



North American Traditions Series

# Over the Cabot Trail



Morgan MacQuarrie  
with Gordon MacLean

Rounder CD 7041

The music on this remarkable CD represents that increasingly singular anomaly: the artistry of a performer whose musical aesthetic has been almost entirely shaped by an immersion within a localized traditional culture. To be sure, the general category of music in which Morgan excels--the violin music first brought from the Scottish highlands to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in the early



nineteenth century--can still be heard anywhere one strays on the island today. Indeed, over the last twenty years or so, this venerable music has come to be widely regarded as emblematic of Cape Breton's unique heritage and many outlanders flock to the island to drink in its strains at the numerous dances and concerts held throughout the summer. Far from Maritimes, well known musicians such as Natalie MacMaster and Ashley MacIsaac perform regularly upon the college music circuit and skilled teachers such as Jerry Holland provide instruction in the style at many of the burgeoning number of summer music camps that now

feature traditional fiddle music alongside classical and other genres of performance.

All the same, Morgan's music sounds rather different from most of these contemporary performers, because their extensive interactions with the wider world have invariably influenced their own performance styles. Yet back in the distant 1950's when Morgan developed his own approach to the violin, the notion that anyone beyond the confines of the little farming villages of Inverness County might care to hear this music seemed inconceivable. Even locally, the old fiddle music was largely viewed as something that the older generation raised in Gaelic households enjoyed. Only a scattering of back country

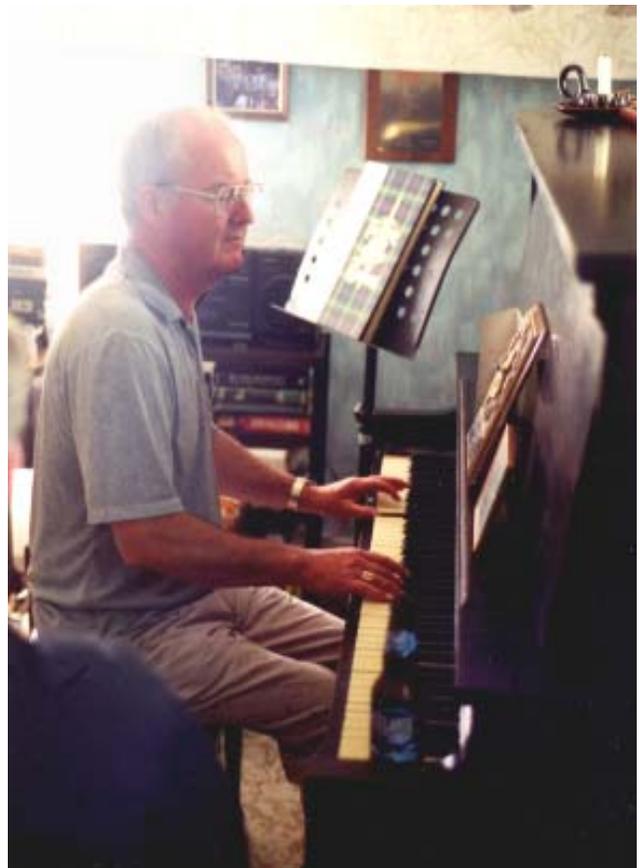
teenagers such as Morgan continued to fool around on the instrument in their idle moments. Economic conditions were quite dire in the Inverness County in that time, as its residents discovered that after World War II subsistence farming alone could no longer sustain a household--that a larger source of cash flow was urgently needed. Most of the local youth faced the melancholy prospect that they would eventually need to find work elsewhere--indeed, Morgan moved to Windsor, Ontario at age nineteen to work in an auto plant. Eventually he migrated to Detroit where he drove a truck for many years over Michigan's notoriously

potholed streets. In the early 'seventies, he married Marie Cameron, formerly of Mabou, and raised two children, Joe and Patricia. He has always been grateful for the steady employment and new friendships that his emigration facilitated.

It is worth observing that these same economic imperatives disrupted many of North America's most vital pockets of traditional music during the same period: many of Kentucky's greatest folk musicians became scattered to the geographical winds in the 1950's as well (the era is now remembered as a time of flush prosperity, but that amelioration rarely reached into the countryside). Paradoxically, in Cape Breton's special case, these same reluctant expatriates wound up playing a vital role in giving the traditional music back home a longer lease on life, because Cape Breton's displaced sons and daughters often spent their summer vacations back home and fondly demanded the old fiddle music for nostalgia's sake. Morgan and his family always formed part of this annual return and he typically spent half of his vacation scouting for local fiddle players. Today it's virtually impossible to wander anywhere on the island and not find elderly musicians who hail Morgan as a devoted friend.

