Alasdair Fraser is widely acclaimed as the top Scottish fiddler on the scene today. Alasdair began fiddling as a young boy, learning classical violin in school and traditional fiddle at home. He continues to study, and cherish, the traditional fiddle music of his native Scotland. A wearer of many hats, Alasdair the teacher runs two successful fiddle camps, one on the Isle of Skye, Scotland, and one in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California. Alasdair the performer is constantly touring, both with his latest band, and solo, where he plays everywhere from the local dance to Lincoln Center. And Alasdair the scholar and explorer is ever discovering new ways to express himself musically. Whether he is playing classic Scottish strathspeys and reels or experimenting with rock and roll, medieval, or Baroque music, Alasdair is a true artist on the fiddle, and ever willing to share his gifts and discoveries.

This interview took place at Alasdair's Valley of the Moon Scottish Fiddling School in Boulder Creek, California, in September 1995, during a break from his teaching.

I'd like to start with your background — where were you from in Scotland, how did you get into fiddling...

Oh, no, not that!

Briefly!

Okay. I started when I was eight years old. There was a fiddle under the sideboard that belonged to my grandfather. He was a fiddler. He was a founding member of the Strathspey and Reel Society in Stirling. My family was actively involved in music. My dad's a piper. So this fiddle was lying there, not being used. I had the chance to get lessons at school. This great teacher was
“I needed to find Cape Breton to fill in the missing links back home.”

going around to schools at that time. He didn’t teach me Scottish, he taught me classical violin, I suppose, although I don’t like the term “classical violin.” He gave me technique on the violin. So I did violin at school, and then I’d come home and play Scottish fiddle at home. It was kind of a two-pronged attack on the violin.

Who were some of your favorite Scottish players?

There were very few. Scottish fiddle music, even now, is reconstructing itself, because it was so devastated. The Scottish culture, not just the fiddle — the language, song, music, everything was devastated by the Church and the British government basically. So there weren’t many heroes for me to copy. But I guess, ultimately, in my late teens I was listening a lot to Hector McAndrew, Angus Grant, Farquhar MacRae, west Highland fiddle player. Of course, I was listening to anyone I could get my ears on. In terms of trying to work out what Scottish fiddle actually is, there were very few role models.

What happened to Scottish music is that it got “cleaned up,” in the same way that the Scottish accent was cleaned up — people were told to speak “properly,” and they were taught to play their fiddle tunes “properly.” Instead of speaking in a Scottish accent, you were taught to speak standard English, BBC English, in the classroom. So the same happened on the fiddle. People would play in a very cleaned up way, almost like a classical version of the original fiddle tunes. The ornaments were taken out, and they were taught a nice vibrato and a warm tone and all this stuff. So I started thinking, “There’s something missing here. Scottish fiddle music is not really alive and well in Scotland.” So I had to look elsewhere for my heroes. I started turning over stones and seeing what would crawl out. That’s how I got into the Cape Breton thing, a long time ago. I needed to find Cape Breton to fill in the missing links back home. Because there was a whole area of Highland fiddle music that was gone. So you have to go to Canada for it. And then you have to look to the Appalachians to find out how dance fiddlers would have played, using double stops and things. And then Donegal for older ideas on strathspeys and highlands. So from Scotland I started looking out around Scotland, where the emigrants went, to try and find out where my music went. Because I couldn’t find it at home. What I was finding was a cleaned up version. So that’s basically my journey. It’s still going on.

I also like to listen to singers a lot. I grew up with Gaelic singing, my grandfather was a Gaelic speaker, my folks were from the Inverness area in the north of Scotland. So I grew up with the Gaelic sounds in my head, and you can translate the Gaelic sounds to the fiddle. There’s a great correlation between fiddle and language. You could stop the fiddle style and go check out the language of the area where it came from, like in Aberdeenshire, they speak in a very spiky way, clip their words, and the fiddling is all very clipped, very snappy, unlike Gaelic speaking areas. So these are all things I get my head into.

How did you start the Valley of the Moon fiddling school?

