Native and Métis Fiddling: Portrait of a People
By Anne Lederman

In 1984, I was fortunate enough to meet an elderly fiddler, Carl Grexton, from Grandview, Manitoba, on a trip he made to Ontario. Later he sent me a tape, which had, scribbled on the label on one side, “Grandy Fagman, MB [Manitoba] Médit Fiddler.” (See photo, front cover.) The music I heard on this recording is somewhat indescribable, a bit rough and out of tune, and frequently accompanied by loud, steady, two-foot rhythms which have the precision of a military drum, much like those often heard in Quebec and Acadia. But that is not what caught my attention the most. Although the tunes seemed to be, basically, jigs and reels and sounded vaguely Scots-Irish, they were so unpredictable and so lacking in any perceivable structure (by me, at the time) that I wondered at first if they weren’t improvised. I was hooked. Within the year, I had gone back to school, got a grant from the National Museum, borrowed a Uher, and landed in Dauphin, Manitoba.

When I arrived, fiddling was a well regarded, but fading cultural expression, as it was in much of rural Canada. In the dominant Euro-Canadian farming community of the area, it was pretty much restricted to the over-sixty set and consisted mainly of jigs, reels, polkas, waltzes, some schottisches and foxtrots, and Ukrainian tunes. But there was another culture here, an older, often almost invisible world of Native and Métis peoples ("Métis" is a French word meaning “mixed”). It is hard to describe the relationship between these two cultures — English Euro-Canadian and Native/Métis. With the French in the middle, they intertwine, they permeate each other, and, in this mingling, determine much of the character of the rural Canadian prairies. But it is not an equal partnership, and each regards the other with a certain amount of distrust.

Carl was the key. When younger, Carl had worked in the bush further north cutting timber, and had met Grandy, the man on my tape. Grandy came from Camperville, Manitoba, a largely Métis settlement about seventy miles north of Dauphin. Over subsequent years, Carl played and socialized with many fiddlers of Native and Métis heritage, which, I learned, was an extremely unusual thing for a "white" prairie farmer. He, alone amongst his Euro-Canadian peers, seemed to admire their way of playing, their quirky repertoire, their driving rhythm. He lost touch with Grandy for many years, but, a couple of years before I arrived, he and Bill Henry, a musician and reporter for the local paper (and whose photos you see on these pages) decided to take a drive to Camperville. They found Grandy, brought him back to Carl’s house for a couple of weeks, made the tapes, sent one to Ontario, and here I was. Only later did I come to appreciate how easy it would have been to never learn of the existence of this music, to never even suspect the extent of this 200-year-old, indigenous tradition, born of a blending of cultures that could only have happened in Canada. It was all because Carl was the sort of person who could see past the odd timing and rough sound to the powerful soul of the music.

Over the next couple of years, Carl and Bill were frequent companions on my visits to fiddlers. Through them, I found myself in the bosom of a culture. I met players of many backgrounds and recorded dozens of hours of music in people’s living rooms, at community halls, weddings, dances, house parties, and just sitting around the kitchen.1 We went to see Grandy in Usherville, Saskatchewan. Further explorations on my own led me to the Ebb and Flow area east of Dauphin where I met and recorded Emile Spence, Albert Beaulieu, Lawrence Flett and Frank Desjarlais, and up to Camperville to Fred and Hyacinth Mckay and Rene Ferland. Bill gave me tapes of Willie Mousseau, a wonderful player of about Grandy’s age who had passed on before I got there. Eventually, I met Lawrence “Teddy Boy” Houle who now resides in Winnipeg (about 150 miles southeast of Dauphin), and heard tapes of his father, Walter Flett. Later, Lawrence accompanied me on another recording expedition which resulted in more recordings, and eventually, a four-record set — Old Native and Métis Fiddling in Manitoba.2

