Note: Only reviews of relavence to fiddling have been published in the issue of the Bulletin. The next issue (December, 1985) will have an extended review section.

Several Pigeon Inlet Albums Reviewed

Music from French Newfoundland / Musique de la Terre-Neuve Franaise. Pigeon Inlet Productions, 1 Stoneyhouse Street, St. John’s, Newfoundland.


Records of traditional Newfoundland music performed by its local practitioners are thin on the ground despite the abundance and diversity of musical talent found on the Island. Kelly Russell and Pigeon Inlet Productions are therefore to be commended for their initiative in producing these two albums which form a welcome addition to the inventory of Newfoundland recordings.\(^1\)

Music from French Newfoundland features seven musicians from the Port-au-Port Peninsula and Stephenville area of western Newfoundland: Ron Formanger (fiddle), Ed Doucette (fiddle), Ivan and Larus White (fiddle and guitar), Ron Felix and Clyde Connect (accordion and guitar), and Gerry Formanger (accordion). The result is a pleasing variety of tunes, performance styles, and musical textures. Ed Doucette playing “Uncle Victor’s Reel” provides the only example of unaccompanied fiddling on the album, and a very admirable example it is too. His playing is deft and assured and there are some nice touches of double stopping even at this rapid tempo. Also commendable here is the way in which the sound engineer has balanced Ed Doucette’s foot-tapping, so integral to this style of playing with his fiddling. All too often the beating of the feet is played down in recordings in deference to the melodic line. Here they are given equal prominence exactly as they should be. Elsewhere, Ed Doucette is accompanied on the guitar (although, strangely, the player is not named) and his performances are consistently highly charged.

Ivan White is a left-handed fiddler as the jacket notes point out. To judge from the photograph, he also rests the fiddle against his collar-bone in a virtually vertical position. This is in contrast to the more horizontal position of the fiddle in the photographs of Ed Doucette and Ron Formanger. Nevertheless, I can detect nothing in Ivan White’s playing to justify the claim that his way of holding the fiddle “consequently . . . gives his music a rather distinctive sound”. To my ear his fiddling is much like that of Ed Doucette, with hints here and there of the influence of commercial playing styles such as country and bluegrass. Larus White’s guitar accompaniment lends unboutsive but sure support throughout to his brother’s fiddling dexterity.

“Aggie’s Waltz” is undoubtedly the best example of Ron Formanger’s playing (again with an unidentified guitarist) on this album. This piece, composed by Ron for Gerry Formanger’s wife, makes effective use of double stopping to suggest a fiddle duet rather than a single melodic line. What a shame that Ron Formanger’s other performances here suffer in places from a squeaky tone and lapses of intonation. Surely it would have been possible to obtain better examples than these of Formanger’s playing.

Of the two accordionists represented here, Gerry Formanger gets rather short shrift, appearing only once. Nevertheless, his playing has plenty of verve and there is much to recommend it.\(^2\) It is Ron Felix, however, who steals the show with his superbly skilful and yet unassuming playing. On all tracks except one (featuring “A French tune” which defies rhythmic transcription) he is complemented by the elastic and incisive guitar playing of Clyde Connect. The close rapport between Felix and Connet makes for some of the most streamlined and highly synchronised performances on this record. As Gerald Thomas has said, this pair certainly warrants an album of its own.\(^3\)

The brief jacket notes (in French and English) are informative as far as they go but many will no doubt regret that they do not go further. Some background on the settlement patterns and cultural links of the Port-au-Port/Stephenville area (which may go part way to explaining the mixture of French, Irish, Scottish, English, and American influences audible in music) would be useful, as well as more biographical data on the players themselves. In addition, more scholarly tune annotations, identifying melodies, printed analogues, and their probable provenance wherever possible, and perhaps even a transcription or two, would be an advantage. As it stands, such would-be titles as “Another very distinctive sort of tune” (Side B, Band 3) give us precious little to go on.

The fiddling of Rufus Guinchard, who is from Daniels Harbour on the Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland, may already be familiar to some through his first album, Rufus Guinchard: Newfoundland Fiddler\(^4\) This latest album, Step
Tunes & Doubles, has three tunes which were also featured on the earlier LP but adopts a rather different format. On Side 1 Guinchard plays a selection of ten jigs, introducing each one with a few comments as to where he learned the tune or how it got its name. The music is executed in a brisk and forthright style by Guinchard who belies his age (eighty-two at the time of the recording) in the robustness of his playing. I suspect his accompanying footwork is equally as vigorous but it is somewhat muffled on most tracks. Rather surprisingly, one or two ragged moments in the playing have been allowed to stand as, for example, towards the ends of “The Skipper Lost His Guernsey,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and “Uncle John Peter Payne’s Tune.” No one plays their best all the time, of course, but, in fairness to Guinchard, these occasional blemishes might have been re-taped.

For Side 2 Rufus Guinchard is joined by Kelly Russell, himself a fiddler, and a guitarist, Jim Payne, for a series of arrangements which the three perform regularly at folk clubs and festivals. As one would expect, the trio’s ensemble is generally impeccable, especially that of the two fiddlers who are often in unison. Their performances are also marked by great gusto which only eases up for the gentility of “Granny’s Waltz” and the poignancy of “Jim Rimbolt’s Tune” as played in a slow version by Russell and Payne.

As with Music from French Newfoundland, background information concerning the performer, the music, and the Newfoundland fiddling tradition is in rather short supply on this album. Guinchard’s own accounts on Side 1 of the tunes and how he learnt them are as interesting as far as they go (despite the fact they are rather faint and uneasy-sounding) but they are no substitute for a biographical sketch, tune annotations, and musical transcriptions. True, we have something approaching these in Kelly Russell’s book, Rufus Guinchard: The Man & His Music, which came out in the same year as the album and is referred to in the jacket notes. Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine that a limited budget may have prevented parts of the book from becoming an accompanying pamphlet for the disc. More extensive jacket notes could nevertheless have compensated for this to some extent. They should, for example, have explained the significance of the verses which Guinchard recites after certain tunes on Side 1 and which, in case you’re wondering, were in fact sung as part of a Christmas courtship custom.

Music from French Newfoundland and Step Tunes & Doubles are both enjoyable and ethnographically valuable albums. With a little extra care and effort, Kelly Russell and Pigeon Inlet Productions could make future records of this kind even more informative and satisfying to listen to for specialists and non-specialists alike. As one of the few, if not the only local recording company currently making discs of Newfoundland performers, Pigeon Inlet Productions is to be commended on the high standards they have attained in these two albums. Let’s hope they will continue to improve.

— Julia Bishop — with assistance from
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Notes

1 A record of Emile Benoit, entitled Emile’s Dream, PIP 732, 1979, was Pigeon Inlet Productions’ first album of this kind.

2 Gerry Formanger also plays the guitar and has recorded extensively under the name Gerry Reeves. See Michael Taft, comp., A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador 1904-1972, Bibliographical and Special Series No.1 (St. John’s: Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, 1975), pp. 40-42.


4 Breakwater Recording #1002, PRP 100257, n.d.

5 The tunes which appear on both albums are as follows: “Uncle Harry’s Out of Shape,” “Up Southern Shore,” and “Out Behind the House.” It should be noted that when the tune credited as “Uncle Peter Payne’s Tune” on the Breakwater disc is in fact a repeat (obviously in error) of the tune, “Out Behind the House.” It appears correctly on Step Tunes & Doubles.

6 (St. John’s: Harry Cuff Publications Ltd., 1982)