Well, I’d always been playing, and I came over here. I was determined to be a good traveler, you know, I was going to go and learn American fiddle tunes, which I did do. I used to go and hang out with bluegrass or old-timey circles, and all that. And people were interested in what I was doing. And one thing I love about the American approach is that it’s not superficial. When people get interested in something, they really want to know. They want to get down to details and work out what’s going on in someone’s playing. So I was being asked all these questions about strathspeys and Scottish jigs and things that made me really look at my own tradition, in a big way, and I love that. So when I gathered how much interest there was, with a few friends, we started this Valley of the Moon school. Basically we rented a camp for the week, put a table out in the middle of the woods, put some fliers up that said “Scottish Fiddle Camp: Come and learn how to play Scottish fiddle music.” And we asked Tom Anderson, from the Shetland school that year, but he couldn’t come. So we had Alasdair Hardie... I wasn’t even teaching then. I taught privately, but I was still too busy checking out my own stuff. We had thirty-five people the first year, and then it doubled every year. Now it’s a waiting list situation.

What about your school in Skye [The Alasdair Fraser Fiddle Course, at the Gaelic College in Skye]?

It’s a similar thing. It’s very much the same philosophy. There’s a philosophy through all these camps that I do, which is, “find your own music on the fiddle.” It doesn’t have to be Scottish. Find out what the idiom is, and speak in that idiom on the fiddle. Make the fiddle speak with an accent. Or with a bunch of different accents. And it’s okay to be creative on your instrument. You don’t have to be scared that you’re not playing the tune right, or anything like that. You have to do your homework and know where the music has been. If you’re studying Irish music, if you’ve listened to a lot of Irish music, and you’ve got a sense of what the idiom is about, and you’ve copied your heroes, then at some point, you say, “Well, I play this music.” And then you make it your own and you make statements from yourself, but using that idiom. So that’s what these [schools] are about. We declare it as a safe environment to find your own self expression. People come here and they feel okay, they know no one is going to laugh at them and say, “No, that’s the wrong way to play that.” They try things, and that leads to quick growth. They just get positive reinforcement. So it’s that, it’s finding your own voice on an instrument and expressing yourself, getting in touch with the emotionality of that music, and relating the fiddle to the dance. That’s a huge thing that I really believe in. I love to play for dances, always have. So playing for dances teaches you a lot about how you bow tunes. Tunes and dance evolved together. So if you want to learn something about one, you look at the other. So you watch the dancer’s feet, an old highland strathspey step in Cape Breton teaches you how to bow.

When you were getting back to the Cape Breton style, what were you listening to, or who were you playing with at that point?

That’s a good story. In Scotland, people didn’t even know about
Cape Breton. Nobody mentioned Cape Breton. I don’t know what you know about Scotland, but it’s kind of... It’s much better now. It’s getting there. So I grew up and I had my strathspey and reel style of Scottish fiddle playing... I heard a group on the radio at home in Scotland — The Cape Breton Symphony. Buddy MacMaster, Winston Scotty Fitzgerald, Jerry Holland, Sandy MacIntyre, all in the same group with a Scottish dance band rhythm section, run by a guy named Bobby Brown who lives in Toronto. He was a Scot. He found Cape Breton and thought, “Well, they’re not getting it quite right,” so he put a Scottish rhythm section in. And I heard this at home and thought it was pretty good. So one day I just decided to go to Cape Breton. It was purely on a whim because I’d heard The Cape Breton Symphony. I put a kilt on and a pair of running shoes and jumped on a plane and flew to Halifax, Nova Scotia. And I took my fiddle. I got off at the airport in Halifax, and I’m standing at the luggage carousel with a kilt on and a fiddle, and this old guy comes up and says, “You play the fiddle?” And I said, “Yes.” “What kind of music do you play?” “Scottish music.” And he says, “Oh, so do I.” And I said, “Yeah, I’ve just come over here to see if I can find a bunch of guys who play in a group called The Cape Breton Symphony.” And he said, “Oh, I play in that group. And we’re all here.” And he pointed them out around the luggage carousel. There was Buddy, Bobby Brown, and all those guys. They had all been talking about me: “Who’s this crazy guy with the kilt on?” So I went over and I got to talking to them, and then I went off with them to their first gig. They didn’t know me from Adam. Bobby Brown took me up, and said, “So you play the fiddle, eh? Let’s have a tune.” So we played a tune together, and he was going, “This guy’s okay!” So I played the gig with them that afternoon. And then I went off on my journey. I went up to a dance in Sydney, and I met Carl MacKenzie, and Theresa MacLellan, and my ears were just being opened by the minute — hearing all the missing stuff. It goes on and on, my love affair with Cape Breton. Then I took the Cape Breton music back to Scotland in my Skye school, that was part of the reason for doing it. I went back to Scotland, and said “Hey, here’s what we’re missing.” And I started teaching it.

