# "Devil on the Fiddle":
# The Musical and Social Ramifications of Genre Transformation in Cape Breton Music

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In 1995, fiddler Ashley MacIsaac released the album *Hi, How Are You Today?* that featured MacIsaac performing traditional Celtic tunes accompanied by modern rock instruments. The musical genre transformation on the album (notable because people who were not fans of Celtic music bought this album, tracks were released for airplay, and music videos accompanied the singles) can be studied according to the types of genre transformation outlined by Alastair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature*. If MacIsaac's goal was to offer a popular rock album while playing traditional tunes on the fiddle, critics and members of his audience inevitably questioned his motivation, from which charges of pandering and exploitation followed. Alternate interpretations stressed that MacIsaac was merely adapting traditional music to reflect a changing musical climate. This thesis examines such perspectives, along with the global phenomenon of modernizing folk music amidst the ambiguous boundary between popular and folk musical genres.

En 1995 a eu lieu le lancement de l'album d'Ashley MacIsaac *Hi, How Are You Today?* (Bonjour, comment allez-vous aujourd'hui). Dans cet album, MacIsaac interprète au violon des mélodies traditionnelles du Cap Breton accompagnées par des instruments propres au rock moderne. Le processus de transformation des genres musicaux, sur cet album, est remarquable car des personnes qui n'avaient jamais écouté de musique celtique ont acheté l'album, des pistes de celui-ci ont été jouées sur les ondes publiques et des vidéos ont été réalisés pour accompagner certaines pièces. Alastair Fowler, dans *Kinds of Literature* (Les différents types de littérature), présente des types de transformation des genres musicaux permettant d'étudier celui qui a lieu dans l'album de MacIsaac plus en profondeur. Si l'objectif de MacIsaac était d'offrir un album rock populaire tout en y incorporant des mélodies traidtionnelles au violon, les critiques et certains membres de son auditoire ont inévitablement mis en doute ses raisons, avançant qu'il a agi ainsi seulement pour flatter et exploiter le public. Par contre, d'autres observateurs prétendent que MacIsaac désirait tout simplement refléter la transformation actuelle du milieu musical en adaptant des mélodies plus anciennes. Cette étude explorera ces sujets en plus d'aborder la question du phénomène global de modernisation de la musique folklorique qui a lieu autour de la frontière ambiguë entre les styles populaire et folklorique.

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**Preface**

I grew up on Cape Breton Island, part of Nova Scotia, Canada, and always new about the island's distinct musical tradition. My father occasionally played his fiddle, took me to concerts in different parts of the island (known by many as 'Scotch Concerts'), and played recordings of Cape Breton fiddlers and bagpipers. Moving into my teenage years, however, my interest declined; I went to fewer concerts, and I rarely heard my father perform.

Between 1997-2000, when I was in my late teenage years, I reestablished a fervent interest in Cape Breton's traditional music due to the band Slainte Mhath. The ensemble included a fiddler, pianist, bagpiper, step-dancer and bodhran player, and a drummer playing a conventional drum kit. Their arrangements of traditional tunes were innovative and energetic, often incorporating Latin percussion instruments, bass guitar, keyboards, and occasionally vocal sampling. It was this presentation of the music—so far removed from style I grew up hearing—that renewed my interest, and led me to reexamine the music I forgot I enjoyed.

During my undergraduate musical training, I chose to study piano accompaniment within Cape Breton's musical tradition for a summer research project at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. Although a modest ethnomusicological study, it nonetheless increased the limited amount of research done on traditional Cape Breton music, a subject rarely studied academically.

The number of scholarly studies on Cape Breton's musical tradition is limited because the island is small geographically, sparsely populated, and the regional music only received national attention since the 1970s when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation released a documentary, *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*. Before 1970,

public performances were rare, although the music always thrived privately within families.

Cape Breton's traditional music was exposed to an even broader and more diverse audience following Ashley MacIsaac's rise to fame during the 1990s. His 1995 album, *Hi How Are You Today?*, featured unconventional arrangements of traditional Cape Breton and Scottish fiddle tunes altered instrumentally to create popular rock music with a clear traditional edge; however, in altering traditional performance conventions, MacIsaac met resistance from many members of Cape Breton's musical community. How MacIsaac achieved this musical genre transformation—from traditional, or folk, music to a popular genre—the reaction of the community, and his reaction to critics are the central concerns of this thesis.

## 1.0 Introduction

Awareness seems widely shared that Ashley MacIsaac performed some genre-bending on his 1995 album, *Hi How Are You Today?*. Larry LeBlanc, writing for *Billboard Magazine*, for example, begins his review of the album by noting that "although rooted in Cape Breton-styled traditional fiddling music, Ashley MacIsaac's debut album, *Hi How Are You Today?*, also encompasses such unlikely contemporary musical elements as punk and grunge."[1] While this point is easily accepted, questions remain: what are the mechanics of this transformation, and what was the impact of MacIsaac's music on the community that fostered his development as a traditional musician? To answer the former question, and therefore to try to understand how the musical genre shift or blend took place, literary genre theory can serve as a research model. Furthermore, understanding the community and culture of Cape Breton Island,

[1] Larry LeBlanc, "MacIsaac's Not Just Fiddling Around" *Billboard* 107/43 (1995): 62.

specifically MacIsaac's home, Inverness County, while considering work by scholars who have examined the implications of introducing folk music to a contemporary popular music audience, will highlight some of the broad ramifications of this musical shift.

These are difficult questions to answer because it is easy for studies of music and culture to rely largely on subjective, aesthetic judgments. Genre analysis, however, is central to many creative disciplines, and provides a variety of theoretical models to choose from which can be used to plot the genre transformation heard on *Hi How Are You Today?*. In general, the musician or composer can interpret any of his/her novel ideas as a generic innovation, but there is also the order provided by previous categorization that can provide insight into such topics as the composer's intent, performance practice, and formal nuance.[2]

When referring to texts that share similar characteristics—whether compositional, aesthetic, abstract, or similar factors—the connective ideas can be tangible or abstract, objective or subjective, subtle or clear. The diverse use of "genre", and the idea that something can fall into various genres at the same time, has led theorists to propose ideas on the origin and construction of genres, the transformation of genres, and theories regarding hierarchies of genres. This complexity is noted by David Duff in his introduction to *Modern Genre Theory*: "Having functioned since Aristotle as a basic assumption of Western literary discourse, shaping critical theory and creative practice for more than two thousand years, the notion of genre is one whose meaning, validity and purpose have been repeatedly questioned in the last two hundred."[3] Despite the difficulties, the notion of genre has attracted so much theoretical attention that there are

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[2] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 170.
[3] David Duff, *Modern Genre Theory* (New York: Longman, 2000), p. 1.

many approaches available for use in critical study. Such theoretical work has been applied to the study of literature and film, but less often to music. The goal in this thesis is to apply previous work in literary genre theory, specifically by Alastair Fowler, to study Ashley MacIsaac's attempt to transform a musical genre from folk to popular.

Although genre identity and transformation are difficult analytical concepts, in this project the ideas being applied to the analytical framework, i.e., folk music and popular music, are ambiguous and often perceived in many different ways. When discussing folk music, for examples, some scholars appreciate its emotional nuance in lieu of formal complexity, while others marvel at finding a piece that has an intricate harmonic scheme (although finding either complexity or intricacy in folk music is not exceptional). Many are challenged by music that is often transmitted aurally and therefore has too many variations to accurately record. This freedom, however, does not mean folk music performance lacks expectations; rigor is simply perceived differently. Critical techniques used in Western art music therefore provide limited results in folk music analysis because the aesthetic framework is so different.

Bruce Headlam demonstrates that while a classically-trained musician or music critic may create a frame of reference for themselves by comparing Cape Breton's traditional music to classical music, the approach communicates meaning with the same precision as a poem's significance is conveyed when translated into a new language. Writing for *Saturday Night* magazine, Headlam explains that the showmanship associated with MacIsaac's approach, for example, is common among classical violinists as well, and while comparable, the spectacle is not equally warranted:

> All violinists are show-offs. Concerto-stopping cadenzas, Paganini etudes, gravity-defying jazz runs, these are the crowd-pleasing sleights-of-hand violinists indulge in, as if to say "forget everybody else on stage. Watch me."...Most of these pyrotechnics centre on the left hand, the one

> on the violin's fingerboard. But Cape Breton fiddling doesn't allow for much of that....The transparency of the tunes—most can be played comfortably in first position, and fiddlers' improvisations don't veer far from the melody itself—means that what virtuosity does exist in Cape Breton is found in the bowing hand.[4]

Although Headlam thinks MacIsaac's technical display frivolous compared to violinists whose virtuosic displays with their non-bowing hand create a deserved spectacle, he explains that MacIsaac's critics have little reason to deride the performer for simply enhancing the performance practice upon which the tradition is based: "Cape Breton fiddle music has always been vulgar music, in the good sense of that word: dancing music that thrives on the beat, as opposed to the more pronounced slurring found in Irish fiddling. MacIsaac highlights elements that have always existed in the music" (57). MacIsaac's traditionalist critics, therefore, according to Headlam, do not get the point, and do not see why MacIsaac's approach is truly worth concern:

> The traditionalists probably have more reason to worry about the new popularity of Cape Breton music on the international stage. The threat is that the island sound will become just another trendy boutique for pop-tinged mainstream musicians (Sting, Peter Gabriel, et al.) to be dumped in the "world-music" bin along with Senegalese drummers, klezmer accordionists, and Pakistani Sufi singers. "There is that commercial aspect to it now—bringing it to a different audience—which I'm somewhat guilty of," says MacIsaac. "Well, very guilty of" (57).

Headlam is more critical of the ramifications of changing traditional music into an accessible popular music form than he is willing to discuss how MacIsaac created this new sound. Coming from a music critic who is clearly more comfortable in a concert hall than a dance hall, for Headlam to argue that MacIsaac's fault is not his creative expression but the market he will attract in the process essentially defies Headlam's own discipline by not examining the music before evaluating its impact. A different approach must be developed: one that examines the ramifications of altering traditional practice, but first explores what has been changed and how.

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[4] Bruce Headlam, "The Devil Went Down to Cape Breton," *Saturday Night* 110/7 (1995): 54-58.

In order to study an example of genre transformation in this music, amidst the inherent challenges and complexity, it is best to incorporate ethnographic elements, including anecdotes, interview excerpts, and occasionally, my personal reflections on the project. When dealing with a small community made up of proud and traditionally-minded people, the outsider must carefully study the music. How the music was altered can neither be examined, nor the ramifications considered, until the tradition itself is grasped—including the historical background that shows how this individual style was created.

The first section of this thesis will provide historical background on the emigration of Scottish people to North America and other regions, including the social and economic reasons for emigration, and where they settled and why. Scottish immigrants contributed greatly to Cape Breton's developing culture since they dramatically increased the population from about 6000 to 35,000 over approximately twenty years. Although, overall, Cape Breton was and remains largely forest-covered and is staggered with small, rural communities, each community has an individual identity that fosters close ties, loyalty, and traditional values among residents; some of these communities developed distinct musical styles with their own harmonic, rhythmic, and performance variants.

A strong music tradition developed in Inverness County, Cape Breton Island, where the first Scottish immigrants settled on the island in the nineteenth century. Not only did the musical tradition develop, but many residents of the area were aware of this individualized musical culture. This recognition lead to a sense that a musical tradition exists in Inverness County, which heavily contributed to the community's identity, and

fostered the careers of musicians who have become known nationally and internationally, including The Rankin Family and Natalie MacMaster.

The context for Ashley MacIsaac's career was established by the Cape Breton musical group The Rankin Family who during the 1980s and 1990s become known in Canada, Europe, and the United States by arranging traditional Cape Breton songs and tunes to include popular music instrumentation, and also wrote original songs that referenced traditional Cape Breton culture. Even before The Rankins, during the 1940s and 1950s, Canadian fiddler Winston Fitzgerald also pushed genre boundaries—presumably in order to widen his audience as well—by adding non-traditional instruments to his performances. He also had a regular radio show that was heard in Atlantic Canada, and was occasionally on national radio and television broadcasts.

Works that look at Cape Breton music and culture encompass the first section of the literature review, the next section of this thesis. Many of the non-academic sources that discuss music base their comments and conclusions on anecdotes, and while stories are important to depict Cape Breton's traditional music culture, there are many variables as well; in other words, relying on personal stories can lead to false interpretation.

Looking at the state of literature on genre in popular music in the second section of the literature review, several important publications must be highlighted. The first, Franco Fabbri's 1980 paper, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications", and "What Kind of Music?" are pioneering works that consider how to incorporate music and genre studies. In the former article, Fabbri proposes a definition of musical genre and describes five generic rules: formal and technical rules, semiotic rules, behaviour rules, social and ideological rules, and economic and juridical rules. The rules were based on

Fabbir's interpretation of music and genre at the time he wrote the paper, but the author hopes these rules will nonetheless offer a framework for future conceptions of music and genre.

The second notable piece of literature on popular music and genre is Simon Frith's "Genre Rules" from his 1996 book, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Overall, Frith's book is an overview of perceptions of popular music and the interaction of music and the business market, but Frith examines these issues more comprehensively than previous studies. He outlines how genre is central to the way fans identify with popular music—including research on which demographic responds to what musical genre—but in doing so exposes how unpredictable such reception theory can be. The relationship between genre label and artist (and therefore the record label and music market) is not simple, however, and despite many attempts by record companies to predict the fan's reaction, genre labels may change simply because a popular artist's fanbase has changed.

The third work on genre and popular music, David Brackett's article, "Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover," also explores the relationship between genre labels in popular music and music marketing, but more significantly questions the role of music analysis within this debate. Arguing that including music analysis will not alienate the non-musician from understanding, Brackett proposes a way to ease the reader into an analytical music discussion. There are common threads among these papers which address genre and music, but each presents the topic from a distinct perspective.

In the third section of the literature review, some significant works on the implications of mixing folk music with modern production will be highlighted. Among

them is the work *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* by editors Philip Bohlman and Martin Stokes. Finton Valleley's essay, "The Apollos of Shamrockery: Traditional Musics in the Modern Age" looks at the criticism faced by modern Celtic rock groups. This is less an even-handed discussion and more so a critical essay, but is still useful to the discussion in this thesis since the author presents a clear point of view. After reviewing Valleley's essay and the other literature relevant to this project's central question, it will be necessary to outline the social context for MacIsaac's 1995 album.

Clearly, there was a social and musical context for MacIaac's album, *Hi How Are You Today?*. His 1995 release can be seen as a natural (although perhaps dramatic) point in a process that has gone on for years: MacIsaac is only following other notable figures, such as Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald and the Rankin Family, who tried to increase the audience for Cape Breton's traditional music by using modern instrumentation and production techniques. Questions remain, however, which are central to this thesis and cannot be answered knowing this point alone; for example, although MacIsaac's approach was not so far removed from those who pushed boundaries before him, why did he became more successful? What motivated those who criticized MacIsaac's approach since MacIsaac was not the first musician to push genre boundaries within traditional Cape Breton music? These central questions cannot be considered independently of the social context for *Hi How Are You Today?* and its reception.

## 2.0 The Central Question

### 2.1 Stating the Thesis Question

While Ashley MacIsaac's first two albums, *Close to the Floor* and *A Cape Breton Christmas* had established MacIsaac as a local hero of sorts, the musical shift on his third album, *Hi How Are You Today?*, was not warmly received by purists. Released in 1995,

the album reached the triple platinum sales level in Canada by 1997, the same year of his successful US tour, which made him a recognizable figure across North America.

Releasing this album was therefore an important event for residents of Cape Breton Island, specifically in his home of Inverness County. But the album's significance was not only because it was marketed and consumed differently than the traditional music on which it was based (people who had never listened to Celtic music bought this album, certain tracks were released for airplay, and music videos were made to accompany the singles), but instead due to its wide-ranging yet specialized aesthetic appeal: performers and listeners of traditional Cape Breton music, and Celtic or popular music in general, were both drawn to the distinct sound.

The album's collective impact, and how MacIsaac achieved it, therefore raises many questions. Musically, what were the implications of introducing a hybrid of the region's traditional Celtic music and more common rock music? What was (and continues to be) the social impact of this transformation on MacIsaac, his Cape Breton contemporaries, and his fans? If MacIsaac's goal was to make a popular rock album while playing traditional tunes on the fiddle (some tracks included a singer performing Gaelic songs), what was MacIsaac's motivation, and is this an example of pandering and exploitation? Alternatively, did MacIsaac merely adapt traditional music to the changing musical climate, as Fitzgerald and The Rankins did before him, and was followed by other Cape Breton musicians after this release?[5] These questions highlight the larger implications of working in the entertainment industry within a capitalist system; in other words, the tension between creativity and commerce. This is a particularly vital issue

[5] Natalie MacMaster, a contemporary who grew up in the same Cape Breton village and is the same age as MacIsaac, released the album *No Boundaries* in 1996, her first major commercial success, which offered both traditional and modern arrangements of the region's fiddle music.

when considering traditional music, in which performers and audiences tend to evaluate the music according to real or imagined ties to pre-capitalist music-making.

It is important to pose questions on the implications of the interaction between traditional music and modern production and reception. Cape Breton Island's music, however, has not benefited from more than a handful of ethnomusicological contributions, perhaps due to the region's size and population. Similar questions, however, have been posed for different types of folk music, world music, and popular music in general, but this project offers a unique case study. How popular music and commercialism interact and the resulting implications is often considered within popular music studies, but this thesis adds a new layer by examining the implications of folk music as commercialized popular music.

**2.2 Central Terminology**

As Richard Middleton discusses in *Studying Popular Music*, both popular and folk music have variable definitions, and are often defined in relation to one another: "the latter is often seen as giving way to the former, as 'traditional' societies modernize, isolated folk enclaves are assimilated into capitalist cultural relations, old-fashioned rural populations are urbanized, and commercially organized practices supersede folk practices."[6] Popular music, specifically, has many definitions within twentieth century usage, ranging from normative definitions that consider popular music inferior, negative definitions (popular music is defined as not being something else), sociological definitions (music associated with a social group, whether it is produced by or for that group), and technologico-economic definitions which define popular music according to the level of technological production employed. Each of these categories is problematic

[6] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), p. 129.

because it is too rigid, too general, or exceptions are easy to find. Middleton acknowledges that the most successful discussions of what popular music embodies synthesize the many perspectives, but center on either the technological innovation or sociological connection which exist to varying degrees in all popular music (4-5). Similarly, most of the terms which denote the central ideas of this study are difficult to define, including 'culture', 'folk music', and 'traditional music'. The nuances determining or separating each of these concepts are not consistent among scholars, but since debate on these topics is central, how each of these terms will be used in this study must first be clarified.

