A Week on the Ceilidh Trail

by Burt Feintuch

A note from the author about this piece:

"I have deep admiration for Sandy Ives, and I was flattered when Pauleena and David asked if I'd write an essay for a book honoring him as he retired from the University of Maine. I wanted to write something that conveyed my enthusiasm for Cape Breton--its musicians and its communities--and I asked the editors if it would be okay to write a more personal piece, somewhere between ethnography and travel writing, but never, I hoped, losing sight of the fact that a folklorist wrote it. They agreed, and my enthusiasm, at a time when I was really just discovering Cape Breton, carried me through this essay, a piece of writing I especially enjoyed doing."

From Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where I live, you drive about 750 miles north and east to get to Inverness, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada. Cape Bretoners who live in the Boston area, an hour south of my home, confound my sense of direction by describing the trip from Boston back home as going down to Cape Breton. In Cape Breton, you often hear people speak about going up to Boston, or up to the Boston states. A maritime historian colleague of mine at the University of New Hampshire told me that this has to do with prevailing winds. I can accept that, but I have real difficulty talking about travel back and forth between Boston and Cape Breton with my Cape Breton friends, and it's reached a point where I try to avoid mentioning direction at all.

This trip, beginning July 25, 1997, registered about 840 miles on the odometer, but I'm a folklorist, which means that I took a few minor side trips. Portsmouth is the last town before Maine on the New Hampshire coast. I drove mostly north the first day, to Calais, Maine, where I crossed into St. Stephen, New Brunswick. Then it was east, along the coast of New Brunswick to Saint John. I spent the night in Saint John, had a look at the city market, and the next morning drove east through New Brunswick, stopping in Moncton where I visited a farmers market, heard a fine young French fiddler busking, had lunch, and had what I thought would be the last good coffee of the trip in a mostly French café (jazz group playing in the courtyard outside). I continued east into Nova Scotia, and then headed north again, toward Cape Breton Island, connected to the Nova Scotia mainland by the Canso Causeway, the world's deepest. Crossing the causeway, I stopped at the Cape Breton tourist information center, picked up a pretty good map and a pile of brochures, and turned left onto Route 19, the Ceilidh Trail.

"Ceilidh or ceil is a word in both Scots Gaelic and Irish. Many folklorists know it from Howie Glassie's superb work centered in a small Irish community. In Ballymenone, Glassie says, the ceil is the heart of community, a small gathering for good talk--crack--tea, and perhaps some music. For many enthusiasts of so-called "Celtic" musics, the term focuses more on the music, leaving the tea and the crack behind, or consigning them secondary roles. A ceilidh is a small house party--perhaps more a visit than a full-blown party--featuring traditional musicians, what in New Brunswick might be termed a kitchen racket or in parts of New England once was called a kitchen junket. In Cape Breton, the term, of course, derives from the Scottish part of the family tree. As small crofters were forced from their land in the Highland clearances, many emigrated to Cape Breton. Especially along the Ceilidh Trail, it's the Scottish part of this multicultural island's heritage that is held to be the essence of the culture, and the music is often called Cape Breton Scottish music even when it's played by Acadiens and Mi'kmaqs. For tourism purposes, Nova Scotia has named quite a number of its highways "trails" or "routes." Terminating at the start of the Cabot Trail, which traverses the northern part of the spectacular Cape Breton Highlands National Park, the Ceilidh Trail is one of the least well known and least developed touristically of these designated roads. The ceilidhs along the Ceilidh Trail are part of public culture, and the trail, and the notion of ceilidh, speaks to tourists and residents, celebrating--and perhaps transforming--a grassroots music scene that is hopping."

I'm here because of the music. An enduring curiosity about deeply planted musical cultures and my passion for playing the fiddle impelled my first trip, last summer, when I enrolled in the Ceilidh Trail School of Celtic Music to try to learn to play a style of music quite unlike what I've played for the last couple of decades. It also gave me an opportunity to look around, to gain some sense of the proportions of the musical scene, and to reflect on my continuing--indeed seemingly endless--research in another musical locality where the music has also come back. I used to say that in Northumberland, the North East of England, where I've done research for more than a decade, the music came back with a vengeance. Compared to here, though, it's a whisper; in Cape Breton, it threatens to become a din. In Northumberland, it's mannered, quiet. Here, it wails. I love it. So, I'm back, again mixing vocation and avocation, enrolled for a week in music school, trying to do some writing, and always looking around, listening hard. The nights are late, the scenery as beautiful as anywhere I've ever been, the skies blue, the temperatures in the seventies and eighties by day, cooler at night. In the winter, though, the ocean freezes.

These days I'm less loathe to mix my musical life with my academic one. Perhaps as part of the Dorsonian legacy (although I went to Penn), I find myself coming to believe that playing music is one way of understanding it, even if the music you play isn't, in old-fashioned folkloric studies terms really your own. Although I write here as if my academic self and my musical self represent different ways of being in the world, the fact is that in my mind they are merging more and more closely, as I resort to examining my musical experiences as a way of understanding those of others.

With the inevitable stops between St. John, NB and Inverness, my destination, it was nearly 10 p.m. Atlantic Time when I reached my motel. After Moncton, I wanted to make good time to get to Antigonish, a bit before the causeway, hoping to get to Ceilidh Music, a record shop connected to CJFX, the am radio station that has played a central role in broadcasting maritime music, especially from Cape Breton and Newfoundland. But it was Saturday, and they were closed. Seeking consolation, I stopped at another music shop that a friend told me carried local music. There I bought a new CD by two..."
thirty people listened, drinking beer, moving their feet in time with the music. A young man named Pellerine played a set, Dewar accompanying. Then Rodney--also in his twenties, a physical education teacher in Mabou--and Glenn played a set, feet pumping in time, the music pulsing with energy.