1 All of these recordings now reside in the Folk Music Archives of the National Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.
2 Although currently out of print, these recordings will be re-released on CD as part of the National Museum’s Archive Series in 2002.
In the intervening years, I have come to further understand both the roots and the extent of what we can generally call “Métis fiddling,” comparing it to what we know of other Métis communities, as well as to old Native, French-Canadian, and Scottish music. This is an ongoing endeavor, but we do now know that elements of the old style and repertoire are common to French, Native and Métis communities throughout the Northwest into Alaska, across Québec into Acadia, and down into the U.S. We know that not only Scottish, French-Canadian, Anglo-Irish and American influences are at work in the older repertoire, but that this music also owes a great deal to the traditional music of Native peoples.3

Let’s go back. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Scots, mainly from the Orkneys, and French-Canadian voyagers from Québec and Acadia came to the prairies in search of furs. They intermarried with Cree and Ojibwa women, creating a mixed culture which is commonly called “Métis.” Métis peoples came to dominate the prairies in many ways for over 100 years, as traders, trappers, interpreters, and general go-betweens for the French, Scots and First Nations peoples. Today Native and Métis peoples in Manitoba still speak several languages — English, French, Cree, Ojibwa, Swampy Cree, Saulteaux (a dialect of Ojibwa), and a mixed language which eventually became known as Metcho. Surnames are French, Scottish (usually Orkney), and Native. Within the same families, some may identify themselves as French, some as Ojibwa, Cree or Saulteaux, and some as Métis.

By the 1880s, the buffalo were gone and Native and Métis peoples who had depended on them were starving. Reserves were created for those who could claim substantial Native blood — parcels of land set aside for their exclusive use, usually near water and not much good for farming. But those who did not qualify for Reserve status, or who lost it over the years were left pretty much to fend for themselves in whatever way they could.4 Today, people survive by fishing, trapping, farm and casual labor, running small local businesses or working for the government and social service network. Some head for the cities and higher education.

Until recently, fiddle was the musical center of Métis culture, having been passed on by both French and Scots traders to their mixed offspring. Fiddles were played for dancing, for listening, for celebration, and sheerly for personal enjoyment. Over the years, the fiddle took on the status of a cultural icon, a symbol of the Métis people. It was said, in the communities I visited, that every male at one time picked up a fiddle. (Why not the women? Not a respectable female pursuit, I suspect, although no one said so in so many words.) The banning of Native ceremonial practice in the

3 I am especially indebted to the work of Craig Mishler for comparative purposes, whose book, The Crooked Stovepipe, about Alaskan fiddling is the only other extensive study done of a Native fiddling tradition in North America. Valuable information about the Turtle Mountain community in North Dakota comes from James Leary, both in the notes to the Folkways recording Turtle Mountain Music (FES 4140) and in the study guide to Michael Loukinen’s film Medicine Fiddle (Up North Films, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan).

4 Until recently, women, and their descendants, lost Status by marrying someone without it. Within the same families, some have Reserve status, some do not.
late 1800s, no doubt, further strengthened fiddling as the main musical expression; in fact, outside of hymn-singing in church, it became the only form of music-making in some areas for quite some time.

But Métis fiddlers did not merely reproduce the music of their Scottish and French forefathers. While some of the tunes are, unmistakably, versions of Scottish, French-Canadian, and even American tunes, the music also bears strong elements of the Native musical culture of their mothers, including the very irregular forms and phrasing, a tendency to stay on or around cadence notes for several beats, the tendency for tunes to descend from higher to lower, a fondness for long introductory phrases, shortened on repeats of the tune. This Native influence makes the music quite distinctive, even from old Québécois styles which it most closely resembles. In its blending of European and Native elements, Métis fiddling also belies a long-accepted tenet in Ethnomusicology, voiced by Bruno Nettl, that Native and European musics did not combine in North America the way they did in South America, supposedly because their differences were too great.