Richard Middleton looks at the difficulty in defining 'culture' and 'folk'. If a culture's relationship with its perceived musical style is deterministic (which is often the case), notions of authenticity cloud perception. A culture's folk music is therefore idealized: "the authentic expression of a way of life now past or about to disappear (or in some cases, to be preserved or somehow revived)" (127). Determining what folk music is, however, is not clear, since many accepted definitions impose assumptions and generalizations upon large groups to which there are always exceptions. For example, folk music is often seen as the casual, simple, unwritten music of lower class peoples, contrasted with the formal, complex, and written music of the upper class (128).

There is a better way to study folk music, although Middleton admits that it is rare. The approach involves dismantling the generalized notion, although thoroughly accepted, that folk music exists in contrast to higher musical forms. Instead, each example of folk music should be considered as its own style within the wide scope of all music, thereby discouraging expectations of what should be within the folk music style

(128). With fewer restrictions, folk music scholars working within this notion of folk music can ask relevant questions on the impact of external musical and cultural influences. There are no rigid answers, but questions about the nature of cultural interaction and the impact of this on music will allow scholars to describe folk music and the accompanying culture more clearly.

By following Middleton's guidelines, traditional Cape Breton music will be interpreted as a distinct style of music that is not defined in relation to another style, but as one type of music amidst a more general perception of music. Furthermore, in this thesis , the terms 'traditional' and 'folk' will be used interchangeably as synonyms for the Cape Breton musical style defined in section 5.1. Similarly, 'traditional Cape Breton culture', or the culture that is referred to when discussing MacIsaac, Inverness County, or Cape Breton Island itself, is a general reference to the specific culture that fostered the development of Cape Breton music.

## 3.0 Historical Background: Scottish Settlement and Developing a Musical Tradition

### 3.1 Scottish Settlement on Cape Breton Island

Cape Breton Island was an isolated forest until the late eighteenth century. In 1774, the population was approximately 1000: 500 Acadians, 200 Irish, and the remainder American, British, and Scottish peoples. There were also native communities in the central and eastern regions of the island, which grew into many individual communities all over Cape Breton. Most of these early residents lived in southern Cape Breton, however, leaving most of the island uninhabited.[7]

At approximately the same time, there was a population spurt in Scotland, and the

[7] Don MacGillivray and Brian Tennyson, *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, NS: UCCB Press, 1980), pp. 32-33.

government altered the economic structure as a means of control, "from food-producing to rent-producing and from mutual dependence of laird and tenant to subservience of the tenant to the employee of an absent landlord."[8] Consequently, the government sponsored boatloads of Scots (mainly peasants who could afford the cost of the voyage) who were "driven out by sheer need, hoping for survival rather than fortune," and transported them to the new British colonies.[9] Cape Breton Island was the chosen settlement for the displaced immigrants since it was easy to get rid of the Highlanders on the nearly-uninhabited island which had many unwatched landing places.[10] Eventually the population of Cape Breton increased six-fold: from 6000 in 1815 to 18,700 in 1827 and 35,420 in 1838.[11]

Cape Breton became the largest Gaelic-speaking centre outside Scotland, and large sections of the island became reconstructions of the homeland, particularly in Inverness County, where most of the Scots settled. Pioneer life was bleak and isolated, which lead the Scots to seek comfort in music: "part of the fabric of each Gaelic-speaking man and woman was a passion for things musical and poetic in the stalwart Highland tradition."[12] It was common to have a fiddle in every Cape Breton household, although few read music, so melodies were transmitted through performance. It was just as common as any part of their speech.[13]

The distinct musical tradition which emerged was based on the "Golden Age of

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[8] James D. Scarlett, *The Highland People* (Fort William, Scotland: Nevisprint, 1997), p. 41.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[10] Don MacGillivray, *Cape Breton Historical Essays*, p. 32.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[12] Allister MacGillivray, *A Cape Breton Ceilidh* (Sydney: Sea-Cape Music, 1988), p. 24.
[13] Allister MacGillivray, *The Cape Breton Fiddler* (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1981), p. 1.

Scottish Fiddling."[14] This was the style which flourished in the Scottish Highlands (the homeland for most Cape Breton settlers) prior to the clearances. Many Scottish fiddlers reached iconic status during the Golden Age, composing challenging tunes and establishing rigorous performance standards. J. Scott Skinner is perhaps the best known of these great Scottish fiddlers, although he was a well-trained musician and composer who did not accurately represent the Scottish Highland settlers who revered him.[15] His status is undisputed among traditional Cape Breton fiddlers today, however, showing that the Scottish tradition was prominent in developing Cape Breton's musical style.

Scottish immigrants were also exposed to Acadian and Irish settlers and their music and culture when they arrived in Cape Breton.[16] There were different degrees of integration between settlers within communities on different parts of the island, and combined with the relative isolation of these communities, not only did a distinct Cape Breton musical style emerge, but distinct regional styles developed as well. Scottish, Acadian, and Irish settlers each contributed unique musical traditions to the development of Cape Breton's distinct musical style that matured due to the island's relative isolation and self-sufficiency that lasted many decades after the first immigrants arrived.[17]

### 3.2 Inverness County, Cape Breton Island

Cape Breton Island's residents were not only isolated from each other in small communities after the mass Scottish immigration, but the island itself is detached from

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[14] Kate Dunlay and David Greenberg, *Traditional Celtic Violin Music of Cape Breton*, p. 2.
[15] J. Scott Skinner was considered a great fiddler all over Scotland, although his influence is still discussed in Cape Breton, and many of his compositions remain standard repertoire both in Cape Breton and Scotland.
[16] Although Cape Breton's musical tradition developed largely due to performance style practiced by the new Scottish settlers, Cape Breton residents with different backgrounds and musical traditions contributed to the unique Cape Breton musical style. Traditional music in Scotland continued to develop in different ways, and today is considered by many to be far more removed from the "Golden Age" than Cape Breton's traditional style.
[17] Dunlay, *Violin*, p. 3.

mainland Nova Scotia, itself a peninsula separated from the rest of Canada. It is serendipitous that early Scottish settlers made their way to Cape Breton as it is one of North America's most eastern regions, and settlers tended to move west. Therefore, unless they first arrived in Cape Breton, or moved there from Newfoundland or other Maritime areas, European settlers would probably never have known that Cape Breton Island existed.[18]

The particular mix of settlers occurring within the remote communities lead to the distinct mix of Scottish, Irish, and Acadian influences heard in Cape Breton's traditional music. The population has grown substantially over the past century, but the island is far from urban in any sense. Outside of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality in eastern Cape Breton (itself by no means densely populated), the island is still largely forest-covered with residents living in small communities and in rural areas.

A strong part of the island's culture is its musical tradition. Although Cape Breton's identity is often essentially connected to the musical tradition, many residents do not play or even listen to the style. In the 1970s, there were very few fiddlers playing in public, the public favoring more popularized styles of musical entertainment. The tradition was understood to be dying (although it was alive within the many musical families and smaller communities on the island). The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation responded by filming and broadcasting a documentary, *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* in 1972.[19] This media coverage exposed the problem, and in 1973, the

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[19] The problem was not that people were not playing traditional music. Due to the prominence of musical families and music's central position in their lives, the music was unlikely to disappear entirely. The challenge was that few of the other residents who did not play were paying attention to this music, and there were fewer opportunities to hear the music in public. The CBC documentary drew awareness to this challenge, providing publicity for the festival that was subsequently organized.

first Festival of Cape Breton Fiddling was held in Glendale, attracting over 130 fiddlers.[20]

Today, Cape Breton Island's culture is defined by many things, but the issue most often associated with the region is its poor economy. During the final decades of the twentieth century, the island's main industries, including coal mining and steel making, were either dramatically downsized or collapsed entirely. The loss of so many jobs lead to an exodus, and those who stayed continue to be plagued by the challenges faced when living in a community with a volatile economy. The provincial government tries to promote tourism as an alternative, and the region's geographical features, Scottish heritage, and music tradition are the focus of this attention. Inverness County has greatly benefited from the publicity.

Inverness County on Cape Breton's western shore is approximately 150 kilometers away from the industrial area, and holds the entrance to Cape Breton via the Canso Causeway, the entry point from mainland Nova Scotia. Growing up in Inverness County within one of the many prominent musical families would have provided isolation from many of the economic challenges plaguing other families.[21] Glenn Graham argues that most prominent traditional Cape Breton fiddlers are somehow connected to these musical families because it gives them a natural advantage: performing and listening to the music is a natural part of your life, and it would be more noticeable if a family member chose not to learn.[22] Betty-Lou Beaton, part of the

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[20] http://www.capebretonfiddlers.com/history.html (accessed 20 March 2006).

[21] I am not implying that because a family contains many musicians they are naturally free of economic challenges; rather, specific musical families are well-known within the community (in Inverness County, the main musical families include the Beatons, MacMasters, and Rankins), and tend to include politicians or other community leaders.

[22] Glenn Graham, *Cape Breton Fiddle Music: The Making and Maintenance of a Tradition* (MA thesis, Saint Mary's University Graduate School, 2004), p. 3. Graham argues that most competent Cape Breton musicians (he speaks of fiddlers specifically) typically come from a familial musical tradition: "in most instances, the Cape Breton fiddle tradition has been passed down over generations of Gaelic descendants in

dominant Beaton clan by marriage, and also member of the equally prominent MacMaster family, recalls how it was a natural progression to become a traditional piano player:

> I was never taught to play. I got started...when I was young, because there was music in the house all the time, and the piano was just sort of there, so one day I just started to play. I don't even remember trying it; I just sort of always played. I learned a lot by listening and by doing, especially by doing. I don't remember there ever being anyone else involved in teaching me. I...started playing with it....It went down the line through my sisters, so when each of them left, I had my turn to start playing.[23]

Music appears to come naturally to many residents of Inverness County, not only the ones fortunate enough to be born into a specific family. The county is rooted in the musical tradition, so most residents are touched by it in some way. Ashley MacIsaac grew up in Creignish, a village in Inverness County, and explains how he was affected by the music:

> I don't know if culture is learned or if it's just in you, but I was drawn to it like a magnet....Of course, it helped that I was surrounded by Cape Breton music constantly. I would hear my dad sing with people that came to visit the house. I would dance while various relatives played the fiddle, the guitar or play the piano at family gatherings.[24]

MacIsaac would have heard live music and recordings of local traditional musicians regularly during his early years since music is a central cultural activity, practiced at both formal, structured events and casual gatherings. This immersion causes many young people eventually to play, perhaps by emulating a specific fiddler's style. Ashley MacIsaac acknowledges that fiddler Buddy MacMaster strongly influenced his performance early on. From his earliest experiences step-dancing, MacIsaac explains that he enjoyed it most when dancing to MacMaster's fiddling. When he later began to study the fiddle, MacIsaac practiced by playing along with MacMaster's recordings,

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a local, family-centred fashion."

[23] Interview by Jennifer MacDonald with Betty-Lou Beaton, 9 July 2002.

[24] Ashley MacIsaac, *Fiddling with Disaster* (Toronto, ON: Warwick Publishing, 2003), p. 34.

trying to get the 'dah da dums' just right.[25] This comment points out not only that the traditional music is interpreted distinctly by many well-known fiddlers, and other fiddlers try to imitate their style as early performers, but also indicates rigor: because MacMaster is a respected fiddler in the community, his interpretation of the 'dah da dums' is worth following. MacIsaac's mature style was eventually distinct, but in learning another fiddler's style, he gained appreciation, learned discipline, and appropriated different features while cultivating a unique style.

MacIsaac began to learn the fiddle when he was eight years old and credits his first teacher, Stan Chapmen, for instilling a strong sense of tradition. It was important for Chapman's students to learn about the immigration of Scottish, Irish, and other settlers, for example. Reading music was part of the education. Chapman taught his students that there was more to a musical score than the pitches performed; the score also specified the rhythm and hinted at phrasing or the direction of the piece. The students first learned to read and perform the tune accurately according to the music before being encouraged to develop a creative and individual style.[26]

These early details of MacIsaac's education indicate several things. First, MacIsaac musicality was partly due to his musical lineage and upbringing. Second, because both his family and community valued this traditional music, and because he learned how it developed, MacIsaac respected his roots and the musical tradition he was part of. Third, his training enforced discipline to read a notated piece accurately, but also encouraged the discovery of one's own sound to make the tunes that have been performed by others sound fresh. These observations counter Bruce Headlam's

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[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Ashley MacIsaac, *Fiddling with Disaster*, pp. 54-55.

assessment that Cape Breton's traditional music is vulgar, thriving only on playing simply melodies over a basic harmonic structure in order to reinforce the meter for dancing. Expressive tone, playing a tune according to a reputable text, listening to established musicians to gain inspiration, and ultimately developing an individual style were each components of MacIsaac's musical education, and are part of any reputable music training.

### 3.3 The Context for MacIsaac's Album

MacIsaac's *Hi How Are You Today?* featured the traditional Cape Breton music with which his fans were familiar juxtaposed with modern popular/rock sounds. For MacIsaac's established fans, the marked contrast between Cape Breton's fiddling tradition and hard rock sounds shaped their initial impression. Even someone not used to hearing this traditional music would probably immediately notice that there was something different about MacIsaac's album since one hears both fiddling and distorted electric guitar, for example.

In offering a sound that both a Cape Bretoner and a popular music fan could identify with—while presenting something unfamiliar for both audiences—MacIsaac's album is an example of a genre transformed. Many musicians have mixed specific cultural influence with modern production and have had wide appeal, including Ireland's Pogues and Newfoundland's Great Big Sea. Modern mainstream music, furthermore, is defined by this recent diversification as Jason Toynbee argues when discussing the 'mainstream'.[27]

For many scholars and fans, 'mainstream' is generally understood pejoratively

[27] Jason Toynbee, "Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks," in *Popular Music Studies*, eds. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), pp. 149-163.

because music that appeals to so many (i.e., appeals to a mainstream audience) cannot be very complex or sophisticated. Mainstream music is therefore not the preferred music of the fan or critic trying to label what music is 'mainstream'; rather, it is the antithesis of the music that this fan or critic prefers. As Jason Toynbee explains, there is a connection between common social phenomenon and some musical styles: the mainstream is a process more so than a category. He offers a definition: "A mainstream is a formation that brings together large numbers of people from diverse social groups and across large geographical areas in common affiliation to a musical style" (149-150).

There are three features of society and the music industry that work together to create the mainstream: a degree of hegemony between diverse groups and subcultures, finding the defining aesthetic center, and the music industry's economic incentive to discover this common ground (150). Mainstream music has therefore changed during the twentieth century, from Tin Pan Alley beginning in the 1920s, rock in the 1950s, to a mix of styles since the 1980s, including rap and reggae (150).

This latest mainstream designation (i.e., since the 1980s) is better described as the death of mainstream as it existed before in favor of diversification. No longer does the hegemony between social groups dominate the common ground, but instead, many different cultural styles and influences meet in the centre using common instrumentation or attempting to establish a common voice (literally: i.e., familiar vocal and melodic style, whether or not it is sung in a familiar language). But rather than a hegemonic centre, complex global networks have emerged resulting in such marketing categories as world music, or the dominance of a specific, culturally-derived kind of music, notably the dominance of rap and reggae sales within the market over the last two decades (157-

59).[28]

This study, however, deals with how MacIsaac transformed traditional Cape Breton music into a genre of popular music. Although his approach sounded new to Cape Breton's musical community, the concept easily goes along with the way Toynbee articulates the modern mainstream. Toynbee describes how North African rai music, for example, is part of the mainstream. MacIsaac's take on Cape Breton music can understood in similar terms:

> The music serves as a transmission belt between local tradition and modern, cosmopolitan identity. On the one hand it embodies 'creative conservatism', or reference via electronically synthesized voices to traditional forms and sounds....On the other it signifies modernity: disco beats on backing tracks and whisky bottles on the covers of cassettes (158).

Combining music elements from a specific culture with modern taste is natural within the mainstream: whereas mainstream music previously expressed common ground between diverse ethnic groups living together in the Western world, modern mainstream music expresses individuality (and conversely, cultural difference) within societies driven by mass production.

### 3.3.1 The Rankin Family

Before MacIsaac attempted to broaden his audience with the release of *Hi How Are You Today?*, other Cape Breton musicians, most prominently The Rankin Family, had become well-known in Canada, Europe and the US by releasing albums featuring popular music arrangements of traditional Cape Breton music, or writing their own songs that referenced Cape Breton history and culture. It is useful to compare and contrast the music and reception of The Rankin Family with Ashley MacIsaac because both are successful musicians from Inverness County, Cape Breton, and were popular during the

[28] Toynbee, "Mainstreaming," pp. 157-9. The third portion of Toynbee's new mainstream since the 1980s is the emergence of regional blocks which include, "Mandarin and Cantonese pop in East Asia, Spanish language music in the Americas, and pan-European repertoire, especially dance music."

1990s.

By the time MacIsaac released *Hi How Are You Today?* in 1995, The Rankin Family had released four albums and had been nominated for seven Juno Awards, winning "Group of the Year", "Country Group Duo of the Year", "Song of the Year" for "Fare Thee Well Love", and "Canadian Entertainer of the Year" in 1994.[29] Their first two recordings were independently released in 1989 and 1990 respectively, and featured unique arrangements of traditional Gaelic songs along with original tracks which were clearly influenced by Cape Breton music. As Lynn Saxberg writes in her review of their performance in *The Ottawa Citizen* on November 21, 1995, The Rankin Family offered an accessible and high-quality musical performance:

> It all looked so easy and fun. Seeing the smiling faces and swinging limbs of the members of The Rankin Family on stage at the National Arts Centre Sunday night, one almost forgot the high degree of talent their music requires. Think about it. The three soprano voices of sisters Cookie, Raylene and Heather Rankin, and brother Jimmy Rankin's tenor, rang strong and true. Not one of the women's voices broke on the highest notes. Raylene nailed the daunting "We Rise Again" to perfection. Even on the trickiest Gaelic lyrics or wordless vocals of Cape Breton mouth music, no one tripped over their parts.[30]

Their distinct but non-threatening songs and arrangements made it easy for Rankin fans to relate to their sound: The Rankin Family did not sound different than the music fans would have heard on top-40 or country/western radio stations, but the direct cultural reference to Cape Breton Island distinguished this group. Furthermore, the reference was clear since their recordings and concerts included Gaelic songs and fiddle tunes from Cape Breton or Scotland, and featured traditional step-dancing.