About three hours later, I was on the road again. I crossed the causeway shortly after leaving Antigonish. At about 7:30, when I reached Judique, a sign on the community center—"Fiddlers Pub tonight"—led to another delay. The community center's permanent sign tells us that it is the "Home of Celtic Music." Tonight, Kirsten and Bon Louis Beaton, husband and wife and stalwart dance musicians, were playing, along with Glenn Graham, who managed to beat me to the hall, having changed his shirt. I had a bowl of seafood chowder provided by the woman who ran the concession, although serving hours were over. About a hundred people sat in the modern community center. Teenagers and people in their young twenties, senior citizens, no one looking like a tourist, sat, drank beer, and moved their feet to the music. A number of the young women had what I thought of as "Natalie hair," inspired by the wild curly blond tresses of Natalie MacMaster, a young Cape Breton fiddler who has crossed over into the wider market of Celtic music enthusiasts.

So, it was late when I reached the Inverness Lodge, my motel. Inverness, which is right on the Ceilidh Trail, is a former coal-mining and fishing community. With a population of 1935, it is a center of services—a hospital, a bank, a racetrack, a Coop supermarket—for its area, despite its economic depression. Houses, almost certainly company housing, lean and sag, with the sea shining brilliantly at the town edge. Two motels, a "beach resort"—about forty small cabins near the beach a mile or so from town—two gift shops, and Thursday-night ceilidhs in the fire house service visitors. North of town, in a place variously called Inversdale and Deepside, is the Ceilidh Trail School of Celtic Music, servicing visitors--a very special sort of cultural tourist--and local people, all of whom come to learn the music of this place. It's a small building, built in the 1960s as a school of perhaps four rooms, now renovated, open this year for three weeks.

Just before ten, I called home to speak to my wife, Max, and the kids. The streets of the town were busy; this was the tail end of the Inverness homecoming, with the Broad Cove Scottish Concert scheduled for the next day, so there were many people in town. The Inverness Lodge had no vacancies, the same as the Gables Motel and the Inverness Beach Resort. I walked the main street a bit, buying Thursday's Oran, the weekly paper. The entertainment section of the small tabloid listed dances practically every night, along with concerts of traditional music, and other music events at festivals and other public presentations. Richard Wood, I noted, was playing that night at the regular Saturday dance at the hall in West Mabou.

Mabou is a legendary site for the music. About half an hour south of Inverness, it's a small village, said until recently to have been the most Gaelic-speaking place on the island. It's the home of the Beaton and Rankin families, and the place named most frequently in tune titles. Tune books and album notes list quite a number of tunes as "Traditional Mabou Reel." You never see "Traditional Inverness Reel." The dance at West Mabou--there are actually a number of Mabous--West Mabou, Mabou Coal Mines, Mabou Harbour, and others--is one of the best known.

Wood is 19, from Prince Edward Island, but regarded highly by Cape Breton dancers and audiences. As Ken Perlman's collection of PEI tunes documents, there's a strong Cape Breton influence in the PEI music, thanks in part to the aforementioned CJFX. Wood seems ambitious and to be positioning himself as a Celtic musician, but the Cape Breton influence is obvious in his style and repertoire. He had taught the week earlier at the Ceilidh Trail School. I'd never heard him, other than a track on CBC radio as I was leaving Moncton earlier that day. I was tired. But Mabou, after all, isn't all that far. Mrs. Wallace, in the motel lobby, told me how to get to the hall. I went south on the Ceilidh Trail, crossed the bridge in Mabou, turned right down a very dark road, traversed narrow bridges. Then parked cars lined the road, perhaps a third of a mile on both sides. I parked at the end of the line and made my way back down the very dark asphalt to the small hall.

It was mobbed. Young people stood in the parking lot. People danced on an outside dance floor behind the hall, a speaker blasting the music. Inside, perhaps 150 people danced or listened. Wood had been inspired to have been inspired by the success of Ashley MacIsaac. MacIsaac's recording "Hi, How are you Today?" blends traditional Cape Breton fiddling, some Gaelic song, and a panoply of very contemporary rock music. The reports are that it sold more than 200,000 copies in Canada, and Ashley, as everyone calls him, is touring the U.S. and Canada with rock accompanists, stepdancing throughout his loud shows, becoming a minor media sensation, wearing punk garb and a kilt (a high kick on late night television revealed that at least one "Scotsman" wears nothing under his kilt), saying controversial things about his sexuality, and trumpeting the appeal of Cape Breton. Wood, who looks mild and clean-cut on TV shows, becoming a minor media sensation, wearing punk garb and a kilt (at least one "Scotsman" wears nothing under his kilt), saying controversial things about his sexuality, and trumpeting the appeal of Cape Breton.

Wood, along with another fiddler, Andrew Murray, and a band, played a set. About 100 people sat in the modern community center. Teenagers and people in their young twenties, senior citizens, no one looking like a tourist, sat, drank beer, and moved their feet to the music. A number of the young women had what I thought of as "Natalie hair," inspired by the wild curly blond tresses of Natalie MacMaster, a young Cape Breton fiddler who has crossed over into the wider market of Celtic music enthusiasts.

Someone is saying hello to me. It's Bea Campbell. She and her husband John live in Watertown, Massachusetts, where John, a fine traditional fiddler, has been a mainstay of the Cape Breton music scene. They have a house in Port Hood, where they spend time in the summer with other members of their
family. The Campbells arrived a couple of days before I did, driving about 800 miles straight through. Boston-area Cape Bretoners seem to prefer to drive down in one day, and they’ll often tell you what they think is the best way to do it. Tonight, John is playing for a wedding.

This is a family dance. It runs from 10 until 1 in the morning, welcoming dancers of all ages. Other nights there are adult dances. Liquor is served, and the law requires that you be 19 to enter. I'm told, is part of the parking lot action at many dances, family or otherwise, although I haven't seen this.

A woman named Jasmine asks me to dance. She's English, but she's lived in Canada for about twenty years. She moved to Cape Breton about five years ago, she tells me, for the dancing. She lives in Southwest Margaree, I think she says, a rural area not far north of Inverness. It's been a year since I tried this sort of dancing, but she's gracious, and we get through the two jig sets and the reel set. I'm reminded of how gracious people here are; you're welcome to try to dance, and in what feels like chaos, the dancers will guide you to some sort of order. Dancing with Jasmine prods my memory of dances last year, when Max and I met nothing but friendly people during the sets, virtually all of them either Cape Breton locals or people born here but forced to leave because of the island's few employment prospects, back for a summer stay. The dancers, it's my impression, are local people and visitors, but most of the visitors are rooted here. They almost always lament that they can't live on the island. Locality is a substantial force here.