Is it getting popular there, too, now?

In the beginning... I played the wedding reels one time, and people said, “Who on earth is this Canadian? You’ve been away too long.” And I said, “These tunes are from Lochaber. They’re in the Skye Collection. This is our music.” But now it’s incredibly popular. Buddy teaches at the Skye school with me now, has done for four years.

When you teach, do you prefer to teach by ear?

Oh, absolutely. That’s the big thing here. I’ve insisted on it. We’ve had a lot of classical violinists come here over the years, and say, “Where’s the music?” And we say, “Well, you’re not getting any music. We’ll teach the tunes first, and then you’ll get the music in a couple of days.” And it’s worked. There are many people here who can stand up and give testimonials: “I came here and all I could do was sight read, and now I don’t even want to see it. I learn it and I can go home and play it.” The first year I did this camp, one group learned by ear and one group learned by music. Six months later, we had a reunion. And the music learners didn’t know the tunes. The ear learners all sat down and played the tunes they learned six months previously. You can’t teach traditional art forms off [written] music. The information isn’t there. Sometimes you get tears. But you know what happens, these violinists get the music out and they sight read it, and they say, “Now give me another one.” And you say, “Well, I’m actually going to spend an hour and a half on that tune, that one that you just whipped off there.” They say, “Well, we’ve done it.” That kind of thinking.

How did your record company, Culburnie Records, come about?

I roam over a wide area musically. I’m very much into the old stuff, ancient music, old Celtic and Scottish music. Life is just a big exploration for me on the fiddle. And I have a great time with it. And I like some really modern stuff. I’ve found I don’t fit into any record company’s standard thinking. They always want to categorize me, pigeonhole me as being “this” kind of a player. I just wanted to make records that were milestones on my journey. And it seems that the best way to do that is through my own company. I did try having relationships with other record companies, but this is much better for me. I don’t have to be answerable to anything else, other than my musical desires. That’s why I stuck with it. Also, I like the idea of a cottage industry. Like on Dawn Dance, my latest album, my wife Sally did the cover, she did all the graphics, and the layout, and that’s really neat — having this project at home that you take from nothing, from me agonizing in the kitchen, saying, “Is this tune any good or is it rubbish?” And I like that I’m allowed to be creative. It’s been great for Sally, too. She’s around this demented fiddler all the time, so she gets to have her side of it in the graphics and all that. It’s kind of nice.

Do you enjoy recording?

Yeah, I do. I love it. Like most musicians, you love it and you hate it, but in the end, you always love it more than you hate it. Recording situations are where the highs and lows are exaggerated — the emotional highs and lows. So you’re very much alive when that’s happening. Things are absolutely, fantastically, amazingly good, or they’re just devastatingly awful. The studio situation is traumatic. But that’s life — you know, you feel like you’re
doing something when that kind of stuff is going on. I kind of thrive on that. And I like the creative aspect of it, getting to make a statement. I don’t like the fact that it freezes things, because I’m the world’s worst for ever playing the same thing twice. So it’s hard for me to decide how I’m going to let this thing go into the world. My ideal way to make records would be just to record my performances, and then at some stage have someone else who knows my playing really well go through all the recordings and pick out the best bits. And I wouldn’t even get involved in it. That would be great. Then I wouldn’t have to go through all this trauma, being the artist and the judge.

What’s your favorite environment to play in — a concert, a dance, or by yourself?

I do all of these, and each one of them stays exciting. I love to play for a dance when I haven’t played for one in months. If I’ve been doing concerts, and I get out on the dance floor, I can do lots of experimental stuff, try things, and it’s great. But ultimately, I think probably a concert is good for me because musically I can explore the heights that I want to get to — the subtlety and musicality. You can cover the whole range in a concert. It’s a close call, because I do love to play for dances. And I love to play unaccompanied, solo, which is really kind of the ultimate, when you’ve only got the melody, you just have to try and make it interesting, and be complete. I love to do that. And I just toured with a six-piece band, and that was interesting to me. What keeps me going is the variety. People ask me what I do — I can never tell them, because I’m all over the place.