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[29] http://www.juneawards.ca (accessed 26 March 2006). *The Rankin Family* was nominated for thirteen Juno Awards during their career, wining six in total, four of which were won in 1994, the year before Ashley MacIsaac released *Hi How Are You Today?*. *The Rankin Family* had actually released five albums by 1995. Their third album, *North Country*, released in 1993, was their first with EMI Records, and therefore their first album released in the United States. The US version of *North Country* was released with some tracks from the Canadian version removed in favor of tracks from their earlier releases (*The Rankin Family* in 1989 and *Fare Thee Well Love* in 1990).

[30] Lynn Saxberg, "Rankins' Music Flows Like a Gentle Cape Breton Stream," in *The Ottawa Citizen* (21 November 1995), p. B 12.

The *Rankin Family*'s best-selling Canadian album, *Fare Thee Well Love*, was released in 1990 and sold over 500,000 units. This album exemplifies the band's approach since many of the tracks were written by The Rankin Family and directly reference traditional Cape Breton culture in some way. The opening track from the album, "Orangedale Whistle", was written by Jimmy Rankin about a specific place in Cape Breton. The arrangement and instrumentation, combined with the level of production, make "Orangedale Whistle" sound like a popularized folk song.

"Orangedale Whistle" opens with acoustic guitar strumming for four measures, followed soon by the lead vocalist singing the opening verse (there is also a tambourine on the downbeat of each measure, and the drummer is pulsing the cymbal lightly on each beat, but voice and guitar dominate):

> The stationmaster looked all around
> Along the track both up and down
> But the train could not be found
> There was neither sight nor sound [31]

The lyrics tell a nostalgic story that describes hardship and economic decline (a common theme in Cape Breton folklore), and the consequential lose of train service. The three sisters in the group act as backup singers on this track, first joining when the last line of the first verse is repeated. As the singers finish singing this line together, the piano enters with a short pick-up into the second verse. The piano creates a more dense texture for the second verse, accompanying (and sounding equally with) the voice and guitar through the second verse; the women join again as they repeat the last line of the second verse:

> He walked on slowly to the station door
> Like so many times before
> He looked outside into a sunshine beam
> Closed his eyes and dreamed a dream
> Drifted off into a dream [32]

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[31] The Rankin Family, liner notes, *Fare Thee Well Love* performed by The Rankin Family (C2 99996).

The full drum kit enters as a pick-up to the chorus that follows, just as the piano did in the previous verse. Gradually adding musical layers eases the listener into the full texture of this popular-folk arrangement by first offering a streamlined texture, more common of folk songs that traditionally may only be performed with solo acoustic guitar, for example. The song is arranged for a larger group of musicians—heard in the first chorus and through to the end—including lead vocals, acoustic guitar, and piano, accompanied by back-up singers, drum kit, bass guitar, and tambourine. Figure 3-1 outlines the form of the piece with the corresponding track numbers.

**Figure 3-1**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **A: verse 1** | acoustic guitar and lead vocals | **0:00-0:34** |
| **A: verse 2** | acoustic guitar, lead vocals, piano | **0:34-1:00** |
| **B: chorus** | acoustic guitar, lead vocals, piano, full drums, bass, guitar and backup singers | **1:00-1:26** |
| **A: verse 3** | acoustic guitar, lead vocals, piano, full drums, bass guitar | **1:26-1:53** |
| **Piano Solo** | with acoustic guitar, full drums, bass guitar | **1:53-2:08** |
| **A: verse 4** | acoustic guitar and lead vocals (light drums on beat) | **2:08-2:34** |
| **B: chorus** | acoustic guitar, lead vocals, piano, full drums, bass, guitar and backup singers | **2:34-3:29** |

To retain accessibility when The Rankin Family produced tracks with less Celtic-influence or folk appeal, songs were driven by band member's distinct voices, and included keyboards, drums, electric, acoustic, and steel guitars, and synth effects. These musical effects created a sound that was more associated with country/western music genres than popular-folk due to added steel guitar, for example, and less explicit or no reference to Cape Breton. Most critics and fans agree that The Rankins had moved farther into 'mainstream' music territory with their 1998 album, *Uprooted* (they also changed their name removing 'Family' in 1998). According to Toynbee's discussion of the mainstream, The Rankins's less-individualized sound actually makes their recording *Uprooted* less mainstream than their earlier recordings. With their earlier albums, The

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[32] *Ibid.*

Rankins offered a distinct variety of Canadian popular music due to the specific Cape Breton cultural reference. When this association was perceived to be lost with *Uprooted*, The Rankins music was less evocative of Toynbee's mainstream since he is not using the term pejoratively: in this case, The Rankins's popular music offerings did not separate them amidst contemporary popular ensembles that do not offer specific appeal.[33]

### 3.3.2 Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald

Before Ashley MacIsaac released his controversial 1995 album, and before *The Rankin Family* became famous with their Cape Breton-inspired popular sound, Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald made a name for himself as a Cape Breton fiddler capitalizing on the commercial media available to him.[34] Fitzgerald came well before either Ashley MacIsaac or The Rankin Family, and while The Rankins were active musicians during the same period when MacIsaac released *Hi How Are You Today?*, and both share a similar family and community background, Fitzgerald is a direct predecessor to MacIsaac, pushing the boundaries of his music by adding non-traditional instruments, and by his regular appearances on radio and television shows both in Nova Scotia and the rest of Canada.

Fitzgerald's name comes up not only as one of the main influences for the fiddlers who came after him, but also as perhaps the finest Cape Breton fiddler, or among the finest. These comments are subjective and debatable, but what is interesting is that

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[33] *The Rankin Family* released a compilation album in 2003, although the band disbanded in September 1999 (perhaps partly due to Raylene Rankin's departure in 1998, after which the band was known as *The Rankins*). Jimmy Rankin released *Song Dog* in 2001 and *Handmade* in 2003. Also in 2003, Raylene Rankin released the solo album, *Lambs in Spring*.

[34] *Winston Fitzgerald: A Collection of Fiddle Tunes* (Englishtown, NS: Cranford Publications, 1997), p. i. Although Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald is an excellent example to discuss as a precursor to MacIsaac, Fitzgerald never expected to make living as a performer, though he did not have one career to balance with his work as a musician. He had many different jobs during his life, including fisherman, solider, carpenter, and cook, while also being a successful performer on radio and television.

Fitzgerald was not Scottish, and did not live in Inverness County. He was born in 1914 of Irish and Acadian lineage in White Point, Victoria County, a small fishing village in Northern Cape Breton. Due to the continued isolation Cape Bretoners experienced into the early twentieth century, Northern Cape Breton exhibits a distinct performance and dance style within the same Cape Breton music tradition.

He began to play the violin because it was a family activity: Fitzgerald's father was also a fiddler, as were his three brothers, and his sisters and mother were each singers and step-dancers. His earliest musical experiences were among his family and the other musical friends who frequently gathered to perform. He learned quickly, and was performing in public as an young teenager.[35] He traveled to perform, meeting people who taught him to read music, and also took a correspondence course with the US School of Music where he learned more about bowing and playing in different positions. Fitzgerald credited his superior performance ability due to this training, along with his personal desire to always improve upon his performance. He spent a lot of time practicing his music (i.e., playing in private, working on his technique and quality of sound). Since private rehearsal is not often associated with Cape Breton tradition music, since the style typically encourages an egalitarian atmosphere, players wishing to 'practice' usually spend more time simply 'playing' their instrument, often in the company of others.[36]

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[35] When he was eighteen, Fitzgerald joined The Maritime Merrymakers, and toured Nova Scotia for a year. The experience allowed him to meet other musicians and learn to read music while also fostering Fitzgerald's desire to learn more and improve his skills, and since he was exposed to classical music, he always placed a high demand on his own performing. He wanted to study classical violin: "I love all kinds of music, especially classical violin—like Perlman. I wanted to be a classical player once, but you can't be both." MacGillivray, *The Cape Breton Fiddler*, p. 103.

[36] This is not to say that other performers do not practice privately, but it is rare since many players enjoy the spontaneity of their performance, and believe they play better as a result. There is no desire here to critique either approach, but it is clear from interviews and those who wrote about Fitzgerald that he

In the 1930s, Fitzgerald was often heard on the Halifax, Nova Scotia radio station CHNS, and later toured Nova Scotia with Hank Snow. Although he was able to perform tunes from his traditional repertoire for these shows with Snow, he was also asked to learn new country/western numbers quickly. Since he had less experience reading music, he usually learned by mimicking recordings. During this period, his efforts, along with other well-known fiddlers at the time ushered in a new era where Cape Breton fiddling became stylized: not only used for dances, it was heard in concert.[37]

By the late 1940s, Fitzgerald formed the group, Winston Fitzgerald and the Radio Entertainers. The group included Betty Wallace on piano and Estwood Davidson on electric guitar. They performed live radio shows from a radio station in Sydney, Nova Scotia over many years, and released several recordings. To compliment his radio fame, Fitzgerald performed live shows in Halifax, Toronto, Windsor, Boston, and Detroit with a larger band, The Winston Fitzgerald Orchestra. He also performed on television for *The Don Messer show*, and as part of The Cape Breton Symphony on *The John Allen Cameron Show,* making him known all over Canada.[38]

Fitzgerald, however, pushed performance boundaries when performing the music he learned growing up in Cape Breton. Although the majority of his audience during his career was from the Maritimes (mainly those already familiar with Cape Breton's traditional music), he enlivened the music he performed by using unconventional backup instruments, including Davidson's electric guitar and sometimes adding a drummer.

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demanded a lot from himself as a musician.

[37] Elizabeth Doherty, *The Paradox of the* Periphery, p. 221.

[38] Most of this historical information was found in MacGillivray, *A Cape Breton Fiddler*, pp. 102-103, and in Paul Cranford, *Winston Fitzgerald: A Collection of Fiddle Tunes* (Englishtown, NS: Cranford Publications, 1997), pp. i-iii. A collection of Winston Fitzgerald's recordings was released on compact disc by Breton Book & Music called *Classic Cuts*.

As noted above, Fitzgerald is often touted as one of the best traditional Cape Breton fiddlers, heavily influencing many performers who followed him. The negative response MacIsaac received in 1995, however, may seem surprising since Fitzgerald's approach foreshadowed what was to come with MacIsaac: both musicians, though several decades apart, offered a dramatic interpretation of the traditional music. The difference between the two, however, was, firstly, the overall aesthetic of their music (Fitzgerald was interpreted as a Cape Breton fiddler with a showier backup band suitable for his radio and television performances); second, the difference between the new audience who were attracted to the music and stage presence of these musicians: Fitzgerald's approach probably did not attract a different fan demographic than what dominated folk music listening in the 1950s; MacIsaac, in contrast, became better known and sold more records than any Cape Breton musician before or since, and attracted fans who did not listen to traditional Cape Breton music, Celtic music, or folk music.

## 4.0 Literature Review

### 4.1 Cape Breton Literature

Although Cape Breton Island is small geographically, sparsely populated, and has a cultural history spanning only about 250 years, many news items, magazine articles, essays, and books, including fiction and non-fiction prose and poetry, have been written on Cape Breton's history, culture, economy, music, and many other topics. Academic work, however, is rare.

The first major academic study of Cape Breton's music was Virginia Garrison's 1985 PhD dissertation for the University of Wisconsin, *Traditional and Non-Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices in Folk Music: An Ethnographic Field Study of Cape*

*Breton Fiddling*. This work outlined the fiddling tradition more comprehensively than any previous work, and explained the fundamentals of the style as studied by a participant-observer. Her field study is very important because it breaks down more than just the musical elements found in the style, but also how the tradition's social context directly impacts the music:

> Music in Cape Breton acts as a unifying agent for human interaction and celebration, i.e., community dances, house parties or ceilidhs, and Scottish variety concerts. The demands placed on the fiddler can be explored within two different venues: the dance and the concert. The house party, because it encompasses elements found in both venues, can be discussed with regard to both topics.[39]

Other students followed with graduate projects on Cape Breton's music tradition including Elizabeth Doherty's 1996 PhD dissertation, *The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition c. 1929-1995*.[40] In 1999, Heather Sparling completed her master's thesis for York University on the region's mouth-music tradition, *Purt-A-Beul: An Ethnographic Study of Mouth Music in Cape Breton*.[41] Glenn Graham master's thesis, *Cape Breton Fiddle Music: The Making and Maintenance of a Tradition*, submitted to Saint Mary's University in 2004, also examines the fiddle tradition, but discusses the relationship between the music's development and the social, historical, and individual influences including religion, family, and commercialism. Along with undergraduate work and a few published journal articles, there have not been many large-scale studies done of this music, while those completed tend to be specialized studies of the fiddling tradition.[42]

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[39] Virginia Garrison, *The Traditional and Non-Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices in Folk Music*. University of Wisconsin Graduate School, 1985.
[40] Elizabeth Ann Doherty, *The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition c. 1929-1995* (PhD dissertation, University of Limerick Graduate School, 1996).
[41] Heather Sparling, *Purt-A-Buel: An Ethnographic Study of Mouth Music in Cape Breton* (Toronto: York University, 1999).
[42] Many topics have been neglected, including accompaniment. In 2002, I studied the history and development of piano accompaniment in traditional Cape Breton music as part of a summer research

Kate Dunlay and David Greenberg have written the most detailed discussion of Cape Breton's traditional fiddling style in two volumes. The second volume, *Traditional Celtic Violin Music of Cape Breton*, written in 1996, offers 139 transcriptions of tunes commonly heard in Cape Breton, and also presents transcriptions of very old Scottish tunes. The authors also outline the harmonic, rhythmic, and performance components of the traditional Cape Breton style, therefore significantly contributing to the study of this music. Their comments and analysis have been discussed in section 5.1 of this thesis, but the volume is one of the most detailed examinations of the fiddling style which is central to Cape Breton's traditional music.

Other than academic literature or detailed analysis, many books and articles discuss traditional Cape Breton music using personal experience, anecdotes, and interviews to impart knowledge Cape Breton culture. Sheldon MacInnes's 1997 book, *A Journey in Celtic Music Cape Breton Style*, discusses his impressions of and experiences with the music, but also incorporates the anecdotes into a larger context. The following sample shows the personal, casual writing style and heavy reliance upon anecdotal information which is often offered as evidence. For example, when discussing Cape Breton step-dancing, the author first describes experiences. The following is portion of this description:

> At the Big Pond parish hall and at many other dance halls in Cape Breton, I came to know some wonderful Cape Breton dancers. Among the highlights were the dances in Mabou where I came to fully appreciate the dancing by the people from that community and surrounding areas who precipitate the ever so popular and legendary Mabou dancers, Inverness County dancers like Raymond and Sarahbelle Beaton, Janette and A.J. Beaton, Mary Janet MacDonald, [and others]....These great dancers and in some cases awesome and inspiring dancers continued the tradition and dazzled the dance floors of Inverness County with their nifty footwork as they

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project through Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. I also wrote the unpublished essay, "Generic Exploration: Considering the Traditional Music of Cape Breton Island in terms of Origin and Evolution" in 2004.

> danced to jigs, reels, and lively strathspeys.[43]

Furthering this depiction, MacInnes reflects on the impact of the great dance tradition he has described:

> Over the years, as I watched these great dancers, I concluded that the art of step-dancing is alive and well in Inverness County. It is commonly understood, also, that the art of dancing has an impact on Cape Breton's cultural, history and tradition, island identity, social cohesion, and economy. Furthermore, it certainly attracts outside attention to Cape Breton from people who are interested in folklore and history and from the general traveling public (77).

The author ends his discussion of step-dancing by tying his thoughts into those of Irish research Colin Quigley, who has done a lot of work on Celtic dance styles:

> Quigley's publication describes, in detail, the formal structuring of steps commonly used by step-dancers. He describes the notion that the steps are presented in intricate detail and that the steps move in rhythm to select music, including jigs and reels. He describes the body posture of the dancer with the emphasis on movement from the knees down, while the upper portion of the body is ore relaxed and subtle so as not to be a distraction from the footwork. The dancer's main objective is to gain equal co-ordination of both legs and feet, a basic requirement of a good Cape Breton step-dancer (77).

Although an anecdotal writing style dominates many discussions of traditional Cape Breton music, and while these examples have little critical weight, they are still useful resources. As Alaistar Fowler acknowledges in *Kinds of Literature*, simple contributions have a place within the general context of the work constructed, although often peripheral: "Even the simplest reading (which lays no claim to be a critical contribution) belongs to the genre, in that it perforce inherits older critical ideas, at however many generational removes....In the economy of criticism, erroneous interpretation may be almost indispensable to critics in the main line."[44]

### 4.2 Genre and Popular Music

Popular music is an entertainment shared by a variety of people who are drawn to many different music genres. This diverse group, however, can easily feel challenged

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[43] Sheldon MacInnes, *A Journey in Celtic Music Cape Breton Style* (Sydney, NS: UCCB Press, 1997), pp. 76-77.

[44] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 271.

when purchasing records by their favorite artists in the contemporary super-sized record store. Genre labels ease the consumer's mind (providing structure and order) while facilitating their shopping experience (guiding the consumer to an area in the store where they will feel comfortable, enabling them to make a purchase). The large, appropriately-located sign will guide a mid-30s, middle income, white male to one area, a 14-year-old boy (full of angst and dressed only in black) in another direction, and a 67-year-old, divorced mother of five and grandmother of 8 in another, very specific, direction—or at least record producers and marketing executives wish it were this easy.

Popular music genres are central to popular music production because one tends to think they know something substantial about another when they know their preferred music genres. In the chapter, "Genre Rules," from *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*,[45] Simon Frith explains that assigning an artist to a genre, or creating music to fit within a genre, is based on value judgments made about those who buy and listen to popular music:

> The first thing asked about any demo tape or potential signing is what sort of music is it, and the importance of this question is that it integrates an inquiry about the music (what does it sound like) with an inquiry about the market (who will buy it). The underlying record company problem, in other words, how to turn music into a commodity, is solved in generic terms. Genre is a way of defining music in its market, or alternatively, the market in its music.[46]

Similarly, with a brief anecdote Franco Fabbri foresaw differing consequences depending on how he answered a police officer's question: what kind of music did he and his companions perform?:

> We know well enough what it implies: if the reply is 'classical music', there should be no problems, but we can easily imagine the reaction of the *gendarme* to responses like 'hard rock' or 'reggae'—a breathalyser for the driver and a general search of the minibus.[47]

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[45] Simon Frith, "Genre Rules," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 75.
[46] *Ibid.* pp. 75-76.
[47] Fabbri, "What Kind of Music," *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 132.

