

# "Couldn't Have a Wedding Without the Fiddler": Old-Time Fiddling on Prince Edward Island

By Ken Perlman



Photo: Ken Perlman

Archie Stewart of Milltown Cross, Kings County

The Canadian province of Prince Edward Island is home to one of the great fiddling traditions of North America. Because very few fiddlers from "P.E.I." have ever been commercially recorded, this tradition is still virtually unknown to outsiders. Yet, many "Island" fiddlers have playing styles that are every bit as complex, musically intriguing, and unique as any folk-instrumentalist you might hear on an old 78.

Traditional or "old-time" fiddling on Prince Edward Island is a lively blend of Scottish, Irish, and Acadian elements. Local lore has it that the first waves of Scottish and Irish settlers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had fiddlers among them, and that these pioneer musicians brought with them tunes and ways of playing that are still important features of Island music. That same lore states that Acadian fiddlers adopted many of the tunes and some of the playing style of their Celtic counterparts, bringing to the music a rhythmic interpretation and lively bowing style that is uniquely their own.

*"One thing, boy, you were always welcome! I heard an old fellow saying one time, the three most important people in the district — the minister was first, the school teacher was next, and the fiddler was next! That was the three most important people in the town... Couldn't have a wedding without the fiddler!"*

— Archie Stewart, Milltown Cross  
Prince Edward Island

The contemporary Island fiddle repertoire — reels, jigs, "set tunes," hornpipes, waltzes, airs, marches and strathspeys (strath-SPEYS) — is a hodge podge of tunes from a variety of national and regional traditions. Its core is Scottish and — to a lesser extent — Irish, but it also includes tunes from Cape Breton Island, mainland Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, New England, and the Southern United States. In addition, there are many tunes composed on the Island, and versions or variants of tunes from *away* (off-Island) that have evolved among Island fiddlers over the generations.

There are at least five distinct "regional" fiddling styles on P.E.I. In **Northeast Kings County**, most of the fiddlers play a style and repertoire that is distinctly Scottish, and most tied to neighboring Cape Breton. In **West Prince County**, on the other hand, fiddlers play a style and repertoire that is distinctly Acadian, with strong ties to neighboring New Brunswick. There are also three other regional styles: **Evangeline** (South Prince County), which blends a bit of Scottish repertoire and rhythmic attack into a largely Acadian style; **Central Island**, which blends some Acadian rhythmic style and repertoire into a largely Scottish-based style; and **South Kings County**, where the sound reminds this writer of 1920s-era fiddle recordings from the American South.

Because of a variety of historical factors — not the least of which was a long term policy by the Canadian Federal Government that promoted growth in the center and west of the country while ignoring the east — P.E.I. retained more or less a late nineteenth century technology and way of life through the 1950s. This means that most fiddlers over the age of forty learned their skills and developed their attitudes toward music in a cultural setting that lacked for the most part such modern "amenities" as electricity, paved roads, automobile travel, self-propelled farm machinery, and electronic communications.

fiddlers I spoke to remember dances called *breakdowns* (also known as *Scotch reels*, *four-hand reels*, or *eight-hand reels*), which required step dancing through most maneuvers. In the 1920s or so these dances apparently gave way to others — like the *lancers* and the *quadrille* — where most maneuvers would be walked through. Thereafter, step dancing became primarily a solo dance form.

All these square dances were divided into distinct segments called “figures.” Each figure had different steps to it, each was accompanied by a different kind of tune, and each was followed by a distinct pause that offered both musicians and dancers a chance to take a breather. Most fiddlers I spoke to remembered that the square dances in their community had four figures. As time went on, each community evolved its own version of square dancing which varied from that of its neighbors in terms of the number of figures, the order of figures, the actual steps done, and the kinds of tunes played for them. Since everyone in each community knew the steps to the local brand of square set, callers were rarely required.

