Contemporary Traditional Music in Newfoundland

In reviewing Emile Benoit's first record, "Emile's Dream" (Quay CS 7932, 1979), Rika Ruebaat concluded: "...this is an excellent album and we're looking forward to future Pigeon Inlet records." This note is, to a certain extent, a follow-up to that comment, but it will go beyond contributions to Newfoundland's discography master-minded by the talented fiddler and record mogul-in-the-making Kelly Russell. There is a minor boom in professional and semi-professional traditional music in Newfoundland at the present, which requires, if only for purposes of historical documentation, some preliminary discussion.

Newfoundland has long been known to students and devotees of folk music and song as a seemingly unending source of traditional material. One has only to recall the major collections made by E.B. Greenleaf and G.Y. Mansfield, Kenneth Peacock, MacEdward Leach, and Naud Karpeles, in addition to many unpublished collections, to realize just how rich the tradition is. But most collectors were looking for certain types of song, and one finds little if any reference to the kind of music and song that many Newfoundlanders actually enjoyed and performed.

Michael Taft, in his A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador 1904-1975, readdressed the balance by proving that as early as the nineteen thirties such popular, media-disseminated genres as Country & Western were already exercising considerable impact on the musical tastes of Newfoundlanders. Country & Western, and later, Rock 'n' Roll music, has dominated the popular tastes. Even today, when such traditional groups as Figgy Duff, about whom more later, play at dances in some parts of the province, they are expected not to play their electric and often electrifying jigs and reels or sing their traditional ballads, but to provide a diet of Rock and Country & Western.

For despite the evidence of a still rich tradition — young folklore students in Memorial's Folklore Department regularly bring in fine collections of traditional song and music — until recently the only people who actively promoted traditional music were professional singers such as Omar Blondahl or professional musicians whose chief impact was on the Mainland, such as Harry Hibbs, or local glee clubs.

The living tradition of folk music was restricted either to field recordings put on disc, or to those usually older performers who had provided the field-workers with their material in the first place. There was, in other words, a very real dichotomy between, on the one hand, traditional singers, collectors, and a fairly small number of professional entertainers who made use of traditional material and, on the other hand, the mass of Newfoundlanders whose tastes were moving ever faster away from the traditional to media-inspired popular music.

The late 'sixties saw the appearance in Britain of folk-inspired groups such as Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span, which derived from the London Folk Club scene of the period. Fairport Convention had of course been a rock group at first, occasionally making use of traditional material. What is significant is that at the very same time a similar phenomenon was taking place in Newfoundland. In 1969 a group called Lukey's Boat was formed. Its music was essentially rock 'n' roll, but under the influence of Noel Dinn in particular, it made a growing and innovative use of traditional songs. Lukey's Boat toured Britain as a rock group, at the same time as Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span were becoming popular, but I cannot say as yet what influences, if any, were exercised by the former upon the latter, or vice versa.

Lukey's Boat disbanded shortly after its British tour, to be replaced in 1973 by Figgy Duff. This group suffered numerous metamorphoses, including in its ranks fiddlers such as Jamie Snider and Kelly Russell. Its driving force was Noel Dinn, the group's percussionist, but it was not until 1980 that its first album, entitled "Figgy Duff" (Posterity Records PTR 13014) appeared.

The album's impact has been enormous, receiving rave reviews in the American press and considerable air time in New York, Boston and other cities of the eastern seaboard. It has not gone unnoticed in Canada where, however, it risks acquiring the stigma of being home-grown. The album is composed almost entirely
of traditional music and song performed not only with the highest level of professional competence but with a superb sense of artistic interpretation. It has been compared, to its advantage, with Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span and The Chieftains.

Apart from Noel Dinn's percussion, vocal harmony and piano, there is the virtuoso playing by Geoff Butler on button accordions, Dave Panting's nimble fingers on mandolin, bass and guitar and, as the focal point of the group's interpretations, the rich and resonant voice of Pamela Morgan (vocals, tin whistle, guitar, piano). Figgy Duff is the one group in Newfoundland to have successfully mediated traditional music with contemporary instruments, while remaining faithful to the spirit of traditional Newfoundland styles.

