

Acadian Fiddling Traditions **by Devon Léger**

When two Acadians meet, the first things we ask each other are along the lines of “Where are you from,” “Where’s your family from,” or “What’s your last name?” Acadians are people of a diaspora, a forced migration that spread from our homeland in Eastern Canada throughout the Western world, and to this day there’s a kind of inbred need in us to try and trace our roots back to some kind of common ground. That diaspora is why, try as we might, it’s so hard to define Acadian traditional music. Each region where Acadians settled has its own traditions, and Acadians have always been very accepting and curious about surrounding cultures. Acadians are also a pacifistic people. That’s part of the legend of the Acadians, that by choosing not to choose sides in the French-English wars, we were expelled from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755, an event known as Le Grand Dérangement, or the Great Deportation. It’s a kind of spirit that lasts to this day in the Acadian willingness to accept new influences and new ideas, certainly in music. In a sense, this differentiates Acadians in Canada from our French-speaking cousins in Québec. Québécois culture has a strong streak of independence from the Anglophone world that you don’t find in Acadian culture or music (though early Québécois musicians were just as happy to borrow from Anglophone sources). This also explains why you’ll hear so little traditional Acadian music when you travel to New Brunswick or Nova Scotia, but will hear lots of Down East fiddling, Cape Breton Scottish fiddling, Acadian bluegrass, or straight country. One of the more popular Acadian folk artists is Cayouche, a big bear of a man with a huge beard who sings hilarious folk songs written in an Acadian dialect, but owes more to Johnny Cash than an old tradition. Nonetheless, there is a traditional style of Acadian fiddling that predates many 20th century influences. It’s been largely eclipsed by the influence of Messer, Cape Breton, and country fiddling, though. There are traditional fiddlers in Acadie playing this style of fiddling, just very few, maybe fewer than 25 left in the Maritimes. Myself and a number of other Acadian artists and scholars have recently been going back and tracking down these fiddlers to try and understand what this older style may have been like and how it relates across the primary Acadian regions in Canada: New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and The Magdalen Islands.

To get the history out of the way first: Canada’s Acadians are not Cajuns. We are related ancestrally, though. The Acadians were settlers from Western France that came to the New World—Nova Scotia and the Maritimes—to turn the marshes into farmland. Nestled in with the Native populations, they built a home for themselves amidst the lushness of their land. In 1755, due to ongoing wars between the British and the French in the New World, the Acadians were forcibly deported over a number of years and from many different places in Eastern Canada. This act of genocide wiped out half the population in the process and scattered the Acadians across the Western world. Many Acadians fled to Northern New Brunswick, or the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, or all the way to Québec and New England, where these populations remain today. Other Acadians

returned to Western France and then migrated from there when, in the 1780s, they got word that they could settle in the Catholic Spanish territory of Louisiana. It's these Acadians that ultimately became the Cajuns (the French word "Acadien" became "Cadien" and then "Cajun").

You can still find musical traces of the culture in Louisiana that can be tied back to Canada and even Western France. Old songs that speak of princes and kings and remain a last tie between the three populations today. Every five years, Acadians from around the world gather to celebrate their culture via Le Congrès Mondial Acadien (Acadian World Congress), and aside from that, the Acadians and Cajuns still have a mutual respect for each other and a fascination in each other's cultures. In fact, a lot of today's young Cajun musicians solidified their French at the same well-known French school in Nova Scotia. But musically speaking, Cajun music today owes little to its early Acadian roots. Instead Cajun music draws mostly from country and blues influences, though the French language is still prominent. A few of the old songs in common are still sung in Cajun music, that's about the last remnant. No one's really done the research to try and track the ties between the instrumental music of Cajuns and Canada's Acadians, though early recordings of musicians like Dennis McGee hint at *contredanses*, *galops*, or quadrilles tunes that may be in common, and there are hints that some tunes may have Canadian roots.

However, I've come to think that there may be more to the story than this, that some of the distinct qualities of Cajun music, especially the syncopation, may come from early Acadian roots. Maybe it's just another story we Acadians tell to try and bring ourselves closer together, but there is an early style of Acadian fiddling that has rarely seen the light of day outside of these communities in Eastern Canada. This style of Acadian fiddling is noted for its heavy syncopation when playing reels, its short and sometimes simple melodies, and its emphasis on repetition. It's dance music, but so is most of the traditional fiddle music in Eastern Canada. What sets this fiddling apart from Québécois and Cape Breton fiddling, the two main traditions that bookend Acadian fiddling geographically, is the powerful and repetitive syncopation in the reels. Like fiddling in Québec, the syncopation in Acadian fiddling derives from what I've taken to calling "ghost bows." These are bow strokes that are so light as to sometimes not actually touch the string, so the impression given is that the fiddler is playing two very rhythmic upbows in a row rather than three back-and-forth bows on the same note. The trick to any "ghost ornament", whether a bowing pattern or a fingered ornament, is in completing the motion of including the ghost note, but not actually fully touching the string. The motion means that the rhythm is spot-on, when in reality playing two upbows in a row in a tune would be a difficult move to pull off without slowing down the rhythm. The ghost bow is very present in modern Québécois fiddling and helps give it what the Québécois call "le swing," but it's even more present in Acadian fiddling where it's arguably one of the key auditory signifiers of this older style of fiddling. Some of the more extreme examples of Acadian traditional fiddling feature syncopation so prominently that it's easy to lose the