Although genre labels are individually significant, there are also broad assumptions connected to most, especially in different cultures.[48] But it remains necessary for a journalist or critic to place a label on a musician or a fan, yet, oddly, it seems less important for musicians to label themselves (not wanting to be limited by expectations). A musician probably deems their music too difficult to pin down to one type, however succinct the term may sound, or too complicated to fit into one broad ideology. Regardless of possible objections by musicians, the relationship between musical type and label is the basis for most genre discussion within popular music studies.

One of the earliest studies focusing on the difference in studying genre between art music and popular music was Fabbri's 1981 paper, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications."[49] This paper was also an early discussion of the relationship between popular music and genre labels within a cultural context. The article proposes five generic rules: formal and technical rules, semiotic rules, behavior rules, social and ideological rules, and economic and juridical rules which create a framework for studying musical genre.[50]

Fabbri's social and ideological rules (his fourth rule in the list), point to Frith's acknowledgement that genre within popular music is fundamentally determined by the interaction between the consumer and the market. The phenomenon itself is encompassed by Fabbri's fifth heading, economic and juridical genre rules, which are

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[48] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[49] Franco Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications," in *Popular Music Perspectives*, ed. D. Horn and Philip Tagg (Göteborg & Exeter: IASPM, 1982), pp. 52-81.

[50] While Fabbri considers this list comprehensive, as a research model, it mainly emphasizes the complex relationship between music and genre. Simon Frith notes the weight of each of these rules is also relative to each musical genre, and that "one way in which genres work in day-to-day terms is in a deliberate process of rule testing and bending" (Frith, "Genre Rules," pp. 91-93). Fabbri admits that each rule does not apply equally to each example, but maintains that all rules are present in some extent within every music genre.

discussed below.

Within popular music, the connection between genre label and marketing demographic has been linked to a genre's social and ideological rules, and is therefore one of the most common means of addressing the issue. Consumer ideology, for example, a key topic within the music-society discussion, denotes the "false consciousness" of a social group, which can dominate an audience member's opinion about the genre, whether he/she is aware or not. Fabbri argues that an individual's mindset is embedded and uncritically accepted (because the individual is usually unaware), and therefore so widespread that it is difficult to grasp the impact of a phenomenon rooted in unconscious bias.[51]

Not only are popular music genres used by those who produce music, but Frith explains that these labels are also used as a way of organizing the playing process.[52] As noted in the introduction to this sub-section, people often think they can conclude something about a person based on the music genres a person prefers. In order for these generalizations to be widely practiced (and to an extent accepted), musicians and fans who identify with a music genre expect to have some things in common (not necessarily all): ideology, demographic, and musical knowledge, to name a few. When discussing musicians specifically, Frith argues that a certain musical language is often expected—a language that expresses the implied shared musical skills and cultural ideology (87).

Similarly, genre labels affect our lives through the listening process. The genre label shapes a listener's expectations regarding what type of sounds they will hear (the musical style), and how they will react (the typical individual response). Listeners also

[51] Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres," pp. 58-59.
[52] Frith, "Genre Rules," p. 87.

tend to describe genre by assuming these listening expectations; i.e., genre X sounds like genre Y, but unlike genre Z.

The challenges in articulating a genre's characteristics are identified by Fabbri as "frontier problems", and he proposes three ways to address them. First, a genre could be described as the intersection between two familiar terms (for example, although this type is different from A. and B., it seems to exist between them.) Second, although less precise, a label that can be easily understood may be offered to define the genre (this could involve using a more general genre label to offer basic understanding). Third, offering similar terms—although not necessarily musical terms—can help connote the genre, including emotive images, and words with similar meaning.[53]

> In the semantic field of a given culture, different musical genres are reciprocally defined by the fact that they occupy bordering semantic zones....the reason why these respective zones have different extensions in diverse cultures is connected to problems of translation. In addition to this, the semantic field can be modified in the course of time in the same degree as social conventions and codes are subject to change (135).

Because genre labels help define and organize the music market while also affecting playing and listening processes, Fabbri's social and ideological rules are indeed central to genre study (they also encompass much of the critical genre study that has been done already). Furthering the ideological issue, Fabbri argues that his fifth rule, "economic and juridical rules," exposes the line between genre perception based on ideology and critical perspective free of bias.[54] Some genres are more economically viable than others, for example, but not all performers or fans are aware of this or think this 'means' anything; in other words, while a fan may or may not be aware of the a genre's connotations—whether the label implies something about them as a performer, listener, or devoted fan—it cannot be denied that, socially and/or culturally, some popular

[53] Fabbri, "What Kind of Music," p. 134.
[54] Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres," p. 59.

music genre labels come with baggage. More than any of Fabbri's other rules, the fifth implies that genres are perceived both individually and collectively (and therefore not always considered critically), but that understanding the relationship between individual and collective perceptions of music genres is integral to understanding or appreciating popular music. [55]

Despite an intense desire to accurately read the market, and while most individuals seem to immediately size up another's musical taste (or the value of another's taste compared to theirs) according to a list of favorite genres, the market is unpredictable and volatile. Interpreting how consumers respond to the market (or vice versa) is only as viable as understanding the genre terms offered. It is therefore more precise to understand how consumer tastes (which fuel the market's genre labels) align with the genre labeling by radio stations.[56]

Radio regulators and programmers want stringent music genre definitions in order to provide a clear picture of what one radio station offers versus another (81). Labels and markets are difficult to interpret and can change quickly (not to mention the different sounds, i.e. musical elements, offered by musicians supposedly in the same genre—but this may not be at the root of a programmer's genre concerns). Genre labels are based on a perceived cultural ideology or reading of the market, and so it often depends upon who is offering the interpretation:

> What is going on here is an idealization, the creation of a fantasy consumer...and, in this, the industry follows tastes rather than forming them....As fantasies, then, genres describe not just who listeners are, but also what this music means to them. In deciding to label a music or a musician a

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 59. Fabbri's text does not negatively imply anything about the uncritical fan as my interpretation of his rule offers. A critical fan is less likely to listen to music created based mainly on economic or juridical rules. Consequently, the uncritical fan is more likely to be ignorant of any rules encompassing the music genres he/she enjoys most—which is why such consumers effectively function within the stratagem.

[56] Frith, "Genre Rules," p. 78.

> particular way, record companies are saying something about both what people like and why they like it; the musical label acts as a condensed sociological and ideological argument (85-86).

If naming popular music genres is culturally and economically dependant (or at least perceived this way), and only moderately determined by the music involved, popular music genres cannot be studied the same way other musical genres have been discussed within musicology. Traditional musicological analysis will only answer part of the question (and not the significant part) since whatever is musically discovered means little without knowing how it relates to the commercial and cultural context (88-89). There is a place for musical analysis, however, which Fabbri points out early in his 1981 article by explaining the formal and technical rules that define genre.

Formal and technical rules govern discussion of genre within musicology. When considering popular music, however, these rules are often ignored. This is because many scholars who study popular music are not musicologists. While it is true that there are many extra-musical factors to discuss within popular music (and living in Western culture means being willingly or unwillingly affected by popular music), musical factors cannot be ignored (i.e., to discuss 'music', you should discuss the *music*). Avoiding formal and technical analysis is often excused, however, because there is no consensus on how to apply formal music analysis to popular music.

Furthermore, the approach would also vary according to genre itself, and encompass both performative rules (which can be highly subjective in both popular and classical music) and textual rules (most conventionally found in musical scores, and more difficult to discover in music forms developed from an aural tradition).[57] Fabbri's second concept helps bridge this gap between music analysis and sociologically-based music

[57] Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres," pp. 55-56.

interpretation by insisting upon semiotic rules.

Recent movement in musicology has proposed many semiotic narratives, based primarily on the relationship between the musical text or performance practice and contemporary culture. Semiotic meaning interpreted from the musical text specifically is less prominent, but Fabbri argues that understanding the codes within a musical text, combined with performance, reception, and more general societal codes, accurately denotes the complex interaction that led to the creation of different genre labels and their interpretation (57). For example, semiotic interpretation exposes the expectations attached to genre: expectations caused by denoting function ("background music"), implying response ("romantic music"), and indicating behavior ("symphony" versus "rock").[58]

Semiotic rules (along with the formal and technical rules and social and ideological rules) acknowledge that the musical community plays an integral part in labeling genre. This community, however, made up of musicians, industry members (managers, record executives), critics, journalists, promoters, and of course, the audience, is far too complex to be adequately addressed. Members of the community have varied significance because they vary according to the time and culture, and there are also individual differences. In modern music the audience is diversified, and the musical community does not need to be present to be part of a genre's identity; a genre does not have to have an 'audience' to exist (i.e. an audience present for a musical performance). All musical genres include a musical community composed of those diverse members

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58. Fabbri's third rule connects semiotic reading of a musical text with specific behavior rules (i.e., the behavior of the musician and audience individually, and their interaction). Within a defined musical genre, there are some consistent, although often stereotyped, behavior patters among those involved. These regularities, according to Fabbri, weed out those who are (perceived to be) less-versed in the genre since it is generally agreed that genres are ruled by a hierarchy of subjective conventions.

listed above.[59]

Similarly, genre labels are functional, and a member of the musical community's awareness of this function, along with their role in defining a genre's function, is variable. Furthermore, audience members, fans, music listeners lie within different societal divisions, so any connection between these divisions and the level of genre analysis is considered. Fabbri explains there are different genre codes which separate roles of members in the musical community due to their varied awareness of the generic codes at work (and each genre is codified differently). The musical community perceives a new genre, for example, because the new elements transcend the genre codes that already exist within the musical system. If the transformation is successful, the new codes will take their place. A new genre may also develop due to new codes created to modernize outdated rules: "success—which has nothing to do with aesthetic value—consists in the answer to expectations."[60]

Frith discusses the role of the musical community by discussing Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians*, which studied how music genre relates to everyday life. She found that "the only music world whose members shared social class characteristics, the folk world (which was essentially middle class), was also the only music world with a clear class ideology: it defined itself as working class" (90). Furthermore,

> The use of music...can vary as to how important it is in defining one's social identity, how significant it is in determining one's friendships, how special it is in forming one's sense of self. The question of musical value is...inevitably tied up with questions of sociability. And the significant social differences may be less those between genres than between degrees of commitment (or types of commitment) to them (90).

Understanding the different ways genre labels function within popular music still

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[59] Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres," p. 60.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 61. Fabbri argues that the most important question related to this perception (i.e. that fulfilling expectations leads to success) is how do those genres which seem to fulfill expectations still deteriorate?

leaves the critic overwhelmed by the degree of variation and complexity between the music, the market, and its genre label—not to mention the individual's expectation. Frith proposes that different "genre worlds" help explain the relationship between the music and attempts to categorize it:

> A new 'genre world'...is first constructed and then articulated through a complex interplay of musicians, listeners, and mediating ideologues, and this process is much more confused than the marketing process that follows, as the wider industry begins to make sense of the new sounds and markets and to exploit both genre worlds and genre discourses in the orderly routines of mass marketing. The issue then becomes how to draw genre boundaries. Genres initially flourish on a sense of exclusivity; they are as much (if not more) concerned to keep people out as in. The industry aim is to retain the promise of exclusivity, the hint of generic secrets, while making them available to everyone. It sometimes seems, indeed, as if a genre is only clearly defined (its secret revealed) at the moment when it ceases to exist, when it can no longer be exclusive (88-89).

Fabbri is also aware of the nuance and variability of genre determination and interpretation. He therefore proposes a framework exposing the importance of a multidisciplinary approach connecting genre analysis and hermeneutics. Fundamentally, though, the modern critic should keep two points central: first, be critical of genre study that holds archetypes outside of cultural and temporal influence; second, genre study should transcend mere social concerns of genre and explore the fundamental artistic or semiotic meaning which regulates the codes governing a genre's social role.[61]
Amidst the interpretive challenges and theoretical ideas offered by Frith and Fabbri, recent scholarship aims at explaining effective ways to approach this issue more often.

In David Brackett's article, "(In Search of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover," the author explores how musical meaning can be proposed, and how this conception figures into the role of genre categories within popular music studies. Brackett's perspective on popular music and genre evokes both Frith and Fabbri's viewpoint: "Genres are not defined by characteristics of musical style alone but also by

[61] Fabbri, "What Kind of Music," p. 136.

performance rituals, visual appearance, the types of social and ideological connotations, and their relationships to the material conditions of production."[62] Genre relationships are often hierarchical, are constantly shifting, and are individually defined. Brackett points to musical styles having a generalized role when categorizing the supra-genre, but are more significant at a genre's lower levels. Any distinction, however, varies according to the genre being discussed: "to deal with the subject of genre is to deal with inconsistency and contradiction, with that simultaneous 'participating' without 'belonging' of texts within genres which lends genre the allure of a possible answer to the question of musical meaning: an answer, however, which hovers constantly beyond the grasp of the questioner" (79). A specific musical discussion, however, is prominent in Brackett's stance on genre. Although he acknowledges the challenges involved for the non-music reader, he identifies the way to bridge the gap between the amateur listener/performer or cultural theorist and the musicologist who each consider popular music from a distinct perspective.

Most popular music critics acknowledge that studying this music requires looking at the complex interaction between the "details of the musical style" (the specific musical elements used mainly within a musicological context), "meaning" (for both the individual and collective audience), and "pertinence" (including social and cultural relevance and questions of value) (66). A genre is therefore identified by these many elements which Brackett calls the "details of the musical style" (65). These details, furthermore, necessitate discussion of the music specifically, which does not need to alienate the non-musicologist reader. By discussing music analysis broadly at first, and gradually

[62] David Brackett, "(In Search of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover" in *Popular Music Studies*, eds. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 67.

introducing music terminology, the reader who is already familiar with how the music sounds, or background details on the performers, is led to understand the relevance of music analysis (66). Brackett is therefore making a case for the often neglected formal and technical rules that contribute to genre identity, as noted by Fabbri.

Brackett's discusses the musical style (including rhythm, timbre, pitch, and lyrics) of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" and George Clinton's "Atomic Dog". The analysis begins broadly by discussing general sonic impressions, moves to specific rhythmic details and timbre (where music terms are defined), and explains the overall impact of the melody and harmonic characteristics of these pieces. It is clear that the reader unfamiliar with music's meta-language would not be able to refute the claims made here, but the author asserts that these musical elements further the genre distinctions he first discussed according to the music's market and cultural function. Analyzing these songs does not lead to an irrefutable theory of popular music genre; rather, music analysis strengthens the author's perspective on the implications of genre labels within these songs specifically (75-77).

Each of the articles mentioned in this sub-section acknowledge that genre within music, and especially within popular music studies, is a complex conception. The challenge is for the critic to realize that while these authors offer a framework (from Fabbri), there is a certain amount of creative possibility within a scholarly approach to popular music as long as it acknowledges the complexity inherent in genre analysis. What separates this thesis from the work done before is that it is important to discuss the details of the musical style, but since a genre transition from folk to popular music is the central issue, there is less chance to work with a musical text in the conventional sense.

There are many other ways, however, to respond to the formal and technical rules which play a part in genre formation, so the point is to discover their function within the music being studied here.

### 4.3 Folk Music and Commercialization

The impact of commercialized folk music has been discussed by many scholars over the past number of years. It has become the industry standard for many folk artists to employ sophisticated production techniques so that their recordings on the same level as most popular music releases. More dramatically, however, modern folk musicians may include both less-conventional folk instruments and musical arrangements of traditional pieces to evoke a popular aesthetic, while also making their music more accessible and widening their audience. But altering the medium of traditional music, especially when the music is tied to national or regional identity, will inevitably cause controversy. If being moved by creativity involves breaking musical conventions and community expectations, the modern folk musician can easily entice criticism. The most common appraisal of such artists is that they do not know or understand (and therefore lack respect for) the tradition they are modifying.

#### 4.3.1 Modern Recording and Production Techniques

In *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, edited by William Ferris and Mary Hart in 1982, Kenneth Goldstein discusses "The Impact of Technology on the British Folksong Revival." The author affirms the point above: embracing the technological revolution has spread folk music to a larger number of people. He therefore describes three benefits of modern sound technology and printing for the folksong. His first (and also most central) argument is that new media forms spread folk music to a wider range of people.

Second, technological innovation leads to increased record production, making more people aware of different folk music styles. Third and least conventionally, Goldstein argues that the increased awareness of folk musics noted in his second point inspires amateur fieldwork where a concertgoer or fan is inspired to record folksingers in their own community. Furthermore, such amateur "revivalists" supplement academic work, creating potential for the two groups to be brought together in this new way.[63]

A. L. Lloyd acknowledges, however, in his chapter, "Electric Folk Music in Britain," also found in *Folk Music Modern Sound*, that although technological innovation will allow folk music to reach a wider audience, it also signals a move away from interior, domestic folk music to its new place within the public sphere. The audience, therefore, may be comprised entirely of outsiders, contrasting with the perception that folk is the music of "insiders."[64] Emphasizing the impact of the style change, Lloyd argues that the folksong's authenticity is therefore affected:

> A folksong repertoire comprises an assembly of tunes and texts performed in certain styles and in conditions of change it seems that it's the styles that are the most fragile, the most open to transformation. When you talk to people obsessed with notions of authenticity you find, more often than not, it's really style that they're talking about (14).

According to Lloyd, technological innovation alters the nature of folk music. But change is central to any musical style, especially within folk music that is full of individual variation. The change Lloyd speaks of is more drastic than performance variation, which is highlighted in his argument that folk music is loosing its authenticity. Lloyd acknowledges that while modern technology places folk music at the same level as modern popular music—increasing awareness of folk music within the mass market but

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[63] Kenneth S. Goldstein, "The Impact of Technology on the British Folksong Revival," in *Folk Music Modern Sound*, ed. William Ferris and Mary L. Hart (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1982), pp. 7-13.
[64] A. L. Lloyd, "Electric Folk Music in Britain," in *Folk Music Modern Sound*, ed. William Ferris and Mary L. Hart (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1982), p. 14.

still keeping folk music within the hands of those who created it—this is a dim consolation when the fundamental message has changed (15-16).

