Buddy MacMaster: Cape Breton’s Living Legend

By Peter W. Marten

Hugh “Buddy” MacMaster of Judique is held in very high regard by all players and fans of Cape Breton music. It seems impossible to portray his style and technique without using superlatives such as “finest” and “greatest.” Indeed, he receives the highest of praise from everyone who hears him play, whether they are dancers, listeners, or other fiddlers. Born in 1924, Buddy has released two recordings, Judique on the Floor and Glencoe Hall, and contributed tracks to various others, notably Traditional Music from Cape Breton Island. He is also active in teaching, and has figured prominently for years in the summer courses offered by Sabhal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye, where this interview took place in July 1998.

Let’s start from the beginning. How did you get interested in fiddling?

Well, I was born in Timmons, Ontario, and I was four years old when my parents moved back to Cape Breton. They lived in Ontario for a few years; my father was a hard-rock miner at the time. Just about as far back as I can remember, I enjoyed music, and I guess I heard some music before we left Timmons. I can just remember one fellow playing a little bit, but I must have heard others as well. I can’t remember that, but I learned some tunes somehow. I’d be doing mouth music, you know, jiggling the tunes, and I’d have two little sticks, playing the violin by the way, and imagining that I was a great fiddle player. So then we moved down to Judique, Inverness County, in Nova Scotia, and apparently I was still doing this with the little sticks, and my grandfather, my mother’s father, saw me doing this and he whittled out a piece of wood shaped like a fiddle, you know, so it looked a little more like a fiddle.

I suppose I didn’t carry on that way for too long, but then I maybe got away from playing with sticks, you know. But I enjoyed music, and there’d be picnics, sort of a field day, and they’d have a piper there, and I remember following the piper around, you know, listening to the music, and then afterwards I rigged up an old kind of make-believe bagpipes, and I’d be marching around [laughs].

But they didn’t buy you a set of pipes?

No, but it was just a love I had for the music that was making me do these things. When I was eleven, I went upstairs and I discovered my father’s violin in the trunk. He was away at the time, so I took it down to the kitchen. I got part of a tune on the violin that day. I’m sure it wasn’t in tune and there was one broken string on it, but I got part of a tune: “The Rock Valley Jig.” I was playing it on G, I didn’t know the difference. There was a fiddler, a cousin of mine, came to the house; he could play, and he said I should play that tune on the key of C, so I switched to C. Of course, I wouldn’t have known C from G then, anyways. I could tell by the sound — it sounded better on C.

Do you still play that one?

Occasionally, yeah. It reminds me of that day, you know, when I play that tune. So, I’ve been playing ever since that day. My mother gave me some money to go up to the store and buy a string, and I got that in the violin someway and I learned to tune the violin pretty quick.

So did your parents play, too?

My father played a little bit. I think when he was a young man he played more, but he got away from it. Just very seldom he’d pick up the violin and play it for his own enjoyment. His mother could play the violin, and my father had a brother that played, he lived in the Boston area — I didn’t hear him when I was young. None of my mother’s brothers or sisters played, but they all enjoyed music. But there are a lot of fiddlers related to my mother’s people, like Dan R. MacDonald, who composed a lot of tunes that are played now, and Alex Francis MacKay from Queensville, Inverness County, and there are others.

Who did you look up to when you were learning to play, after you’d gotten started?

There was a man living in Judique, Alexander MacDonnell, and I
"[As a child], I'd do mouth music, you know, jigging the tunes, and I'd have two little sticks, playing the violin by the way, and imagining that I was a great fiddle player."

used to enjoy his playing. Of course, there weren't many fiddle players around my area—right in Judique—but this Alexander MacDonnell, he used to come to the house, to my parents' home, and he was quite a good player. He played by ear, but he learned these tunes from other players that used to visit him, who read music, so he always had his tunes quite correct. He always stressed that to me, that I should try to pick up the tunes, to play them, as correct as possible.