How did you decide to record with the musicians on Dawn Dance?

It’s taken years to find people that fit the bill. As a fiddle player, what I’m interested in is rhythmic intensity. I want people to be able to get down, get rhythmic, get in touch with the animal side of the self. But then also be able to get lyrical, and beautiful, and sweet, and good tone, and all these things, so I want everything. And very often when you’re searching for people to play with, you find classically trained musicians who have great technique, great chops, but the rhythm isn’t there, the animal part isn’t there, and the ornaments — there’s no idioms. They don’t have the ornamentation or the background or the tradition. And you’ll find the other extreme, you’ll find people who are able to be in touch with the rhythm part and the traditional part, but don’t have the tone and the lyricism and the beauty aspect. So it’s been a search to find musicians.

That’s what I’ve found in this band. The piano player, Tim Gorman, is a great classical and jazz man, but he’s been playing rock and roll for years. He needed a change. We met up at dinner one night, and played together. This guy’s got rock and roll rhythmic intensity, but he’s also got beautiful pianistic technique. And Chris Norman, the flute player — he’s got the traditional thing going on, but he likes to get into Baroque. He’s got the sweetest tone you ever heard on the flute. Eric Rigler, piper, same thing. And he’s got an added plus in that he plays Scottish Highland pipes and Irish uileann pipes, which is really rare. So I’m getting through them all, I’ve never had such a big band. The bass player, Todd Phillips, is a good guy, a really good bass player. On percussion, Peter Maund plays medieval percussion, middle eastern percussion, but used to play in rock bands and all that. So he’s got years... That’s the other thing — I like playing with people who have played years, but listen. I get real impatient when I’m playing music, whether it’s a session or anything, where nobody’s listening — everybody’s playing, and nobody’s listening. And it happens so often in jam sessions. The tunes get faster and faster and faster. Everybody’s fighting for a place, and they’re all seeking a false high which is speed. The real high is in listening and having a group high. Finding this groove, and sitting with it and becoming addicted to it. Which you can only do if you listen. So everybody in this band listens like crazy. That makes it fun to play music.

What are some of your favorite recordings?

One of my favorite Scottish recordings is a fiddle record called The Cameron Men, from the 1920s. They were a bunch of fiddlers, cousins and brothers, who played for dancing in an area called Kirriemuir in Scotland. They were recorded on records, and it’s the Scottish fiddling that interests me because they recorded at a time before the Scottish fiddle became really cleaned up. So they’ve got lots of great ornaments, “bits of haggis,” they call it. Haggis in the left hand — little crispy bits, unclean notes, like C supernatural, between C and C sharp, the same one the Cape Bretoners use. They were all dance musicians, so there’s lots of style in their playing, and great rhythm, and that’s what it’s about. And I guess the old Hector McAndrew records I like a lot. I love Cape Breton players too, but I don’t listen to their commercial recordings.
"I don’t like competition in music. 
I like sharing ideas."

I think the soundtrack to the *Tous les matins du monde* movie is amazing. It’s got this gamba player who locked himself in his garden shed in France, and just played this gamba. Solo viola da gamba music.

*How do you practice?*

I don’t really practice. I play a lot. I’m always playing, I’m always trying things. Playing is practicing for me, I guess. Having said that, I know better, I know I should — I hate to say “should,” but I should. But I never really get to it. The only time I really practiced was in the old days, when I was younger. I just did a concert in the Lincoln Center with Itzak Perlman and some other classical violinists. I was representing the fiddle community. And at the end of this concert we were all supposed to stand in a line and play the Bach violin concerto, so I thought I’d better practice! [Laughter] So I had my music stand out, and my Bach double violin concerto in my living room at home, practicing. I regressed, and I went back to being fifteen, when I used to do that. That was fun. And when I was backstage at this concert, all these classical players were out there playing, child prodigies, fifteen years old. Perlman played Paganini, Vianesi, and all this stuff. In the old days, I went through some of that stuff, but I didn’t like it. I never fit into that world. So I started to regress, and I was backstage thinking, “What am I doing here? I’m just going to play a bunch of reels and a slow air.” And I found myself thinking, “Well, Alasdair, you better play something difficult.” I said, “Okay, something difficult.” And then I caught myself, and said, “No, no, you know better than that now.” And I felt great. I thought, “I’m just going to play what I play.” So I just went and did what I do. A beautiful Scottish slow air, and some reels and jigs. And it felt really good. I don’t like competition in music. I like sharing ideas.