The focus of this study is traditional Cape Breton music, a folk music style that is often called "Celtic", a term that is distinctly complex. Whole countries and large regions within nations have produced works of literature, music, and art that identify as "Celtic," including Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Spain, and Australia. In 2003, Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman edited a collection of essays written on the impact of modern works claiming to be "Celtic", including modern Celtic music adaptation. Their work is revolutionary within a field that, although not lacking scholarly attention, is plagued by ambiguity. Stokes and Bohlman clarify, for example, the nature of different scholarly approaches within Celtic studies, noting that a specific nationalistic approach "evokes an anglocentric and politically neutered aestheticism," and may refer to the Celtic roots or associations within that country, but fundamentally differs from scholars claiming to study the "Celtic."[65] Specific regional or nationalistic Celtic examples, and the broad, international Celtic perception, therefore, are two distinct perspectives, although "Celtic" is thrown around haphazardly by musicians and fans alike (1-2).

For Celtic musicians who desire to alter their sound, the connotative power of "Celtic" provides a marketing advantage (1). The struggle to interpret what is Celtic, however, centers on the term's simultaneous broad associations and specific diversity. How do so many different artistic forms connect as "Celtic" works—seeming to produce equal "intensity of feeling"—not because of shared cultural characteristics, but due to

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[65] Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman, *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003), p. 1.

their "interwoven and mutually constituting processes" (2)? This bewildering notion of Celticism is perhaps due to scholarly treatment which has placed the roots of displaced Celtic ideology on the fringe. Previous scholarship illuminates the uneven social structure of the Celts which is reflected in the subsequent scholarship by marking a centre and a periphery: the centre encompassing the written records of the powerful, while those on the fringe (who generally encompass the diaspora) were neglected and left few records. Stokes and Bohlman propose an association between Celts who are on the fringe with other marginalized groups through movement to the New World: "The movement is retrospectively given a Celtic patina through various forms of acknowledgement, some explicit and verbal, others cryptic and indirect, of 'home's' formative and enduring influences." This has lead to Gaelic-language rap music in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (exposing a Celtic subculture), for example, and the popularity of *Riverdance*, which dramatically increased the audience for Celtic music, but also set very high production and marketing standards for musicians wanting to ride the momentum.

Despite the ambiguity of Celtic ideals and a Celtic musician's position on the fringe, many musicians unite through the international festival tradition which provides a "social modus operandi, certain simple rules of etiquette" to perform together, despite language or musical differences. A trope provided by these festivals is the pilgrimage, a common image in Celtic folklore, an image that forges connections among outsiders on the fringe:

> The specific landscapes of Celtic pilgrimage and the specific nature of its semiotic system intensify the functions of musical colportage even more. The visual and sonic imagery of Celtic pilgrimage, therefore, lends itself to widespread commodification and dissemination through the colportage of cassettes and CDs. Cassette culture and colportage converge in a postmodern bricolage, in which historical and geographical journey converge (9).

As Stokes and Bohlman acknowledge, "Celticism as commodity form has

certainly done more to shape contemporary Celtic imaginaries than Celticism as writerly academic endeavor" (15). Applied to music, the Celtic ideology as seen in objects and artifacts, which gained strength in the market over the 19th century, has had a major impact on Celtic music. The earliest recordings by Celtic musicians, notably The Chieftains who formed in 1962 and released their first recording, *Chieftains 1*, in 1963, were marketed to the widest possible audience in the United States and Europe. This continues today with Ireland's *Capercaillie* and *Altan*. Many factors are involved with the success of such bands—their success is not merely due to the novelty of appreciating obscure World Music ensembles on the social fringe. But a question remains: "how, in the context of its actual social ramifications (as opposed to supposed ill-effects), the commodity form and commoditized attitudes toward music making produce such diverse sociomusical realities on the Celtic fringe" (17).

Although Irish music is successfully marketed to an audience all over the world, Fintan Vallely argues that melding this music (whether the music itself or the accompanying behavior of its musicians) with the popular mainstream is ultimately a bad thing. The author refers to Irish music as being, "a victim of its own success."[66] His criticism is tied up in what he interprets as a casual use of traditional Irish music to explore a musician's creativity, without really knowing the music he claims they are abusing. According to Valleley, the long history of Irish music involves periods of repression followed by periods of subversion leading to its rescue. For a young musician familiar with Irish culture and equal awareness of popular music, seeing Irish music as a viable career path leading them to rock star fame—while leaving their critics behind

[66] Fintan Vallely, "The Appollos of Shamrockery: Traditional Musics in the Modern Age" in *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003), p. 201.

negatively deemed 'purists'—is what constitutes this shamrockery (204). The mainstream popularity of Irish culture inherently represents the issue at hand: Irish culture has a complex history and is impossible to define. By simplifying it—so it becomes "aural wallpaper"—is a disservice to all involved (205).

Even when the music expands on the idea of Irish music and culture, Valleley notes that attempts to re-establish Irish music by incorporating musical influences from other cultures rarely produce results that are adequate to any tradition represented. He discusses the recent phenomenon of Afro-Celtic music which he sees as fundamentally racist:

> On stage the band is a visual reconstruction of the Victorian pyramid, the power balance of colonialism—squatting on the bottom in clouds of smoke the Africans..., the Celts on a level above, and dominating them all with the electronic control machines are the Englishmen (206).

Not all examples of musical fusion are unbalanced (or can be interpreted as such), but nonetheless, a general criticism of this type of music is that the artists do not know or understand the history behind the musics they are working with. When questioned about the fusion, a musician may hide behind the vagueness of history. To rationalize the Afro-Celtic fusion, for example, one can either imply that there was an historical alliance between African and Celtic peoples (although there is no clear information, but one can meld history to support their approach and therefore sell more records), or more generally hide behind the broad idea of the "Celtic". For Vallely, this means there is no clear Irish identity either, so "by implication, the mere Irish are now, in fact, 'nobody'" (207).

As the author explained above, however, Irish culture is too complicated and diverse to pin down, so how can an artist using modern recording techniques represent the tradition adequately? The problem is not merely due to musical fusion itself, or incorporating modern instruments, as Valleley criticizes the act of modernizing folk or

traditional music in general. Electronic production (or using electronic recourses within a folk music cross-bread) not only changes the way we listen to folk music, it changes its very identity as Lloyd explained, which causes Valleley to refer to Marshall McLuhan's point, "the medium is the message", to articulate his central concern (208-9).

Any folk tradition that relies upon stringent rules (due to a need to reinforce a clear ideology, for example) will meet resistance when specific expectations are diverted; less than drastic innovation can promote dissent. Valleley acknowledges that as long as the musician truly believes in the music he/she is creating (which he believes is not the case with the performance example of Afro-Celtic music described above), the consequential criticism or negative reception is a fair trade off (214). Although Valleley ends his essay with this point, his conciliatory tone seems to be an artificial concession since he is ending an essay that clearly expressed his criticism of mixing folk and popular throughout on a confusing positive note.

## 5.0 Answering the Central Question

### 5.1 Constructing Traditional Cape Breton Music

Since Inverness County has a long Scottish heritage which is often noted in any media portrayal of Cape Breton, combined with the recent push to attract tourists to the region to enhance the economy, it should come as no surprise that eventually a musician would try to use these circumstances to his/her advantage. The question that often arises is whether this awareness (which could therefore be construed as exploitation) is appropriate within a tradition that not only has clear musical characteristics, but is also accompanied by and implied code of values (such as respect and loyalty).

It is therefore necessary to study how MacIsaac altered traditional elements and created a new genre before discussing the impact of these changes on the culture that

closely felt the effects of this change. The first step in this process is to discuss the traditional music that MacIsaac alters on *Hi How Are You Today?* by examining it according to a research model provided by literary genre theory.

### 5.1.1 Genre Interpretation in Three Steps

In *Kinds of Literature*, Alastair Fowler offers a comprehensive analysis of literary genre, including how genres form and change, and more basically, the difference between what he labels "kind", "mode", "genre", and "sub-genre". His approach is a functional research model because, as literary scholar David Duff points out, Fowler, "aspires...to restore order and clarity to what [he] sees as and unnecessarily chaotic body of knowledge."[67]

Fowler outlines three stages in genre interpretation: construction, interpretation, and evaluation (256-76). A genre must be reconstructed while objectively considering its historical and literary context. This step is challenging since the critic has to revaluate knowledge that may be taken for granted: "The patterns, structures and meanings that it [construction] recovers have a privileged status unqualified by subsequent sound-changes, semantic changes, or changes in convention" (256). Construction must take a contextual approach because modern genre theory indicates that genres are fluid. The relationship between where a genre has come from, where it is going, and how it exists at one time is critical to its analysis, but rarely gets this necessary attention in favor of the second step, interpretation:

> The constructive phase is commonly omitted from accounts of interpretation, as if it could be taken for granted. But a literary work is never 'given.' In actual fact there are no words on the page, no conventions, no meanings (256).

Interpreting this music, therefore, requires constructing its musical context,

[67] David Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*, p. 232.

including the harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and performative aspects. Fowler discusses Hussel's concept "horizon of meaning" in which the interpreter constructs the author's perspective at the time the work was written, always trying to weed out one's own assumptions and interpretations (259). Fowler hones this concept to his notion of "generic horizon"; i.e., accurately reconstructing the genre at the time of a work's development:

> Genre can be a powerful instrument in construction, since its conventions organize most other constituents, in a subtly expressive way. 'The genre provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning components.' It need hardly be said that the limiting genre is the state of the genre at the time when a work was written (259).

Therefore, following Fowler's suggestions, I will proceed to describe how traditional Cape Breton music was defined as a genre when MacIsaac learned and presented in 1995 on *Hi How Are You Today?*.

### 5.1.2 Traditional Cape Breton Music Constructed

When studying the traditional music of Cape Breton Island, the danger exists that categorizing each musical element within the tradition (from the bow-hold, bowing style, ornamentation, accompaniment—to specific performance styles, including drones, bowing techniques, lilt, and timing) contradicts the reason there is variety within the style to begin with. Many performers developed their style by imitating other fiddlers, but the conventions themselves that make up this style developed for many reasons, be they practicality, convenience, or circumstance. Furthermore, while explaining musical details according to Western music's rules of harmony, melody and rhythm provides the outsider with a frame of reference, it is more important to appreciate why and how these variations developed within their own context. What follows is an explanation of the basic musical and performance conventions within the style; there are many individual

and stylistic conventions that are not discussed.

### 5.1.2.1 Dance Forms and Performance Style

| **Dance Forms** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **slow air** | **march** | **strathspey** | **Clog, hornpipe** | **reel** | **jig** |
| slow tempo with emphasis on melody and expression; many are older Cape Breton, Scottish, or Irish tunes; some airs were composed more recently | written in 4/4 or 2/4; slower tempo than strathspey; very steady beat | reel performed at a slower tempo; very distinct sound due to bowing style and dotted rhythms | rare, but still sometimes performed as part of a group of tunes after strathspey and before reel; common time, steady beat; Irish influence, including triplets | dominates group and solo dancing; there are many Scottish reels, and fewer Irish reels; Cape Breton performance style is distinct | common dance form in many regions; Irish jigs important in CB culture; one of the clearest examples of Irish influence on traditional CB music; compound meter, most often 6/8; |
| **Performance Style** | | | | | |
| Expressive performance; refined bowing style; vibrato | steady tempo; walking pace; slow strathspey is similar with more dotted rhythms (therefore different bowing accents) | dotted rhythms, 'hack bowing'; central in solo step-dance repertoire | rare, sometimes played at same tempo as reel; due to Irish influence | performed in cut time; strong emphasis on each beat in the measure; bow-push accent or dig: heavy bowing (both up and down bow) on each pitch; initiated by fast downbow to begin | melody often contains six eighth notes/measure; performance goal is to accent each pitch (usually change bow direction with each pitch) |

**Figure 5-1:** Dance forms and performance style, arranged according to tempo from left to right; left is slowest

Cape Breton's musical tradition is dominated by dance tunes, including reels, strathspeys, and jigs, because both group and solo dance has been central to the style's development. Figure 5-1 outlines the performance practices that are very often applied to performances of the most popular dance forms in Cape Breton. The chart is arranged horizontally, according to tempo, and outlines general points that can vary among individuals or within different communities.

As noted in the chart, the jig is a very common dance form. In Cape Breton, the importance of the jig is directly related to influence of Irish settlers. Before Scottish settlers arrived in Cape Breton, the island had a substantial Irish community, especially in Inverness County.[68] Since Inverness has the strongest musical tradition, the cultural impact of this ethnic mix is one of the most important factors in the development of Cape Breton's musical style.[69]

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[68] Paul MacDonald, *The Irish in Cape Breton* (Wreck Cove, NS: Breton Books, 1999), pp. 119-120. MacDonald explains that even before moving to the new world, Scottish and Irish peoples had been closely linked: they shared fishing ground, and some Irish people worked seasonally in Scotland. Also, the shared fishing ground between Irish settlers in Newfoundland and those in Northern Cape Breton lead to the development of a distinct regional style in Ingonish and the surrounding area.

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

The reel is an especially important dance type in Cape Breton since it is performed for both solo step-dancing and group dancing. Although also a dance form in Scotland and Ireland, the reel's performance in Cape Breton is distinct. The piece is written in cut time and is played at a fast tempo. The focus is on every beat in the measure; therefore, the performer almost always produces a tap or heavier stomp with his/her foot while performing.[70] Practicality rules performance: it is easier to dance to this music because the beat is dominant. Other individual performance features, including the drone, accent, and lilt of each performer, produce a sound that enhances the energy and drive common within the style, will simultaneously exposing the tradition's distinctiveness.[71]

When performing a reel, the bowing focuses on the "bow-push accent" or "dig".[72] Although also used when performing strathspeys (explained below), within the reel, the technique further emphasizes the beat by accenting either the downbow or upbow that corresponds to each beat in the measure. The bow-push accent characteristics the difference between Cape Breton bowing and, for example, classical bowing style: pressure is applied to the bow so both the down-bow and up-bow are either pulled or pushed by the performer when playing almost every note, occasionally with even greater

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[70] Dunlay and Greenberg, *Violin*, p. 12: "Reel time is often beat with a rocking motion of the foot, alternating between the heel and the ball of the foot to produce four taps per measure [sic]. The heel marks the strong beats (first and third) and is usually more forceful than the toe tap. However, a few fiddlers slap the toe more forcefully than the heel, adding an element of syncopation." This point is foreign to my observation or understanding of the style. A reel is performed at roughly mm=half note: 110-120, so to coordinate this motion between the heel and the ball of the foot would be challenging, distracting, and most importantly contradict the point that the performers tap provides a steady backbeat.

[71] Dunlay and Greenberg, *Violin*, p. 12: "In a more formal setting such as at some concerts, Cape Breton fiddlers may stand and refrain from tapping their feet." Dunlay and Greenberg overstate this point, despite the qualification that it only happens at "some concerts". If this happens, it is an exceptional case, for example, when the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association of approximately 100 fiddlers is gathered on stage. If a fiddler is standing, they will still stomp their foot, because there are few, if any fiddlers, whose playing has not been influenced by Cape Breton dance or other dance players where stomping the foot is central to performing a reel.

[72] Dunlay, *Violin*, p. 15.

emphasis so a particular pitch stands out. Dunlay and Greenberg describe the technique:

> Extra pressure and push is applied at the beginning of the stroke so that the speed of the bow is initially fast and the bow is deep in the string; then the force is relaxed to normal. However, the accent comes without hesitation from the previous bow stroke (15).

The strathspey is essentially a reel performed at a slower tempo and dominated by dotted rhythmic figures which are heavily accented with by the bowing technique. James Hunter described the bowing as "hack bowing": the dotted eighth note is played with a down-bow, followed by an accented upbow for the sixteenth. Dunlay and Greenberg describe the term "hack bowing" as derogatory since many scholars connect the performance style with monotony and discourage its practice, but the performer can emphasize an already accented note, or the end of a phrase, for example, with a longer bow stroke (13). Far from boring, James Hunter notes that the "jerk of the wrist" on the upbow in any traditional Scottish tune provides the unexpected accent on the upbow which is distinct to Scottish folk music (and is carried on in traditional Cape Breton music). Although the bowing motion is similar in Scottish and Cape Breton music, a strathspey performed in Scotland and one played in Cape Breton will sound very different because of the performer's lilt.[73]

The lilt is a specific performer's individual interpretation of rhythmic values, especially noticeable in a strathspey where there are many dotted rhythms to interpret in different ways.[74] It is a subjective, stylistic approach based on tradition and preference,

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[73] James Hunter, *The Fiddle Music of Scotland* (Edinburgh: T & A Constable, 1979), p. xix.

[74] Drones are used when playing reels and strathspeys as well, furthering the distinct Cape Breton sound. Although reminiscent of an older style, drones are heard and taught to fiddlers today (especially in Inverness County). The open string creates the drone with another consonant pitch; the goal is to establish both pitches in the time it should take to play one (while allowing a subtle give-and-take). The drone is usually played very close to the melody pitch, and is not notated in the music, although a tune may indicate "lots of E-string drone." See Dunlay, *Violin*, p. 16.

but is also part of the distinct Cape Breton sound.[75] The lilt varies according to region and performer, and while it is difficult to notate, a "proper" lilt can be learned aurally.[76] Tempo and ornamentation also add to the difference between Scottish and Cape Breton strathspey performance.[77]

### 5.1.2.2 Modality and Tuning

| Modality | | | | Gapped Scales: | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **mixolydian** | **dorian** | **major** | **minor** | **Hexatonic/pentatonic** | **double-tonic** |
| flattened 7th scale degree, raised 3rd scale degree | flattened 7th scale degree, lowered 3rd scale degree | some tunes in conventional major; also modal mixture or there is an ambiguous tonic | very rare because there is rarely a raised leading-tone when 3rd scale degree is lowered | used in many tunes, although they may be written with a key signature that does not accurately reflect the tonal impression of the tune; pentatonic used here literally means five-note scale, and does not indicate a particular sound the or pitches included | tonic not immediately clear, although piece resolves on one tonic eventually |

**Figure 5-2:** describing the most common modes heard in traditional Cape Breton music

The tunes performed in Cape Breton are sometimes written in major, rarely if ever in minor, and are most often written in mixolydian or dorian mode.[78] Mixolydian's flattened seventh scale and raised third scale degree, and dorian's flattened seventh and lowered third scale degree, are central to the traditional sound. Melodies may also involve modal mixture; for example, the third scale degree can be raised and lowered

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[75] Many performers feel that the piano accompaniment is a strong component of the distinct traditional Cape Breton sound. Initially, the accompaniment came from the fiddler's drone, or from another fiddler playing open strings to complement the melody. Accompaniment was also as basic as someone tapping knitting needles to enhance the fiddler's performance. These practices accompanied the fiddler, but also served a communal purpose, boosting the mood of the settlers in a new land by uniting those listening. Between the late nineteenth century, the ensemble sound was achieved using the pump organ or parlor reed organ; it provided a heavy drone similar to the bagpipe. By the early twentieth century, however, pianos were more common in Cape Breton homes, completely changing the accompaniment sound. An energetic, often syncopated, style accompanies the fiddler or piper today, which is as variable as the fiddling style. For an historical overview of accompaniment, see MacGillivray, *A Cape Breton Ceilidh*.