The physical education movement, which played a significant role in various "folk dance" revivals in the U.S. seems not to have had an impact here. The phys-ed people stressed the dance as a form of sociability, and they built in ways to encourage the sort of "good clean sociability" they valued. In the contradance revival, callers usually build in time between dances so that people can visit with each other. The music, some contradancers maintain, shouldn't be loud enough to make talk impossible. If you arrive as a couple at a contradance, the tradition is that you don't stay with one partner; sociability demands that you each dance with others. Tonight in West Mabou—as at all the other Cape Breton dances I know—people are here for the dance and the music. The music is too loud for easy conversation. The sets follow in rapid succession. Couples who arrived together often dance only with their original partners. But in contrast to contradances, which seem prissy viewed from West Mabou hall, these are intensely social occasions. In the sweaty clinches of the dance or while you sit or stand on the sidelines with others who aren't dancing that set, the music, the lack of space, and the sheer exuberance conspire to open you to others, to have you step into intimate spaces while holding on for dear life.

Playing nearly at rock club volumes, the music wails. Richard is a remarkable young player. He's flashy--and "flashy" is a term that many traditionalists don't like. But for me there's a musicality in everything he does, even when he toses in bits of flash, mostly short blasts of hot bowing that stand out from the way the tune generally is treated. Scott MacMillan comes in, borrows Pius's guitar, and sits in. He's a guitar player and an arranger of music, having orchestrated--literally--anumber of cross-roads productions bringing together Cape Breton fiddlers and classically trained musicians. Wearing shorts and a belt-pek, he's playing hard, sweating along with the other musicians.

They do a set for stepdancing. Unlike other sets, which feature only one form of tune--jigs or reels--a set for stepdancing will typically begin with strathspeys and culminate in reels. The effect is of acceleration, and the dancers mark the time, and the changing time, with their feet. Spectators form a circle. Dancers come into the center, usually one at a time, and dance until tired. The next dancer follows. The set continues until no one else comes forward. All the while, the musicians are mute; they speak a bit to each other, but only in their music do they address the audience. A moment after the stepping ends, the first jig set of the cycle begins again.

By one in the morning, the dance is starting to wind down, as scheduled. But tonight it's not ending easily; the energy is too high, the crowd too exuberant, Richard is playing a reel set. Abruptly, he leaps off the small stage, his wireless transducer not tying him to the sound system. He's in the middle of a circle of dancers, and he's stepping, while his fiddler, Pius, grinds the music running off his face. People are whooping around the room, and dancers are now running off the floor, their only modestly heavy shoes pounding the floor, beating the music's rhythm. I'm hot, exhausted, happy, wired. Making my way down the dark ribbon of road to my car, I find my way back to Inverness and bed. So ends day one.

The Broad Cove Scottish Concert is the next day. One of the largest events on the traditional music calendar, this is the concert's 41st year. It's on the grounds of the St. Margaret of Scotland Church, sponsored by the parish. The churches play a significant role here in the music. Many of the dances have parish sponsorship, and they take place in parish halls. Concerts and festivals often enjoy church sponsorship. In the nearly mythological story of the Cape Breton fiddle revival, Fr. John Angus Rankin is accorded special status. In the early 1970s, a documentary aired on radio and then on television, titled "The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler," presented an alarming view, warning of the music's impending demise. Rankin organized a festival on the grounds of his church, and more fiddlers than anyone could imagine showed up. The revival, so the story goes, was born at the festival at the church in Glendale. I wonder at the convenience of this notion, especially when I realize that there are plenty of signs that the music was happening in public and private venues before Glendale. This, remember, is Broad Cove's 41st year. At the very least, though, it seems that Fr. Rankin and the documentaries helped bring renewed public attention to the music.

The concert begins at 3. I arrive a bit early, wondering whether there will be a crowd, mindful of published reports of 9000 people attending in some years. Broad Cove is just a bit north of the Ceilidh Trail School. The road is marked by a sign with a field of green tartan plaid, announcing the dates for this year's concert. Trespassing beyond the narrow road and near the church is not allowed. An unpaid lane leads toward the parking lot. You gain entrance at a booth, paying $8. Benches line the area in front of a wood-frame covered stage, the parish church behind it. The weather has been undecided all day, but now it's bright and the sun is strong. Running from 3 until early evening, emceed by a man in a kilt and a clergyman, the concert presents brief performances by a veritable who's who of Cape Breton performers. The biggest names—Natalie MacMaster, Ashley MacIsaac, and the Rankin Family—aren't here, but many other of the best known Cape Breton musicians are. John Campbell told me back in Watertown that the mail brings you an invitation to play. Then you show up at the grounds where you receive a number, indicating where you fit in the day's sequence of performances. Sitting on a bench, I notice someone wearing a t-shirt that says "a culture is preserved one generation at a time--Dewey Balfa." It seems a long way from Cajun Louisiana and the musician and cultural activist whose words are memorialized on the t-shirt. And the sentiment provokes me to wonder whether an attitude of cultural conservation is part of today's Cape Breton music scene. I'm not seeing many signs of it. Instead, it's almost as if there's an exhilarating party going on, and people are celebrating and having a ball.

Following an invocation, a pipe band opens the afternoon. Mixed with local dancers, a visiting group of Irish-style stepdancers, fiddlers and piano accompanists dominate the bill. We hear Alex Francis MacKay, Buddy MacMaster, Howie MacDonald, Jerry Holland, John Campbell, Richard Wood, Brenda Stubbert, and other master musicians. I meet Jasmine Dunn, who's going to be teaching at the school starting tomorrow; she's sitting at a table where the vendors are, selling her CD and a book of tunes by her late grand-uncle, as she says, Dan Hughie MacEachern, a highly regarded fiddler and maker. It's autographed by some of the best known fiddlers from the island. Wandering around, I recognize people who are here for the school. I see the superlative Irish fiddler, Brendan Mulvihill, who lives in the Washington, DC area but teaches and otherwise visits here with some frequency.
the Rankin Family. In the Mull, the music in the background is bound to be the Rankin Family, although last year's exception seemed to be the then-new recording, "Fine, Thank You Very Much," by Ashley MacIsaac.