The subtle rhythmic nuances of square and step dancing are still reflected in the Island fiddle sound. The little dip that occurs on each upbeat when Islanders swing their partner, for example, shows up in the rhythms of the bowing style. Similarly, a “shuffle-stomp” routine that step dancers put in at the end of each fiddle tune part strongly influences the way that fiddlers phrase these endings. When a fiddler has assimilated these and other dance-related elements, he or she becomes known as a “lively” player. Such a player is said to convey a rhythm so infectious that anyone within range will want to get up and dance.

### “Jigging” the Tunes

Making music in old Island districts was not just the province of the fiddler. Most residents knew at least the more common tunes by heart, and a fair percentage excelled at an activity known as “tuning” or “jigging” — singing dance tunes with full rhythmic nuance using abstract vocables or nonsense lyrics. In fact, when no fiddlers were available, “tuners” were sometimes called upon to provide music for dancing. Fiddlers Teresa Wilson and Jenny McQuaid, who both attended the Monticello one-room schoolhouse in northeastern Kings County during the 1930s and ’40s, remember that some children would jig tunes and others would dance square sets during lunch recess. Guitarist Vincent Doucette, a man in his forties from the Tignish area of western Prince County, tells of fishermen jigging tunes on the docks for their step dancing colleagues:

“I remember if you were at the harbor Saturday afternoon after everybody was all done fishing... one guy’d be jigging and the other fellow’d be step dancing, they’d keep it up a long while. That’s the way they’d practice their steps.”

### Fiddling Families

Most Prince Edward Islanders believed that the art of fiddling was inheritable, like hair and eye color. One still widely-held theory on the handing down of the fiddle art holds that great fiddling

often skips a generation. Consequently, the most likely group of offspring among whom the gift might fall would have fiddling grandfathers on both sides.

It was regarded as quite natural, therefore, that the art would be dominated in many areas of the Island by large fiddling families. In such families, at least one parent, and a large percentage of the numerous children in residence, played fiddle, accompaniment instruments, or step danced. Not only was music making and dance continual on evenings and Sundays in these households, but community members could precipitate a house party merely by dropping in. Fiddler Zélie-Anne Poirier, a quilt-maker from St. Nicholas in the Evangeline region of Prince County, remembers it this way:

“We had an old-fashioned [pump] organ... We had an old guitar. Always a couple of fiddles in the house — had to be, there was too many playing. And we used to have square dances in the house — there were so many. We had fourteen one winter ... fourteen in the house, so lots of nights we had square dances. We were never short of music and that’s for sure. Everybody used to come down [from the neighborhood] and sing and dance and God knows what.”



Photo: Ken Perlman

Zélie-Anne Poirier of St. Nicholas, Prince County

## Learning Tunes



Photo: Mike Hird

*George MacPhee of Monticello, Kings County, author Ken Perlman, and the ever-present pot of Northside tea.*

In the old days, these fiddling families produced most of the Island's few active female fiddlers. Fiddling was considered by and large to be a man's calling, and those women who were musically inclined were encouraged to take up the pump organ or piano. Part of this was simply an extension of other "division of labor" attitudes that had men running the plows, mowers, and binders, and women learning to spin, weave and cook. But there was also a general feeling that fiddling at dance events was no "proper" activity for a woman. In fact, with the exception of a few players like Ms. Poirier, most Island women who fiddled plied their art primarily in the privacy of their homes.

Families with no fiddlers in residence often kept a fiddle around the house in case someone should come by who could play it. In fact, the appearance of a fiddler at such a household would often occasion the suspension of all farm work. Fiddler Merlin Quinn, a tall red-haired farmer in his sixties from Cardross in Kings County, remembers it this way:

"My father loved the fiddle [but couldn't play]. So if anybody ever came in that could play fiddle, it just stopped everything right off. That was the end of the work — we all went in. Stopped there as long as they'd play. Didn't make no difference if it was the middle of the day or what. And we'd stay and listen to the fiddle.... I remember the driver [of a potato truck] could play the fiddle. He'd come up and we'd start to load the potatoes. We put the load on, I guess. But then nothin'd do but he'd come in... Oh, the fiddle'd come out first thing. Perhaps the teapot would go down... But, as long as they wanted to play, there was no hurry to get back to work... and that was it. My father was a great worker — worked hard all the time, never stopped. But at the same time, if there was somebody come in with a fiddle — my father stopped everything right off."