*What do you think of the Scottish fiddling scene, or the traditional fiddling scene in general, here, as opposed to in Scotland or Cape Breton? Is it taught in the schools more in Scotland?*

There’s some amazing pockets of stuff over here, and there’s an attitude here which is really healthy, and that’s “Let’s try it.” In Scotland, it was bleak for a long time. The Scots were embarrassed about being Scottish for so long. But if you go back to eighteenth century Scottish fiddle music, you’ll find it laced liberally with Italian ideas, English ideas. People were always thinking that if it was from the Continent, it must be better. Low self esteem. Insecurity about your own culture. So, even when I was growing up, you didn’t hear a lot about Scottish history in Scottish schools, you didn’t hear much about Scottish music. You did German music, you did Beethoven, but you didn’t do Scott Skinner or Neil Gow. And these things all come together — it all gets very political real fast. But there’s a change now. People are out looking for their own voice again. There’s traditional teaching in school. I’ve been encouraging that for years. Another reason I set up my Skye school was to send some waves out, and say “This music is worthy of a lifetime study. This is not trivial music.” It’s often treated as trivial by the establishment. Especially in music schools. In Glasgow, they used to expel people if they were caught playing Scottish music. Isn’t that incredible? So the turnaround that’s happened now is that the Royal Academy of Music opened a Scottish fiddle department, which they just asked me to go back and head up. I’ve got a real job and I don’t need to teach Scottish fiddle at the Royal Academy of Music in Glasgow. I’ll go there and teach occasionally. The idea is to generate teachers who will go into the schools and teach fiddle. So that’s looking good. My worry about that is that it will turn out these highly qualified fiddle teachers who will go out and say, “This is the right way, and this is the wrong way to do it.” Which is detrimental to the tradition.

*What kind of fiddle or fiddles do you use?*

At the moment I’m using a new fiddle made by David Gusset, who was a San Francisco maker until five years ago when he moved to Oregon. David won a gold medal at Cremona. Quite often it’s collectors that buy his instruments. I could never make up my mind whether I wanted an old fiddle or a new one. Then I realized to get the quality of instrument that I wanted, I was going to have to get a new one. He knew I was interested in getting one, and he liked the idea of one of his fiddles not going to a collector. “Yet another fiddle goes to a collector and gets put in a humidity controlled glass case, for life.” So I got this fiddle, and it’s a good one.

*What do you use for performing? What kind of pickup or whatever?*

I don’t like pickups, so I use a small mic. I’m behind the times. It’s a Fender M1. It’s a really good little mic. So good they stopped making it. They used to brag that it was indestructible. It probably is, and that’s why they stopped making it. But there are even better mics available now. I put it in behind the bridge. I can take it off and it doesn’t mark the instrument in any way. I use the same instrument to play acoustic, and Baroque situations, and flailing around with a six piece rock band. I used to use pickups, but I like to have some air between what I’m doing and what’s coming out the sound system.

*What about bows? Do you have a favorite bow?*

Yeah, it’s a French bow. I love bows. I also have a Baroque bow. One of the lectures I like to give is that you’re playing these Irish and Scottish fiddle tunes, 18th century and earlier, and you’ve got this modern bow with a classical bow hold quite often, designed for playing Mozart through the current. So I bring out my Baroque bow, which is convex, so you can get a lot more pressure on it, and it’s shorter — it’s built for speed. Then you get these little French bows that are made for playing fast, playing reels. So ideally, I’d look like Robin Hood, with this pack on my back, and whip out my bow for a 19th century Scottish reel, get into some old Neil Gow Cape Breton strathspeys — they’re happier on a Baroque bow — what Neil Gow would have used in 18th century Scotland. You get modern fiddle players who are holding their classical bows up the stick a little bit, because it feels easier. And you get classical violin teachers saying, “No, that’s wrong. Hold your bow here.” What that fiddler is trying to do is go back to an

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older style of bowing where you've got a shorter bow. I love exploding myths, misrepresentations. It's only been done like that for fifty years. For four hundred and fifty it wasn't done like that.

