

# Button Accordianist

from Chesterfield Inlet, N.W.T.

## Papaluk (Theresa) Kukkiak

by Greg J. Brunskill

Papaluk was born 4 or 10 October 1941 somewhere around Garry Lake, NW of the present settlement of Baker Lake, N.W.T. Her people, the Garry Lake Inuit, were relatively isolated from non-native culture because they lived so far inland from the coast. She grew up as a child in a happy family, and her father Kushuk was a good hunter and a guide/interpreter for the first priest to tend the Garry Lake flock. As a little girl, she remembers that people came together, especially at Easter, for celebrations, to visit and play games, but she remembers that there was no music. She first heard accordian music in the Garry Lake area when she was 12 or 13 years old, and the people would play during storms, gatherings, or whenever

---

*RIGHT: Papaluk (Theresa) Kukkiak playing her button accordian at Saqvaqjuac (40 km northwest Chesterfield Inlet, N.W.T.) in June 1988.*



they were not busy. Hard times came in the late 1950's, when starvation plagued the people, and she lost her first husband and several siblings.

After this, Papaluk moved to the Hudson Bay coastal town of Chesterfield Inlet, and married Maurice Kukkiak. She knew little about the traditional Inuit women's skills related to coastal marine mammal meat and skins, as she grew up inland. However, she quickly learned to prepare skins, sew waterproof sealskin boots, and deal with household tasks and eight children. Today, she is widely respected as a first-class seamstress and savant of the old ways. When Papaluk was 22, her husband bought her a single row button accordion. In a short time, she was able to play all of the tunes she remembered from her teenage years. All of her tunes were learned by listening to other Inuit players. There were no Inuit taboos or restrictions from the church on accordion music in her community. One year later, her husband found it necessary to trade Papaluk's accordion to a woman for a sled dog.

After this, Papaluk often played the button accordion at parties and gatherings, as the accordion was passed around to all could play it. She met other good players in Chesterfield Inlet: Bertha Aggark, Rita Pamiyuk, Alice Kreelak, and Theresa Kimmiliardjuk. They would play music outside during the day (if there was no work to do), in the tent or igloo, or at the community recreational hall. Other people might join in with harmonicas and the jaw harp. The tunes had no oral or written names among the Inuit. Some songs or tunes were played differently

if people wanted to dance, usually by speeding up the tune and adding accents or emphases to rhythmic phrases. Papaluk's husband Maurice did dance during my taping session, and it was a rather acrobatic display of balance and speed. He would dance to either jigs or reels, often balancing on one leg for extended parts of the dance, which appeared to be invented on the spot. I gave Papaluk a two-row Hohner button accordion during my last visit in 1988, and she had it figured out in a few days.

Papaluk does not have names for her tunes, but I identified a few of them as follows: Red River Valley, Golden Slippers, Coming Around the Mountain, 100 Pipers, You are My Sunshine, Soldier's Joy, a tune similar to Woody Guthrie's Rueben James, Nellie Gray, and several unidentified polkas. These tunes are characteristic of Manitoba, Ontario, and the North American Midwest. Only a few tunes (Feller from Fortune, and some jigs, such as Haste to the Wedding) have a Newfoundland feel to them. Nearly all of these tunes were played with different variations each time around the melody or fiddle tune structure. Sometimes song tunes would be speeded up and given a catchy rhythm if people wanted to dance, and in these cases the tunes sometimes gained a bar. For example, she usually played "You are my Sunshine" as a slow song, but during a dance she would speed it up, adding dotted quarter & sixteenth notes, and make it sound like a hornpipe. I am a fiddler, and I know most of her tunes, but I found it difficult to play along with her. Her variations often ignored my assumed progression of chords, and her phrasing and metric accents were often unexpected

## .....*Papaluk*

and unusual. But her music works very well where it counts...among her friends and family.

At present, Papaluk lives in a southern Canadian style house in Chesterfield Inlet, and has a television and radio which provides a wide range of music. Her children listen to Nashville country music and rock & roll tapes from portable 'ghetto-blasters'.

Papaluk's repertoire appears to have a largely midwestern North American origin. This is in conflict with the results of other studies (Bell, 1987; Bennett, 1985), which indicated that most of the Anglo-Inuit music originated from contact with Scots, Newfoundland & New England whaling ship crews during the early 1900's.

This study could not have been done without the assistance of Dr. Harlod (Buster) Welch and Catherine Welch. They operated a Fisheries Research camp (Saqvaqjuac) north of Chesterfield Inlet, and Maurice Kukkiak was hired as a field technician for several years. Papaluk and some of her 11 children would often come to visit the camp kitchen for tea. Buster & Cathy Welch have some of the Inuktutuk language, and they helped obtain this information. The tapes were made at a camp party, and there is a lot of noise, talking and singing in the background. If anyone wants a copy of the tape, please send a blank 90 minute cassette.

### REFERENCES

Bell, Ian. 1987. The big squeeze, button accordians in

Canada.

Canadian Folk Music Bulletin. 21 (3):4-7.

Bennett, John. 1985. The fiddler's heritage at Pangnirtung.  
Canadian Folk Music Bulletin. 19 (3):32-35.