Almost all tune transmission between the generations was by ear. Because of all the "jigging" that went on around the house, and the continual exposure to fiddling through local house parties, youngsters would usually have had the opportunity to commit to memory a fairly developed repertoire by the time they actually took up the fiddle. In fact, a number of fiddlers we spoke to expressed surprise that anyone would even want to play fiddle without possessing in advance a tune reservoir of this nature.

Learning new tunes often had to be done on the fly. A couple of hearings at a dance might be all the exposure to a particular tune you'd ever get. Many fiddlers developed the ability to absorb at a single hearing the essence of a new tune. They would then fill in the details upon subsequent hearings. Consequently, many Island players have prodigious powers of musical recall.

Because their ears were so developed, exposure to fiddle music on radio enabled them to vastly expand their repertoires. Most older fiddlers report having learned tunes from a variety of players whose music appeared on radio between 1930 and 1960. The two most influential fiddlers on radio during this period — Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald and Angus Chisholm — came from the nearby island of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. New Brunswick-born Don Messer, who performed for years on Charlottetown radio, also served as a significant tune-source. Interestingly, P.E.I.'s exposed position on the Atlantic coast enabled some fiddlers to occasionally pick up and learn tunes emanating from WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia!

According to most accounts, retrieving a new tune from memory was often an unconscious process. A fiddler would awaken in the middle of the night, be lying abed in the morning, be out working the fields or on a fishing boat and a recently heard tune *would appear to him in its entirety*. If a fiddle could then be immediately got hold of, the tune could be picked out and retained in memory.

Fiddlers who experienced tune recall while working often faced a hard choice. Either they interrupted their work day and made a dash for the fiddle, or they risked losing the tune forever. Folklorist and song-collector John Cousins from Woodstock in Prince County, tells this tale of how a well-known fiddler from nearby Milburn dealt with this dilemma:

"Guy Boulter... would go to cut grain. Now in order to cut grain you had to haul a binder. To haul a binder you needed three horses — a binder was the heaviest piece of machinery that was on the farm for horses to haul — [and] it was a complicated maneuver to hitch a three-horse team... They said Guy Boulter would if he was out on the binder — and a tune would be goin' through his head... He'd be thinking

of this tune. It'd get to him so bad that he'd get off the binder, he would drive to the barn, he would unhitch the horses, and he would put them in the barn and he would sit down and play that tune on the fiddle. He couldn't stop himself."

### *The Mixed "Gift" of Fiddling*

One reason that the art of fiddle instruction never developed on P.E.I. was the widespread feeling that the ability to make music was a *gift* from the Deity. Since fiddling was a gift, there was no need for older players to attempt to influence the development of a youngster. If they had the "gift," they would find their own way. If not, there was nothing to be done about it.

Having the gift of fiddling was sometimes a mixed blessing. Along with the joy of playing came the strongly felt obligation to share your gift with the community, regardless of how you felt about it. In fact, fiddlers were expected to offer their services gratis at house parties, community fund-raisers, and (for the most part) weddings.

Despite the general affection for his music and the constant demand for his services, the fiddler was not always held in high regard. Due to the network of community obligations, he was often required to spend several nights a week playing long hours without pay. At the same time, he also had to work from dawn to dusk at farming or fishing. If he slacked off on his daytime responsibilities, he developed a reputation for laziness. If he declined invitations to play, he was considered mean-spirited.