However, I would venture that the ceremonial voice and drum music of the Plains and the Celtic fiddle music of the Scots, partly via French Canada, in fact, had much in common — a strong steady pulse, modal melodies using similar scales, a texture of melody with rhythm accompaniment. After all, voice and fiddle are not so different. It is in their forms and structures that Native Plains music and Celtic fiddling differ most, but even here there is evidence of mutual accommodation; some tunes lean more towards the two-part, equal-length phrase structures of the Scots, others follow the outlines of old Native Plains song, consisting of several phrases of different lengths, starting high and descending in pitch to rest on a final low note.

Eastern Canadians, Ukrainians and other northern Europeans were encouraged to come to the prairies and farm, beginning around 1890. (This phenomenon was so recent that I was able to meet and talk to some of the original “pioneers” who had come as children just before the turn of the century.) Fiddling was also at the center of this young rural culture, forming the basis of dance and wedding bands. But this new breed of Euro-Canadian settlers did not, for the most part, take to the older Métis approach to fiddling with its crooked phrasing, quick short bows and aggressive footwork. The prevailing attitude still, in 1985, was that Native players “didn’t understand rhythm,” that they were musically lacking in some way, that their music just didn’t make sense. Native and Métis players were regularly passed over in contests, adding to their general feeling that they were being unfairly discriminated against. Many had given up any attempt to participate in musical events outside their own communities. However, there is some evidence that this situation has improved in recent years, partly from the interest and attention paid by “outsiders” to Métis music.

Style and Repertoire

A description of a social event at a Manitoba fur trade post from the early 1800s reports a repertoire of Scottish strathspeys, jigs and reels, played by “Indian” fiddlers “to the vigorous accompaniment of the foot. We have known men to carry an extra pair of moccasins, so that when one pair was worn out on the rough floor they might not be at a loss.” While strathspeys have largely disappeared on the prairies, as they have in many other areas of Canada, the repertoire and style of the older Métis players I met in 1985 still owed much to the 19th century fur trade — Scottish jigs, marches and reels and strong influence from Québec. Players have no names for most of the old tunes, beyond the dance they are used for. Grandy called most of his tunes, simply, “quadrilles” or “old Scotch reels.” He frequently played them in sets of three to correspond to the parts of a quadrille set — First Change (often, but not always, jigs), Second Change (marches, two-step-type tunes or


6 In a sense, French-Canadian music bridges the gap, with some irregularities of phrasing, but generally still in a two-part structure. Some of the asymmetric phrasing in the French-Canadian repertoire is traceable to old French instrumental and song traditions, which are also frequently asymmetric, but more may have developed in Canada through Native cultural influence in Québec itself.

7 Quoted in Macbeth, 1971, page 54.
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reels) and Breakdown (reels). Other tunes named for their dances include Red River Jig, Duck Dance, Rabbit Dance, Reel of Four, Reel of Eight, Drops of Brandy (also called Hook Dance), La Double Gigue (frequently known here by its French name even in non-French-speaking communities, called Double Jig in Alaska/Yukon), the Handkerchief or Scarf Dance, and the Seven-Step (with a tune Graham Townsend recognized in the Shetland Islands). All of these are known on both the prairies and in Yukon/Alaska, and all seem to be directly related to older Scottish dances. Each dance seems to have had one particular tune associated with it in any given area in North America, but not always the same one in every place. While a few of the tunes are well-known (Macdonald’s Reel for a Reel of Eight, Fisher’s Hornpipe for La Double Gigue, Haste to the Wedding as a common First Change), others have proved more elusive. In Manitoba, many of these dances are not done anymore, but players still know the tunes.

Dances adopted later from the Anglo-Canadian repertoire are more commonly done today, such as the Waltz Quadrille (also a particular tune) and many whose tunes are not specific — the Butterfly, polkas, waltzes, scottiches, foxtrots, one-steps and two-steps. Also common is the “sideways polka,” which usually kicks off a dance as a kind of warm-up, and serves as a filler between dances — couples do a basic polka step in side-by-side formation, all facing the same direction in a big circle around the floor, while the fiddler plays any number of tunes of his choosing."