When Morgan learned the fiddle, few of his peers regarded the old violin music as an expression of "Celtic heritage," "Cape Breton pride" or anything else of that sort. Quite the contrary, such music was often disdained by the snobbish as emblematic of country backwardness, much as the old Gaelic language

itself was also being rejected. Morgan's parents both spoke the language and loved it for its poetical expressiveness, yet firmly believed that their children would become disadvantaged if they didn't entirely adhere to English in their own lives. So Jack and Zina MacQuarrie only spoke English in front of the children. Morgan, his brother Allan and a few other friends liked to hang out with older musicians about the neighborhood and to drive in some old wreck of a car down to Mabou to see the Beatons and the Rankins, but they never expected that many of their classmates would take much interest in Scottish music, for whom rock n' roll or country music had become the preferred idiom. Once in a while Morgan would see the word "Celtic" written on the signs for the fancy



tourist cottages in the National Park, but never supposed that the term had any application to him. Today he will re-



with Allan

mark, with his typical dry humor, “Everywhere you now go in Inverness County, it’s ‘Celtic’ this and ‘Celtic’ that, but I never thought of myself as ‘Celtic.’ When I was a kid, I think I

knew about enough to recognize that I was Scottish, but that was about as far as it went.”

So from the first time that Morgan sneaked his father’s old fiddle from under the bed and gradually begin to hack away at a few old tunes to quite late in his life, the notion that anyone beyond some fellow son or daughter from Inverness County would take any interest in his music scarcely crossed Morgan’s mind. Many Inverness County emigrés had already discovered, when they settled in their new homes faraway, that modern Canadian fiddle music in the manner of Don Messer had a good deal more popular appeal. Skilled performers such as Jimmie MacLellan or John L. MacDonald began to play in this newer style simply to retain some semblance of an audience (indeed, in Morgan’s youth Messer-style music became fairly popular even in Cape Breton, especially within the environs of industrialized Sydney). Yet Morgan himself never made any attempt

to modify his own playing to such contours--only the old Scottish sound of back country Inverness County that appealed to him. He wistfully remarks, “I don’t believe that I could play any other kind of style even if I tried, for I think that old Scottish music is the only kind of music that I’ve got in me.” However, the Detroit-Windsor region sheltered a closely-knit community of Nova Scotians who would regularly request his fiddle for parties and an occasional public dance, allowing Morgan to continuously polish his skills over a lifetime of very active playing. As such, he represents as sterling an exponent of Cape Breton’s unique “old style” Scottish music as can



Jack: ice racing on Lake Ainslie

be found anywhere.

It is worth parenthetically observing that the 1950/early 1960s period represented the last occasion in which fiddle music of any sort might stake a plausible claim to comprising a minor genre within “popular music” generally (whether in Messer’s updated Canadian idiom or Tommy Jackson’s Nashville manner). Today, both Nashville and

Messer-style music seem on the wane whereas Scottish music from Cape Breton thrives in a newly gained ascendancy as an “alternative music” on a worldwide basis. But the character of its supportive audience has also shifted considerably since Morgan’s youth, for



most contemporary admirers of fiddle music are well educated people who are aware of the historical significance of the idiom (albeit in a rather romanticized vein). Almost invariably, performance styles shift considerably as it becomes self-consciously emblematic of local pride and heritage.

Accordingly, despite Cape Breton’s recent heartening reinvigoration of tradition, it is inevitable that basic characteristics of the island’s older fiddle style will have shifted in the interim, for most musicians who came to the music later than Morgan do not employ the same rich panoply of venerable “folk” techniques that had formerly distinguished the local music. Even a glancing comparison of Morgan’s playing with that heard on virtually any of the other records being now produced on the island will reveal quite striking divergencies. Although his playing is utterly individualistic and instantly recognizable by anyone with an ear acclimated to the music, his core approach retains the

MacQuarrie home

common coin of techniques utilized by the great old-style players of Inverness County’s past. Indeed, the music heard on this CD is completely consistent, in terms of both technique and ambience, with the oldest recordings we possess from Morgan’s home region, which runs between Foot Cape on the coast through the little Gaelic hamlets scattered along the north shore of Lake Ainslie. The great power and expressiveness of this local style derives from the extremely muscular fashion in which key musical notes get attacked, in such a manner that the bow slightly bounces and skittles across the string, rendering what is usually written as a single note as a compact burr of tones (simultaneous swift ornaments in the left hand augment the effect). Superimposed on this subtle tonal grain are a wide variety of rocking bow motions that supply pulse and articulation to measure-length passages. Together these interlocking patterns of attack lay down a robust rhythmic motif against

which the tune's melodic values are then set, often in a subtly syncopated manner. In effect, a skilled "folk" player of the old school harnesses a fair degree of what classical violinists would regard as unwanted "bow noise" to supply a rhythmic underpinning for their own playing, which they further augment by continuously tapping out clogging patterns with their feet (Morgan confesses to being unable to play unless he can hear his feet quite loudly). Accompaniment on the piano and (occasionally) the guitar became customary in the early twentieth century but Cape Breton's old-style



fiddlers retained the same strongly rhythmic approach that had been obligatory when dancers needed to hear a solo fiddler clearly across some dusty and noisy schoolhouse hall.

