

# REVIEW

## EIGHT RECORDS OF FIDDLE MUSIC

It would be the wildest of exaggerations to say that *any* form of Canadian folk music is adequately represented on record. Nevertheless, there is better representation of the music of the Maritimes, perhaps, than of any other region; and in particular, we are fortunate in having (relatively speaking, at least) a good sampling of the fiddle music of that region currently available to us. As one might ruefully expect, however, this is no tribute to initiative by a Canadian recording company. Few native-born organizations, it seems, are capable of taking action to preserve anything of our heritage; they would rather bow down before the drearier U.S. commercial images instead. No; it is to a U.S. company, Rounder Records of Somerville, Massachusetts, that we are indebted for the seven Canadian fiddle music records here reviewed.

The folk music of the Maritimes derives, of course, from that of Scotland and Ireland—the songs of Newfoundland, in particular, from Ireland, the fiddle music of Nova Scotia, naturally enough, especially from Scotland. Nevertheless, a considerable local flavour has been incorporated into the music over the years. The fiddlers indeed no longer play in the style of their Scottish counterparts; instead they have developed their own local sound, often characterized as the “Cape Breton style”. This is amply represented on these records.

Two, in particular, epitomise this style: *John Campbell: Cape Breton Violin Music* (Rounder 7003) and *Carl MacKenzie: Welcome to Your Feet Again* (Rounder 7005). John Campbell learned his music from his father Dan J. Campbell, a locally renowned and expert fiddler, and his mother Mary, a more than competent accompanist on piano. The family home was at Glenora Falls, Cape Breton, and music still figures largely at family reunions there, though John himself now lives in Watertown, Massachusetts. Perhaps as a consequence of this geographic relocation, the Scottish element is less perceptible, the New World elements stronger, in his playing than in that of Carl MacKenzie. Carl still lives in Nova Scotia; he is an engineer by profession. On both records, Doug MacPhee provides a heavily emphatic piano accompaniment; but it was Carl, not John, whose music set my daughters’ feet tapping!

The music of *Jerry Holland* (Rounder 7008) will be known to many through his participation in the “Cape Breton Symphony” on John Allan Cameron’s popular television programme. Jerry’s father was from New Brunswick, but he was born in Massachusetts and learned his music there; only much later did the Hollands settle on Cape Breton Island. On this record, Jerry is accompanied on piano by Joey Beaton; Jerry composed six of the pieces and Joey one, the remainder being traditional or by other Maritimes composers. Jerry’s playing is strong, almost aggressive—forceful, effective, but lacking a little in delicacy. Like most others here reviewed, this record would be excellent for dancing.

A Cape Breton family feature on the fourth record, *The Beatons of Mabou: Marches, Jigs, Strathspeys and Reels of the Highland Scot* (Rounder 7011). Donald Angus Beaton and one of his sons, Kinnon, play fiddle, whilst his wife and his other son, Joey, provide accompaniment on two pianos. Excellent dancing music, again, with strathspeys and reels predominant; but some blurring of sound results and this is not a great record just to listen to.

Graham Townsend is perhaps the best-known exponent of traditional-style fiddle music, saving perhaps only Joseph Cormier; and Graham has issued several records, of which I shall here consider two, *Classics of Irish, Scottish and French-Canadian Fiddling* (Rounder 7007) and *Le Violon/The Fiddle* (Rounder 7002). Graham was born in Toronto and grew up in Quebec; nevertheless, his music very much has the Cape Breton flavour. This applies, whatever the source of the tunes he is playing; and on the second record he ranges widely, including hoedown music from south of the Border and Cajun tunes, as well as ones from Canada, Scotland, Ireland and the Maritimes themselves. On the first record, he is accompanied only by Glenn Paul on piano; on the second, by a group including Bobby Brown (piano, accordion); Donald Wood (string bass), Fred Collins (drums), Maurice Beaulieu (banjo, rhythm guitar) and Ollie Strong (guitar). Graham's playing is always crisp and skilful; but it has a certain monotony in tone—perhaps nowadays he is playing too much for dances, too little for himself? Yet it is unkind to fault so highly competent a musician and, once again, these are excellent

records for dancing.

Of all the records, however, the one which I most enjoyed listening to is the seventh, *Winnie Chafe: Highland Melodies of Cape Breton* (Rounder 7012). She concentrates on slow airs and on marches; the piano accompaniment by her daughter Patricia is pleasantly unobtrusive. Winnie's material, as the title indicates, is predominantly Scottish in origin, much of it traditional but including several of the compositions of the great J. Scott Skinner; some local tunes are also featured. The beauty and sensitivity of her tone makes this a record that will be again and again on my turntable.

The last record I would like to mention is of music from south of the border: *New England Traditional Fiddling 1926-1975* (JEMF-5, available from the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Inc., University of California, Los Angeles, Ca. 90024). This is a fascinating anthology of reissues of commercial records, material from the Library of Congress collection, and recent recordings, with a splendid accompanying booklet in which the history of New England fiddling is summarized and the recordings discussed in great detail. Since it is not Canadian folk music, a detailed review would be inappropriate here. Nevertheless, this record is strongly recommended as a valuable adjunct to the musical knowledge of anyone seriously interested in fiddle music.

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*Editor's note: in CFB Vol. 1 no. 5 (Sept./Oct. '78) we ran a review by Frank Ferrell of Classics of Irish, Scottish and French-Canadian Fiddling and Le Violon/The Fiddle.*