

Inuit Accordion Music—A Better Kept Secret

Jim Hiscott

Jim Hiscott has appeared in the *Bulletin* before, discussing his composition, *Spirit Reel*, in 29.3 (September 1995). If you're the kind who listens to credits at the end of CBC broadcasts, you'll likely have heard him cited in the production of a variety of concerts from Winnipeg. On his own initiative, he has also been responsible for a significant proportion of folk, traditional, and other sorts of interesting noncommercial Canadian music that is heard on the people's airwaves. The present essay is his presentation from the opening night of the CSTM Conference at the University of Winnipeg, October 1998. Jim also took these photos at the CBC 60th Anniversary Accordion Festival at Iqaluit. We appreciate his sharing them, and his experiences, with the Society.

I'd like to speak about a music that's probably a better kept secret than any other Canadian tradition—the button accordion music of the Eastern Arctic. It's a living tradition, widespread and unique in many ways.

Over the years, while living in Winnipeg, every once in a while I'd hear a fascinating story about someone's aunt or grandmother from northern Manitoba who used to play the accordion. I wondered, what kind of music did these women play? What was the context? Somehow I could never set up an interview or meeting with any of these former accordion players. Then a few years ago I heard a homemade tape by a woman from Repulse Bay, named Monica Mapsalak. She played polkas and other tunes, with a family back-up band, in a style that reminded me of Newfoundland button accordion music. I called Patrick Nagle, the manager of CBC Radio in Iqaluit, and he said yes, there were accordion players there, and CBC had in fact had a festival a few years before. At that time the CBC Network was looking for proposals for its 60th anniversary, and I thought, why not a CBC 60th anniversary Inuit Button Accordion Festival, bringing this music to the rest of the country?

It took several months to put together the resources for the project. The costs in the Arctic are great. Each accordion player lives in a different village. Each village is a two or three hour flight from the next, and airfares are expensive in the north. But finally things were in order, and I was on a plane to Iqaluit with a Winnipeg recording engineer and a few cases of digital recording equipment. It was one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life.

The accordion players were from various places around the North. Simeonie Keenainak, the best known, comes from Pangnirtung, further north on Baffin Island. He's a retired RCMP constable and an avid hunter who's also a successful wildlife photographer. Elisapi Kasarnak is from Pond Inlet—she spent 12 hours on a skidoo, then 4 hours on a plane, to get to Iqaluit to play in this festival. From Cape Dorset came Qarpik Pudlat, who's also a hunter and a carver. Zebedee and Jeannie Nungak flew from Kangirsuk in Nunavik, Northern Quebec. Zebedee Nungak is President of the Makivik Corporation and an important and influential politician of the region, as well as an accordion player. Kaina Nowdluk is from Iqaluit. He's in his

early 20s, and at the time was working in the local fish store.

Simeonie brought his three-piece backup band with him—Tim Evic on guitar; George Qaqasiq, bass, and Juilee Veevee, drums. Jonah Kelly, a CBC announcer in Iqaluit, hosted the event, and helped me to bridge the culture and language gap.

The Festival took place on Saturday evening, June 29, 1996. When concert time came, the Anglican Parish Hall was jam packed with about 300 people of all ages, mostly Inuit. As Kaina Nowdluk began his first tunes to open the festival, the audience just about exploded. It was a fabulous concert, five accordion players playing high-energy sets of great dance music. And after it was over, the community had a real dance and the musicians played for another couple of hours.

History & Background

Time to back up for a little of the roots and context of the Inuit accordion tradition.

The concertina, and later the button accordion, were developed in Europe in the early to mid 19th century, and one- and two-row button accordions became really popular in the late 1800s and the early years of this century. They literally spread around the world at that time, and there are indigenous accordion styles from Brazil to Algeria, Finland to Chile and Colombia, Madagascar to Arctic Canada.

Accordion music was brought to the north of Canada by European and American whaling crews, who were active from the 1600s through the end of the 19th century. Whale oil was used in Europe and America for fuel and for lubricating machinery, and baleen, from the mouth of the whale, was used for various products, including women's corsets. Whaling lasted until the early 1900s, when the animals became more scarce, and when baleen and whale oil were replaced by other products. The sailors came from Scotland, England, New England, and Newfoundland. In addition to European sailors, there were often Inuit crews who would help with the hunt, as well as supply caribou meat and other provisions.

There would often be musicians on board the whaling vessels: fiddlers and, later, accordion players. When the ships were in the local harbour, there would be dances. Andrew Atagota-

aluk, an accordion player from Inukjuak whom I interviewed, told me his mother remembered fondly the dances at the old Hudson's Bay post when the whaling ships were in. The Inuit came to like the music and the dancing. Eventually they became interested in playing the button accordion themselves. Accordions became a desired consumer item at Hudson's Bay Stores.*

The traditional music of the Inuit is drum dancing, which involves a hunter reciting his life story to the accompaniment of a drummer and a chorus. There's also of course throat singing, as well as the jaw harp and other instrumental music. The Christian missionaries in the north saw their role as one of



taking the Inuit away from drum dancing and the shamans, and replacing this culture and belief system with their own religion. Christianity is very strong in the North today. Drum dancing still exists, but the accordion and the square dance have replaced it in many contexts. It's interesting, though, that drum dancing is still regarded as a very serious form of music, and dancing to the accordion is seen as enjoyment, entertainment.