Figgy Duff is, however, only the most visible of groups and individuals performing in traditional style or relying on traditional material. Another group, The Wonderful Grand Band, has enjoyed a highly successful television series which owed a great deal to the comedy of Greg Malone and Tommy Sexton. The group does not restrict itself to traditional music alone, but has a strong penchant to rock 'n' roll and the Dylan-esque ballads of singer Ron Hynes. The group's first album, however, entitled "The Wonderful Grand Band" (Quay CS-78-014, 1978) eschews rock 'n' roll for traditional material and singer Hynes' own compositions. One should note here, too, that although Kelly Russell left the group shortly after the album appeared, the WGB still uses many of his arrangements.

This is a testimony to Russell's talents; over the years his technical competence has improved by leaps and bounds, due in part no doubt to the experience he gained playing with many of the important groups in St. John's. But he has taken upon himself another role, that of record producer and promoter of Newfoundland talent, old and young.

His first success, and his first production of traditional music, was Emile Benoit's album. While Emile Benoit translates well musically from live performance to record, much of his special talent is lost. For Emile Benoit is also a gifted comic raconteur; this gift he allies to his numerous compositions, preceding most of his tunes with a story about their making and naming. Emile Benoit has had an important influence on many younger musicians precisely because of his gifts as a composer. It is the rare performer in St. John's and elsewhere in Newfoundland today who does not have one or two of Emile's tunes in his or her repertoire. Both Figgy Duff and The Wonderful Grand Band use his material, and he has played live with both groups.

Emile Benoit was "discovered" when he was in his early sixties after playing in folk festivals, and the importance of such festivals in sensitizing the Newfoundland public to traditional music cannot be over-emphasized.

The same is true for another older performer, Rufus Guinlard of Daniel's Harbour, whose fiddling wizardry was captured on record ("Rufus Guinlard, Newfoundland Fiddler", Breakwater Recordings 1002, n.d., Breakwater Books, Duckworth St., St. John's) a few years ago. Like Emile Benoit, Rufus Guinchard has travelled widely in the last few years, has played on radio and television, at festivals, and in bars in St. John's.

The St. John's Folk Festival (now The Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival) brought in many performers from all over the province. Many had never performed in other than their traditional home context, and were far removed from the sophisticated world of the professionals. But such is the bond between the two that it was possible to see, for example, fiddlers performing on the same stage who were separated by more than sixty years of experience.
The Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival is not, of course, a purely musical event. Festivals lend themselves to a very popular traditional genre in Newfoundland, the recitation. Kelly Russell has brought together an album of live performances of recitations from the most recent festival entitled "The Tales the Fishmen Tell" (Pigeon Inlet Productions 733, 1980; PIP, 1 Stoneyhouse St., St. John's). It features such well-known performers on the Newfoundland scene as Francis Colbert of Job's Cove, John Joe English of Branch, Lem Snow of Deer Lake, and Baxter and Wiff Wareham of Harbour Buffett. The Wareham Brothers are, of course, well-known to Mainland festival-goers.

Kelly Russell's production of recitations was probably inspired in part at least by an earlier album he made of tales told by his late father, Ted Russell. Ted Russell wrote and read a series of tales based on the humorous possibilities of life in a fictitious Newfoundland outport named Pigeon Inlet. In the 'fifties his program, entitled "The Chronicles of Uncle Mose", was successfully aired both provincially and nationally. Kelly Russell salvaged the remaining tapes and made the record bearing the same name as the old radio program (Pigeon Inlet Productions 731, n.d.). "The Chronicles of Uncle Mose" fit squarely into the recitation tradition in Newfoundland, and a second series of "Chronicles" will shortly be released.