Stories abound on the consequences of too much fiddling. There is, for example, a former settlement in Kings County that is said to now be abandoned because it once sported so many good fiddlers that no one ever did any work. And then there's the one — told here by Ervan Sonier — about the Prince County fiddler whose long suffering wife was dismayed to see him head off with his instrument to a house party while several weeks' backlog of chores were piling up:

"Now the woman's at the door and she yells, 'You're leaving with the fiddle again!' 'Yes.' And she said, 'You know there's not a stick of wood cut about the place!' 'Christ, woman,' he said, 'I'm taking the fiddle, not the ax.'"

### *Fiddling Today*

Community life is no longer what it was during the Golden Age of Fiddling. With the coming of the "modern" era in the late 1950s, the focus moved away from local music and dance to entertainment provided by mass communications. Hundreds of community fiddlers — products of a tradition that had provided dance accompaniment for generations — were still in place, but their talents were no longer in demand. As the importance and visibility of fiddling declined, the art no longer drew youngsters to its fold. By the mid-1970s, Island fiddlers were an aging population with few members even as young as thirty.

By the late 1970s, some fiddlers on the Island became sufficiently alarmed by the state of affairs to do something about it. Under the leadership of Fr. Faber MacDonald from Little Pond, Kings County (now a bishop in Newfoundland), Joe Pete Chaisson from nearby Bear River, Ervan Sonier, and several others, the P.E.I. Fiddlers' Association was formed. Eventually, a separate branch was organized for each county.

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The P.E.I. Fiddlers Association made two important changes in the musical life of the Island. First, they established a number of annual fiddle festivals and concerts, thereby creating some fiddling venues that were viable in contemporary Island life. Second, and most important, they focused support for group fiddle lessons aimed primarily at youngsters.

The most successful of these teaching programs was set up by Joe Pete Chaisson and his sons Kenny, Kevin, and Peter on behalf of the Kings County branch of the P.E.I. Fiddlers' Association. Using proceeds from an annual fiddle festival, they established free weekly fiddle classes in the town of Rollo Bay. After fifteen years of operation, these efforts have just begun to bear fruit and a new generation of players trained at Rollo Bay is now coming into its own. Interestingly, some of the best new players are female, and you saw it here first that the next fiddling sensation from the Maritimes may very well be Peter Chaisson's fifteen year old daughter Melanie.

The house parties, school dances, and other activities so common during the Golden Age of fiddling are now gone from the scene. Their spirit still lives on, however, every time an old-time fiddler picks up his bow, and every time reminiscences of old times sets his features aglow. Hopefully, the youngsters now taking up the art can carry this spirit into the next generation and beyond.

*[Ken Perlman is a well-known banjo and guitar player with several instruction books and recordings to his credit. He also has a Master's degree in ethnomusicology. His work on Prince Edward Island fiddling has consumed much of his energies over the last few years. An anthology cassette, made from Ken's field recordings, entitled The Old Time Fiddlers of Prince Edward Island, was released in 1993 (Marimac Recordings). He has put together a collection of over 400 Island tunes — entitled The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition — which is due to be published shortly by Mel Bay. He is also at work on a book based on the oral histories of Island fiddlers. His own most recent album is Devil in the Kitchen (Marimac).]*

## Tune Genres

Most tunes played by Island fiddlers follow conventional Celtic categories. They are:

- *Reels*: By far the most frequent kind of tune heard on the Island. A driving cut time (2/2) tune with lots of eighth notes. Sometimes known on P.E.I. as "fast tunes."
- *Set Tunes*: Cut time dance tunes which are not reels. Examples are converted song melodies, and polka-like tunes. Sometimes known on P.E.I. as "slow" tunes. The Irish analogue here is the "Kerry Polka."
- *Jigs*: 6/8 time tunes. Islanders recognize two varieties. *Irish jigs* have lots of eighth notes; *Scotch jigs* (Irish analogue: *single jigs*) have more quarter and dotted-quarter notes, or more sharply defined melodies.
- *Hornpipes*: Most hornpipes on P.E.I. are played in exactly the same manner as reels.
- *Waltzes*: Medium-tempo dance tunes in 3/4 time.
- *Airs*: Tunes played strictly for listening. The player sometimes avoids keeping strict time.
- *Marches*: Medium tempo cut-time tunes, not generally used for dancing. Most marches played on P.E.I. come from the Scottish tradition. There are two kinds: *Pipe marches* have four parts; *fiddle marches* have two.
- *Strathspeys*: Dance tunes — mostly from the Scottish tradition — with complex rhythms in 4/4 time. Can be played in a variety of tempos. Rarely played on P.E.I. outside of Northeast Kings County.