thread of the tune. Of course, these old tunes are only one part of any Acadian fiddlers repertoire, as most Acadian fiddlers are as adept at Cape Breton or Down East fiddling as they are at the old tunes, but I believe there's something to be learned by looking back at these old tunes and old fiddlers and trying to understand what makes them so different from the other styles of fiddling and fiddlers that surround Acadians today.

So who are the fiddlers that play in this older style of Acadian fiddling? There aren't many left (and fewer still who still play regularly), and they're spread out across the Acadian diaspora in the Canadian Maritime Provinces. Thanks to the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, who've worked hard to bring out Acadian fiddlers over the years, and the research of myself and others like Toronto Acadian fiddle researcher Seán O'Connell, Nova Scotia journalist Paul-Emile Comeau, who just wrote the first book on Acadian music (*Acadian Driftwood: The Roots of Acadian and Cajun Music*), fiddle scholar Lisa Ornstein who worked with Acadian artists for years, and young fiddler Robin Leblanc in Bathurst, New Brunswick, we've been able to track down and learn from some of the last old-school Acadian fiddlers. Here are some highlights:

The Magdalen Islands, Québec:

Bertrand Deraspe, Avila Leblanc, Jérôme Arsenault

These islands (Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine in French) off the coast of Québec are some of the last bastions of traditional Acadian culture, though strong radio signals from the Maritimes means that most fiddlers here are just as enamored of Cape Breton fiddling as old traditional Acadian fiddle tunes. **Bertrand Deraspe** is one of the great Acadian fiddlers in the Magdalens and is still going very strong now that he's partially retired from his main work as a lobster fisherman. Bertrand learned tunes from his father, **Arnold Deraspe**, also a great fiddler, from other fiddlers on the islands, and from an old blind hermit who had some amazing tunes. In general, fiddlers from the Magdalens seem to favor shorter tunes with heavy rhythmic syncopation. **Avila Leblanc**, a famous fiddler and tune/story collector, had a number of great short reels (usually one A and B part and each part at 8 measures) that he called "cotillons." Lisa Ornstein, who visited and learned from Avila, ties some of these tunes to little songs called "*rabestans*." **Jérôme Arsenault**, who recorded an album of traditional Acadian tunes under his performing name **Vilbon le Violoneux** in the 70s and now lives outside Montreal, called his tunes "rigodons." Either way, the fiddling of the Magdalen Islands may flirt with Scottish, Irish, and Québécois influences, but there's a beating heart of old Acadian tunes underneath that are beautiful, enchanting, and mysterious.

Prince Edward Island:

Eddy Arsenault and the Arsenault Family

The Acadian fiddling of Prince Edward Island (mainly situated in the West) has been well documented, not just by American banjo player Ken Perlman who published a book of tunes and an album of field recordings, but also by the main families in this music who formed well known touring bands like Barachois, Gabelle, or **Vishtën** (the only Acadian

trad band currently touring internationally). Chief among the PEI Acadian tradition bearers is the Arsenault family led by elder **Eddy Arsenault** (who passed away in 2014). A marvelous fiddler, there's a truly great album called *Party Acadien* that features a powerhouse "kitchen party" session at Eddy Arsenault's house and showcases his fiddling and the fiddling of his children as well. As far as style goes, growling tunes seems to be particularly popular in Acadian PEI (and among most Acadians). Eddy Arsenault and other Acadian fiddlers in PEI had signature takes on tunes like "La Marmotteuse" (The Mumbling Woman). Growlers, or mutterers, or mumblers, are part of a larger French-Canadian tune family in which one part rides on the lower strings with some syncopation then jumps to the higher strings (most folks know The Grumbling Old Man and Woman as the classic example of these tunes). Sometimes the G string is tuned up to A for these tunes to get better growls out of the fiddle. Though Eddy Arsenault passed away in 2014, his son **Peter Arsenault** and other members of his family are keeping his tunes alive. Though there's only a few actual recordings of him, another great PEI Acadian fiddler was **Sid Baglole**, who had a large traditional repertoire and a heavily syncopated manner of playing. Barchois in particular drew a good number of their tunes from him.

