Cape Breton, an island north of Nova Scotia, has a distinctive musical and cultural identity. Although many parts of Canada were settled by Gaelic peoples, it is only in Cape Breton that the language and related arts continued well into the twentieth century. When the immigrants first saw Cape Breton they were struck by its physical similarity to the Highlands of Scotland (one theory of continental drift suggests that they were once joined) and were content to homestead there without looking further west. Many of these settlers were unilingual Gaelic speakers. They brought a simple conservative lifestyle with them; subsisting by farming, fishing, hunting and lumbering, and amusing themselves by dancing, singing, storytelling, fiddling and piping. These ancient Gaelic traditions were generally transmitted orally. Eventually English and European educational values (i.e.: written history and music notation) began to dominate. In Cape Breton music, the dance tradition slowed this assimilation process. Most musicians, both Gaelic and English, picked up enough by ear to play for dancers. However, as they wanted to increase their repertoires they taught themselves to read music. The newly acquired tunes, mainly from the Scottish and Irish collections, were adapted to already developed individual styles. Note reading did not radically affect their bowing, intonation, phrasing and sense of swing. In the ‘kitchen college’ peers gave the feedback necessary for development.

Radio and commercial recordings have influenced a shift of the music’s function from dancing to listening. Also, as younger players imitated their favourite recording artists instead of their neighbours, regional styles and repertoires have faded. Today it is rare that a beginner is lucky enough to be under a master’s guidance and therefore, the safest approach for learning the music is to utilize as many different media as possible, without overemphasizing one source.

In recent centuries, the fiddle has taken over from the pipes as the main dance instrument. However, in Cape Breton, fiddle styles have been strongly influenced by the pipes, which affects gracing, intonation and repertoire. Before amplification fiddlers also strove for a full, continuous resonance. They achieved that sound by using altered tunings and long, light, spirited bowing. Life and taste
were added by improvising various shakes, cuts and graces. In small rural community halls one unaccompanied fiddler would often play for fifty to one hundred dancers. Volume was sometimes increased when two stylistically similar fiddlers played together. Often they achieved more power by playing in octaves. However, when many fiddlers play together, it limits the freedom of expression necessary in good fiddling.

Although sophistication of musical taste eventually demanded a ‘band’ sound at dances, chordal accompaniment often limits the fiddlers’ freedom to explore spontaneous melodic variation. This sophistication also exposed audiences and musicians to classical ‘violinistics’ and harmony arrangements. Thus, a compromise will have to evolve between the solo traditions with their instinctive improvisations, and group activity with fixed melody and fixed ornamentation. The major and minor scales of modern music allow sophisticated harmony but they are much more limited melodically when compared to the older modes which often colour melody with spontaneous inflections of moving, undefined intervals not possible on tempered instruments.

New technology is changing the fiddlers’ accessories, techniques and repertoire. Thirty or forty years ago, players who were used to playing on gut or plain steel strings switched to the new aluminium-wound-on-gut strings. More recently, to get the best sound with a pick-up, many players find that the wound steel strings or synthetic core strings give a quick response in conjunction with short, precise bow strokes. The resonance is created electronically, at the board. The new aesthetic demands ‘clean’ playing. Thousands of professional and amateur recordings have been made and most players get a portion of their repertoire from these sources. Hundreds of books have been

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**Cuir Sa Chiste Mhoir**

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**Cape Breton Setting**

Reel
written (on both sides of the Atlantic, spanning over 200 years). Dozens of excellent players are scattered geographically. Starting with Issue #38 of the Cape Breton Magazine (Wreck Cove, Nova Scotia, B0C 1H0, subscriptions $8.00) I have begun submitting music, interviews and tapes to help disseminate the music. Of course, if anyone wants to learn, the best place to start is to go to old-style dances, gaining a feel for the steps and the movements. If you ignore the dancer, it is unlikely that you will develop the all-important swing, intrinsic to Cape Breton fiddling.

In performance an individual playing the above music might spontaneously mix melodic fragments from the first and third lines. He would also vary the drones and bowing. He could further vary his attack on any note of his choice, although the ‘dirt’ is usually added in locations that emphasize rhythm. In the given melody, all of the quarter notes could be varied by one of:

- cuttings
- trills
- graces - hammers
- pulls

Or combinations of the above. The actual pitches sounded on the raised-bass strings are not the same as the scordatura (mistuning) notation indicates. The notes given show fingering from the standard violin tuning and therefore anyone attempting to use this arrangement on an instrument in a tuning other than AEAE, will have to re-arrange. An alternate title for this tune is the #3 Wedding Reel. It was recorded in standard tuning on a ’78 recording by Dan J. Campbell and Angus Allan Gillis in the 1930s. The Gaelic title refers to puert a beul (mouth music). Often Gaelic words were sung for dancers when no instrumentalist was available.