Freed from these auditory obligations, most contemporary Cape Breton performers have gradually shifted to performing with a much lighter stroke, reserving their bow decorations only to well-defined "cuts" (= bow triples) occurring at restricted positions within the tune. In contrast, Morgan employs bro-

ken bow patterns almost constantly within his playing, along both directions of bow stroke--a fact that admiring aficionados often point out to him. He once he commented on this issue: "I was at the Red Shoe [= a local pub] one day and John Campbell's brother Alex told me how much he liked my up-bowings--putting in a cut on the up direction. Well, I guess I do that sometimes, but I had never thought much about it. Anything I do just comes natural to me from what I feel should be in the tune."

More contemporary approaches generally favor a more rapid and equitably paced approach to a melody such as a reel, whereas Morgan commonly plays more slowly and articulates his melodic line into sharply individuated blocks, often creating the impression of two voices answering to one another. These melodic groupings can be of quite varied bar lengths which and collectively fit together with the pleasing asymmetries of a Chinese box puzzle. In conversation Cape Breton's old-style players often emphasize the importance of "phrasing" in this sense; they claim that each tune needs to be provided with a specific personality through stress and hiatus. Morgan is a great master of this venerable fiddle art and commonly introduces sharply punctuated accents in unexpected places--local connoisseurs often remark upon his particular ability to "punch up" a phrase through brisk and sharply terminated bow strokes. In a reel (= the faster tunes in 4/4 time that conclude most of his med-

leys), Morgan commonly delays critical notes slightly to supply an old-fashioned sense of dance “lift” and will often conclude a section with a stinging slur of slightly accelerated notes ending with a strongly marked terminal accent. His divergence from the more squarely metered modern approach becomes even more evident when their strathspey playing is compared (= the slower group of sharply accentuated melodies in the middle of a set). Few modern players infuse this middle run of tunes with the same knotted complexity and ingrained sense of “Inverness County Scotch snap” (the old-fashioned Cape Breton articulation of this characteristic rhythmic pattern is quite different from the approach historically passed along by mainland Scottish players such as Hector MacAndrew). Yet most connoisseurs of old-style playing consider the strathspey sector as the portion of a performance where players really prove their mettle. In all of his tunes Morgan invariably employs what he calls “double stringing”, i.e., a continuous harmonizing of the central melodic line upon adjacent strings. Adding this complement of drones and harmonies to a highly decorated and vocal-like central melodic line engenders that rare blending of indomitable pride and melancholy that supplies the distinctive hallmark of old-style Inverness County music.

Consider, for example, band five on this CD. The slow air “Mrs. Jamieson’s Favorite” was composed by Charles Grant, a nineteenth century school master who had been an associate

of the celebrated composer William Marshall. Grant would have almost certainly expected that an air such as this



Jack MacQuarrie

would be performed in free time utilizing neo-classical technique (for a good example of how this tune sounds when approached in this manner, see Ron Gonnella’s LP, *International Friendship of the Fiddle*). In contrast, Morgan approaches the tune entirely in the manner of an old-fashioned Gaelic song, suffused with a light waltz pulse with notes clipped off short and gracings added in a vocal-like manner. The popular march “Donald MacLean’s Farewell to Oban” was the first tune Morgan learned to play, having heard it on a popular Rodeo 78 circa 1956 by his hero, Joe MacLean. Despite its venerable-sounding contours, its composition dates only to 1938. It was written by the piper Archie MacNeill in honor of its namesake’s loss (!) of a piping contest held in the Old Country village of Oban. Joe MacLean seemed to have introduced

a fair number of these mid-'thirties homeland compositions into the modern Cape Breton repertory (compare, for example, his stirring treatment of Tom Clough's

"Nancy" on Rounder 7024).

Such tunes Joe may have acquired through his epistolary contacts with the Aberdeen composer and

entrepreneur J. Murdoch Henderson. Morgan approaches this march with somewhat more syncopation than did Joe (we might parenthetically note Gordon's beautiful echoing of the melody on the piano, again characteristic of an older style of piano accompaniment). "Alex MacEachern's" is another comparatively new tune that sounds utterly old and completely congruent with the classic folk strathspeys of the late eighteenth century. It was composed by the late Dan Hughie MacEachern, who was a good family friend who often visited the MacQuarrie cottage so that Morgan's sister Ann might play the piano for him. Dan Hughie published two collections of his own tunes and his family have recently released a fine CD set of home recordings (*The Land of My Love*). Morgan picked up "Morag's Wedding" from the late Donald MacLellan who had learned it from his father, the celebrated Cape Breton violinist Ronald MacLellan (for background and a transcription, see Dunlay and Greenberg, *Traditional Vio-*



lin Music of Cape Breton). As such, it represents one of a handful of older Cape Breton tunes that have not been definitively located within any of the great