[76] Dunlay, *Violin*, p. 13.

[77] The performance style reflects the interaction between solo player and dancer, including how the fiddler holds the fiddle and bow, whether the performer stands or sits, how they tap their foot along with the music, and more modern considerations, including whether the fiddle is amplified, and whether the piano accompanist plays a piano or keyboard. Each of these conventions is based largely in personal or community taste (acknowledging again the different regional styles in Cape Breton), and have changed over time.

[78] Dunlay, *Violin*, pp. 6-7. Tunes are rarely written in melodic minor, although sometimes tunes are referred to as being in minor when they are actually written in another mode or employ modal mixture. The minor mode that could be used in this music would be natural minor: presenting a lowered seventh scale degree, which is a feature of the style, but also a lowered or eliminated sixth scale degree. A harmonic or melodic minor scale (with its raised seventh) would sound quite different from the folk sound of traditional Cape Breton music.

within one tune.[79] In such cases, the accompanist would use the III chord (the relative major of the minor tonic) to accompany the dorian flattened third scale degree. In other words, a tune that is "in A"—whether dorian or mixolydian—would accompany the C natural (i.e., scale degree three) with a C major chord; the mixolydian C# can be accompanied by the tonic (A) major chord. Accompanying such tunes could involve complex harmony, but to keep continuity, and in focusing on keeping a steady beat, the accompaniment is not married to the specificity of the modal tuning. In general, a mixolydian tune uses the basic chords of I and vii, mixed with ii, IV and v; a dorian tune would use i and III as the basic chords, with v, vii mixed in (see figure 5-2).[80]

There are also melodies that do not seem to have a clear tonic. The initial ambiguity is between either scale degrees one and two or seven and one, and these tunes may be misleadingly labeled "Double-Tonic". As Dunlay and Greenberg note, "double-tonic" only indicates that a tonic is not immediately clear, but the piece will eventually rest on some pitch that evokes the tonic harmony. Any tune that does not have a strong leading tone will not have the same push toward a tonic heard in the major or minor modes, and many traditional Cape Breton tunes have flattened seventh scale degrees. Therefore, the term—misleading as it is in any case—should not be used for tunes in mixolydian or dorian, where there is an inherent ambivalence between scale degrees seven and one due to the flattened seventh; such tunes also sound distinct and should not be grouped under one general heading.[81]

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[79] The raised/lowered third scale degree is thought to have developed from the bagpipe tradition. Many Scottish settlers played the Highland bagpipes (their volume made them popular for outdoor gatherings), which is a notoriously difficult instrument to tune correctly. Many believe that this has lead to the ambivalent third scale degree found within many traditional tunes performed on the violin.
[80] Dunlay, *Violin*, pp. 6-7. Referring to a tune as "in A" (or whichever key) is common in Cape Breton because of the modality of most tunes. Tunes are often grouped according to key to create continuity.
[81] Dunlay, *Violin*, pp. 8-9.

Along with modality, traditional Cape Breton tunes can involve gapped scales, whether hexatonic or pentatonic, and others are meant to be played in high-bass tuning. Tunes with such harmonic structures will also often be named "double-tonic". Dunlay and Greenberg argue that the term is acceptable as long as it is restricted to tunes which feature a pull between the first and second scale degrees. They also note that nearly all tunes which require high-bass tuning can also be grouped as double-tonic. For high-bass tuning, each of the lower strings on the violin is tuned up one wholetone; therefore, the open strings become a-e'-a'-e". High-bass tuning was common among early settlers since the greater sympathetic vibrations in the strings allowed the fiddler to fill the room or hall with sound before the assistance of modern amplification.[82] The technique also allowed the fiddler to imitate the bagpipe drone which was the favored dance instrument after the settlers arrived in Cape Breton.[83]

Whether a tune is in high-bass tuning or not, gapped scales also feature less goal-directed motion than those in major.[84] There are many examples of traditional Cape Breton tunes which feature a hexatonic or pentatonic scale. Dunlay and Greenberg use "The Black Hoe" as an example of a double-tonic tune where the pull is between G and E, the first and sixth scale degrees.[85] A more apt characterization of the tune is that it features a hexatonic scale: G-A-B-D-E-F#. The authors acknowledge this tune's connection to the hexatonic scale, but reasons that this label is misleading since a piano

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[82] *Ibid.*, p. 11. High-bass tuning is also know as scordatura and is only used for tunes written in A because it produces strings tuned to a-e'-a'-e".
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[84] Gapped scales are common in folk music from China, and Africa, for example, but also Scottish folk music. James Hunter lists the different types of scales found in traditional Scottish music, including pentatonic and hexatonic gapped scales, the bagpipe scale, and modal scales in his 1979 publication, *The Fiddle Music of Scotland.*[84] Scottish music greatly influenced Cape Breton's traditional music so, of course, these scales are found within both traditions.
[85] Dunlay, *Violin*, p. 120.

or guitar player may accompany the cadential E, which cadences every fourth bar including the end of the piece, with a C major chord (even though the hexatonic G scale lacks a C).[86] Accompaniment, however, is spontaneous, and even if the piano or guitar player is familiar with the tune, what they play in that moment is rarely planned. Furthermore, "The Black Hoe" is a jig, and therefore played at a fast tempo. Considering the tempo and running melody in 6/8 time that characterizes most jigs, the decision to play a C major chord with the E melodic cadence would probably go unnoticed by an audience who did not notice the melody's missing C—which is the sub-dominant in the G scale the audience is familiar with.[87]

### 5.2 Interpreting MacIsaac's Album

The previous section discussed the characteristics of traditional Cape Breton music and therefore promoted the accurate genre construction advocated by Alastair Fowler necessary within genre criticism. Fowler's second step, interpretation, is the essence of such criticism.

> The second phase works in a manner almost opposite to that of the first. In its pedagogic analogies and critical persuasions, interpretation tends to enlarge and blur the forms that construction defined. It is diastole to the former systole (263).

The diastole/systole metaphor aptly reflects the relationship between traditional Cape Breton music and what is heard on Ashley MacIsaac's 1995 album *Hi How Are You Today?*. Constructing traditional Cape Breton music (the historical and social characteristics outlined in chapter 2.0, and the musical characteristics outlined in the preceding section) establish the context that facilitates studying the relationship between MacIsaac's knowledge of and relationship with this culture.

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[86] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[87] The typical audience member would, however, be familiar with a standard G major scale with a C Major IV chord, so I do not think it is surprising to hear the chord played in a tune lacking C in the melody.

### 5.2.1 Genre Transformation on *Hi! How Are You Today?*

Having some understanding of MacIsaac's musical education and perspective on the Cape Breton culture (see 3.2), it is now possible to discuss the musical transformation heard on his 1995 album. As a musical genre, traditional Cape Breton music was musically altered by MacIsaac; first, because it was accompanied by non-traditional instruments, and second, because the form of the traditional pieces heard was altered to work within a contemporary popular sound.

In *Kinds of Literature*, Alistair Fowler names several ways genres evolve or are consciously transformed. He outlines categories that encompass most examples of genre transformation, whether individually or in combination: topical invention, combination, aggregation, change of scale, change of function, counterstatement, inclusion, and generic mixture.[88] While discussing these categories takes up a full chapter in his book, in the following chapter Fowler notes that generic modulation occurs more often than full genre transformation. The modulation serves as a modal abstraction; i.e., a novel concept that is included, but not fully realized, or is incorporated to varying degrees, "from overall tones to touches of local color" (191). Most of the tracks on MacIsaac's album, however, feature musical genre transformation since the popular music instruments add more than just color to the arrangements. The traditional Cape Breton music heard is juxtaposed evenly with the popular instrumentation, and the interaction between the popular and the traditional is central in each arrangement. There is one track from *Hi*

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[88] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 170. For an example of a musicological study incorporating Fowler's theories, see Julie Cumming, *The Motet in the Age of Du Fay*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). David Duff points out that some of Fowler's categories are similar: none are mutually exclusive, and a transformation may involve different categories simultaneously. Fowler, however, also points this out at the beginning of his chapter, further explaining that there may be some types of transformation which are not accounted for since how genres change is a major topic within literary criticism. See David Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*, p. 232, and Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 170.

*How Are You Today?*, however, that does exemplify generic modulation.

The track, "What An Idiot He Is" is the most adventurous track on *Hi How Are You Today?*. The song was written by Canadian folksinger/song-writer Bob Snider, but is arranged on MacIsaac's album as a modern rock song (including drums, electric and bass guitars, back-up singers, and synthesizer effects).[89] Due to this instrumentation, most listeners would identify the song as a popular music track, perhaps with an alternative-folk feel; i.e., the fusion of folk and popular that is heard on the rest of the album does not dominate the aural aesthetic of this track. MacIsaac sings lead vocals, and there are subtle fiddle additions in the background and near the end where he plays an excerpt from the Scottish march by James Scott Skinner, "The Duke of Fife's Welcome to Deeside."

The first brief reference to the Scottish march begins 2:41 into the track. Two melodic fragments are presented, followed by the final verse, and another excerpt is heard during the last fifteen seconds as the song fades out. The bowing accents and tempo reference how the tune would be played traditionally, but since MacIsaac does not play the full tune (and the excerpts are slightly obscured for effect), the proportions of the fiddle tune within the folk/rock arrangement function as a brief signifier of Cape Breton fiddling, the musical tradition, or island culture more generally.[90]

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[89] While it is common for a folk songwriter's piece to be performed by another artist, the traditional fiddle tunes MacIsaac incorporates into the other tracks on the album are not associated with anyone specific, even if they were recently composed by a performer. Within the tradition, pieces are often played by many different fiddlers, and rarely would a performer be identified by the tune he/she plays. Instead, their individual fiddling style makes a performer notable within the tradition. "What an Idiot He Is" is the only track on this album that does not have this same freedom, nor is it identified with Snider's own performance of the song.

[90] There is no need to speculate why MacIsaac referenced the tune by J. Scott Skinner and the consequential generic modulation. Its inclusion indicates the personal connection between MacIsaac and Cape Breton's traditional fiddle music and the related cultural value it holds. The brief excerpt is performed with traditional accents and at a typical tempo. See Ashley MacIsaac, *Fiddling with Disaster*, p.

While it is true that a lot of what seems to be genre transformation in music is only modulation, and many other Cape Breton musicians have tried to enlarge their audience by creating a folk/popular music sound using this approach, most of the tracks on *Hi How Are You Today?* do exemplify a transformed genre which can be examined according to Fowler's most salient genre transformation categories.[91]

Topical invention is one of Fowler's categories for genre transformation, and is described as occurring when the element combined within an existing genre becomes the defining feature of the transformed genre. The focus, therefore, of topical invention is the "matter" of the genre being "invented" (which can be either a new element or something enhanced from the genre itself) rather than the form of the original genre. In other words, a genre formed because of topical invention is identified by the matter of the integrated work, and not by its form (170). If the album is considered a transformation of a popular music genre, then the invented element is the inclusion of Cape Breton fiddling; contrastingly, if the album is interpreted as altered Cape Breton music, then the added popular instrumentation and enhanced production expose the topical invention. Either way, these observations distinguish what type of genre transformation has occurred on the album most generally.

### 5.2.2 Change in Function

Fowler discusses how a change in function can lead to a transformed genre. In early genre study—more focused on identifying pure, static, defined genres—very subtle change in function indicated a transformed genre (174-5). Today, function is determined

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[91] For this study, the categories that are applicable depict MacIsaac's genre transformation very well, and are essentially more specific types of transformation that also fit under the headings of Fowler's more general categories.

more broadly, and whether a genre varies gradually and/or unintentionally over time due to this modern perception, only drastic change leads to genre transformation (175). Since MacIsaac released an album that targeted wide commercial success, his approach points to the changing function, and therefore the transformed music genre.

Most traditional Cape Breton musician's recordings have modest distribution and reception goals. Only MacIsaac, Natalie MacMaster, The Rankin Family, and The Barra MacNeils have had record deals with major labels (at that time—there are currently a few more), as opposed to the many Cape Breton musicians who released albums independently or with smaller labels. MacIsaac does not hide his ambition during a 1993 interview (i.e., an interview conducted before he released *Hi How Are You Today?*):

> I'd like to go out there, being someone who can play an instrument, and get rich off it. Because I don't feel that all these pop bands out there who can't play anything should get rich off it if we [traditional Cape Breton musicians] can't. So If I can go out there and continue to play the fiddle the same way I always—I'm going to play the fiddle the same way whether it's new traditional, old traditional, or anyway—the fiddling is going to be the same. The thing that is going to happen with me is maybe the packaging is going to be a bit different.[92]

In these early days of his career, MacIsaac, perhaps idealistically, wants the impossible: affluence from performing a style of traditional music that is not known to make musicians rich or famous (i.e., rich by a successful popular musician's standards) by changing only the "packaging", while wanting to be consistently understood as a traditional fiddle player. MacIsaac does play his fiddle traditionally on the majority of the album, and although he alters traditional elements as will be discussed below, the altered packaging greatly affects the audience's aural perception, and therefore their initial reaction. Juxtaposing what many Cape Breton fans saw as 'their' traditional music with 'outsider' popular music prevented many listeners from getting past their initial impressions of the sound; to many, the music seemed anti-traditional. For this audience,

[92] Joseph Beaton, interview with Ashley MacIsaac, 21 December 1993.

the music's function had changed completely: it is not the music heard in dance halls, concerts, or on recordings that are independently produced and distributed. It is important to therefore understand what specifically within the music accompanied the genre transformation.

On MacIsaac's album, he expands the form and broadens traditional rhythmic expectations on some of the tracks. For Fowler, such changes indicate a change in scale within a genre, one of his types of genre transformation. There are two types of changes in scale, *macrologia* and *brachylogia*: macrologia magnifies a generic feature (whether internal or from another genre) so that it is the identifying feature within the newly transformed example; brachylogia references a larger generic form through reduced means.

### 5.2.3 "Devil in the Kitchen"

On the track "Devil in the Kitchen" MacIsaac presents a traditional Scottish strathspey within an untraditional, hard rock arrangement. MacIsaac's rendition is driven by typical hard rock accompaniment dominated by crashing cymbals and fast alternating bass drum pedals. Whereas the fiddler performing a strathspey traditionally accents every beat in the measure through "hack-bowing", dotted rhythms, and heavily tapping their foot, MacIsaac's recording removes these defining features. Instead, the bowing is streamlined to accommodate the forward momentum produced by bass drum pedals and rhythm guitar (see figure 5-5).

Genre transformation is also exemplified within the form of the piece. "Devil in the Kitchen" is a traditional bagpipe tune that was arranged in the late 19th century by J. Scott Skinner, and performances will vary regionally or individually. The tune features

Figure 5-3 – transcribed edition of J. Scott Skinner's arrangement of "Devil in the Kitchen"

# Devil in the Kitchen

Sc. fid. J. Scott Skinner (1843-1927) arranged and popularized a violin setting for this pipe tune. In SkinnerScViol.

By W. Ross (Sc.) Player: Gus Longaphie

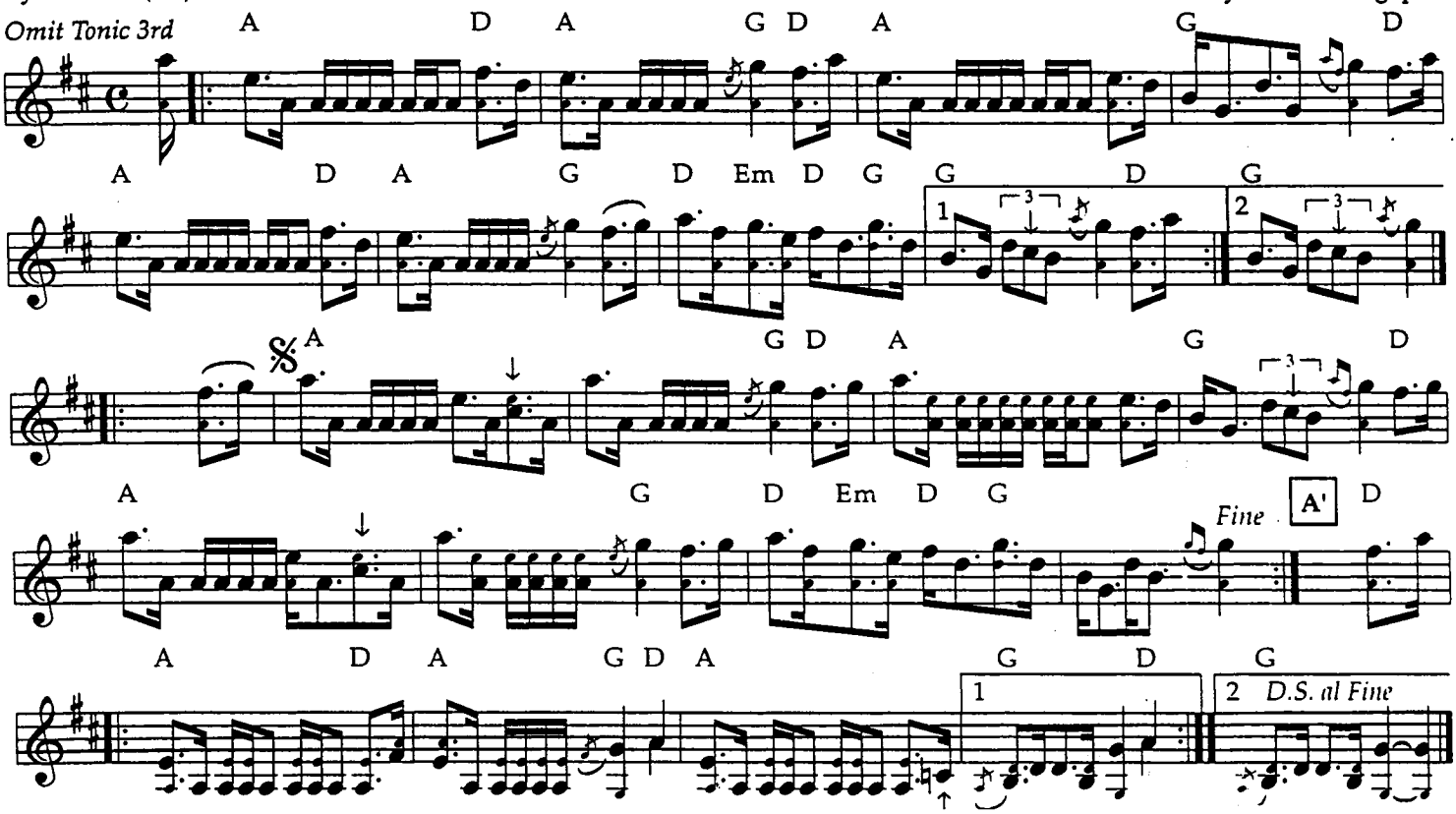


Figure 5-4 – "Devil in the Kitchen" transcribed from Natalie MacMaster's album, *No Boundries*