## Fiddling Events on Prince Edward Island

If you want to get a taste of P.E.I. fiddling on its home turf, a good place to start would be some of the major festivals. The largest is the Rollo Bay Scottish Fiddle Festival, held the third weekend in July in Northeastern Kings County. Two fiddle festivals are also held in the town of Abram-Village, Prince County: the Atlantic Jamboree (first weekend in August), and the Acadian Exposition (Labor Day Weekend). In addition, the Prince County branch of the Fiddlers' Association holds a festival in Kensington each August, and the Queens County branch holds one during the winter months. Check with the P.E.I. Department of Tourism for dates (1-800-463-4PEI).

Fiddling can also be heard at various local events. Locating these usually requires scanning newspapers, or just asking around and letting your interest be known. If you get up to Northeastern Kings County near the town of Souris (pronounced SOO-ree), there are now three year-round old-time dances and ceilidhs (KAY-leys: informal musical evenings). These include the Circle Club Dance in St. Peters (Fridays), the Goose River Dance (Saturdays), and the Monticello Ceilidh (Sundays).

The following reels are transcribed from performances appearing on the anthology cassette, *The Old Time Fiddlers of Prince Edward Island* (Marimac Recordings). Both of the tunes presented are widely played favorites on the Island, often referred to as “good old tunes.” Observe that for “double stops” (stacked notes), the full-sized note represents the melody while the smaller note is a second or “harmony” note. Notes with two stems represent doubled-notes (that is, the same pitch played simultaneously on two different strings).

## Pigeon on the Gatepost

Transcribed by Ken Perlman as played by Archie Stewart of Milltown Cross

This tune is Irish in origin, but the version generally played on P.E.I. has evolved substantially relative to its Irish ancestor. The two 6/4 measures in this version represent Stewart’s own “twist on” (individual approach to) the tune. There are two unrelated tunes in the Irish tradition also known as “Pigeon on the Gate” — one generally played in G-modal, and one in E-modal. (The downward pointing arrows in the B part refer to pitch; the notes are played lower than written — somewhere between G natural and G#.)

Musical score for "Pigeon on the Gatepost" in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). Above the staff are the chords A, D, Am, and G. The second staff continues the melody with chords Am and G, and includes a first ending bracket labeled '1' and a second ending bracket labeled '2'. The third staff features downward-pointing arrows above several notes, indicating a pitch bend. The fourth staff includes a section labeled 'Alt. A Part, Meas. 1' and continues with chords G, Am, and Am.

## Homeward Bound

Transcribed by Ken Perlman as played by Angus McPhee of Mt. Stewart

This tune is very widely played in the Eastern half of P.E.I. It seems to have its origin in the Canadian Maritime Provinces, although it does strongly resemble a tune called “Gem of Ireland” (see the *One Thousand Fiddle Tunes* book).

Musical score for "Homeward Bound" in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). Above the staff are the chords D, G, Em, A7, and D. The second staff continues the melody with chords G, A7, D, A7, D, D, and Em, and includes a first ending bracket labeled '1' and a second ending bracket labeled '2'. The third staff features double stops (stacked notes) and includes chords D, A7, D, Em, Bm, G, A7, D, A7, and D, with first and second ending brackets labeled '1' and '2'.