Scots collections (the influence of printed music on the Cape Breton repertory extends as far back in time as we have been able to trace). As remarked above,

contemporary players rarely "phrase" their strathspeys into such tightly clotted clusters and with such lush ornamentation. The concluding tunes "Annie is My Darling" and "The High Road to Linton" are old reels that have proved popular in Cape Breton as far back as we have any record and both appeared on early 78's. In former times, fiddlers often played these reels in "high bass" tuning (AEAE) to gain more volume at a dance (Donald MacLellan often set "Donald's MacLean's Farewell" in this evocative tuning as well). Morgan will occasionally play a "Christy Campbell" set in ADAE tuning, but generally eschews any cross-tuning for fear of breaking strings. Most younger fiddlers tear into the reel portion of a medley at a breakneck pace, but Morgan usually pulls back slightly on the implied rhythm at this point, so that his reels sing out quite sweetly when the strathspeys conclude. The best old strathspeys tend to be rather melancholy in their flavor and the gentle dance "lift" of the reels supplies a pleasing release in

tension when their moment comes around.

All in all, band five provides an excellent object lesson in how an old-time Inverness County fiddler assembles a “listening set” as a coherent musical totality. Indeed, the vast majority of tunes on this CD represent the fare that was historically favored by the great violinists of Morgan’s home region: Sandy MacLean, Angus Allan Gillis, Donald MacLellan et al. (the tunes that Morgan has grouped into sets on this CD can be profitably compared with Donald’s own choices on Rounder 7044, for example). Of course, no two fiddlers play exactly the same tunes in the same order and, indeed, few old-style fiddlers repeat exactly the same groupings from one occasion to another. However, certain pairings and triples of tunes remain fairly constant, such as the “Duke of Gordon”/”Johnnie Pringle” grouping in band 7 or the “Warlock’s”/”Bog an Lachan” pairing in band 10. As Morgan explains the matter, these partial associations reappear because a Cape Breton fiddler rarely conceives of a medley as a sequence of discrete tunes (indeed, few of the older musicians know names for most of their tunes), but instead considers its unfolding in developmental terms: the whole must progress through a gradually accelerating sequence of complimentary moods. Thus the conclusion of a specific tune will “call for” some designated form of contrasting continuation, whether it be a specific melody or any of a family of acceptable substitutes. Morgan finds

formal recording work rather aggravating because he and Gordon have decided that they should fix these choices ahead of time, rather than merely allowing the fiddler to select the continuation as whimsy dictates. In addition, some of the now standard tune pairings seem to have become fixed through the influence of canonical recordings. I am under the impression, for example, that the “Warlock’s”/”Bog an Lachan” pairings represents the imprint of Bill Lamey’s well-known Celtic 78 whereas many of the other tune associations common to this popular E Minor grouping seem far older. It would be interesting to study the archival recordings of older musicians with an eye to these matters.

In contrast to the venerable features of the strathspeys and reels, many



of the jigs heard on this CD (= tunes in 6/8 time) represent recent compositions by Canadian composers such as Morgan's old friends, Dan R. MacDonald and Donald Angus Beaton. Quadrille

"Father, I want to confess. Signed, Aristotle Stagira." But no one had a clue who poor Mr. Stagira might be. Archie's wife and several friends searched the hills back of Creignish looking for a troubled



sets in 6/8 time represent a more prominent fixture of the modern Cape Breton square dance than apply in the homeland and so a large amount of home grown product has sprung up to fill the gap. Among these is the curiously titled "Aristotle's Confession" by Archie A. MacNeil of Creignish, N.S. The story behind its evocative name is as follows. Frank MacInnis is a well-known booster of Cape Breton music (Frank helped me greatly in my early recording work in the 1970s) and lives near Archie. One of his children had returned from Europe with a passel of foreign currency and one Sunday Frank slipped a few coins in the collection tray on a whim, signing the envelope "Aristotle Stagira" (or some other facsimile of Greek nomenclature). Frank continued this practice for several weeks and eventually upped the ante:

stranger but to no avail. Eventually, Frank's confession resolved the matter and laughter at the episode inspired Archie to compose this fine jig.

Morgan and Gordon extend their thanks to Archie and all of the other fine Cape Breton composers whose work is included here, including Francis MacDonald, Jerry Holland, Dan Hughie MacEachern, Dan R. MacDonald and especially the late Donald Angus Beaton, whose family has been very close to Morgan and whose excellent jig provides our album with a title. The compositions of our pianist, Gordon MacLean, are invariably regarded as "choice" and the touching lament "Jordan Taylor" honors the memory of a relative who died young.