Some players have learned tune names from recordings or other fiddlers over the years. “Early on, I never did hear them call a name on a tune…’Whiskey Before Breakfast’…that was a ‘Reel of Eight.’ The first time I heard a name for that was Andy de Jarlis.”

Andy de Jarlis was a French Métis fiddler from Woodridge, Manitoba who recorded thirty-three records of traditional and original tunes, many of the former in somewhat “straightened” versions. Although he is widely admired, it is not uncommon to hear older players say that Andy “changed” the older tunes. However, his influence is so widespread that his versions have, in many cases, replaced older aural ones. He also named many of the older tunes. For example, de Jarlis’ Trading Post Reel is traceable to an old Scottish tune, the Gaberlunzie Man; most of the older players play very “crooked” versions of the tune, which almost certainly predate de Jarlis, although many use his title.

In addition to the old Scottish repertoire, which is frequently so altered as to be possibly untraceable, many common tunes of both North American and Scots-Irish origin are known by name and played, such as Devil’s Dream, Soldier’s Joy, Flowers of Edinburgh, Girl I Left Behind Me, Turkey in the Straw and Arkansas Traveler. These tunes generally exhibit less irregularity in phrasing, suggesting they came into the repertoire more recently. Métis players in this area also play Ukrainian tunes.

Interestingly, the most obvious French-Canadian connections come from the two most widespread old dances and their tunes, the Red River Jig (for solo step dancing) and the Drops of Brandy (a line dance from Scotland, much like the Virginia Reel). These seem

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* This side-by-side polka seems to be unknown in Yukon/Alaska, where the Red River Jig, the solo stepdance, serves this “filler” function. On the prairies, Red River Jig was generally saved for one special time of night, usually just before midnight and the supper break.

to be versions of La Grande Gigue Simple and Le Brandy of Québec, respectively. In western Métis traditions, both tunes are quite irregular, while in Québec they are usually in a strict 3/2. (That is, they feel like reels with 3-beat phrases.) However, this is an older British Isles rhythm which has largely fallen into disuse, which suggests the possibility that both tunes have forgotten Orkney ancestors.

French influence is further revealed by the use of the terms “jig” for stepdance tunes and “jigging” for the dancing itself, corresponding to the French word “gigue.” Red River Jig (La gigue de la rivière rouge) and Double Jig (La double gigue), are both reels, not 6/8, used for “jigging” (stepdancing). And, of course, there’s the footwork. Only in French, Native and Métis areas do fiddlers clog with both feet as an accompaniment to fiddling. On the prairies, some clog to jigs as well as reels (rare in Québec), in the following patterns:

Jig

[\begin{array}{c}
\text{6/8} \\
(\text{usually) heel toe toe heel toe toe}
\end{array}]

Reel

[\begin{array}{c}
\text{2/4} \\
\text{heel toe toe heel toe toe}
\end{array}]

Many players “make” their own tunes, and we can only assume that this has been happening since the first fiddlers appeared in Canada. Whether original or not, there is often a sense of personal ownership of tunes. “If someone heard you playing his tunes, he’d walk up to you and say, ‘Hey, you play your own tunes.’” I was told of older players who felt that the tunes should not be recorded, and there are stories of tapes having been fatefully erased after a player dies, sometimes in somewhat mysterious ways.

Altered tunings are used in both Manitoba, Turtle Mountain and Alaska/Yukon, most commonly ADAE (from lowest to highest) and AEAE. These are common in older Scottish tradition, as well as in French-Canadian and American styles. AEAC# is used for versions of “Hangman’s Reel” and a companion, “Hangman’s Waltz,” which are probably from Québec influence (these tunes are also related to Rye Whisky and Lost Indian in the U.S.). Some older players also know versions of Bonaparte’s Retreat in “drop D” tuning — DDAD, but it is not common. All tunes in AEAC# and AEAE are sometimes called “devil tunes,” and there are reports that older players were afraid to play them for fear the devil would appear. In Alaska/Yukon, this type of story seems to be confined to one particular tune.10

Bowing in the older style uses short, generally separate strokes, mixed with two-note slurs, similar to French-Canadian. However, there seems to be a generally stronger off-beat accent than in Québec, especially in 6/8 tunes, resulting in two-note chords on accented notes. Some players practice what they call “double-stringing,” that is, playing open strings along with the melody. According to the players themselves, this was much more popular in the past than it is now and is considered to be a Scottish practice.

