

John Durocher: *A Gifted Composer*

By Ron Ritchie

The tornado struck with a fury never before witnessed by the residents of Sarnia, a city of about 40,000 in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. It was May 21, 1953, and only moments before I had rushed outside with my older sister and brothers to collect dozens of hailstones which were the size of golf balls. After a hasty retreat to the basement, we ascended to find only a broken window — otherwise, our home had been spared. But I clearly recall the drive around our neighbourhood that evening — the devastation from that storm was unbelievable. Homes were flattened, hydro poles had been knocked down and debris was everywhere. We later learned that five people had been killed by that tornado — but wait a minute. What does this have to do with fiddle music? Like many other important events that shape our history, this storm was eventually transformed into music — this time by one of Canada's most prolific writers of fiddle tunes, John Durocher. If you have access to any of Don Messer's records or tune books, check out "Tornado Hornpipe." Now you know the story behind the music!

Two years earlier, another severe storm had played havoc with the Sarnia region. Only on this day, the Don Messer Show was in town. Don was booked to play at Kenwick-on-the-Lake in Bright's Grove that evening — one of several wonderful dance pavilions which, in years gone by, lined the Canadian shore of Lake Huron from Sarnia in the south to Tobermory in the north. Bright's Grove was a sleepy resort town about fifteen minutes northeast of Sarnia. Late that afternoon, Ernie Joyce had been busy setting up the tables and chairs for the evening's entertainment. He was more excited than usual because he had worked hard to convince the pavilion's owner, Jack Kennedy, to invite Don and his band to perform. Jack was more interested in hosting the likes of Perry Como, Glenn Miller, Guy Lombardo, and other big bands of the era, but eventually relented to Ernie's insistence that the show would be a success. The pavilion was set in a beautifully treed park overlooking the blue waters of Lake Huron, but within a few short minutes that afternoon, some of the park's magnificent trees had been violently uprooted and many of the large branches had been thrown directly onto the open air dance floor. When Don and the cast arrived, they surveyed the situation and immediately decided that the show must go on as planned. And indeed it did! Chuck Joyce recalls his father saying to him many years later that the enthusiastic patrons danced all night around the felled trees and that it proved to be one of the largest crowds to ever attend a dance at Kenwick-on-the-Lake.

A young man by the name of John Durocher was there that evening. He had written a fiddle tune and wanted to present it to Don. They met after the show, and "Television Reel" became the first of dozens of tunes to be written by "Johnny" and recorded by Don.

There are literally thousands of fiddle tunes in print or recorded, and each has its own unique story that "just needed to be told." Like "Tornado Hornpipe," I will share with you some of those



John Durocher with Eleanor Reid (Townsend), early '70s.

stories which were transformed into fiddle music by a man who clearly was one of the best contemporary composers of Canadian fiddle tunes. In conducting my research for this article, I spoke with several of the "old timers" from Johnny's home town who knew him well. As you will soon learn, his path also crossed many high profile musicians along the way. Many of these musicians had a slightly different "take" on some of the stories about Johnny — I have made every attempt to be as accurate as possible.

Born within a poor community at the southern edge of Sarnia during the Great Depression, Johnny Durocher (Dur-oh-sheer) was the youngest of sixteen children. Barely a teenager, he decided to quit school so he could secure employment in order to help his mother make ends meet. All of his older brothers and sisters were musical — guitar music and singing was a regular happening at the Durocher household. Ron Tedball, a Sarnian and friend of Johnny's for many years, recalls that Johnny had noticed a damaged fiddle case sticking out of a trash can one day while walking home. He discovered that it contained an old fiddle in disrepair, so he went to the door and asked if he could have it; the answer was yes. Almost instantly, the fiddle became his life. He never received much formal instruction other than a few lessons from a music teacher — William Brush — but with Brush's help, Johnny quickly learned how to read and write music.

Like many other composers of all genres of music, Johnny was soon writing tunes and naming them after his family, friends, life in and around his home town, his favourite sports heroes and special events of the day. Hence, the obvious ones: "Pocket Rocket Richard's Reel" (Johnny was an avid Montreal Canadian fan), "Coronation Special Reel" (commemorating Queen Elizabeth's crowning and visit to Sarnia), "Jeannie's Jig" and "Robin's Jig" (in recognition of his wife and daughter), "Centennial Polka" (1967 was Canada's 100th birthday) and of course my favourite, "Dale Ritchie's Hornpipe" (after my father who was also a fiddle player from Sarnia).

