

A Note on Métis Music

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The boundaries among Métis/French/Native music are at times indistinct yet there are certain genres of music and dance which can be identified clearly as Métis. The Métis partake of the enormous repertoire of “chanson” which Europeans

brought from France but the language and vocabulary is uniquely Canadian. In the example below, compare the version which is written to sound like Métis singing with the version written in standard French.

“The Young Girl Who Wanted to Get Married”

Joe's Sung Version:

Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se mareiller
Elle demandait son père
Aussi sa tendré mère
Bonjour mon cher père
J'voudrais meu mareiller
Quand j'ai pensé aux amants
Ça m'empêche dé dormir

Oh, té-toi donc ma chère petite frontise!
T'y as pas encore quinze ans,
Tu pensais aux amants
Et j' t'emmènerai en velle
Dans un couvent des orpheliens
Lorsque tés prieras Dieu
Pour tous tes beaux parents

Non, non jé prire pas
Pour auquin de mes parents
Jé prierai Dieu pour mon cher,
fidèlement
J'équèterai du blanc
Aussai des beaux rebans
J'érai aux bals, aux danses
à dévertir seulement
Sé l' butt : ll

Standard French

Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se marier
Elle demandait à son père
Aussi sa tendre mère
Bonjour mon cher père
Je voudrais me marier
Quand je pense aux amants
Ça m'empêche de dormir

Oh, tais-toi ma chère petite frontise!
Tu n'as pas encore quinze ans,
Tu penses aux amants
Et je t'emmènerai en ville
Dans un couvent des orphelins
Pour que tu prieras Dieu
Pour tous tes beaux parents

Non, non je me prieras pas
Pour aucun de mes parents
Je prierai Dieu pour mon cher
fidèlement
J'équèterai du blanc
Aussi des beaux rubans
J'irai aux bals, aux danses
à me divertir seulement
C'est le bout : ll

This traditional folksong was sung by Joe Venne of Birtle, Manitoba and collected by Lynn Whidden, December 13, 1988.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Métis created their own songs, in the style of traditional folk song, which com-

mented on the immediate events of their lives: religious, agricultural, and particularly on the political turmoil of the times. With the recent upsurge of political consciousness several of these songs are again becoming well known:

Sur le champ de bataille

La Métisse

I

Je suis métisse et je suis orgueilleuse
D'appartenir à cette nation.
Je sais que Dieu de Sa main généreuse
S'est fait que peuples avec attention.

II

Le Métis semble un petit peuple encore,
Mais vous pouvez voir déjà leur destin.
Entre haïs, trahis, fallait honneur,
Il fallait faire un plis de grand dessin.

III

Ah! Si jamais je devais être aimée,
Je choisirais pour mon fidèle amant
Un des soldats de la petite armée
Que commandait notre fier Dumont,
Que commandait notre fier Dumont.



Mme Jean Lefrènière sang both these songs and attributed their origin to Louis Riel. She was recorded December 21, 1969 in Saint Francois-Xavier, Manitoba by Henri Letourneau; the tapes are in the archives of the St. Boniface Historical Society, Manitoba.

Unfortunately, most of the old songs of European or Canadian origin, are no longer

Sur le champ de bataille

Qu'est un champ de douleur,
On voit que des mitrailles
Ça fait frémir le coeur.

II

J'ai reçu une lettre
De ma chère maman,
N'ayant point encre et plume
Pour pouvoir lui répondre.

III

J'ai dû prendre mon camus
Se le tremper dans mon sang
Pour pouvoir répondre
A ma chère maman.

IV

Jettant genoux pa terre
Appelant ses enfants,
"Priez pour votre frère
qui est en régiment."

V

Mourir, faut mourir
Chacun aura son tour.
J'aime mieux mourir en grève
Faut tous mourir un jour.

sung. Increasingly, the Métis sing and compose in the English language and in popular/country style. The following contemporary song sums up the ongoing dilemma of the Métis.

It was composed and performed by Edgar Desjarlais, Winnipeg and collected in November, 1988 by Lynn Whidden.