As with most traditional styles across Canada in recent decades, there was among the Inuit a period of low interest in the button accordion, with the influx of international mass culture—rock and other electric pop musics, &c. But now it's coming back. There is an increasing number of younger players—for example, Kaina Nowdluk, in his early 20s, and his younger brother, both in Iqaluit. They're from a musical family—their mother was a well known player. There's also Edward May in Kuujjuak, and Andrew Atagotaaluk's sons in Inukjuak. The future looks bright for the button accordion in the north.

Accordion Culture Today

Many of us would have serious problems with the goals and methods of the missionaries in promoting accordion playing to replace non-Christian practices; but the fact is that the Inuit now regard square dancing and the button accordion as their own tradition. Square dances have been the social occasion of choice for at least a century.

There are many stories about accordions in the north. In her informative book *When the Whalers Were Up North*, Dorothy Harley Eber quotes Mary Ipeelie of Iqaluit with a story about a shed full of accordions in an abandoned whaling station. The Inuit would leave their accordions in this shed when they went out hunting or whaling, in order to keep them safe from accidents. There would be over 30 accordions of different shapes

and sizes at any one time. When a group of hunters came by in the summer, they would take a couple of the instruments out for a dance, take turns playing them, then leave them for the next group. One imagines that sometimes hunting groups might come

by in the winter, and would perhaps thaw out an accordion for some dancing.

There are carvings of accordion players. I've seen one for sale in Winnipeg, a figure with the head and antlers of a caribou and the body of human, holding a big, spread-out accordion. There's a particularly powerful one in the Iqaluit museum, very wide and with a heavy, solid body; two heads and an accordion opened up across the entire width

of the body. These carvings give the feeling of a mythical power in the music; the players seem to have a spiritual as well as musical status.

Today, most communities in the Eastern Arctic have at least one accordion player, often several, who remembers the tunes and plays the dances. Many of the players today, such as Simone Keenainak and Andrew Atagotaaluk, remember older women playing the accordion when they themselves were children.

The accordion style is reminiscent of Newfoundland, and possibly Quebec, styles. The dance steps are variants of the square dances that you find in various forms across Canada. Tunes are reels, polkas, jigs. There's a short list of old tunes which are very popular throughout the north. Many players now learn tunes from records and the radio, played by southern musicians such as Harry Hibbs. It's interesting that Irish polka and slide rhythms are so strongly represented in the older Inuit tunes, as they are in Newfoundland music.

More research needs to be done about the specific sources of Newfoundland music, as well as those of Inuit music, but here's one little tidbit that might be interesting. In Ireland, polkas and slides are associated only with the southwest corner of the country, Kerry and Cork. I recently asked an Irish music scholar about why these dance tunes might be so prominent in eastern and northern Canada. He told me that in the 19th century these simpler dance forms were popular over all of Ireland, and it's only in the last hundred years that reels and jigs have taken over as the dance music of choice at sessions. During various emigrations to Newfoundland, and during the whaling period, the older dance forms were still prevalent, especially for dances. It's these older styles that immigrants brought to North America, and sailors to the North. Irish music could have arrived via Boston or Newfoundland. Perhaps these dance steps were in use throughout the British Isles at the time—you don't for example

hear strathspeys, even though many whalers were Scots. Interesting avenues for a researcher to explore!

One thing is certain. Like Métis musicians on the Prairies, the Inuit players have greatly changed the tunes they learned. Those tunes have evolved into new forms which are clearly Inuit tunes. There are also Inuit composers and new music being created for the accordion. There are local variants of tunes, and of dance feel, from community to community. These differences are perhaps lessening with the influence of the media, radio broadcasts, and the fact that the best known accordionists often travel from community to community to play dances.

Dances

Dances often take place around Christmas, when it's night most if not all of the time. Andrew Atagotaaluk told me they used to build a big igloo especially for the Christmas dance—you'd have 50 or 60 people dancing with accordion music in one big igloo. They would tear it down afterwards. There was no heating—he said people there got used to the cold, and actually had to go outside to cool off between dances. This was on the Boothia Peninsula, above the Arctic Circle.

Dances can also happen in times between summer and winter when thin ice makes hunting dangerous. They go for many hours, and they involve the whole community—children, elders, men and women of all ages. The dance sets are often in group configurations, as in square dancing, but there is also dancing in couples. There are children's dances. Between dance sets there are Inuit games, which in Iqaluit consist of things like musical chairs and searching for your boot in a pile. Good fun!

