EMILE’S DREAM
Emile Benoit, Pigeon Inlet Productions, 1 Stoneyhouse St., St. John's, Nfld. $5 plus postage.

Last month we received this record with the following note from Kelly Russell: “Emile Benoit is one of the finest folk musicians we have in Newfoundland. Emile’s music, though mostly original on this record, is very much in the traditional style, with an interesting combination of French, Irish and Scottish influence. There is quite a lot of unique folk music in Newfoundland, though very little of it has appeared on record. It is my intention, with the establishment of Pigeon Inlet Productions, to produce more of these folk records and distribute them to areas where this sort of music is popular.”

Before I even heard it, I knew I would like this album. The front cover shows Emile fiddling at Black Duck Brook. Behind him you see the cove and his house on the opposite shore. The photo on the back shows him fiddling in what I assume to be his kitchen. Before you’ve read a word of the liner notes or heard the music, it’s obvious that this album has been produced with care and respect for Emile and the community out of which he comes. The album, like the photos on it, are more a portrait of the man and his life rather than just a presentation of fiddle music.

“Emile Benoit is a French Newfoundlander. Born on March 24th, 1913 in the small community of Black Duck Brook on the Port aux Port Peninsula, he has been both a fisherman and a farmer, a carpenter and a logger, a blacksmith, an unofficial doctor and the father of thirteen children. Emile is also a fine storyteller, comedian, stepdancer and fiddler, as well as being a very warm and wonderful person.” The liner notes go on to tell Emile’s story of his fiddling in his own words.

“When I was a young fellow, I remember, my father used to sing and play with two sticks. He would put one up under his chin like the fiddle and he’d go like a bow with the other one. He was singing the jigs and me, now, I used to dance and every night I would say, ‘Dad, come on, give us some fiddle’, and he’d take the two sticks and he’d play. He used to tell me about his father, Henri, who was a fiddler, and his grandfather, who came over here from France and I thought about that a lot; I carried that around in my brain.

“One time I said ‘Dad’, I said. ‘Can you make me a fiddle?’ So he took an old piece of board, and he took out his pocket knife and shaped it to look like a fiddle. So, all right; he told me to go ask Mom for some sewing thread. She wasn’t too pleased to give it to me because thread was about 5 cents a reel, a lot of money in them times. But she give it to me anyway and, my son, my heart was pumping about 100 mile a minute. So, anyway, my father cut the thread into four pieces and made the strings, he made a little bridge, and a bow, then he gave it to me to try. Well I rubbed the bow on it and, you know, supposing you were to give me a million dollars right now, it wouldn’t make me so
happy as I was then with that little fiddle. It didn’t make no sound, you know, just a sort of buzzing noise like a bumblebee or something. And how I used to haul on that, every day, every day, giving it to her. My mother couldn’t keep enough thread around to patch the clothes.

“So, good enough. I had an uncle; his name was John, and when he seen me going at that he said to my father, ‘That Emile, you know, if he had a real fiddle, he could play it.’ ‘Yes,’ said my father, ‘I think so because he likes it.’ ‘Well’ said Uncle John, ‘I think I’m gonna make him one.’ It took about a year before he finally made me one. It wasn’t the best but it was pretty good. He got some catgut strings, horsehair for the bow and spruce frankgum for the rosin. So, good enough. He showed me a jig and I still remember it; I can still play it. And my father, he would sing the old jigs that my grandfather used to play and I learned them. When I was 16 years old I played for what they used to call a ‘spree’. I was the only one around here then who could play, you see, and they’d get me to play all the time so I got good. But after years and years of playing the same jigs all the time, I got tired of them. I had nowhere to get the tunes; there was no radio or phonograph, so I started making them up.”

All but one set of tunes on this album are Emile’s own compositions. The music is clearly and simply presented. Emile is obviously not a concert fiddler, but someone who plays for dances and parties. His style is rhythmic and unaffected with all the earmarks of a self-taught musician. My only reservation about the record is the use of guitar as backup. I would have much preferred piano. There is also no address or mention of Pigeon Inlet Productions on the album cover, an unfortunate omission if Kelly Russell wants to expand his market. But on the whole, this is an excellent album and we’re looking forward to future Pigeon Inlet records.

Rika Ruebsaat

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