Speaking of the Rankin Family, one night I was in Freeman's Pharmacy in Inverness. Along with the Bear Paw, one of the gift shops, this is a good source of recordings of local musicians. Some tourists were asking for one of the Rankin Family's recordings on CD, not the cassette versions on display. The clerk said they were out of the CD. But she suggested that they call the house in Mabou. Mrs. Rankin, whose children are the band, would almost certainly be home, she said, the clerk, and she's the one who handles the local distribution of the recordings. You can probably get one from her, the clerk told the incredulous fans.

In a place where the music is so abundant, you can find local recordings in many small shops. In Inverness, the Home Hardware store and the Coop have good selections, along with the aforementioned gift shop and pharmacy. In Mabou, try either of the two grocery stores. Stop in country markets, and the odds are that there will be tapes and CDs for sale. You walk through the doors of stores where windows are plastered with signs about local dances, festivals, and concerts to find small displays of local music. Generally that's it— they don't sell any other recordings. God knows where you'd go to buy something by Michael Jackson.

In nearly every case, the musicians finance and produce their own recordings. Ian MacKinnon's 1989 M.A. thesis done at Memorial University of Newfoundland, "Fiddling to Fortune: The role of commercial recordings made by Cape Breton fiddlers in the fiddle music tradition of Cape Breton Island," is an excellent examination of the history of Cape Breton recordings. A brief burst of interest in the 1970s on the part of a then small independent label in the U.S. led to a handful of recordings of Cape Breton musicians, both from the island and resident in the Boston area. But according to MacKinnon, some of those musicians were unhappy with the way the company did business; at the very least, there seem to have been communication problems between the company and some musicians. The result was that musicians began taking charge of their own recording, producing tapes and then CDs, and distributing them to the small shops that sell them.

Today's generation of young stars—Natalie and Ashley—began this way, although they found their way to major labels and wider distribution. Jerry Holland is now on Green Linnet, one of the major "Celtic" music labels; his "The Fiddler's Sticks Collection" is an anthology made from his privately produced tapes. Paul MacDonald, a guitarist and seemingly untroubled advocate of the local music, and his DAT machine have played a major role in helping musicians produce their own recordings, as have a couple of studios in Nova Scotia. Guitarist and fiddler Dave MacIsaac, one of the strongest and best rhythm guitar players I've ever heard, plays on a huge number of these recordings as do a handful of the island's best piano players—Joey Beaton and Hilda Chiasson-Cormier among them. It's hard to find these recordings when you don't live here; I've been lucky to find good mail order sources. You can be hard to find the recordings even if you're lucky enough to be here; personal distribution depends on the energy and commitment of the artists and their families. Someone has to take the tapes and disks to the stores. I've been looking for early recordings by Kinnon Beaton. Eventually, I asked him if they were available. He said he doesn't much care for the two first ones and that he's stopped bringing them to the stores. But he offered to see what he had at home and to give them to me, refusing to take any money. The next night, at a concert where we agreed to meet, he had a tape and an LP for me.

So, it's dinner with the Rankins in the background. I'd stopped for a sandwich at the Mull as I was driving to Inverness from the Judique community center (only yesterday!). The young woman who waited on me asked if I was going to Broad Cove. She told me that this would be the first Broad Cove concert she'd missed since she was six years old. She had to work. Bob and Bryn are tired, so they decide to go back to the motel. Charged up, I decide to go to the dance that follows the concert. This one is at the hall in Strathlorne, a few miles below Inverness. While we were eating dinner, it turns out that the concert was closed down early by a violent rainstorm, but it hasn't rained in Mabou.

Strathlorne is less crowded than West Mabou was. Jackie Dunn is playing piano. I don't recognize the fiddler and the guitar player. The fiddler, in t-shirt, jeans, and baseball cap, is playing hard and loud. He's very intense, making judicious, forceful movements that seem to synchronize with, or emphasize, his bowing. Using dynamics more than many of the other players I've seen, sometimes he really digs in with the bow, while at other times his touch is lighter. I ask the woman sitting next to me if she knows who it is. It's Dougie MacDonald, she tells me. I own two of his recordings, but I've never seen him, so this is a treat for me. Like Richard Wood last night, he's doing some things I've rarely heard here. Most fiddlers play sets of tunes "on" one key. That is, they'll say "A," for instance, to the piano player and then launch into a medley of tunes that center on A as the tonic note. In formal musicological terms, they're moving from major to minor and into various modes, but in local tradition all of this is "on" A (or D, G, C, F, Eb, or whatever tonal center they choose). Dougie, though, is changing keys in his medleys, something that's fairly novel, although not unknown, here, although it's standard practice in many other "Celtic" musics. This dance seems to have an inordinate number of rowdy teenagers whose enthusiasm for stepdancing overbalances their skill. Adults form sets of their own, and the young people jump around together at the back of the hall. On the wall is a list of members of the local "hall of fame"—fiddlers who've played here, ranging from the late Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald, who had a recording career and did a lot of broadcasting, to local musicians. For me, though, although the music is wonderfully intense and deeply energetic, it's not a dance I especially enjoy.

The Ceilidh Trail School of Celtic Music began perhaps thanks to the parish's interest in seeing some sort of good use for their building. Janine Randall's proposal for a school and cultural center gave her the facility. Janine lives in St. Andrew's, Massachusetts. Her father, Johnny Muise, is originally from the Inverness area, and the Muise house in Roslindale was one of the Boston sites of many music parties, uniting visiting Cape Breton musicians—usually in town to play a dance, either in the Canadian-American Club or in one of the dance halls—with Cape Bretoners living in the Boston states. Until she was a young adult, Janine thought these spirited nights were the norm. One night, while the party was in the basement, the house above had a small fire, and no one noticed either the fire or the firefighters until someone went upstairs. Anyway, Janine wanted to create a school to help teach and celebrate the music. The first summer's schedule was grand and sweeping—master musicians from Cape Breton, Ireland, Scotland, and the U.S. teaching various Celtic musics on fiddle, piano, and guitar. Some weeks went very well, but not all did. One or two weeks were canceled because of undersubscription. This year the plan is accordingly more modest. There will be fewer teachers, and the focus will be on local musicians and music. It's hard to find the recordings even if you're lucky enough to be here; personal distribution depends on the energy and commitment of the artists and their families. Someone has to take the tapes and disks to the stores. I've been looking for early recordings by Kinnon Beaton. Eventually, I asked him if they were available. He said he doesn't much care for the two first ones and that he's stopped bringing them to the stores. But he offered to see what he had at home and to give them to me, refusing to take any money. The next night, at a concert where we agreed to meet, he had a tape and an LP for me.