There was another fella used to come to our place, Angus MacMaster, but he's no relation of mine; he played. And then a little later, other musicians used to come to the house. Bill Lamey, he was a good player. He read music and he used to play on the radio, and he was quite popular. I really enjoyed his playing. My sister played piano, so he used to like to come to my house and my sister would accompany him.

And Dan Hughie MacEachern, that'd be Jackie Dunn's grand-uncle, her grandfather's brother, he used to come to our place a lot. And of course, Dan R. MacDonald, and Gordon MacQuarrie, he would have a book of tunes called The Cape Breton Collection [by Gordon MacQuarrie], around 1939 to '41, something around that time. So, my parents enjoyed the music and all these musicians used to come to our house.

Later on, while I was growing up and working for a few years, Winston Fitzgerald used to come the house then, so we always had a lot of music around the home.

*When did you learn to read music?*

Well, I was about 23.

*So you were going for quite a few years before you learned to read...*

Yeah, I used to play by ear. I could pick the tunes up pretty quick, I guess quicker than I can now by ear. You know, I guess when you're younger it's easier to pick up tunes. I depend on the music more now. I was working in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and a fella that was rooming with me took me to this lady's house, Mrs. Mildred Leadbeater. She was a pianist and she told me I should learn to read the music. She just drew up the five lines and marked the notes, things like that, and that seemed to get me more interested in learning to read, so I got an instruction book and I picked it up myself.

Was there any kind of attitude against reading music? Were there a lot of people around who could read music?

Well, not too many, except these fellas that I used to hear. But a few years after I started to play, you know, there was more fiddlers coming to the house, and most of these fellas could read music. They were pretty well advanced [at it.] Of course, Dan Hughie MacEachern, and Dan R., they were good composers and they used to write their tunes [down].

*How do you feel your repertoire has changed over the years?*

Well, I still play quite a few of the older tunes that I've played for years, because a lot of the old tunes that came from Scotland here, they're really old standards that are always popular, and they're good for square dancing and step-dancing, so I think most of the Cape Bretoners still fall back on these old tunes. But a lot of the newer tunes, they don't seem to survive like the old ones, you know? You play them for a while and then you kind of lose interest in them, but some of these older tunes, they'll never die. I hear them over here, like "Miss Drummond of Perth" and "King George IV" and "Miss Lyle" and all those tunes, the "Duke of Gordon's Birthday," there's many tunes. I hear they're popular here, and they were brought to Cape Breton 175 years ago and they're still popular, you know?

*Many people talk of a special "lift" in the Cape Breton style of playing. What do you think this lift consists of? Is it timing, ornaments, double up-bows?*

It's a combination of the tempo and the bowing. It's hard to explain. It doesn't have to be fast to have a lift or to be lively, you know. If it's too fast and too quick, the bow moving too quickly, you lose the lift. It's hard to describe. In Cape Breton, step-dancing and square dancing, I think, has a lot to do with the way we play, to make it lively for the dancers, and playing the strathspey for step-dancing. You have to give it a lift or a lively feel to make the dancer feel like dancing or perform better, you know?

*Do you think that works both ways? Do you find that fiddlers draw off the dancers for energy as well?*

Well, that helps, too. When you see a dancer responding to your music, that sort of puts you in a better mood to play. And the same at the square dances, dancing square sets. If you see the people enjoying themselves, it sure puts you in the mood to play. So, maybe they don't have the same lift in Scotland. They lost the step-dancing here, it died out many years ago, and I think that has a big effect on the way they play here, you know. They do mostly Scottish country dancing and the strathspeys and reels are tempoed and expressed to accommodate the dancer.

*So Scottish players would play a strathspey more slowly?*

Yes. Of course there are some strathspeys that the Cape Breton player plays slow as well, you know. There are certain tunes that, if you play them faster, it just doesn't sound normal for them to be played that way, whereas there are other tunes and I think maybe they were composed to step-dance to many years ago here in Scotland, because a lot of the strathspeys are ideal for step-dancing.
On the subject of the relationship of Cape Breton to Scotland, do you know Gaelic?

