. This creates a thicker, more expressive result. He then plays notes on the D string simultaneously with an underlying open G string drone. This is common to the old sound, giving it a bagpipe feel, very notable in the playing of the late Dan Joe MacInnis. Ian also subtly plays an open G drone with the G notes ending the first and second parts of the tune. On the repeat of part one, on the D note, very first beat, Ian in the old style breaks up the D into three sounds with a grace note above breaking up the D.

The similar type of ornament is used throughout, adding a guttural accentuation, similar perhaps to pipe gracings or the expression in a Gaelic singer's voice. Regular grace notes are also heard whereby the note above the melody note is employed just before the melody note. Slight vibrato is added as well, especially on his ending G notes. The drones and subtle playing on two strings are very noticeable on this cut, reinforcing the idea that the "bigger" sound gives Cape Breton fiddling added expression.