At ten on a clear Monday morning, week three of the Ceilidh Trail School begins. There are two fiddle instructors. At 73, Buddy MacMaster has been playing for something like 61 years. He's the grand master, a local favorite, a very active dance fiddler who has taught in Scotland and performed in many venues. He's as good as they come, a world-class musician. Jackie Dunn, from Antigonish originally, but now living in Judique—where Buddy also lives—is young, in her late 20s. From a family that has a deep involvement, especially on her mother's part, in the music, she's a fine fiddler, a terrific piano player, and a very good stepdancer.

These family relationships are worth pondering. An anthropologist doing kinship studies might be struck by how tight the family networks are and how the webs cover extensive territory. If we start with Buddy, we find that his daughter Mary Elizabeth is a fine piano player who often accompanies her father. His niece, Natalie MacMaster, is taking the larger world of Celtic music by storm. Buddy's sister, Betty Lou, married Kinnon Beaton, and she often plays piano for his fiddling. His nephew, the father, Donald Angus Beaton, was a very influential fiddler. With his mother, Elizabeth, his brother, Joey, and his father, Kinnon recorded an important LP, The Beaton's of Mabou, in the mid-1970s. Joey's wife Karen is a fine fiddler. Elizabeth still plays the piano. Kinnon and Joey's nephews-Donald Angus's grandsons—Glenn Graham and Rodney MacDonald featured earlier in this essay. Harvey Beaton, the well known stepdancer and his close relative. Dougie MacDonald is a cousin of the aforementioned Howie MacDonald. Howie plays the fiddle, keyboard, and other instruments with the Rankin Family band. Two other Rankins, Mary and Rita, have begun recording as singers. I understand that they are distant relatives of the better-known Rankin Family band. Janine Randall's father, Johnny Muise, is a distant relative of Arthur Muise, another fine local fiddler. Jackie Dunn, the grand-niece of fiddler and composer Dan Hughie MacEachern, often plays with Wendy MacIsaac. Wendy is Ashley MacIsaac's cousin. Ashley is

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distantly related to Buddy MacMaster. On and on it goes.

The school offers two tracks of fiddle instruction. One is for people who are beginners through intermediates. The other is for intermediate through advanced players. I'm in the intermediate fiddle group. We spend the morning with Buddy, the afternoons with Jackie. Other people are here to work on piano with Joey Beaton-what a master player he is!-and guitar with Brian Doyle, son of Maybelle Chisholm Doyle, a legendary piano player. Brian is a working musician, making a living playing in Celtic and pop bands on the island. At lunch time we break for a short concert by the instructors. Others show up to be part of the audience and other musicians come by on occasion. Then we scatter, looking for lunch, running errands, coming back a couple of hours later to finish the day in our lessons. At night, there's music everywhere.

Buddy is a patient teacher. He's one of the most expressive fiddlers I've ever heard, coaxing beautiful tone from his instrument, using complicated and challenging ornamentation. When he stops playing, he's very quiet, mild-mannered. He's self taught, but he believes in the written music, as do many musicians here. We sit in a small classroom, Buddy facing us, with his music on a stand in front of him. We're learning mostly by ear from his example, but he wants the music in front of him so that he can make sure that he's teaching us the tunes as written. The first three tunes he chooses to teach us are recent compositions, a march and a reel by Jerry Holland, another reel by John Morris Rankin. In these cases, it's quite possible that the written music conveys an authoritative sense of how the music should be played. But on the older tunes, I'm less sanguine, while Buddy is no less convinced, it seems, that one should refer to the written music. So, he teaches us to bow as the music is written, slurring (taking more than one note in a single bow-stroke) only when Jack's sheet indicates. The Cape Breton style, unlike others I've played, rests on the idea of vigorously bowing one note per stroke, with few exceptions. The down-bows, which tend to be the most forceful, come on the beat, and you virtually always begin a measure with a down-bow.

By day's end I will have sat for about four hours in classrooms with Buddy and Jackie. My classmates are a mixed crew. There are youngsters-the 12-year-old son of some friends of mine from New Hampshire is here, as are two girls of about his age. One of the girls came from a small island community in British Columbia; three generations of women from her family have traveled here together. Oddly enough, in the guitar class there's a woman, probably in her forties, who comes from the same small island, although the two contingents don't know each other. In my group there's a full-time contradance musician from Massachusetts. Later in the week, a well known contradance and English country dance fiddler resident in Vermont will join us. There's a twenty-something Acadian woman from New Brunswick, now living in France. A man in his forties has come from Norway. An early music player from California is here, en route to Europe for other musical events. Other people are in and out through the week. Although most of us have paid by the week, it's possible to pay for a day's tuition. Janine's idea was that this would encourage local people to participate.

Now it's Monday night, and I might be in a folklorist's paradise. A co-op devoted to reviving Gaelic in Cape Breton, which publishes a newspaper and sponsors public programs, is now housed at the Glenora Distillery, a new venture-the only single-malt distillery, they claim, in North America. People are going to pay five dollars to hear a cultural specialist talk to two master musicians in a two-hour program presented by the co-op. We get there a bit late, and the room is packed-about a hundred people. Willie Kennedy, a marvelous, soft-spoken musician whose style represents an older generation, is on stage along with Fr. Angus Morris, who is obviously much more accustomed to public presentations. Catholic clergy have played a surprisingly active role in the fiddle music here, from performing it to organizing festivals. The public interview is a bit stiff; they've rehearsed the questions, which defeats spontaneity, but the talk is informative, and the playing that follows is a treat.