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As Chuck Joyce and I were growing up in Sarnia in the 1950s and early '60s, during the summer months we regularly heard a tremendous roar coming from the St. Clair River. This river runs along the western edge of the city and forms a natural boundary between Canada and the United States. We knew that this noise had to be coming from Sarnia's own world class speedboat, "Miss Supertest." Over a ten year period, three of these huge speedboats were built and powered by 2000 hp Rolls-Royce Griffin engines. With Bob Hayward at the controls, in 1959 Miss Supertest III became the first Canadian-owned boat to win the prestigious Harmsworth International Trophy. Many of you may play Johnny's "Miss Supertest's Victory Reel," but the question must be asked: do you play it fast enough to win a trophy? As it happens, this popular reel is just one of the over 400 tunes which were written by Johnny — with many of them either recorded or published by Don Messer, Graham Townsend, Phil Howes, Al Cherny, Webb Acheson, the Irish Rovers, and possibly others.

As mentioned earlier, Canada celebrated its one hundredth anniversary as an independent nation in 1967. Johnny commemorated that historic year in Canada's history with several tunes: "Centennial Polka," "Expo 67 Jig," "Canadian Centennial Reel," "Centennial Hornpipe," and "Sir John A. MacDonald Reel" (Canada's first prime minister).

The world's entry into the "space age" proved to be of major interest to Johnny and this important time became the backdrop for several more tunes: "Apollo 11 Reel," "Apollo 12 Reel," "Astronaut's Breakdown," "Cape Kennedy Reel," "Lunar Landing Reel," "Man on the Moon Jig," "Journey to the Moon," and "Satellite Reel." Just the titles of these tunes could easily form the starting point for a science unit in a school's classroom somewhere!

Over the years, Johnny spent many years competing in and enjoying Ontario's annual fiddle contests — from Shelburne to Perth to Petrolia. He loved following the careers of young, aspiring fiddlers such as Chuck Joyce, Frank Leahy, and Don Reed. Once, while watching television, one of Johnny's granddaughters exclaimed excitedly, "A boy is playing one of Grampa's tunes on TV!" Sure enough, a ten or eleven year old Don Reed was performing "Grandma's Rocking Chair Jig" on a popular children's program. Johnny remarked to his daughter, Robin, that the boy had terrific talent and would surely be one to follow. A few years later he presented Don with "Don Reed's Breakdown" at one of the contests. Today, Don remembers Johnny as being a quiet man and "...in the top handful of writers of all time. A lot of John's tunes are Canadian standards which are played by myself and others quite regularly." Don, from Sudbury, Ontario, and a three-time North American fiddle champ, is currently the fiddle player in Ontario's popular country and western band "South Mountain." This band has been touring Europe extensively for the past few years and has recently won the honour of "International Group of the Year" by the Dutch Country Music Association.

Another young fiddler on whom Johnny kept a close eye was Chuck Joyce. Luckily, Chuck was also a native of Sarnia and their mutual interest in fiddle music quickly led to a close friendship. Chuck recalls Johnny always greeting him at the contests with, "I've got some new tunes for you to listen to." "Chuck's Favourite" and "Sunset Reel" were just two of those tunes. Chuck went on to compete at Shelburne where he twice became champion in both the "Eighteen and Under" as well as the "Canadian Open" classes. He has also won competitions in New York State and Manitoba. During an eight year "retirement" from competing, Chuck became involved as a judge at several of the Ontario contests. As well, he has become an active teacher at various fiddle camps and workshops. He notes that many of Johnny's tunes are played by the competitors: "St. Patrick's Jig," "Fiddle Fingers," and "Messer's Memorial Waltz" are three of the more popular compositions. (Johnny wrote Messer's tribute tune the night that Don died). Chuck has recently returned to the competitive scene and in 2002 and '03 placed fourth in the Canadian Open class at Shelburne and in the summer of 2004 earned a second place finish at Pembroke, Ontario. One of his students, Greg Henry, was the Junior Champ at Shelburne in 2003.