No, a few words. I hear somebody talking and I get a few words that I understand, but just about every word I hear, I know that I heard it in Cape Breton, you know. I don’t know the meaning of the word, but all the words sound very familiar to me, because I used to hear quite a bit of Gaelic when I was a boy... All the older people spoke Gaelic then... There’s quite a few that are still around whose first language was Gaelic.

Do you find that Gaelic has a role in how the music is played?

Well, there’s arguments about that, but you know, myself and a lot of the other players, they don’t speak the Gaelic language, but we have an accent, you know, from the Gaelic. And we’d hear older fiddlers playing that spoke Gaelic, so I think it shows up in our music.

When was the first time you came to Scotland?

Nineteen seventy, on a pleasure trip with my wife and Father John Angus Rankin, who was parish priest in Glendale, Inverness County, and Doctor Malcolm MacLellan, who was President of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish. So, we were over here about three weeks and I had my fiddle, but I didn’t come to play the violin, I just took it along.

Did you end up playing over here on that trip?

I played some. I was at the Gaelic Mod in Oban, and I did play in a couple of ceilidhs there.

How did people react? Had they ever heard Cape Breton music before?

Well, they seemed to enjoy it. I don’t suppose they’d heard much of it, if any, you know. I suppose maybe the occasional person had recordings of Cape Breton fiddling, but I would say that would be rare. I don’t know—I played a lot of the tunes that the musicians would be familiar with.

Would it be correct to say that you have a reputation for making up your sets as you go along, as many Cape Bretoners do?

Yes, I guess a lot of the time while I’m playing I just decide as I’m going along what [tune] I’m going to play next. Most of the time the Cape Breton fiddler plays a medley of tunes on the same key. There’s certain keys you can switch over, like from G minor to B flat, that match up pretty well. I suppose in my case, that’s the way I heard fiddlers play, you know, staying on the same key. At first when I used to hear a fiddler play a tune on one key and switch from A to G, it kind of sounded to me like he didn’t have enough tunes to follow up on the key. That’s what it sounded like, you know. I think that was done over here a lot, too. It seems that some books have a strathspey and a reel to follow up on the same key.

New styles and influences have been coming into Cape Breton in recent years; Natalie MacMaster’s No Boundaries and Ashley MacIsaac’s Hi How Are You Today are two of the most prominent examples of this. How do you see the future of Cape Breton fiddling? What sort of balance will there be between absorbing new styles and tunes from the outside and keeping to the old way of playing?

Well, I suppose there’s room for both the old style of playing and the new, but I’m somewhat concerned. We had a unique style of playing, and it seems that when the outside world got to hear it that they were quite interested in it, and a lot of people came to Cape Breton to hear our music. And if players are playing other styles, our old style may die out — I think that’s quite possible — or almost die out. It’s bound to change, you know. [Among] young fiddlers, there’s a lot of great players, a lot of talent, but I’m a little concerned about it.
I couldn’t see it dying out, but maybe, as some people would say, becoming “diluted.”

Not dying exactly, but it can change a lot, and it won’t sound like the same thing at all, you know.

What about your generation compared to the generation before it? Are you playing a significantly different style than they were?

Well, my style is pretty close to what was always played around, I think. Of course, every fiddler has his own unique style, because it’s something like handwriting. Everybody is going to write somewhat different, you know? So your personality comes out in the music. Through the years, some of the older players weren’t good dance players, and it’s the same today. They were great just playing in a room for listening to, eh, but they weren’t the dance players. And that’s just the way they played, you know, whereas some more were great dance players. They had that lift and you can play correctly and have the lift and be a good dance player, you know. But there are some players now that are playing a lot of Irish stuff, you know? And well, you wouldn’t know that they came from Cape Breton when you hear them on the radio — you’d think they were from Ireland, eh?

Aren’t there some corners of Cape Breton where players have traditionally leaned toward a more Irish style?