As in other North American fiddle traditions, older players tend to vary the tunes every time they play them, whereas younger players often have only one version of a tune. In Métis practice, these variations can involve changes of phrasing and structure as well as notes. Especially phrase endings (cadences) frequently change length as players choose to emphasize these key notes by repeating and embellishing them. This makes it difficult for people to play together, although they often adjust their versions to match each other in casual situations.

The fiddle was generally unaccompanied until guitars came into use in the mid 20th century. Sometimes a second fiddle is used, doubling the melody, playing in octaves, or playing drones or chords. In Turtle Mountain, one two-note chord is sometimes played on every beat throughout the tune with an “off-the-string” bow (lifted after each stroke). This is called “bucking” or “Le boss” and was also used to teach. “One would beat out the time on the strings like the drum while the other one played. That’s how the young ones learned.”11

In Native and Métis communities in Manitoba, playing the old tunes was a dying art in the mid-'80s, just as it was in the surrounding Euro-Canadian milieu. Older people play at home, or sometimes for “dry” dances run by Alcoholics Anonymous, while the “wet” dances generally have amplified country and western music. Some communities are starting dance groups for young people, who learn to do the old dances as choreographed and costumed performances. Contests are increasing, and this is helping to spur new interest. However, many of the younger players

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10 See Mishler, 1993, page 56.
reject the extreme irregularity of the older repertoire, leaning more towards what they hear on the radio — country music, down-east fiddling, or the tunes of recorded Métis players whose tunes are more symmetric. But there are some who continue the old way and who are fiercely proud of their Native and Métis heritage. It is a good sign.

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Hands-on Experience

Emma Lake Fiddle Camp in Saskatchewan offers fiddle classes by Calvin Vollrath and John Arcand, both respected Métis players and recording artists. For information, contact the Saskatchewan Cultural Exchange Society (SCES), 2431 8th Ave., Regina, SK Canada S4R 5J7; (306) 780-9494; sces@gpfn.sk.ca

Further Reading:

Recordings/Films:

The following transcriptions are taken from the versions recorded on Old Native and Métis Fiddling. “Drops of Brandy” and “Red River Jig” are on Volume I (Falcon Productions FP 186) and “Grandy’s A Reel” is on Volume II (Falcon Productions FP 286). It is also on Anne Lederman’s 7 Cats in a slightly different version (Falcon Productions FP 003).

Drops of Brandy


Notes: Both A and B are 8-beat phrases but feel like a 3+2+3 metre, and so have been transcribed as such. B is usually played just once, but on a later repeat, twice. Tune ends after two A’s with ending as shown. The bracketed notes are played on some repeats but not others.
Grandy’s A Reel

Transcribed by Anne Lederman as played by Grandy Fagnan, Userville, Saskatchewan, 1986. Tuning (from low to high): AEAE.

Notes: Tune ends with A part, repeated three times (usually) with coda bar as final. Grandy tends to vary the number of repeats of sections, and how they repeat. It is not possible to transcribe Grandy’s exact bowing. It is a combination of separate notes and two-note slurs. The “snap” figures (with 32nd notes) are slurred.

Red River Jig

An old version, transcribed by Anne Lederman as played by Lawrence “Teddy Boy” Houle, Winnipeg, 1985. Tuning (from low to high): ADDE.

Notes: Again, while the A parts are 8 beats long (usually), the ticks show where I feel the main phrasing to be, 3+5 beats. The first beat of the B parts can be thought of as a transitional beat, sort of a turnaround between parts. The variations show that phrases are not always the same length on subsequent repeats.