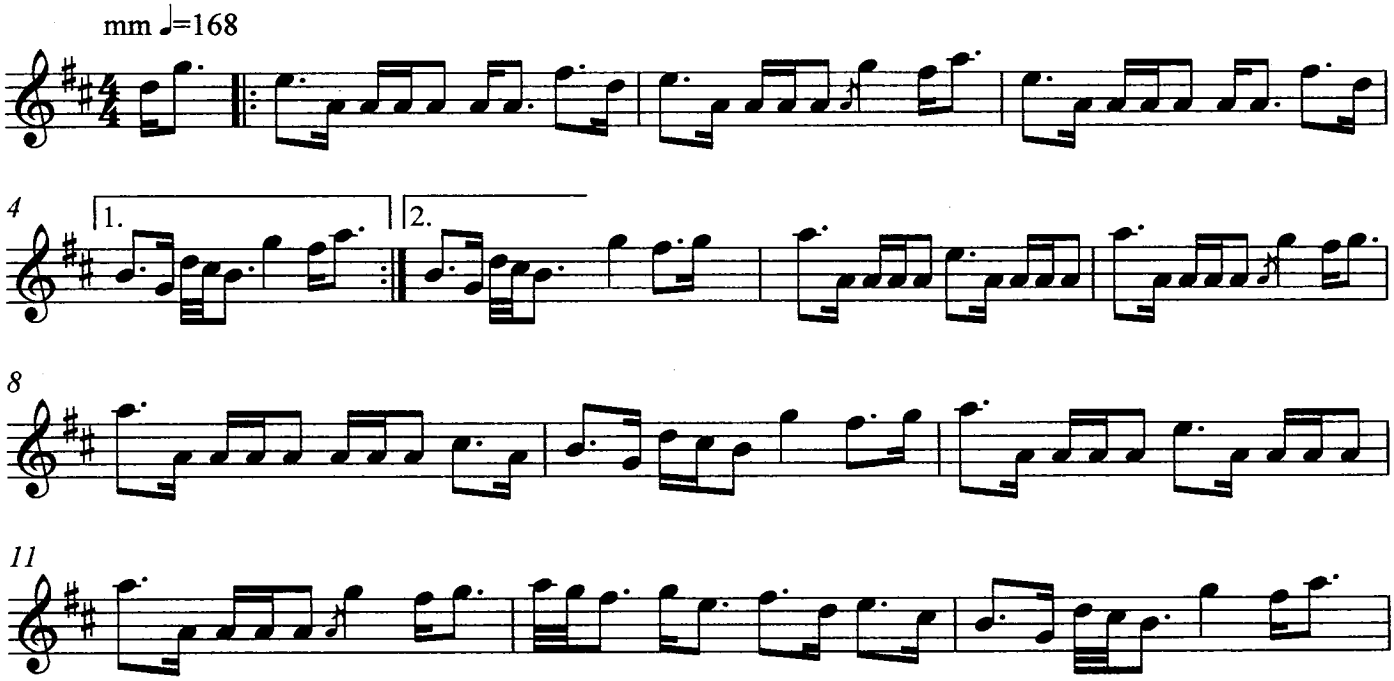
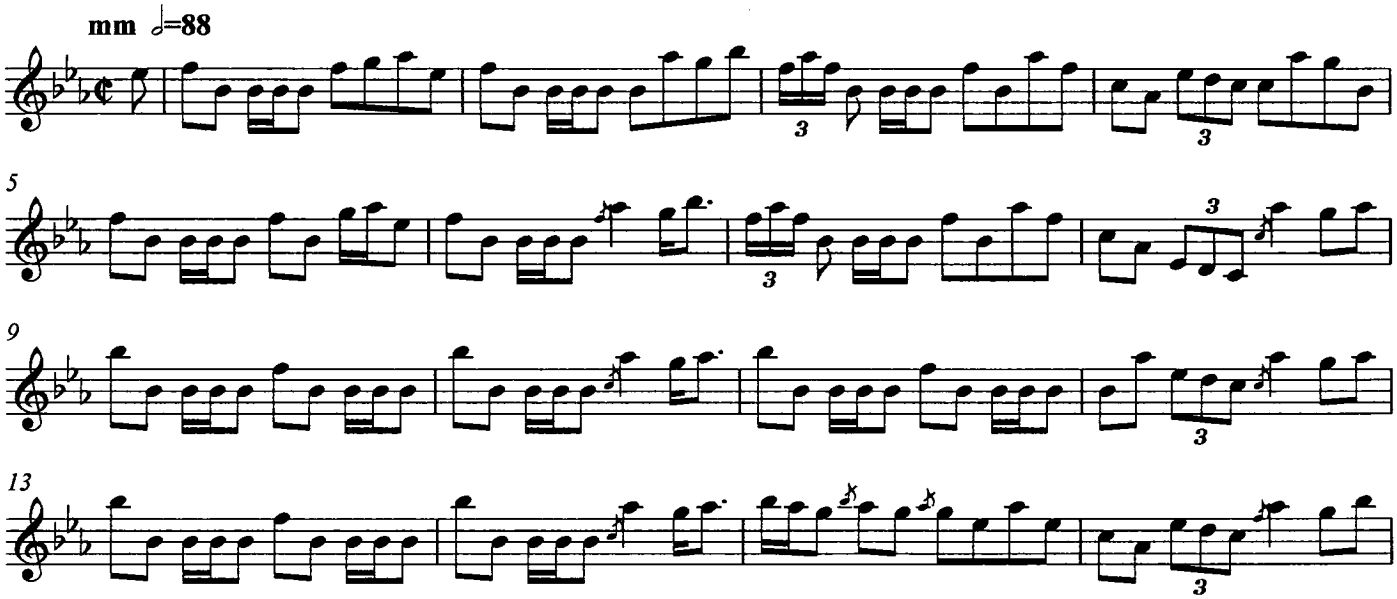



Figure 5-5 – "Devil in the Kitchen" transcribed from MacIsaac's rendition on *Hi How Are You Today?*



sections of two four-bar phrases (like most traditional tunes) plus an added four-bar phrase as a third section. The supplementary section is similar to the B section, but the melody drops an octave. Figure 5-3 shows one version found from a published collection of traditional fiddle tunes.[93]

On Natalie MacMaster's widely-distributed, major label 1996 recording, *No Boundaries* (which, coincidentally, also includes tracks that fuse traditional and popular music elements), MacMaster records "Devil in the Kitchen" as part of a traditional set of strathspeys and reels. Her performance on this album is transcribed in figure 5-4, and while she is not pushing traditional stylistic boundaries, she is not playing the tune exactly as it is found in the version in figure 5-3. Melodically and rhythmically, the melody is varied from the text version, especially at the beginning of the B section, and during the final section where MacMaster's rendition is somewhat simplified compared to the Skinner edition.

Furthermore, MacIsaac expands the form of the traditional version of "Devil in the Kitchen" when presenting the hard rock arrangement. Because playing "Devil in the Kitchen" traditionally would last less than one minute, and would be played within a group or medley of other strathspeys leading into several reels, MacIsaac's version presents the tune several times, interspersed with interludes by other instruments. Figure 5-6 outlines the form of the piece with corresponding track numbers.

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[93] J. Scott Skinner, "Devil in the Kitchen," in *Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes.* Perlman, Ken, ed. (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 1996), p. 192.

**Figure 5-6**

| Section | Track nos. | Description |
|---|---|---|
| INTRO | 00:00 - 0:13 | distorted electric guitar, muffled vocal sampling, tempo established with fast drumming on snare |
| A SECTION | 00:13 - 00:35 | tune played 1st time: AB (each played once) |
| interlude 1 | 00:35 - 00:46 | distorted electric guitar dominates with expanded turning figure |
| B SECTION | 00:46 - 01:08 | No A section; instead BB |
| quasi-guitar solo | 01:08 - 01:47 | Expanded interlude: same guitar turn figure is followed by different guitar riffs |
| C SECTION (with B ending) | 01:47 - 2:20 | ACCB (C repeated encompasses 1st and 2nd endings of traditional tune); |

MacIsaac's arrangement broadens the scale of "Devil in the Kitchen" from the traditional version which would be one small section of a larger group of tunes, to *Hi How Are You Today?*, where the piece dominates one track on the album, the arrangement mimicking a hard-rock song, complete with guitar solo. Furthermore, the rhythmic features of the tune, which are its most distinct aspect since dotted rhythms largely define the traditional strathspey, are expanded as well, which is clear when comparing figure 5-4 and 5-5. In comparison with the traditional version of the tune seen in 5-3, or the version heard on MacMaster's recording in 5-4, MacIsaac's rendition (figure 5-5) streamlines many of the dotted rhythmic figures into eight-note figures, and occasionally triplet figures, therefore removing one of the most distinctly traditional features of the strathspey.

MacIsaac argues that whether or not he has created a new sound, he is still playing his fiddle the same way he always played it.[94] One could push this comment further: MacIsaac reasons that if the backup instruments were removed, the fiddle track would feature the same stylistic features as if he performed the tune traditionally. While this may be pushing MacIsaac's point too far, or taking his comments literally, there is no doubt that he tried to reach a wider audience with his fiddling, and that MacIsaac is known firstly as a fiddler. Therefore, the way the fiddling is presented (i.e., the

[94] See footnote 92 for MacIsaac's quote discussing this issue from his 1993 interview with Joseph Beaton.

performance style) will probably be scrutinized because that is what MacIsaac does: he is a traditional fiddler, and his performance on the album is not stylistic for whatever reason—whether due to the altered rhythm and bowing heard on "Devil in the Kitchen", for example, or simply the dramatic impact created by the distorted electric guitar and crashing cymbals.

When considering change in scale, Fowler argues that brachylogia is more interesting than macrologia because condensing vast generic features into a small form of expression, while maintaining the identity of the reduced form, will lead to more complex, interesting works (172-3). Because MacIsaac tries to grasp the broad idea of traditional Cape Breton music, a vast folk music tradition, using several separate Celtic-popular tracks, points to brachylogia.

### 5.2.4 "Sleepy Maggie"

The track "Sleepy Maggie" was the most commercially successful single released from *Hi How Are You Today?*, performed by MacIsaac on violin and featuring Gaelic singer Mary Jane Lamond.[95] Not only a hit for MacIsaac and Lamond, "Sleepy Maggie" features a layered reference to a broad notion of Cape Breton culture, which follows Fowler's concept of a brachylogic change in scale that causes genre transformation. The traditional fiddle tune "Sleepy Maggie" is played both on fiddle and sung in Gaelic on this track; yet the arrangement has an extremely accessible popular sound, employing a steady drum machine beat, some acoustic guitar, and solo and accompanying vocals.

Because MacIsaac included both fiddle and vocals, "Sleepy Maggie" references the historical context of Cape Breton fiddling: many traditional Scottish tunes are also

[95] "Sleepy Maggie" was in heavy rotation on radio stations nationally, the video was popular on Canadian music television channels, and MacIsaac and Lamond performed the single on the American late-night talk show, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, during their 1997 American tour.

Gaelic songs (or have corresponding Gaelic words to accompany them), and the fiddling style (specifically an individual's lilt and quick accents) mimic the rhythm of the Gaelic language.[96] Such accent patterns are difficult to notate in the score since they are part of the traditional style as it is currently known; therefore, the connection is heard, but it is challenging to plot how or why these stylistic traits developed. The connection between MacIsaac's version on fiddle and Lamond's Gaelic rendition, however, not only depicts the historical significance of the relationship between the fiddle and the Gaelic language, the relationship between the melody as performed on fiddle compared with how it is sung highlights the way instrument and voice interact within traditional Cape Breton music.

A written version of the traditional fiddle tune "Sleepy Maggie" shows that the melody played on fiddle by MacIsaac and sung by Lamond (see figure 5-8) diverges from the traditional version (see figure 5-7) more so than would be expected due to individual variants seen (for example, variants seen between MacMaster's rendition of "Devil in the Kitchen" and the traditional version). If MacIsaac tried to perform the traditional fiddle version of "Sleepy Maggie", it would not have melded with Lamond's vocals effectively: if MacIsaac had chosen to perform the tune at an expected traditional tempo, the frequent, quick melodic leaps would have been awkward to accommodate.

With "Sleepy Maggie", however, there is added complication. The tune "Mullean Dubh" ("The Black Mill", see figure 5-9) is quite similar to the tune MacIsaac plays on the fiddle during the opening sections of "Sleepy Maggie". In correspondence with Lamond, the singer acknowledged that their rendition of the song is actually a

[96] There is a lot of debate surrounding how much influence the Gaelic language has had on Scottish fiddling. See Graham, *Cape Breton Fiddle Music.*

Figure 5-7 – traditional "Sleepy Maggie"

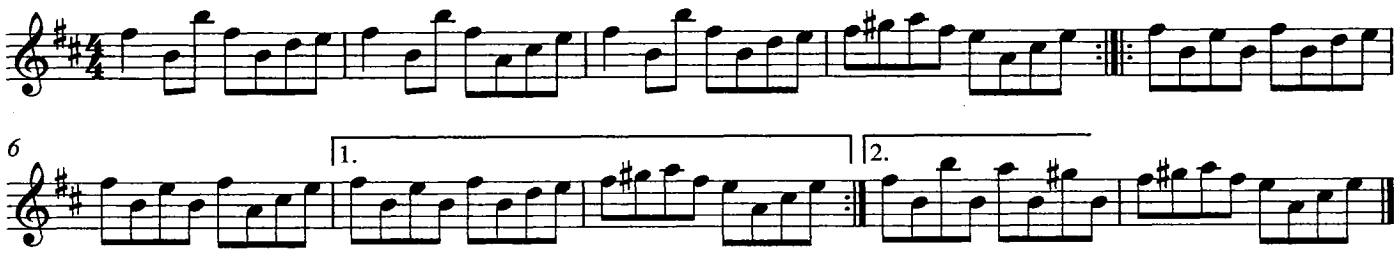


Figure 5-8 – MacIsaac and Lamond's "Sleepy Maggie", between 2:52-3:10

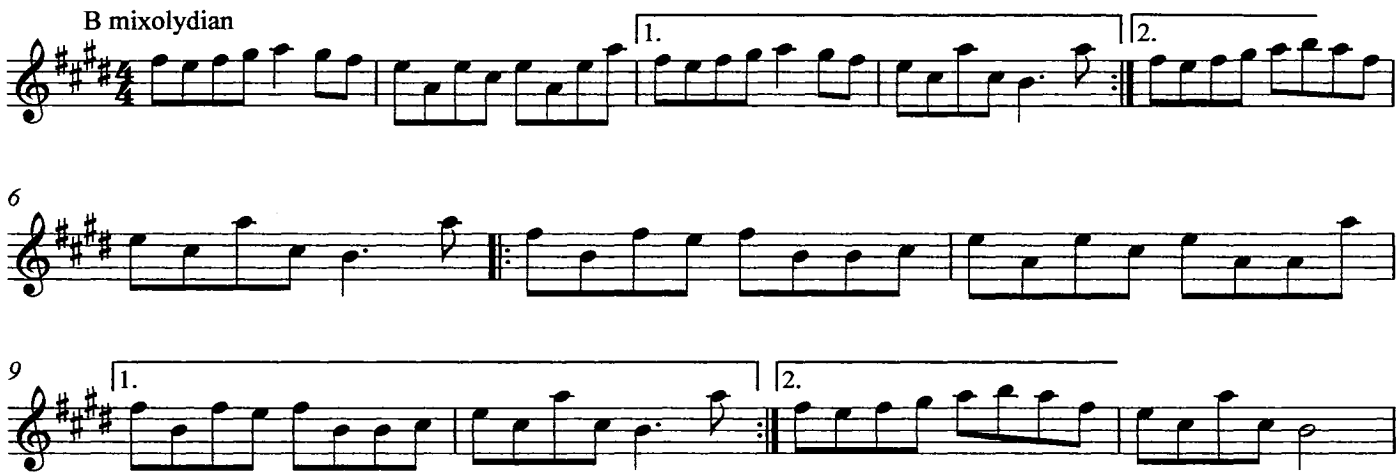
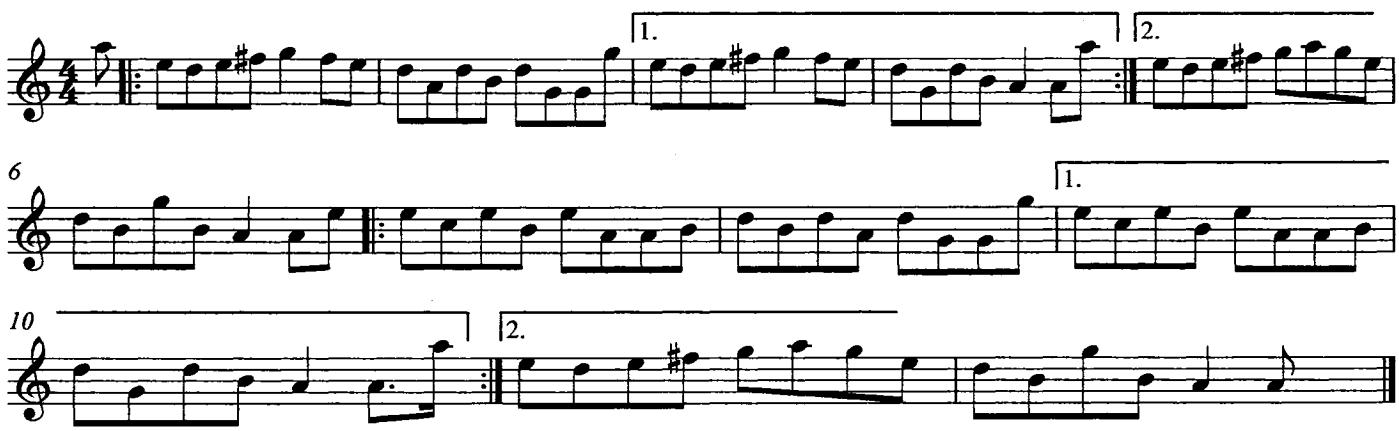



Figure 5-9 – traditional tune "Mullean Dubh" ("The Black Mill")



combination of "Mullean Dubh", "Sleepy Maggie", and new melodic material.[97] The Gaelic lyrics, furthermore, are taken from a different traditional Gaelic song, and the melody and lyrics heard during the bridge section were written by Lamond. The entire track, therefore, is a modern arrangement of several traditional and contemporary elements.