Well, I guess so...Like Johnny Wilmot, he passed away a few years ago. He played Irish music, but that was a rare case, you know, there wasn’t many Irish players. He grew up over in the industrial area around Sydney there, and he had an uncle who played Irish music, see. There was a line of music there that came from Ireland to Cape Breton, but other than that I don’t know of any fiddlers that really played Irish. But the younger players now that are coming up, they hear — well, the Irish music is popular everywhere, through the States and even in Scotland here, they’re playing more Irish music than they did a few years back. So, I have nothing against the Irish music, I really enjoy it — it’s beautiful and great music. But it is different, you know. I love it, but I’d hate to see us lose our own unique Cape Breton way of playing. Then we wouldn’t be playing Cape Breton music, we’d be playing Irish music, eh?

Of course, that’s the age now. A few years back — it’s not too many years since radio came into existence, you know, sixty or seventy or whatever years ago, and television, I guess, wasn’t a common thing in homes in the forties. And tape recorders, there was no such thing as tape recorders until a few years back. So all this stuff — they’re hearing all kinds of music from different places. Well, I guess that’s good if people are enjoying it. And they’re hearing our Cape Breton music everywhere as well. People didn’t used to hear it, it was just kept in our own local area.

What about the regional styles within Cape Breton itself?

In Cape Breton, a fiddler from Mabou, you could detect a player from Mabou if you heard him. And somebody from the Iona area, Victoria County, well, you could detect their playing. That was in the horse-and-buggy days, you know? They learned to play and they didn’t hear fiddlers from the other side of the island. Now, they travel around in cars, people come over from Sydney into

Glencoe, West Mabou, the Inverness [County] side, so I suppose they all play a lot of the same tunes, and learn and exchange tunes from one side of the island to the other.

What sort of style do you have?

Well, I was from Judique, and I know that my style is somewhat different from Mabou. I guess I have my own style.

Fair enough! What do you recommend for fiddlers learning the Cape Breton style?

Well, try to play the tunes as close to the way they’re written as possible, you know. It’s true that every player maybe changes tunes slightly. You can hear just about any player and they might play a note here or there a little differently, but if you change the tune to take away from it musically, it’s not a good thing to do, so if you try to play it the way it was written, you’re usually pretty safe — musically correct, you know.

You can decorate the tune with ornaments, you know, and that’s just a little ornamentation. Of course, if you can’t put the ornaments in properly, it’s not going to sound good either, you know, but you can decorate a tune up without taking away from it. It should make it sound better. And you have the basic notes correctly, you know. The ornamentation’s just something a little extra that fits in, eh? And of course, a young player has to practice. You have to practice to be a good player; I don’t think anyone can play well unless they practice a lot.

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About His Equipment

Tell us about your fiddle.

Now I play mostly a Roth violin. It's made in West Germany. I bought that in 1958 or '59 and I've been playing that ever since. It's my working fiddle and it's very good. But I have another violin, I bought it in New Jersey a few years ago. It's made by Sergio Peresson. He came from Udine, Italy, and I mentioned it to a lady today, who was in the workshops, and she knew about him and his violins. Isaac Stern bought one of them and several prominent, world-famous musicians bought his violins. I don't take that one out much; I just use it at home.

What sort of bow do you have?

I never had a real expensive bow, you know, playing at dances and kicking around, but I bought a bow recently from Roger Treat [of Vermont]. An $800 bow, that's what he sells them for; he's just a young lad. But my bows aren't very valuable.

Are they light or heavy?

Oh, kind of a medium.

What sort of strings do you have?

I use Thomastik, "Greatest Precision Steel Strings"; they're good for dance music. The classical players, they don't use this kind. I tried Dominants, but I didn't like them so well; I like Precisions better for dance music. The other strings are softer, and I like the sound of the steel strings.

I've seen a lot of Cape Bretoners putting what many people would probably call a ton of rosin on their bows. Are you one of the people who uses a lot of rosin?