Turning now to biography, Morgan was born July 29, 1946 to Jack and Alexandrina ("Zina") MacQuarrie of

Loch Ban, Inverness County. This little grouping of farms lies about a mile west of the hamlet of Kenloch on the north shore of Lake Ainslie (little remains of Kenloch today, but in Morgan's youth it contained a railway stop, a dance hall, several stores and a large Presbyterian church). Jack MacQuarrie had been a good fiddler in his youth, but he had pretty much set the instrument aside by



Jack and Zina MacQuarrie

the time Morgan came along: "It was either the fiddle or the farm', my father used to say." He would occasionally play a tune or two at a party and talk of the time when he had played for dances: "Way back in the depression my father had played all night for a dance and had filled up his pockets with nickels and quarters, for that is all the people could afford to pay back then. But he had a hole in his pocket and all the money slipped out onto the floor. The little kids that were there immediately swooped down and scooped up all of the money and so my father came home with nothing that night." About Jack's playing, the late Donald Angus Beaton once told an interviewer, "Morgan could easily inherit

his swing from his father Jack MacQuarrie who was a noted player. His time for jigs was very good and the violin music he played was beautiful. He was truly a crackerjack on the jigs."

Jack was very industrious and in the war years built the pretty cottage overlooking Lake Ainslie in which Zina still lives, at age 95. To earn extra money, Jack farmed and sold farm implements and, when the first televisions came out, carried a demonstration model around to nearby farm families. Morgan and brother Allan used to accompany their dad on these expeditions, although "we were so busy blaggarding and cutting up that my father might have gotten more sales if he had left us at home."

Jack MacQuarrie maintained a friendship with many of the notable fiddlers throughout the local swatch of Inverness County and would sometimes take Morgan along when he visited Sandy MacLean over in Foot Cape, who was one of Cape Breton's most celebrated violinists during the 1930s. Often gregarious Gordon MacQuarrie (no relation) would stop by for a few days visit, which always proved a treat for the children as Gordon played both the fiddle and the pipes and provided a continuous flood of funny stories and poems. Visitors for a week or so were not uncommon in those days, when an old bachelor like Gordon might get bored with whatever he was doing and spontaneously decide to visit his old friends Jack and Zina (what was not so common was Gordon's penchant for playing his pipes at two in the

morning in the middle of the house, although Zina soon put a stop to that). At such times, too, the old Gaelic stories would come out--which the children could determine were not intended for their ears from the laughter. Gordon had been one of the first Cape Bretoners to compose a large stock of tunes, which he published in 1940 as *The Cape Breton*



with Zina

*Collection*, along with early tunes by Dan R. MacDonald and other violinists of the period. Indeed, the first tune in the book is “Alexandrina MacDougall of Scotsville” which Gordon composed in Zina’s honor before she married Jack (by coincidence Wilfred Prosper recorded this pretty melody for us on Rounder 7039--Morgan had never heard the tune previously). Buddy MacMaster once told me that many of the tunes in the book are

rather difficult and that it took some time before many of them gained much currency, although nowadays Gordon’s “The Bonnie Lass of Headlake” is one of the most popular slow airs on the island.

When Morgan was nine or ten, he would walk down to the summer dances in the little hall in Kenloch. This modest establishment had served as one of Cape Breton’s greatest social locales through the ‘thirties and ‘forties for the pioneer recording artists Angus Allan Gillis and Danny Campbell used to play there. By Morgan’s time, other halls around Mabou or in Inverness town had become popular and Kenloch Hall’s own days were near an end. Morgan was lucky enough to witness its two final seasons, the first with his musical hero Joe MacLean, who would drive over from his railway job in Sydney for the occasion, and the second with Buddy MacMaster from Judique, who played at Kenloch before he began his long association with the famous dance at Glencoe Mills. Morgan usually lacked the modest admission fee, so he would commonly remain outside listening through the windows until Malcolm MacQuarrie, the hall’s kindly manager, would say wave the children in. Afterwards Morgan would walk the mile home in the moonlight, with all the evening’s tunes swirling through his head. Thereafter Morgan would need to catch a ride to the other dance halls that eventually replaced Kenloch: “They started opening up all of these halls and because Kenloch was kind of out of the way, people started going other places to dance. Now it was

only fifty cents to get into a dance in that time, but a lot of us kids didn't have much money. Well, they'd used to stamp your hand so that people could go in and out of the hall. We kids would see that and we'd get a pen and try to draw a mark the same as the regular customers had. It's surprising how often we managed to get in a dance that for nothing that way!"

Morgan listened religiously to the several dedicated Scottish programs that could be heard on local radio--in particular, to Gus

MacKinnon's "Scottish Strings" that broadcast weekly from Antigonish on the mainland. Morgan used to sit on the family washing machine listening to the radio pretending to play the violin along with the music. Eventually he became sufficiently emboldened to pull his father's old Steiner from under the bed and attempt "Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban." Morgan wasn't supposed to touch the instrument, but Jack indulged his son anyway: "He knew I was practicing but he never said too much about it; I think he secretly liked the fact that I was playing." From that early summer at Kenloch Morgan had become transfixed by the sweetness and grace of Joe MacLean's music and to this day Morgan's playing reminds knowledgeable listeners of the older man's style.