Red Man's Shoes - White Man's Shoes

I ain't red nor am I white,
I've been like this for all of my life
People say I'm white inside,
White inside and red outside

Chorus:

But sometimes I find myself,
Wishin' I was in Red Man's Shoes
Then sometimes I find myself,
Wishin' I was in White Man's Shoes.
But I'm not ashamed at all my friends
I'm proud to be just what I am
Nothin's gonna change the way I feel
Inside my heart and inside my head
Red Man's Shoes - White Man's Shoes,
Red Man's Shoes - White Man's Shoes.



Context of the Music

Until recently, with the construction of public gathering places, the setting for most Métis music was the home. Frequent family gatherings provided the occasions to sing and tell stories. The men would often gather in one room, the women in another, and take turns singing until the wee hours of the morning. Their vivid songs were full of humour and description of the joys of drink and women (Personal Communication with Joe Venne, Birtle [Ste. Madeline], Manitoba, 1988). Impromptu dances happened weekly in some communities. As word of the evening's entertainment spread around the community, the family hosting the dance would stack their furniture in a corner of the house, or even outside. Because nearly every adult male could play a musical instrument, the music and dancing would last continuously throughout the night. Everyone was welcome to come to

these dances, even the priest, and the sound of the music could often be heard across the community (Personal Communication, Grand Rapids, 1981).

Dances

Where the oldtime dances still continue, the favourites are the polka, waltz, two-step, schottische, and square dance. While it is recognized that Métis square dances differ from Non-Native (a combination of Native footwork with the set patterns of squares from Scotland and France), it is the Red River Jig which is the pride of Métis families and they like to joke by saying that the way to drive a Métis crazy is to nail his moccasins to the floor and play the Red River Jig (Personal Communication, Crane River, Manitoba, 1981). Families guard their own steps and . That is

“introductory” (beginning steps; every jigger has his own style) and enjoy competing in jiggling contests (Personal Communication, Cayer, Manitoba, 1981). A good Métis jigger is light on his feet, keeps in time to the music, uses many different steps during one dance and travels in circles rather than lines as one dances (Personal Communication, Crane River, Manitoba, 1981). There are other dances such as the double jig which was danced by two couples and the *Ta pi ska kan ni si mo win*, in which a silk scarf was tied around the head and the partner held the end. There was also a dance called the rabbit dance and remembered as great fun, in which the man chased his female partner! (Personal Communication, Grand Rapids, Manitoba, 1981).

Music Instruments

Generally, Métis music instruments were portable, easy to tune and to play by ear, such as the fiddle (violin), mouth-organ, accordion, spoons, comb, and “Jews” harp. But another folk saying is that there was rarely a Métis home that didn’t have a fiddle hanging on the wall (Personal Communication, Grand Rapids, Manitoba, 1981) and when they could not afford to order one from a catalogue, they would make them, often from maple wood and birch bark. Sometimes, lacking other instruments, the fiddle would be tuned to the bagpipes (Personal Communication, Grand

Rapids, Manitoba, 1981). In the last few decades, the violin has been superseded by the guitar, another portable instrument relatively easy to obtain and maintain.

Fiddle Style

The Métis adapted European violin style, as they did the dance and songstyle, to their own cultural predilections. Lederman (1987:16) suggests that the introductions, monotone endings, descending pitch and five-beat phrases typical of old Ojibwa song are also characteristics of Native/Métis fiddling in Manitoba. Hence, although Métis fiddling partakes of the Scots-Irish tradition, Lederman believes it also has essential elements of traditional Ojibwa music.

Although fiddling remains popular, Métis access to the popular media appears to be extinguishing the aforementioned Native music elements. Métis musicians now regularize the uneven phrases to phrases of unvarying four and eight beats and are introducing complex harmonic structures rather than adhering to the straightforward I-IV-V-I progression of the older tunes (Personal Communication, Brandon, Manitoba, 1989).

Formal study of Métis music has barely begun, but as this brief article shows, the Métis have a rich musical life and heritage waiting to be explored. ■

Sources

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1981-89 Personal Communications to the author in Manitoba Métis communities.

1983 Music of the Indians and Métis I & II (Kit). Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Education and Training, Media Productions.