I don't think I use as much as some. I think it's a habit a lot of the time, I don't think it affects the sound that much. Of course you won't get any sound if you don't have rosin, you know. I suppose it grabs the string better, but I would think too much rosin might take away the sound, if your strings are dirty with rosin.

You've released two albums. For a prestigious fiddler with a long career, that's pretty few. What sort of jobs have you had to pay the bills?

I worked for Canadian National Railways for 45 years. I've retired. I was a station agent; I was in different stations, different positions, and I was a telegrapher when I was younger. That became obsolete, and they put in teletype and Comtel machines. That's what I did for a living.

Now what was this story I heard somewhere that you used to practice the fiddle while at work?

Well on night jobs it'd be quiet, eh? When I was younger, a young fella, I'd have my violin with me and I'd take out my violin and practice tunes. On the job you had to be careful about your work, you know. I was working in connection with the movement of trains, meeting points and running extra trains, so you'd have to be very alert about that, but in between those times you could find time to play.

[Peter Martin works as a translator and teacher in Helsinki, Finland. His main interests are Celtic, French-Canadian and Finnish fiddling.]
Alex MacDonnell’s Favourite
Jig by Dan R. MacDonald

Buddy MacMaster: Alex MacDonnell was a fellow that used to come to our place, and he was a pretty good violin player, played by ear. In his late, late years, he learned to read. All the fiddlers used to go to his place.

Paul Cranford: In Judique?
Just up by the schoolhouse here. He played very nice, sweet music. He wasn’t what you called a dance player, but he played very sweet music and played quite correct, you know, for an ear player. All the fiddlers, most of them, went to his place, including Gordon MacQuarrie, Dan Hughie MacEachern and Bill Lamney.

Probably Dan R. himself.
Oh, Dan R., too, but Dan R. used to come to my place a lot because he was related to my mother.

It’s certainly a nice jig.
Yeah, I have two or three notes different there...because I picked it up from Dan R. when I was a teenager. It's the way I always played it. John Donald (Cameron), when he heard me playing it, he said, "Well maybe somebody changed it, overseas." John Donald got those tunes from the BBC in Scotland. Dan R., I think, played them on a BBC program when he was over in the Army in Scotland.

Queensville Jig
By Dan R. MacDonald

The second jig you called Queensville...
Queensville, yeah. Well, he stayed with the MacEacherns for awhile. That’s where he learned to read music. He spent some time in Queensville with Dan Hughie’s family.

I think those are great, those two tunes.
Yeah, they're very nice jigs, no doubt about it.

[Note: On Buddy's new album the above tunes are played in a medley with two more Dan R. tunes: "The Green Tree" (Heather Hill Collection) and "Gordon Graham's Favourite" (Trip to Windsor Collection).]
Remembering
Buddy MacMaster
(October 18 1924 – August 20 2014)
By Jody Stecher

It is not unusual for a listener to be moved by the skillful playing of slow airs by a good Scottish fiddler. The only fiddler to make me weep from his playing of reels has passed away. The tears well up again as I remember Buddy MacMaster, a great musician and a great man. When I first started hearing about Buddy in the early 1980s, people said that should Inverness County ever secede from Canada, or Nova Scotia, or from the rest of Cape Breton, Hugh Alan “Buddy” MacMaster would automatically become Premier. Then I heard a fellow get so worked up while hearing a young Cape Breton fiddler play that he just had to yell. He didn’t yell “yahoo” or “drive her,” though. He yelled “Buddy MacMaster!” But to really understand his near-mythic stature, consider this: it was said that if you hired him to play at your wedding, Buddy would play at your funeral for free. The implication is that, being immortal, Buddy would outlive everybody. It was not to be, of course, but that’s how his music affected a listener.