One of Morgan's fondest memories is of the day that he came home from school and found Joe MacLean visiting with his father in the parlor: "To me that was just as good as having a movie star in the house!"

Morgan's sister Ann had just taken



up the piano and so brother and sister began to practice together. Local fiddlers in search of an accompanist would drop by and Morgan acquired a lot of new tunes that way (Morgan does not read music and has picked up all of his music through a very well-developed ear). Willie Kennedy (who is about twenty years older than Morgan) lived on the homestead next door and Morgan began to roam about the countryside with him and other like-minded young men, playing music and engaging in sundry hijinks, of which Willie ruefully reports, "Jack MacQuarrie had been good friends with my father and had played music with him. He always said, 'As long as Morgan's with Willie, I guess he'll be okay.' Well, if he had known some of the scrapes that we got into, I'm not sure

he would have said that.” Of that time, Morgan reports, “Well, we never took the fiddling or anything else too seriously. There weren’t too many my age that were interested in the music, which is why I



with Willie Kennedy

started hanging out with older people. We’d always get a crew together and, after an evening like that, nobody’d get home to milk the cows. No one else cared much about what we doing; we were just trying to have a good time. Everything I learned to do back then came easily to me: the fiddling, the partying, the raising hell and everything else. But that’s really the time when I developed my own style; it just came naturally to me from all the sorts of things I had been hearing all of my life. And somehow I came out with my own sound--a person never really knows how that happens, do they?--and now I couldn’t play in any other way if I tried. And it’s funny: Willie and I have played a lot

together all of our lives, but he has learned a lot of his style from the Chisholms while I’ve tended more to the Joe MacLean, Donald Angus Beaton, Dan J. MacInnis sort of sound. Winston Fitzgerald was probably the most popular fiddler in that time and I used to listen to him a lot, but it never seemed like it was totally Inverness County to me. I guess I always liked the old Angus Allan Gillis style a bit better because I had heard more of it from my father and his friends.”

Hanging out with his brother Allan and older boys meant that somebody usually had an old jalopy that could carry them off to hear music somewhere. Often they’d drive down to Mabou to hear violinist Donald Angus Beaton and his wife Elizabeth, whose music impressed Morgan greatly. One time Morgan’s gang drove up to Maragree where he first met Cameron Chisholm, who had already become a phenomenal fiddler by age fourteen or so (Cameron is the same age as Morgan). They became good friends and eventually roomed together in Windsor when each had left the island in search of work (Cameron returned to Margaree after a few years away, however). By the time that Morgan had settled in Detroit, Willie Kennedy had moved to Mabou: “So when I’d be home for a vacation, I’d round up Willie, Dan R., Malcolm Murray and a bunch of others and we’d all go down to Buddy Rankin’s in Mabou, where there was always a lot of music and a lot of fun. John Morris was just a small kid then and

his feet couldn't even touch the pedals of the piano, but he'd be chording for us. He sure could rattle her out, though." The Rankin children, including John Morris, eventually formed a "folk"-style ensemble that became of the first Cape Breton musical groups to attract outside attention (see Rounder 7027 and Rounder 2028), after another local son, John Allan Cameron, had paved the way as a vocalist and guitarist: "John Allan really got the ball rolling insofar as the rest of the world was concerned. He had his own television show and Roy Acuff even had him on the big radio show down in Nashville. John Allan certainly wasn't afraid to get out in the middle of it, which is something that I never would have done, for there weren't many from Kenloch that ended up on the Grand Ole Opry."

Instead of heading for Nashville, Morgan traveled west, looking for work in the big Cape Breton community in Windsor, Ontario. "Back then, there were almost more fiddlers around here than in Cape Breton: Dan R. MacDonald, Allan MacDonald, Jim Dan Gillis, Little Jack



MacDonald, Bobby MacNeil and his family, Johnny Archie MacDonald and many more. Alex Francis MacKay had lived here but had just gone back to Cape Breton and Hughey MacDonald had



with Cameron Chisholm

recently died. But now there aren't too many left here now except Bobby MacNeil and his children Steve, Tommy and Jimmie. The writer Alistair MacLeod's son Kenneth has become a good fiddler and there's a young fellow named Cameron Rankin who's very good on the piano." Morgan had often performed with Marion MacLeod and Kay Campbell as accompanists, but Marion has recently moved to Cape Breton whereas Kay has become less active musically.