Johnny did compete at some of the contests, but preferred to listen and share his gift with his peers. Ron Tedball recalls that one of Johnny's tunes had a distinct Western Canada theme. Al Cherny, the popular fiddler from Medicine Hat, Alberta (who eventually transplanted to Wingham, Ontario to become a regular on CKNX Barn Dance), heard Johnny playing this tune at one of the contests. Al telephoned him later and asked if he could use it as his theme tune and change the name to "Medicine Hat Reel." Of course it was fine with Johnny! Another story tells of Johnny selling one of his tunes at a contest to another fiddler for \$100.00. Johnny's explanation: "Why not sell it? I could use the extra hundred bucks and I can always write another one."

As many of you are aware, one of Don Messer's fiddles has recently been bequeathed to Frank Leahy, a terrific fiddler from Waterloo, Ontario. Frank has been touring across Canada with Don's fiddle and has publicly acknowledged Johnny Durocher's contributions to the Canadian fiddle scene. Frank describes him as one of the "...best composers for fiddle tunes in the Down East style. His tunes are melodic, lasting and authentic... a great Canadian fiddle player and composer...maybe the greatest!" Johnny never visited the Maritimes, but has left his mark with titles such as "Maritime Reel," "Newfoundland Breakdown," "Nova Scotia Breakdown," "Spud Island Jig," "Annapolis Valley Reel," "Antigonish Reel," "Bluenose Breakdown," "Cape Breton Breakdown," "Down Easterner's Hornpipe," "Fredericton Hornpipe," and of course "The Great Atlantic Breakdown." When Frank was competing as a teenager, he remembers that Johnny always seemed to be playing where there wasn't a crowd. John was often at the contests, but never wanted to be the centre of attention.

Walter Ostanek, Canada's "Polka King" and three-time Grammy winner from St. Catherines, Ontario, developed a close association with Johnny in the '60s and '70s. Walter hosted live television and radio broadcasts from Kitchener, Welland, and St. Catherines. Because "...fiddle and accordion music blends well," Walter often invited the top fiddle players of the time to play live on the programs — Ned Landry, Earl Mitton, Ed Gyrki, Graham Townsend, Chuck Joyce, and others. He was also instrumental in organizing two major fiddle award concerts a year in recognition of outstanding contributions to fiddle music. These "Country Fiddle Heritage Club" awards were sponsored by the local radio station, CJQR, and Molson's Brewery. Walter had noticed Johnny's name as the composer for many of Don Messer's tunes and decided to invite Johnny to play on a number of occasions. In 1985, Walter presented Johnny with a "Country Heritage Award" for his outstanding contributions to country music. Walter describes Johnny's tunes as "...not simple — very intricate — you could just tell it was a Johnny Durocher tune!" Gerald Bailey, another Sarnia fiddler, drove Johnny to the radio broadcasts where both of them performed. Gerald was most impressed with Johnny's "...great ear for writing. An Irish tune sounds Irish, a Scottish tune sounds Scotch. John always liked telling jokes — always had a new one to tell."

Johnny Durocher — a man from very humble beginnings and with limited formal education who "bit his nails to the bone." Neither Johnny nor his wife had driver's licenses — he was terrified of driving in a car. But he was truly gifted. Many of you already play or listen to his music and it will, no doubt, be played for many generations to come. He was a "working man" who spent his days at a Sarnia factory and his evenings and weekends performing and writing music. His daughter Robin remembers her father often coming home from work whistling a new melody. After dinner, a glazed look would take over his eyes and she just knew that a new tune would be composed by the end of the evening. Perhaps Neil Armstrong had just landed on the moon ("Man on the Moon Jig"), Number 4 had scored a winning playoff goal the night before



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("Bobby Orr Reel"), or Johnny had just spent the weekend at a contest with a friend ("Ron St. Pierre's Hornpipe"). Do some computer research of your own — learn more about the Miss Supertest racing boats, the Buchta Dancers (from "Buchta Dancer's Jig"), Indian Pennies (from "Indian Penny Reel") and other places, events, and people that inspired this amazing man to compose his tunes. As a young boy growing up in Sarnia, I remember Johnny and my dad jamming together in our family room — no different than what is experienced in kitchens and living rooms around the world. I feel blessed to have been in his presence. If you are the musician who inspired Johnny to compose "Left Handed Fiddler," "Jolly Fiddler's Breakdown," or "Fiddle Maker's Breakdown," then write to me and share your connection with Johnny.

Johnny Durocher, 1934 - 1989. He died a young man, but his music will surely live forever!

[Ron Ritchie is a retired educator from London, Ontario, and has been playing the fiddle for about three years. He can be contacted at rritchican@yahoo.ca.]

Robin's Jig

By John Durocher