Buddy balanced all this with soft-spoken dry wit and an unassum- ing personality. He worked for many years as a station master for the railway. The hours between active work were spent perusing books of fiddle tunes, both Scottish and Irish. Buddy was alert to new compositions as well, and was the first to play tunes that are now standard core repertoire in Cape Breton. He also was an astute creator of medleys. One tune would flow into the next with such inevitability that a medley sounded like one flowing composition. He never called attention to the technical difficulties of some of his tunes; he just played them. He’d select tunes from his vast repertoire according to the type of occasion, and played them in a style that was at once personal and traditional, at once powerful and graceful. He could make a new tune sound like a perennial standard, and an old “chestnut” sound brand new. Perhaps his greatest musical achievement was how memorable — how truly unforgettable — his music was. Those attending a dance, public concert, or private session where Buddy was playing would find that something he played had lodged in their minds and would not let go. “That tune Buddy played? I can’t get it out of my head.” I’ve heard that many times.

He played in all keys but I’d say Buddy MacMaster absolutely owned the key of D major. “Down the Burn Davy Lad,” “O’er the Moor and through the Heather,” “Davy Stewart,” “Jenny Dang the Weaver,” “The Forth Bridge” followed by “Master McDermott.” These were no mere sequences of notes coming from Buddy’s fiddle. These were luminous living entities, something that can’t be explained except to say that he had an affinity for this key. Easier to explain is his early reputation as “King of the Jigs.” He had a special touch with the bow in 6/8 time, which he applied to a combination of well-known tunes and repertoire he’d found in the old books. I’d be surprised if a hundred years from now, fiddlers in Cape Breton didn’t call these, as they do now, “Buddy Tunes.”

Buddy released four solo recordings (Judique on the Floor, Glencoe Hall, The Judique Flyer, and Cape Breton Tradition), a duet album with his niece Natalie MacMaster (Traditional Music from Cape Breton Island), and also contributed tracks to various others, notably live CD recordings on both Traditional Music from Cape Breton Island (Nimbus) and The Heart of Cape Breton (Smithsonian). Buddy performed and taught throughout Canada, as well as in the U.S., Scotland, and Ireland. In 2000, Buddy was awarded the Order of Canada for his contributions to Canadian culture.

Born in Ontario in 1924, Buddy MacMaster was four years old when his parents moved the family back to Judique, Cape Breton. His father played fiddle, but it was his mother’s singing and lilting to which he especially attributed his love of music. By age twelve, Buddy was performing in public, and at fourteen he played his first square dance, which he continued to do into his eighties. During the 1970s, Buddy appeared regularly on CBC Television’s Ceilidh show. As his “day job,” Buddy worked for the Canadian National Railway.

[Buddy’s CDs and many transcriptions are available from Cranford Publications, www.cranfordpub.com. Buddy was one of twenty fiddlers on Fiddler Magazine’s Fiddlers 20 book/CD set, and was also featured in Fiddler Magazine’s Carrying on the Traditions: Cape Breton Scottish Fiddling Today video (out of print). For an excerpt of an interview with Buddy by Peter Marten in the Cape Breton 2000 issue of Fiddler Magazine, please visit www.fiddle.com.]
Buddy MacMaster (1924-2014) was one of the most loved fiddlers of his generation. Remembered as a gentleman and fine fiddler much in demand for concerts and dances, his legacy includes a repertoire highly imitated by others. In addition to his stock of older traditional tunes, Buddy was often the first to play new tunes – ones recently composed by younger local players as well as others learned from musicians met, or books acquired, during his travels to Scotland, Ireland, the USA, and other parts of Canada.

The first time I heard Buddy play was in 1977 in New Waterford’s Heather Tavern. That afternoon he played hundreds of tunes. At the time I was fairly new to the music and since I was sitting with one of the local experts (Doug MacPhee), I was given a running commentary as the tunes were being played. It’s a humorous memory for Doug as he recalls me frantically writing both titles and sources on scraps of paper, serviettes, and cigarette packages. Many of the tunes Buddy played that day came from the Skye Collection, a book I later reproduced and published. I am grateful to Buddy for his inspiration and will miss his warm humour, generosity, and friendship. – Paul Stewart Cranford

This tune can be heard at www.cranfordpub.com/buddy. There will also be links to other tunes composed in Buddy MacMaster’s memory.

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