Does writing tunes come easily to you? Do you stumble upon them as you're playing?

It varies. One good thing about playing for dances, especially Scottish dances, sometimes you put medleys together — you play one tune, then you play another tune, and you need another tune that goes with these two. And sometimes it's easier just to make one up.

On the spot?

Yeah, or in advance. Sometimes I make them up at the dance. And sometimes they're pretty bad! I make them up for a reason: you have the other tunes picked, and it has to flow out of the previous ones... Here [at the school] I encourage people to make up variations on tunes. Once you get good at making variations up, the next thing you know, you're writing your own tunes. You make up this variation, and all of a sudden you realize, "That's not a variation, that's a tune."

I do a lot of flying, so I used to have this rule that every time I got on a plane, I'd write a tune. I'd just sit with a piece of blank manuscript.

Without the fiddle? Just in your head?

Yes. The kind of tunes that you make up that way, which are not muscle-related, are really different from the kind you make up with a fiddle in your hand. They're quite often harder to play. But I have a lot of fun with arrangements, and I stow them over them all.

You were talking about music speeding up at jams... Do you think a lot of the tunes are played too fast in general by a lot of people?

Well, I would never be a judge and say it's too fast. You have to make your own decisions. You can go and play for a dance and you'll soon find out what a good tempo is. Tempo is very important. Some wild old reels do want to go a bit faster, but for the most part it's the groove that's important, not the tempo. Ask Cape Bretoners — you'll never see a Cape Bretoner play fast, unless they're trying to not be a Cape Bretoner. They play totally in the groove, which is the most exciting. And we all know that if you're a fiddle player and you get out on stage in front of an audience, and you play fast and you speed up at the end, the audience goes "Yea! It's great! It's great!" They'll go wild. But that's the cheap thrill.

And a lot of it is not deliberate. The violin is a consuming instrument. You're working on your ornaments, and your bowing goes all to hell. Or you work on your bowing, and you start making mistakes. There's so much going on. If you have a difficult string crossing, you speed up. If you've got a difficult third finger thing down here, you speed up. Every time you have a difficult problem, you speed up. So it's all this. And you get a lot of players who haven't really worked on their playing, they speed up a lot. It's a beginner problem.

What are your plans for the near future?

The band that I got together for the Dawn Dance album is really interested in working some more, and I'm interested in working with the band. They way I describe that band, by the way, is it's got all these people who have these qualities, they're all from different backgrounds — rock and roll backgrounds, medieval, Irish, Baroque, all these elements that I like to dabble in. And they're all coming together and finding a common ground in music, which I love to do. So I can say it's being held together by Scottish glue.

So that's the job for that band, to create more music using these elements with a Scottish glue in it. Everything I do has a Scottishness in its direction.

And I'm also going to record with Chris Norman on wooden flute, and a lute player, and gamba. We'll do eighteenth century Scottish music. So that keeps me happy. That means I get the modern direction taken care of, and the old stuff, the really traditional stuff. And I'll keep doing my unaccompanied things. And I play for dances. That keeps me sane. And running these courses is great. I jack charge my batteries with these schools. It's just a fantastic community, great friends, company.

[For information on the Valley of the Moon Scottish Fiddling School, write to P.O. Box 1339, Forestville, CA 95436, or call Teresa Caswell at (707) 887-7111. For information on the Skye fiddle school, write to Gavin Parsons, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Teangue, Sleat, Isle of Skye, Scotland IV44 8RQ. Phone: (0) 1471 844373; Fax: (0) 1471 844383.]

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<td>Laura Risk &amp; Athena Tergis</td>
<td>1992</td>
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<tr>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Culburnie</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tallochgorum — Alasdair Fraser Live</td>
<td>1992</td>
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If not available locally, the Culburnie productions may be ordered directly from Culburnie Records: P.O. Box 219, Nevada City, CA 95959, (916) 292-4219.
**Tommy's Tarbukas**

Composed and transcribed by Alasdair Fraser, from his *The Road North* album (Sona Gaia/Narada).

The following two tunes were composed and transcribed by Alasdair Fraser and can be found on his *Dawn Dance* album (Culburnie 106D). They go together.

**Independence Trail**

**Galen's Arrival**