"When I first landed here, I didn't know anybody, but that very first weekend I was invited to a party over at Johnny Archie MacDonald's. Well, we were all young and we used to fill up his house on Sunday. Poor Johnny Archie sure had to put up with a lot of shenanigans on our part. His daughter Barbara



Johnny Archie MacDonald was always there playing the piano, just a young teenager, and I got to be good friends with all of Johnny Archie's boys as well (he had to raise all of those kids by himself on a policeman's salary and I'm sure he must have had a pretty hard time doing it). He used to run most of the dances in Detroit back then and in 1967 Danny MacPhee and I tried to put on a few dances ourselves in Windsor. But running a dance in those days didn't work out very well for us, because there was always a lot of fighting at a dance back then. I remember once going into one of Johnny Archie's dances and finding a couple of guys handcuffed to chairs there. But nobody seemed to notice--they were used to that sort of thing back then. The Nova Scotia Club in Detroit holds two or three dances a year and the club over in Windsor does the same, but that's about

it around here nowadays. Many of the people who used to go to the dances when I arrived have now either died or moved back to Cape Breton.

“Johnny Archie had made a lot of records on his own in the 1940's and '50's and he organized the Five MacDonald group back in the early 'sixties. Doing that couldn't have been an easy job because Allan MacDonald (who was on those records) told me that Johnny

Archie would have to go all over town rounding them all up for Sunday rehearsals. Well, Cape Bretoners don't like to be organized by anybody, especially on a Sunday! Allan eventually became a very good friend and we'd play together at parties a lot. He'd grown up in Foot Cape next to Sandy MacLean's house and he was a big fan of Sandy's music. We used to talk a lot on the telephone about the news from back home and about this tune and that. Allan died a few years ago and I still miss him a lot. He was a very nice man and his sister, Joan Boes, was a fine lady as well. She was a very good composer and a lot of people in Cape Breton play her 'The Sweetness of Mary.' And Joe MacLean's brother John still lives in Detroit and we'll often talk about stuff in the same way as I did with Allan.”



John MacLean



with Allan MacDonald

In fact, it was through the helpful MacLean clan that I first became acquainted with Morgan. Morgan had never known Joe himself personally very well, for Joe was soft-spoken and generally stayed in the Sydney region which Morgan rarely visited during his trips home. Nonetheless, Morgan listened very intently to Joe's music all of his life, both on records and on

home recorded tapes that friends like John MacLean had given him. In fact, when Morgan issued his first cassette tape in the early 1990's (*Kenloch Ceilidh*), he dedicated it to Joe's memory who had passed away shortly before. On John MacLean's suggestion, Morgan and Willie Kennedy took a complimentary copy over to Joe's sister, Theresa Morrison, who lives in Sydney. As it happened,

I came up to record Theresa's first Rounder CD (7026) a few months later and, when I inquired about other traditional players, she told me about Willie and Morgan. At the time I lived in Columbus, Ohio and so it was an easy drive to Detroit to meet Morgan, who immediately took me over to visit Allan MacDonald and John MacLean. I was impressed not only by his distinctive yet thoroughly traditional fiddle stylings, but with his

immediate warm-hearted friendliness. It struck me that Morgan might prove a perfect partner in initiating another round of archival recordings within Cape Breton. A goodly number of Cape Breton's best old-style players were beginning to get along in years and I felt that a strenuous effort should be made to record as many of them on tape as would be possible. But it is impossible for an outsider such as myself to



Theresa Morrison and Joe MacLean

convince reluctant performers to record (which is never a pleasant process, no matter how hard one strives to make it otherwise). However, Morgan took up the task of persuasion with great gusto and eventually his sister Bonnie and brother Allan joined in as well. There are now nearly twenty Cape Breton CDs in our *North American Traditions Series* and few

of these would exist without Morgan's vital contributions (interested listeners will especially wish to consult the four volume set *Traditional Music of Cape Breton*, which presents an overview of our recording efforts). Much of this was just in the nick of time, for Morgan and I recently had a melancholy conversation where we reviewed how many of the fine musicians that we recorded have now passed away. Morgan merits a good deal of credit for the success of our preservation



with Michael Anthony MacLean

work.

It was through working on this series of recordings that Morgan and I became fast friends with our genial pianist, Gordon MacLean. Morgan had once met Gordon briefly years before but didn't know him well, since Gordon lives in Sugar Camp, at the far foot of Inverness County (I had encountered Gordon earlier for he accompanied Theresa Morrison on her first CD). After Morgan had finally persuaded a reluctant Willie Kennedy to tape a few sets for our first anthology, Willie brought along Gordon as accompanist. Morgan was immediately captivated by Gordon's sweet style, which does not overpower the fiddler's phrasing. His accompaniment work is greatly in demand amongst Cape Breton's finest old-style violinists precisely because Gordon constructs a gentle and sympathetic support for a

tune, rather than forcing the beat aggressively as many contemporary pianists do. Gordon grew up in a lighthouse near to Joe MacLean's family home in Washabuck and has also remained dedicated to Joe's special flavor of music, providing Morgan and himself with a very rich basis for musical interchange. Through Gordon's intercessions, Morgan and I have become acquainted with Joe's surviving brother Michael Anthony and his most hospitable family (Michael's son Vince has provided a warm memoir in the notes for the volume of *Traditional Fiddle Music of Cape Breton* devoted to the region (Rounder 7039)). Gordon is a retired high school science teacher and he and his wife Hazel have opened their fine home for many of our recording sessions. Gordon also plays solo pieces on the piano and parlor organ in a sweet and restrained fashion, several of which appear in our *Traditional Fiddle Music* series. Morgan so admires Gordon's playing that he insisted we leave room for another solo here (band 8).