New Brunswick:

Gerry Robichaud, Eloi Leblanc, Dominique Dupuis, Robin Leblanc, André à Toto Savoie

New Brunswick has a long tradition of Down East fiddling, and though Don Messer was born in the province and even took tunes and compositions from local Acadian fiddlers, there's still a tradition of Acadian fiddling that predates the overwhelming influence of Messer. For an interesting example of this, look to **Gerry Robichaud**. Though he recorded a number of LPs in the Down East style, his album for Rounder Records as **The Robichaud Brothers** had a wealth of older tunes that feature the syncopated bowing of traditional Acadian fiddling. The two main areas of New Brunswick Acadian fiddling that I've looked into are Southeast and Northeast New Brunswick. In SE New Brunswick, the Memramcook area outside of Moncton (where my family is from incidentally) seems to have been a hotbed for traditional fiddling. Chief among the Memramcook fiddlers was the great **Eloi LeBlanc**. His only LP, from 1977, is an intense affair, with fiddling whose speed is nearly unmatched. He was a prolific tune composer as well, and Messer took at least a few of his compositions. LeBlanc also had a great store of older tunes handed down from local musicians that are named in the traditional Acadian way: by listing the line of tradition by first name. A wonderful tune, which my family band covers on our new album, is called "Reel à Eric à Théotime à Six-pouces" (Reel from Eric from Six-Thumbed Théotime). That means that Eloi learned the tune from Eric, who in turn learned it from Théotime (the six-thumbed is an Acadian phrase for "all thumbs", meaning clumsy). Acadians name each other the same way, by listing their father and father's father. So my traditional name would be "Devon à Louis à Francis" (my dad Louis and my grandfather Francis). Throughout Acadian regions you'll see traditional

tunes named in this manner. Today in Memramcook, the popular young fiddler **Dominique Dupuis** carries on some of Eloi's tunes.

Up in Bathurst, in the NE part of New Brunswick, next to *La Péninsule Acadienne* (The Acadian Peninsula), young fiddler **Robin LeBlanc** brings the SE and NE fiddling traditions together through his own heritage. A powerful third-generation fiddler, Robin has marvelous tunes from his uncle **Ira LeBlanc** and his grandfather **Fériol LeBlanc**. He's also studied with key fiddlers in the NE of New Brunswick near his home. Though SE New Brunswick shows a lot of influence from Messer, the NE Acadian Peninsula has its own traditions of fiddling. Scottish Cape Breton music has a strong influence here, heard in the numbers of popular jigs, which are called "les slows" ("the slows," because of their tempo). The most famous fiddler from NE New Brunswick is **André à Toto Savoie** from Shippagan. André was featured in the films of Québécois filmmaker André Gladu and became a symbol for Acadian fiddling. Though he composes a lot of tunes, André also has a very traditional repertoire handed down from his father and friends in the Acadian Peninsula. His tune, "Reel à Belzébuth" (Belzebuth's Reel), is one of the more popular tunes in French-Canadian fiddle circles, though its original name had been lost and it's now known as "André à Toto's". André is still fiddling, though getting up there in age, and is often visited by people looking to understand Acadian fiddling.

The elements of Acadian fiddling that I'm writing about here are just the tip of the iceberg, but they're also the ties that bind these various communities together. There's more to learn and discover and we have a lot of ground to cover before we can really understand Acadian fiddle traditions. Questions that remain include how the wild mouth music of Acadian singers relates to the tunes and whether this might be the root of the syncopation, where the beautiful and mysterious music of Cape Breton fiddler **Joseph Larade** (who fiddled while he sang) came from since it seems to have no precedent, how Acadian fiddlers in Newfoundland relate to other traditions, how Acadian fiddling for jigs differs from Québec or Cape Breton, and what kind of tunes are held in common among these different Acadian communities. Acadians as a people love stories, so I'm hoping that articles like this mark our first steps towards writing a new story about Acadian fiddling that will show that there's a natural grace and sense of playfulness to our music that can be traced to all the places we've lived in our long diaspora.

If you'd like to hear more of this music, my family band, **La Famille Léger** (The Léger Family), just released an album of rare tunes we learned from original sources, archives, and our recent travels to New Brunswick and Cape Breton. It's called *L'Étoile du Nord* (The North Star) and can be found online. Please email me (devon@hearthmusic.com) if you'd like more information or sources on Acadian fiddle traditions and look for a new website coming in 2015 that features biographies and audio/video for each of these fiddlers and more.

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