This Monday night I've decided to go from the Distillery to the adult dance in Brook Village. I haven't been to an adult dance before. My understanding is that the distinction between adult and family dances has to do with liquor laws. You must be 19 to go to an adult dance, and once there you can purchase tickets that you use as scrip to buy drinks. Buddy is playing tonight, which is why I've chosen to come. For more than three decades he's been the regular player at the Thursday family dances in Glencoe Mills, but he's decided to take it a bit easier this week because he's teaching for five days, so he's opted out for Thursday. This is my only chance to see him play a dance. Last year, Max and the kids and I went to Glencoe Mills, where he was astonishingly good. Want to hear him, he warmed up, he played the very best. His whole body, feeling the floor, shoulders rocking from side to side, his trunk moving in out in time with the music. That night in Glencoe, the floor of the stage was wet with his sweat. It's as if he's possessed, and the compounding of his mild demeanor and his musical intensity yields a powerful experience for dancers and spectators.

Running from 10 until 1 in the morning, the dance is in a hall I've never visited. The rain pours down as I make my way to Brook Village along dark quiet roads. The hall isn't mobbed the way West Mabou was, but the parking lot is full and the roadside is lined with cars. People sit at tables at the end opposite the stage. Buddy and Mary Elizabeth work hard, the sound amplified by Buddy's contact microphone, held on his instrument by a rubber band. Like most of the piano players here these days, Mary Elizabeth eschews the piano and plays an electronic keyboard. The dance floor is comfortably full, and I can't say that I miss last night's teenagers. Nobody dances. Some are content to socialize over a beer at the tables in the back, tapping their feet to the music. A handsome, well groomed man enters the room, says hello to me, and asks me where I'm from. A retired policeman who lived elsewhere on the island, he's moved back home. He looks to Buddy and tells me, "That man has played all over the world." Indeed, it's world-class traditional fiddle music happening in small halls every night here. To my mind, hearing Buddy is as good as it can get. The rain has stopped as the dance ends, and I'm in bed in the motel by 2 a.m.

Tuesday is much the same at the school. A friend from last year is slated to meet Bob, Bryn, and me tonight for a reunion, driving up from the Antigonish area for a fiddle lesson with Jerry Holland. I'm torn. In Mabou at the Beaton Building there's a Tuesday night program featuring Kinnon Beaton and friends. The goal, as in Buddy's class, is for us to be able to play the tunes Friday night in a school concert open to the public. People in this part of the world are so enthusiastic about the old music that, I'm told, they'll actually pay to hear students and their teachers play.

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Think concert; think old-time live radio. Then miniaturize what the mind’s eye presents, and Tuesday night at the Beaton Building will make sense. On Mabou's main street, with its white frame and plate glass windows, the small building was probably first a house. Then it might have been a restaurant, and its own dirt airstrip. The barn, converted to a small theater and hall for dancing, is, in the season, a popular venue for what's billed as “Three-Fiddler Concerts.”

Natalie MacMaster is at the Normaway tonight. In Margaree Valley, the Normaway Inn is a low-key but upscale resort, with an expensive and highly regarded restaurant, small cottages, an inn building, and its own dirt airstrip. The barn, converted to a small theater and hall for dancing, is, in the season, a popular venue for what's billed as “Three-Fiddler Concerts.”

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pretend at all, says simply "Buddy and Friends, 8 p.m." Willie Kennedy and Fr. Angus Morris are playing, playing well, giving me the pleasure of hearing Willie's very traditional style in a setting more comfortable for him than the Distillery was. The emcee announces a short break. Bob and Bryn are here from the school. They recognize Mary Janet MacDonald, last year's stepdance teacher, who has brought them, by prearrangement, a copy of her instructional video. I see Harvey Beaton, too, a well known stepdancer, perhaps 40. A few young children walk around. Then the emcee introduces Buddy and Mary Elizabeth as "the MacMasters," telling a story about Buddy's neighborliness to him years ago. Warm and enthusiastic applause follows. Buddy plugs in his fiddle microphone, and off the two of them go, playing beautifully in the hollow-sounding big hall. After every set of tunes he adjusts the tuning of his instrument. Then they're away again on the next set. They speak not a word to the audience, but it seems not to matter. Everyone, it is clear, loves the playing; this feels like a large family event as much as a concert.

Then something I haven't seen takes places. Mary Elizabeth picks up a fiddle. Betty Lou Beaton comes out and sits at the keyboard. Buddy and Mary Elizabeth play a couple of medleys of tunes with Betty Lou's accompaniment. Their bows move in nearly perfect synchrony, and the two fiddles go very well together. The crowd won't let the music stop, clamoring for an encore. Buddy and Mary Elizabeth come back. Piano and fiddle close the night. The audience shows, judging its appreciation. A few moments later, Buddy is on the floor near the stage, perhaps half a dozen men gathered around him, talking. I go up to say hello, and I hear talk about music and about neighboring connection. Buddy and I have a few pleasant words, and then I head for an early night at the motel.

More school on Thursday, Dougie MacDonald stops by to play in the miniconcert before lunch. He and Brian Doyle play a couple of sets of tunes, one pretty much traditional, one a swinging, improvisational-sounding combination of tunes with more complicated chords and a jazzy feel. Later, we're told that such playing is considered by some to be too far outside the tradition. Afterward, talking with Dougie for a moment, I learned that he had been using a chainsaw all morning, and that, as a result, he felt that his hands were not working as well as they ought. Dougie has been a coal-miner, although I don't know if he still is. Buddy worked for the railroad, a telegrapher. I understand. This is a music played mostly by hard-working men and women. We give more emphasis in the classes today to the tunes we're to perform at the final concert on Friday night.