Kelly Russell has recently produced yet another album of traditional music, drawing here on his collections from the French area of Newfoundland, in the Port-au-Port peninsula-Stephenville area. "Music from French Newfoundland" (PIP 734, 1980) contains a mixture of accordion and fiddle with guitar accompaniment played by French Newfoundlanders. In addition to the brilliant accordion playing of Ron Felix (who certainly deserves an album of his own), it features traditional fiddle tunes by Ed Doucette, Ron Formanger, Ivan White (a left-hander) and accordion by Gerry Formanger.

In addition to the recordings noted above, there are others which have not received wide attention, but which indicate the depth of the current renaissance in traditional Newfoundland music. Minnie White, a fine west coast accordionist, has made two albums which deserve attention, "Accordion and Mandolin Favourites" (Audat 4779058, 1967) and "Homestead Reels" (Quay CS 7816, 1978). From the same area of Newfoundland is the undated

"Musical Memories of Codroy Valley, Newfoundland" (private recording by RCA Custom Record Div., Canada, L.P. 13) by Walter McIsaac on fiddle and his daughter Marina Cashin on piano; McIsaac has a Scottish background, from Cape Breton Island, and it is reflected in his tunes and style.

A more recent album, purely acoustic in nature, is "Tickle Harbour's The Hare's Ear" (Quay CS 7955). Until recently disbanding, the group comprised Des Walsh (fiddle, mandolin, bodhran, bones, vocals), his brother Don (guitar, bodhran, vocals), Rick Hiscott (fiddle) and Gerry Strong (tin whistle, pipe drones, vocals). Strong's whistle contributes much to the refined and delicate interpretations of both the traditional tunes and performers' own compositions (including a few pieces composed by Emile Benoit).

This outline of current activities in Newfoundland's folk music world has mentioned the major contributions of recent years. It needs to be underlined, of course, that records are the visible and concrete signs of such activity. In St. John's, at least, there are numerous pubs and clubs which provide stages for traditional and other performers. The St. John's Folk Club, which now meets at the Ship Inn, is usually jam-packed on a Sunday evening, and with cause, for one can quite often see the cream of Newfoundland traditional performers following one another informally upon the stage.

Perhaps the final evidence of the fast-growing resurgence of interest within the province in music derived from its own tradition
is provided by the OZ FM radio program "Jigg's Dinner" hosted by the knowledgeable Neil Murray on Sunday mornings for a whole two hours. The show is province wide and receives requests from all over the province. Irony of ironies, "Jigg's Dinner" is broadcast by one of the major rock and pop stations in eastern Canada; yet it has one of the highest ratings of all radio shows in Newfoundland. Neil Murray provides a rich fare of traditional music from Newfoundland, and the broader tradition of the English and Celtic worlds.

This note has attempted to provide some preliminary documentation on what in retrospect may one day appear to be a period of great significance to traditional music, not only in Newfoundland but in the rest of Canada. Someone better equipped than I should take upon himself the task of historian to the small and compact world of contemporary traditional music in Newfoundland.

- Gerald Thomas
Centre d'Etudes Franco-Terre-neuviennes
Memorial University of Newfoundland

NOTES

2 Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland, Cambridge, 1933.
7 See Taft, A Regional Discography, 54-59.
8 Ibid., 15-17.
9 For example, "Songs from the Outports of Newfoundland", recorded by MacEdward Leach, Folkways FE 4075, 1966.
10 In addition to his recording work, Russell teaches traditional fiddle to pupils ranging from seven to seventy, is involved in radio, television and film work, and has recently formed a new group, Three Turn Tune, with Jim Payne (guitar, mandolin, vocals) and Colin Quigley (fiddle, banjo).
12 The 1981 Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival, organized by the St. John's Folk Arts Council, is to be relocated this July in Pippy Park, where excellent facilities will permit a bigger and better festival.
13 Past festivals have been videotaped by a local TV station and are given frequent airings. John Joe English's recitations, always a highlight of the festivals, are often requested on "Jigg's Dinner".