Deux reels-à-bouche

The following are two examples of reels-à-bouche, or turlute, from the Archives at Université Laval. The French-Canadian turlute is a vocal technique that most agree was imported by Irish and Scottish musicians in that first wave of colonists from the British Isles. The distinguishing feature of both the British and French-Canadian techniques is that nonsense syllables are improvised against tunes from the dance music of the Celtic repertoire. An intriguing feature in the Québécois turlute is that although often sung as an entire nonsensical text, it is also used as a refrain in songs with French texts, in both cases the vocables always drawn from English-Celtic nonsense syllables, such as deedly dum or deedly dee, &c. It’s a striking aural combination to hear a hearty Québécois drinking song featuring a refrain in what you’d swear were Irish vocables.

The main use of turlute seems to have been as a mnemonic, to commit dance tunes to memory in the absence of an instrument, or just because sometimes it’s easier to hum. Hearsay has it that at social occasions musicians would turlute for people to dance to, when there were no instruments available or when the fiddler was off wetting his whistle. People still turlute today for memorizing tunes and in performances of traditional Québécois music there is almost always a turlute showcase.

I’m in the process of finishing my master’s thesis at the Université de Montréal, in which I look at turlute of the 20th Century, in a kind of survey/comparative approach. I hope you enjoy the transcriptions. The reel-à-bouche by Benoît Benoit can be heard on the recording from the Université Laval entitled Acadie et Québec: Documents D’Enquêtes.

Sharon Berman

Reel de Ste-Anne

[Music notation image]
This dance was ten miles from Grouard in an Indian settlement. Our boy friends had heard about it and wanted to attend this Indian "muchigan" to see what it was like. The large dance hall was built of logs. A row of log posts down the middle held up the ridge pole of the roof.

I think every Indian from Grouard and the surrounding country was there. The orchestra consisted of two violins played by Indians who had taught themselves, and they were good players. Their music was fast and they kept good time with their feet. The Indians danced on one side of the posts which divided the room, and the few white people who attended danced on the other side. The Indians danced mostly square dances which we didn't know how to do, but the white people one-stepped to the square dance music.

The best part of the evening were the Indian jiggs [sic]; they always played the Red River Jigg for these numbers. Only one couple was on the floor at a time for a jigg number. A squaw, not a young girl either, stood in the middle of the room and moved up and down slightly, in time to the music, turning around slowly all the time so she faced her partner at all times. An active young man in a very fancy beaded costume danced around the squaw with wild intricate movements. Sometimes you'd think he was going to grab her in his arms or jump on her; then he would back up again. He wore tight pants so you could see his leg movements and the buckskin fringes on his jacket emphasized his actions. This may have been the famous Cree "chicken dance."

... We stayed till daylight. I don't remember any midnight lunch. Moonshine seemed to be the only refreshments, and we didn't have any. "Let's go to Grouard for breakfast," the boys suggested. I suppose they were hungry.