On Thursday nights, at least in the season, there's a ceilidh on the Ceilidh Trail. In the hall of the Inverness fire station, hosted by Alice Freeman, who owns the Bear Paw gift shop across the road, the ceilidh is one of the few public musical events I haven't sampled in my two trips. I've stood outside the hall and listened, but I haven't crossed the threshold. Years ago, I went to a ceilidh in a hotel in downtown Perth, in Scotland, an event targeted at tourists and locals who wanted to dance in a kit and celebrate something. The ceilidh in Inverness appears to share some features with the tourist ceilidhs in Scotland. Here you'll see a few people in kilts, and you'll likely hear the highland pipes. Few people in play the fiddle and stepdance, and some of the better known performers-Jackie Dunn, for instance-make appearances as well. These affairs run in the early evening, and they are pretty much spectator events. Perhaps they raise funds for the firefighters. I've not gone to them because I've been too busy trying to get a meal and then head to the dance at Glencoe Mills.

Thursday night at Glencoe Mills is one of the most popular dances on the island. It has been Buddy's dance for something like 30 years, but tonight he's taking a rest. Remember, he told us that he planned to take it a bit easier this week because of the teaching. From what I can see, taking it easy means playing only Sunday's Broad Cove concert, Monday's Brook Village dance, and Wednesday's program in Port Hood while teaching for five full days and playing in the Tuesday session at the Distillery. That's not to say that I know all he did that week. It's only what I saw.

Drive south on the Ceilidh Trail from Inverness. In Mabou, turn left at the sign for the religious shrine. Then the road turns to gravel, but keep going, staying on the gravelly main road, traveling not too fast if you want to avoid the dust. People are not sure how far it is on the unpaved road, but my estimate is seven miles. Then you're at a crossroad, with a gentle wooden church, very well maintained, on one corner, the parish hall, with "a thousand welcomes" in Gaelic over the door, across the way. Rodney MacDonald is playing tonight in Buddy's place with Joel Chiasson on keyboard. It's moody, the music at an aggressively high volume. Rodney is one of the hardest-driving fiddlers around. In his mid-twenties, he is, I've been told, a physical education teacher in Mabou. Chiasson is also young, a very clean, very hard-driving keyboard player who's on Rodney's solo recording and on Rodney and Glenn's new CD. The crowd is full of enthusiasm, and there's little room to walk, other than in an el in the hall where the soft drinks and chips are on sale. The Bose 802 speakers are distorting at one point, the volume so high, a whirling high-pitched sound drilling into my ears, sounding like a science fiction film soundtrack gone berserk. I run into Mary Lamey, daughter of the late Bill Lamey, mainstay of the Boston Cape Breton community, a fine musician whose recorded music is now mostly out of print. Last year at this dance, with Buddy playing, I danced briefly with a woman who had gone to school in this building. Now she lives off the island, but like so many others, she was back for as long as she could manage during the summer. This dance may be especially well known here because the hall gives its name to one of Buddy's two recordings. The square sets in not square at all because of the loss of the four-couple set as the basic formation-snake around the room, like amoebas, pushing out to fill expansive areas, squeezing into tightness when imperative. Rodney's foot pounds, his black shirt wet from exertion. In the parking lot, people talk, perhaps tasting from a bottle or can. Cars overflow the gravel lot, lining the road. It's dark, but it seems that no one lives nearby—lights are not evident. This is an enclave within an enclave. Avoid driving home too fast, the music in your head, the dust filling the road.

Friday. More practice at the school for tonight's Ceilidh Trail School concert, this time with Joey Beaton's piano accompaniment. The piano is the rhythm instrument of choice in this music, occasionally supplemented by an acoustic guitar. I say "piano," but in most cases the accompanists play an electronic keyboard, foregoing pianos even when one sits in the hall. Joey Beaton has told me that he much prefers the old uprights, but on the evidence of what I've seen, he seems to be voicing a minority opinion. It sounds to me as if most of the recent recordings use keyboards, not pianos. Sometimes I must ask piano players about this. Perhaps it's that the keyboard sound can be cleaner, with less sustain. Perhaps it's that they're always in tune. Perhaps it's that they're easier to move. Or perhaps I'm missing entirely the local view.

Tonight's concert is in a parish hall, a bit north of the school, just off the Ceilidh Trail on the Shore Road. It's a T-shaped hall, kind of odd, a small stage centered in the top of the T. Janine's voice is nearly gone, the result of three weeks of announcing, organizing, tending, prodding. Alice Freeman has agreed to emcee. People pay a small admission charge to enter. Like the symposium at the Distillery, this event makes me marvel at the appetite and support for music here. The various groups-guitar, piano, the two levels of fiddle classes-perform what they've practiced, with Alice asking each person's name and home. The audience is warm in its response. In general, the concert seems to me to be a success. We demonstrate a square set, with Buddy playing-visitors showing locals what they already know. The twelve-year-old from New Hampshire plays a solo, introduced by Buddy as a very promising player; the crowd is very enthusiastic. Buddy plays some selections. Jackie joins him. People begin to dance. I say my goodbyes to everyone, heading for the dance at Southwest Margaree, bushed but intent on seeing a dance that I had heard still features the old square sets, the four-couple set.

It's another adult dance, although the musicians-Kyle Gilles, Dawn MacDonald, and Patrick Gilles on fiddle, keyboard, and guitar—are the youngest I've seen at a dance. These are people whose names are unknown to me. Like the adult dance at Brook Village, it's less crowded than the family dances, which take place at the school. They recognize Mary Janet MacDonald, last year's stepdance teacher, who has brought them, by prearrangement, a copy of her instructional video. I see Harvey Beaton, too, a well known stepdancer, perhaps 40. A few young children walk around. Then the emcee introduces Buddy and Mary Elizabeth as "the MacMasters," telling a story about Buddy's neighborliness to him years ago. Warm and enthusiastic applause follows. Buddy plugs in his fiddle microphone, and off the two of them go, playing beautifully in the hollow-sounding big hall. After every set of tunes he adjusts the tuning of his instrument. Then they're away again on the next set. They speak not a word to the audience, but it seems not to matter. Everyone, it is clear, loves the playing; this feels like a large family event as much as a concert.
formation is what they remember from the old days, and they'll lament the tumult on most of today's dance floors. Tonight, the hall is beginning to fill with people from the school, and I'm sufficiently worn out for that to send me home. It feels as if a balance is shifting; I don't want to spend my last night in an event that feels too much an extension of the school.