Although "Sleepy Maggie" is based on traditional Cape Breton tunes, MacIsaac and Lamond present a modern arrangement while also changing traditional conventions by altering their performance. For example, the two perform the melody together between track numbers 2:52 and 3:10 on the recording (see figure 5-8). Despite the slower tempo and decreased bowing accents than would be heard traditionally, they evoke a broad conception of traditional Cape Breton culture, which is what MacIsaac is more accurately doing with *Hi How Are You Today?*; he is not staying true to the traditional performance practices he would employ if performing in Cape Breton, but overall, the popular arrangements are still accessible to a broad audience while specifically referencing a cultural tradition.

It is not remarkable that MacIsaac and Lamond decided to alter the traditional melody so that the voice and fiddle are cohesive, or to offer an accessible popular music arrangement that referenced Celtic culture, but their actions acknowledge another example where MacIsaac changes traditional conventions or expectations for the sake of the popular aesthetic: "Sleepy Maggie" is first heard as a fragment on the fiddle followed by the full tune sung in Gaelic and later played on violin. The implications of the traditional alterations are minor, though, compared to the benefits of attracting a wider audience to MacIsaac's music. Not only would a larger number of listeners be interested

[97] Mary Jane Lamond, email correspondence with Jennifer MacDonald, 20 May 2006.

in this single because of the distinct sound produced, the opening melodic fragments on violin ease the listener into the track while creating immediate Celtic connotations.[98] The approach is a valuable way to draw the listener in while remaining specific enough to allow MacIsaac to tap into the Celtic success found in the mass market during the mid-1990s. As stated earlier, by 1995, Ireland's *Chieftans* and the stage show *Riverdance*, for example, were successful Celtic-influenced entities, and MacIsaac's approach accessed this lucrative Celtic folklore market.

### 5.3 Implications of Genre Transformation

The works highlighted above, including Fowler, Fabbri, Frith, and Brackett, explain that genre analysis is only relevant when the many intersecting factors are considered. Several of these factors are outlined by Fabbri, and recognized by both Frith and Brackett, in their contribution to musical genre analysis. Since examination is complex, MacIsaac received a strong reaction (and some strong criticism) from his Cape Breton contemporaries, community members, or other traditionalists; this reaction was based on a communal ideology: traditional, folk, or community-based music operated according to very specific rules and conventions. There may be regional or individual differences (which can help a performer by distinguishing him/her within the community), but when MacIsaac altered too many of these conventions—not only the music, but the behavior, production, consumption, and reception associated with the tradition—it was construed as going too far.

The biography on Ashley MacIsaac's website describes him as, "An ardent

[98] As noted in 4.3 (the discussion of Stokes and Bohlman, *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*) 'Celtic'is not easy to define, and many artists can accurately claim their work is 'Celtic' The term's ambiguity is part of the appeal: Celticism should embody mystery.

traditionalist with a penchant, nevertheless, for experimentation."[99] Taking up a similar perspective, a conversation with MacIsaac's first fiddle instructor revealed that Chapman believes MacIsaac's (and also Natalie MacMaster's) popular take on Cape Breton's traditional fiddling was done only to make the musicians marketable to a wider audience, and was not a natural expression of their creativity.[100] Exploring MacIsaac's career, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television series *Life & Times* interviewed Gerry Deveaux, who plays the spoons on the track "Spoon Boy" from *Hi How Are You Today?*. Deveaux explains in the documentary, "People would say 'don't ever get him [MacIsaac] to come here and play *that* type of music. Bring him here, but make sure he plays the really Cape Breton music'—and he did." Interestingly, Chapman noted that when MacIsaac plays his fiddle traditionally, not only is he considered one of the most skilled performers, but he is also one of the most traditional Cape Breton fiddlers.[101]

Seumas Taylor, however, is clearly one of Ashley MacIsaac's critics who thinks that in trying to popularize the tradition, MacIsaac and his contemporaries have demeaned it:

> I am extremely sorry to see that artists like Natalie McMaster [sic], the Rankins, and...Mary Jane Lamond, are attempting to 'rock up' their material. I likewise deplore what Ashley McIsaac [sic]...has done to debase the native idiom. I understand the lure of money and fame, and don't begrudge them their success—they are extremely talented youths. I wish they would realize that this music doesn't NEED 'improving.' It has stood for centuries on its own merit, preserved by our ancestors into the modern age, and may go on (if we can keep the Gaelic culture that produced it alive) long past the unlamented (by me, at least) demise of rock, jazz, and other pop idioms.[102]

Among members of the larger music community, however, the reaction to *Hi How Are*

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[99] www.ashleymacisaac.com/biography (accessed 16 February 2006).
[100] Conversation with Stan Chapman at Cape Breton University, 8 November 2005.
[101] I interpret Chapman's comment as referring to the relationship within the fiddling tradition between old and new performance styles. Glenn Graham discusses the development of the fiddling tradition since the first Scottish settlers arrived in Cape Breton in his thesis, and examines both the old and new fiddling styles. Graham, *Cape Breton Fiddle Music*, pp. 86-97.
[102] Seumas Taylor, "Standing up for Gaelic Culture," *Celtic Heritage* June/July (1997): 5.

*You Today?* was largely favorable. The album was frequently described as a quality example of popular music, and while the traditional Cape Breton elements are of course referenced—this point is central since Ashley MacIsaac is known as a fiddler—the synthesis of folk and popular is not questioned. In other words, music critics evaluated MacIsaac's album for what is was rather than what they thought it should be. Writing for *Billboard*, Larry Flick praises MacIsaac's approach, specifically describing "Sleepy Maggie":

> Talk about unusual concoctions. Nova Scotia's MacIsaac uses his astute songwriting skills and prodigious violin talent to create a striking blend of Gaelic chants, hip-hop-derived beats, and a pure pop melody. His playing is enhanced by the vocal flexibility of Lamond. Finding the appropriate format for this gem may be tricky at first. It will need the loud support of sophisticated musical adventurers. Complaints about the absence of quality pop music are not acceptable this week. Here it is.[103]

Near the end of the quoted passage, Flick acknowledges that it is difficult to find the appropriate medium to deliver a piece of music that clearly exhibits a genre blend. This point leads into the discussion of other opinions that criticize modernized folk music. Valleley, for example, points out that since "tradition" and "innovation" are contradictory by definition, they inherently should not be mixed.[104] This of course explains the potential for conflict, but since the two nonetheless collide, what other lines of reasoning do traditionalists follow?

When literally applied to folk music, innovation means that modern music recording technology immediately removes the individuality and intimacy from performance. A musical event can be recreated, or even turned into something else (through sampling, for example). In idealized folk music, however, the audience is made up of those who know the subtleties of the music and the rules that govern its creation

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[103] Larry Flick, "Ashley MacIsaac with Mary Jane Lamond: Sleepy Maggie" *Billboard* 108/46 (1996): 78.
[104] Valleley, "The Appollos of Shamrockery," p. 208.

and performance; i.e., those who created it listen to it. In the real world, many folk musics have been observed by people who are not members of the community, and these observers have included features from the observed folk styles within their own musical expression, thereby transforming musical genres. Most recently, however, modern recording and production has changed the community of observers fundamentally so that is mainly composed of those whom A.L. Lloyd calls "outsiders".[105]

Similarly, cross-breeds (Valleley's term) may also remove folk music elements and place them within a popularized musical context (or incorporate one folk style with another folk style), thereby changing the folk music's meaning. (This was seen in the discussion of "Sleepy Maggie" from MacIsaac's album). This act is not inherently problematic, but can easily concern fans of the original folk music who encounter a musician who does not respect the implications (or seem to understand that there are implications) of making this kind of music.

Valleley highlights four problems that he thinks threaten modern examples of Irish music: inaccurate reproduction, loss of personality to technology, suppression of meaning, and loss of self-descriptive language.[106] Valleley's list summarizes the main arguments against modernizing folk music, and while most of the tracks on MacIsaac's album present traditional music in an altered aural aesthetic due to modernized production, MacIsaac offers a direct reference to the tradition he altered. The track "Spoon Boy", which is the sixth track on the album of twelve, presents MacIsaac playing his fiddle in typical Cape Breton ensemble. By including the track, he reconstructs the tradition he alters on the rest of the album, and consequently, educates those of his fans

[105] Lloyd, "Electric Folk Music in Britain," p. 14.
[106] Valleley, "The Appollos of Shamrockery," p. 214.

who are unfamiliar with the folk music involved. Correspondence with Glenn Graham reiterates this point:

> Even if the music is sometimes "repackaged" as it reaches commercial audiences outside of Cape Breton, its authenticity almost completely remains intact when interpreted locally, as many of the artists (including Ashley...) have a familial and local influence that is strongly inherited and taken seriously....That way, it survives in the local context, which it always has. And that is what is most crucial....Even amongst some packaged, more "electric", non-local performances, the aforementioned and other artists very often will "educate" the audience and...give a blast of either solo fiddle, or double fiddle with piano and/or guitar in a very traditional set, which could very well go over as well as the [Celtic]-pop arrangements.[107]

Critics who share Valleley's perspective, however, would argue that including a traditional set of fiddle tunes on an album that is otherwise an example of Celtic-popular fusion does not compensate for the change heard on the rest of the recording since MacIsaac also uses modern production techniques to record the set of traditional tunes. According to Valleley's argument, therefore, the meaning is suppressed, the self-descriptive language is obscured, much of the personality is lost, and this group of tunes will never be an accurate reproduction of traditional Cape Breton music because the listener is not hearing a group of tunes being performed in Cape Breton.

All of these points are conceded, but the larger question arises: modern production implications aside, by using these techniques, MacIsaac can reach a larger audience, and is able to make a living as a musician while being creative and sharing his traditional culture with others. Why does Valleley's perspective center on technological use, which is an inherent part of modern music production, when the artists involved want to achieve largely noble results (make a living, be creative, and develop a broader fan base). While offering slickly-recorded folk music inevitably alters traditional music, folk music is not stagnant, and is it more realistic to expect that any music will reflect (or react in some way) to the cultural forces that surround it.

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[107] Glenn Graham, email correspondence with Jennifer MacDonald, 5 January 2006.

There is an added challenge when discussing the impact and reception of Ashley MacIsaac's music. Articles written about MacIsaac since *Hi How Are You Today?* was released discuss his music less often, and instead describe his controversial performances and the musician's comments on his sexuality and lifestyle practices, which affects current perception of MacIsaac as a musician. Because this thesis examines the genre transformation that occurred on *Hi How Are You Today?* within the cultural context that accompanied the 1995 album's release, it would not have been responsible to rely entirely upon current commentary on MacIsaac as a musician. Contemporary impressions of MacIsaac are inevitably based to some degree on the publicity he received after the 1995 release of the album.[108]

## 6.0 Conclusions

Discussing broad concepts like popular music or folk music—along with the cultural impact of each—leads to many questions that cannot be definitively answered, yet examining these issues leads to new insight. Indeed, both popular and folk music have no clear definition, although some general points can be agreed upon (for example, when discussing definitions for popular music, Middleton acknowledges that there is some kind of connection between sociology and popular music, and musical production with what we consider popular music, although these are by no means complete definitions).[109] Despite these complications, examining Ashley MacIsaac's approach on his 1995 album as an example of innovative folk music involved considering several

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[108] Several controversial performances have contributed to MacIsaac's image, including his appearance on American talk-show, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* in 1997 and a performance in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1999. Much of this non-musical controversy began in 1996 when *The Advocate* published an interview with MacIsaac which disclosed details about his sexual practices, which resulted in MacIsaac's removal from *McLean's* Honor Roll list for that year. For a good summary of the reaction to MacIsaac's early controversial behaviour, see Patricia Hluchy, "Ashley's Indiscretion," *Maclean's* 109/48 (1996): 120-22.
[109] Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, p. 5.

questions, and produced the following concluding thoughts.

In his 1993 interview and his autobiography, MacIsaac describes himself as changing only the packaging of the music: he is still playing the fiddle the same way as he would if performing live in Cape Breton (stylistically—including bowing, accents, phrasing). After looking at specific tracks on the album, especially notable on "Devil in the Kitchen" in which he streamlines the bowing style (see 5.2.3), it is clear that he did facilitate the altered aesthetic by changing some of the music and stylistic components typically heard in traditional Cape Breton music. MacIsaac had to alter his performance so the music would appeal to the average popular music listener. Most of the tracks on *Hi How Are You Today?* are radio-friendly, three to four-minute arrangements of one traditional tune which is lengthened through varied instrumentation, sections with solo instruments, different instruments playing the tune, or repeating tune. This contrasts with traditional tune groups that are performed together. Overall, this point does not take away from the overall impact and thoughtfulness of the album's arrangements.

The degree to which MacIsaac altered traditional performance practice on *Hi How Are You Today?* highlights the potential for a future project examining the track "Sleepy Maggie" in depth: looking how traditional tunes and new material were combined to create the melody heard on the track, how the form of the piece influences how the melody is arranged (more specifically, what is the relationship between MacIsaac and Lamond's conception of the form and how they created the melody), and closely considering how and why MacIsaac is diverging from traditional bowing and accents. Since this was the most commercially successful track from the album, the impact of the song on listeners, combined with its function as a music video and as a radio single,

distinguish the track according to what it may reveal due to is musical form, and for its social implications, more than other track on the album.

Acknowledging that MacIsaac altered traditional performance practice to fit the popular aesthetic reveals much about audience reception. Members of the Cape Breton community who criticized MacIsaac for his approach were more likely reacting to the impact of juxtaposing a harder popular sound (such as electric guitar) with traditional elements they are more familiar with; after all, there is more to music reception than the reality of how the music is altered, including the production and promotion the album, along with perception of the musician's image. When considering MacIsaac's work on *Hi How Are You Today?*, there are powerful signifiers which impact the listener produced by electric guitar, distortion pedals, and synthesizer effects, for example. Considering how the musical community reacted to this altered sound would be a detailed study itself. Scholarly work has already been produced on the role of popular music signifiers—both primary and secondary, and the connection between the two—and there is potential value in examining this work and applying it to how MacIsaac's has been received as a musician.[110]

Although it is easy to understand a musician's desire to transform the music they know intimately, it is also easy to understand that the traditional community is in a difficult place: on one hand, their tradition is personal, intimate, and greatly tied into the lives of many people; therefore altering it is taken very seriously. Furthermore, this is also a tradition that developed amidst the forced emigration and harsh living conditions encountered by settler's in their isolated new home, combined with the challenging

[110] For a very good overview of semantic analysis in popular music, see Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular music*, pp. 220-244.

economic conditions faced by Cape Breton residents throughout their history.[111] The common debate within popular music studies, creativity versus commerce, is furthered within a community where economic concerns are central. It is possible that community members were uncomfortable with a musician from an economically depressed area who could become well-known and financially independent producing an album that juxtaposed what many see as opposing musical approaches, sounds, and ideologies.

It is also difficult for traditional critics of MacIsaac's album to argue that their tradition has conventions that must be upheld at all cost. Innovation is central to traditional or folk music, and has been combined with outside forces to create some of the most prolific musical genres that exist today: including rock, jazz, and country music.[112] Within Cape Breton music specifically, the conventions explained in 5.1 are discussed while acknowledging that there are many individual and regional stylistic variations all over Cape Breton Island. Creating an individual style is encouraged. Proponents of tradition, however, may note that for a performer to develop their distinct sound, they have to spend a lot of time mimicking other performers, later making these aspects work for themselves.

Furthermore, it is difficult for musicians to make a living when competing with very high production standards expected from any album that wants to sell a lot of copies in the modern music market, which Valleley concedes in his essay. Similarly, Middleton acknowledges that folk artists have always been connected with the popular market as well—there are no pure, authentic, untouched folk traditions that can escape the influence

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[111] MacIsaac acknowledges that he also needed to face the economic challenges of making a living as a musician living on Cape Breton Island, or as a performer of traditional Cape Breton music. This is why he tried to broaden his audience with his 1995 album designed to appeal to popular music listeners as well.
[112] Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, p. 129.

of other musics. Combining musical styles is natural and expected. It is most important is that the musician understand the possible implications of the transition (for themselves as musicians or for the community connected to this musical style); therefore, the musician wishing to make a connection between the popular market and their own folk traditions should understand the history involved, which is specifically argued by Valleley, but also acknowledged more generally by Fowler when he discussed the need to construct a genre before interpreting or evaluating it.

Many of MacIsaac's critics seem to be influenced more so by the music's immediate aesthetic impression rather than striving to appreciate what he is accomplishing musically through this blend of popular and traditional musical elements. His proponents, ironically, would encourage the listener to strive to hear the connection between the traditional music and how it is being incorporated with modern musical components like electric guitar, drums, synthesizers, and sampling. Advocates for this treatment want the individual to listen carefully and take note of those musical elements that are unconventional to them, learn something about it, and appreciate the distinct sound created. The influence of the traditional remains in MacIsaac's music, but his career ambition opened the door to a broader audience who was exposed to the music through mass-market distribution, and attracted to the sound because of the modern production techniques. These new listeners, consequently, become educated about Cape Breton's musical style, therefore increasing their awareness of this distinct musical tradition that they may have never known of otherwise.

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Appendix 1

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**Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans**

**REB File #:** 156-0206

**Project Title**: Devil on the Fiddle: The musical and social ramifications of genre transformation in Cape Breton music

**Principal Investigator:** Jennifer MacDonald **Department:** Music

**Status:** Master's student **Supervisor:** Prof. D. Brackett

**Granting Agency and Title (if applicable)**: N/A

This project was reviewed on February 23, 2006 by

Expedited Review ✓
Full Review ____

Blaine Ditto, Ph.D.
Chair, REB II

**Approval Period:** February 23, 2006 **to** February 22, 2007

This project was reviewed and approved in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects and with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct For Research Involving Humans.

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* All research involving human subjects requires review on an annual basis. A Request for Renewal form should be submitted at least one month before the above expiry date.
* When a project has been completed or terminated a Final Report form must be submitted.
* Should any modification or other unanticipated development occur before the next required review, the REB must be informed and any modification can't be initiated until approval is received.

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