In the old days there used to be only the accordion at a dance. Now, with southern influence, there's a band—usually electric guitar, electric bass, and drums, to provide a strong beat and help the accordion player keep going for long dances. And each dance may be very long. There was one at the Inuit Accordion Festival that was 30 minutes long. Andrew Atagotaaluk told me he once played for two hours nonstop—just one dance! And you can't run through your repertoire of tunes to provide variety during one of those marathon sessions.

I have to tell this personal story: I was in Iqaluit, and, in preparation for the concert broadcast, was doing interviews with some of the players. One of them, Elisapi Kasarnak, didn't speak English; so CBC host Jonah Kelly did the interview for me, to be translated later. The day after the concert I was still around, waiting for my flight. There was a dance, and I thought, maybe I could sit in. I'd brought my accordion, and I observed that the musicians played a lot of polkas in the dances. I play



polkas myself, and so I thought, maybe I could try my hand, if there was an opportunity.

Kaina Nowdluk was playing this particular dance, and he knew me from the Festival. After a couple of hours he got a little tired. He motioned, *Here, you take over*. I was honoured to be asked, and I went up on the stage. I gave the band the key changes for three polkas. Then I started playing. I got through my three tunes, playing them a few times each. But the dancers kept dancing. So I had to keep

playing. I played a fourth tune, then a fifth. They kept dancing. There was no chance to give the band the chord changes, but they seemed to be following just fine. I must have played about ten tunes before the band suddenly stopped behind me.

Apparently there was a problem. I wasn't sure exactly what it was. The Emcee thanked me—she said that they had certainly heard something unusual being played for that dance. Kaina Nowdluk got back on stage. A couple of months later I got a translation of Elisapi Kasarnak's interview—the one in Inuktitut. I came to the point where she says (paraphrased): *The most important thing my teacher taught me was never to change the tune in the middle of a dance.... If you want to be successful playing the accordion, never change the tune in the middle of a dance.*

You can imagine the colour rising in my face as that sank in. I had changed the tune at least ten times without even thinking. They had wanted me to stay on the first tune, for as long as they wanted to keep dancing.

I learned at least two lessons: one, don't change the tune; two, don't imagine you know what a tradition is about without first gaining a good deal of exposure and knowledge. Next time I hope I'll know better.

Conclusion

Another point which soon became very clear was that Inuit button accordion music needs to be much better known. At present hardly anyone in southern Canada is aware it exists. If you travel in the north, you see posters of accordion players in the air terminals, but somehow the word doesn't get south.

The recording situation is not well developed. There are only a few accordion cassettes, and maybe one or two CDs, available even in northern communities and towns, not to mention outside the Arctic. Many of the older generation of accordionists have a repertoire that could easily be lost. An important project would be to record their playing, preserve the music of their generation before it's too late.

It would also be important to find out who the best players are now, to do a history of the music, a genealogy of the players

in each community. And to make recordings of the best local bands and accordion players. There's great positive value for all of us in knowing what music people are making in the various regions of our own country. In helping to promote that music, and taking pride in our shared culture—knowing that we live in a country that's filled with local styles and traditions.

Inuit button accordion music is a unique Canadian culture. Like other original traditional musics in this country, it helps us to see ourselves as creators rather than merely consumers of the music from other places. Hopefully we will get to know this tradition better in the future, so we can enjoy it, and share it with others around the world.

*For a lovely account of the results of a similar process among the Cree, readers might take a look at the NFB film *The Fiddlers of James Bay*. It's out on video, and if your local library doesn't have it, you can buy it cheaply—it's worth several viewings! —Ed.



Carstairs, Okotoks, Mossleigh, Cochrane, Reid Hill, Elnora, Daley, Duchess, Patricia, Lomond, Pincher, Blackie ... were a few of the centres on the map at which Ma Trainor and her [Calgary] orchestra were featured.

Weather [sic] or no ... they got there. By car, mostly, they jogged over rutted country roads, pushing themselves out of snowdrifts and through mudholes.

"I remember one night we were playing at a dance at Cochrane," said Nev York [sic]. "It was so foggy I was lying out on the fender of the car, directing the driver. It was slow going, but we made it!"

Those country soirees often went merrily on and on until the pink blush of dawn. Ma and her musicians would pack up their instruments and pile back into the car while the farmers went home, changed their clothes and milked the cows!

Linda Curtis. "Whether Rural or Royal ... Ma Trainor and Her Hillbillies ... made music for forty years." [Calgary? Date? Publication name? from Ma Trainor scrapbook at Glenbow Archives, Calgary. All ellipses in original]



By the bye, I hope that in Mr. Scout's next poem, his hero or heroine will be less addicted to "grammerye," and more to grammar, than the Lady of the Lay and her bravo, William of Deloraine.

George Gordon, Lord Byron (London, England, & elsewhere) English Bards and Scots Reviewers

The Canadian Society for Traditional Music Annual Conference and General Meeting will be held in Toronto this year, from November 3-5, in conjunction with 14 other music societies. For more information, contact Leslie Hall, Department of Philosophy & Music, Ryerson Polytechnic University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario M4G 2K3 <lrhall@acs.ryerson.ca>.