Perhaps the balance is shifting. Perhaps this will become a place that, like too many others, devolves into a parody of itself in the way it presents itself both to itself and to others. In one sense, Cape Bretoners have done a remarkable job of being the custodians of their music. They've created and accepted a narrative of its history, one that values continuity with a Scottish past and speaks of a revival from within, sparked by a priest. They've reached a point in which the players largely control the means of disseminating the music; the musicians finance and market their recordings and tune books, in some cases—with distribution that is nearly entirely local. Historically, interactions with the media have largely been close to home—some CBC broadcasting from Halifax, radio from Antigonish. The people who crowd the summer dance halls are for the most part local or tied to locality. But even in the year since I first visited, I see signs of change. Ashley and Natalie are both on big labels in the U.S., playing in significant venues across the continent. Some of the tune books are in distribution by Mel Bay, probably the largest North American producer of tune books and tutors in acoustic music. Buddy taught for a week last spring in a big production called "Gaelic Roots" at Boston College. U.S. radio shows that call themselves Celtic are adding some Cape Breton music to their play-lists. A month after I return, I hear a couple of people talking at a New Hampshire contradance about their visits to Cape Breton in the summer past, one speaking of dancing at Glencoe Mills. People come to Cape Breton now for the spectacular scenery, to drive the Cabot Trail's serpentine roads above the sea, perhaps, too, for their idea that they will see a simple, decent way of life. Some come for the music. After me, the deluge?

Tourist materials announce "Celebrate Our Music, 1997-1998" in Nova Scotia. Buddy's picture, with Stephanie Willis, is on the cover of the big free guidebook, a manipulated image in which the backdrop is added. They're pictured on the provincial tourist map, as well. Although the Nova Scotia year of music extends to other parts of the province and venerates more than one genre, Buddy's photo on the map says something quite palpable about the way this music is being put on the map.

I wish the musicians and their communities well as they are mapped into domains called tourism, heritage, and entertainment. I wish the dancers well as the halls grow more crowded with locals and visitors, as the volume increases. I wish this place well, as the fishing closes down after the mining ended. I berate myself for being part of what may be soon a flood of people who make me wary-part of the problem, not part of a solution. Yet, for better or worse, the flood may be a solution of sorts, a way of bolstering economic viability for a community context with a music with guts and great staying power. When I grumbled about tourists to Jackie Dunn, she told me how much it's tourists who are wanted. But when I talked with John Campbell when he was back in Watertown after his summer trip to his house in Port Hood, John told me how good it was toward the end of the summer when just the regular people were there and things were back to normal. Somehow there's a cultural and economic balance that must be found between the two perspectives, tourism on the one hand, and back to normal on the other.

Sometime in the early 1970s when I was about to begin, or was in my early years of, graduate school, Max, and I took a trip to New Brunswick. We were heading for the Mirimichi festival, which had the reputation of presenting entirely local music. I was young, enthusiastic, and inexperienced in these issues. In my mind's eye, I saw loggers emerging from the woods to sing an old ballad or play an old tune, disappearing back into the woods immediately thereafter, only to materialize again for next year's festival. We hadn't been to Maritime Canada before, and despite the fierce bugs, we had some very good times. The festival, though, was a disappointment. It seemed more a territorial social occasion than a celebration of local music. For me, it at times actually verged on rudeness. On stage in a civic building--was it the town hall?--some elderly people sat, indeed, taking their turns singing or playing tunes. But the audience seemed not to care. The chat in the room overwhelmed the performances from the stage. This is enervated, and must now be less good than it once was, I remember thinking.

I heard Sandy Ives' name invoked during the festival. My faded memories aren't helpful as to exactly where it appeared, but I remember being struck that the festival organizers seemed to want to add some legitimacy to an event that seemed to me in decline. One way to do it was to point out—perhaps in the printed program materials, possibly from the stage—that folklorist Sandy Ives used to visit the Mirimichi festival. In an ironic inversion, it would seem that having had a folklorist visit conferred authenticity.

At that point, I didn't know Sandy, and I'm not certain that I knew his work. But the citations stuck with me, and they certainly predisposed me to read his work in graduate school and beyond. He was one of the first scholars I knew who'd staked a kind of claim to knowing a region well; it's hard to think "folklore," "Maine," and "Downeast" without also thinking "Sandy Ives." Now, roughly twenty-five years later, I've found myself back in the Maritimes, but in a very different world of music.

In his work in Maine and the Maritimes Sandy Ives brilliantly examines traces of music cultures that resided mostly in memory. Vivid as those memories are, and as compelling as Sandy's descriptions and analyses are, one might argue that the memories represent what can happen—as it all too often does—when a community can't maintain a balance between continuity and change. In Cape Breton, the balance, it seems to me, has yet to stabilize. In the meantime, the music is prospering exuberantly, and more and more people around the world are seeking it out. Where it will settle down is anyone's guess.

A further note:

The music doesn't sit still. As this article goes to press, early in 2000, I should mention a few changes. The famous CJFX ceilidh broadcast had, by last summer, become less oriented to Cape Breton music, more inclusive of various kinds of Celtic music performances from Canada, Ireland, Scotland, and elsewhere. The Rankin Family announced that they would no longer perform, and shortly after that, John Morris Rankin, the brilliant traditional player and band member, died in a tragic road accident, his truck plunging into the icy sea, not far from home. The Beaton Building is now the Red Shoe Pub, having been sold, renovated, and expanded. Joey and Karen Beaton have moved the ceilidhs across the street to the larger Mabou hall. Ashley MacIsaac has been the subject of considerable media coverage because of his extravagant rockstar lifestyle, and Natalie MacMaster continues to wow audiences around the world. Rodney MacDonald was elected to the Nova Scotia legislature, running on the Conservative Progressive ticket, and he is currently minister for tourism and culture. The last time I saw Glenn Graham, in the summer of 1999, he told me he was starting an M.A. program in Atlantic Canada studies. Every year I go back to Cape Breton, the dances and concerts seem more crowded, and music continues to "drive 'er," as they say. What doesn't seem to change is the remarkable graciousness and friendliness of the many Cape Bretoners in and around the music scene.