As sometimes happens, my tape recorder broke down just as we were hoping to wrap up our recording work. Fortunately, the well known recording engineer and guitarist Paul MacDonald was able to step in at short notice and help us finish the CD. Paul also remastered the record and helped research its tune names, along with the redoubtable tune experts John Donald Cameron, Dave MacIsaac, Doug MacPhee and Paul Cranford. We are deeply indebted to Paul for his help, as well as to Phlis McGregor of the CBC and Bob

MacEachern of Hawk Radio.

No traditional music as lovely as this can have been sustained without the continuous support of a wide group of friends and kinfolk. Morgan and Gordon extend their thanks to all who have encouraged them over the years, including, in pride of place, their own families.

--Mark Wilson



### The selections:

1. *Lady Duff's, The Island of Mull, My Little Old Home by the Lake* (J.D. Kennedy), *Dan. R. MacDonald's Jig* (Dan. R. MacDonald), *Over the Cabot Trail* (Donald Angus Beaton) - jigs.

2. *Maids of Arrochar\** - slow air; *Dòmhnall Cléireach* - strathspey; *Celtic Ceilidh* (Dan R. MacDonald, SOCAN), *Donald MacGugan's Rant, The Maid Behind the Bar* - reels.

\* *To the memory of Vestie MacDonnell*

3. *The Frost is All Over, Traditional, Trip to Toronto* (Donald Angus Beaton), *Little House Round the Corner* (J. Hand), *I'd Rather be Married than Left* - jigs.

4. *Lord Napier of Magdala* - march; *Corimonie's Rant* (Daniel Dow), *Athole Brose* (Abraham MacIntosh) - strathspeys; *Lady Muir MacKenzie, Smith's Delight* - reels.

5. *Mrs. Jamieson's Favourite* (Charles Grant) - slow air; *Donald MacLean's Farewell to Oban* (Archibald MacNeill) - march; *Alex MacEachern's* (Dan Hughie MacEachern), *Morag's Wedding* - strathspeys; *Annie is My Darling* (Simon Fraser), *The High Road to Linton* - reels.

6. *Aristotle's Confession* (Archie A. MacNeil), *Humours of Glendart, Murphy's Weather Eye* - jigs

7. *Jordan Taylor\** (Gordon MacLean) - marching air; *Miss Forbes' Farewell to Banff* (Isaac Cooper) - march; *The Duke of Gordon's Birthday* (William Marshall), *Johnny Pringle* (William Marshall) - strathspeys; *The Mourne Mountains*, *Sheehan's* - reels.

*\*To the memory of Jordan Taylor*

8. *A Jig Played by Dan R. MacDonald*, *Buddy MacMaster's Fancy* (Jerry Holland, SOCAN), *Jim Anderson's Delight* (Ronald Cooper, MCPS) - jigs.

9. *The Warlocks* (Robert Lowe), *Bog an Lochan* - strathspeys; *Tarbolton Lodge*, *Little Jack's* - reels.

10. *Killicrankie* - slow air; *The Brigg of Ballater*, *Lady Loudon* (Wm. Gow) - strathspeys; *Mrs. J. MacLean* (J. MacDonald), *The Haggis* - reels.

11. *Duncan MacQuarrie's*, *The Century Man* (Francis MacDonald), *Angus MacIsaac* (Jerry Holland, SOCAN), *The Boston Caledonian Club* (Edwin Christie) - jigs.

12. *Col. Stockwell's* (P.M. Sutherland) - march; *Miss Maules* (Robert MacKintosh), *Hoch Hey Johnny Lad* - strathspeys; *A Trip to Windsor* (Dan R. MacDonald, SOCAN), *St. Kilda's Wedding* - reels.



## Credits:

Produced and annotated by Mark Wilson.  
Recorded by Mark Wilson with the assistance of Paul MacDonald  
Remastered by Paul MacDonald  
Tune identifications by John Donald  
Cameron, Dave MacIsaac, Doug MacPhee and Paul Cranford  
Photography courtesy of Morgan MacQuarrie and by Mark Wilson  
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### *This CD belongs to the North American Traditions Series*

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North American Traditions Series



The rural communities of the United States and Canada possess a rich and varied heritage of spirited forms of social music including square dance fiddling, old songs and banjo tunes. Under the general editorship of Mark Wilson of the University of Pittsburgh and drawing upon recordings made over the past thirty years, **The North American Traditions Series** seeks to introduce this music and its performers to a wider audience.

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