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Traditional Folk Music 1910-1965

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Newfoundland and Labrador is a province with a rich cultural history exemplified by its vibrant folk music. From 1910 to 1965 Newfoundland experienced a folk revival that emphasized the cultivation, appreciation, and study of its folk culture.¹ The traditional music renaissance of the twentieth century occurred during a time of economic and political vulnerability, as Newfoundland became an urbanized and

¹ The folk revival movement represented a variety of students, musicians, academics, politicians and social activists groups who researched, popularized and reinterpreted folk music of North America from the 1940s through the 1970s. The Canadian Folk Revival movement was a British initiative which sought to strengthen Canadian imperialism through the intense awareness of Canadian national identity. Areas which were considered to be the most 'British,' mainly the Canadian maritimes, became hotspots for research. In terms of popular media, folk music collectors were sources of inspiration for young Canadian and American musicians such as Gordon Lightfoot, Neil Young, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, etc. These musicians popularized the movement and in turn integrated traditional folk music into mass media and popular culture. See Gillian Mitchell, *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945-1980* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 1-34.

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modernized province of Canada.² Although Newfoundlanders continued to use traditional music as a form of expression from 1910 to 1965, music was also a cultural artefact reciprocally affected by the tensions that it resisted. This paper will discuss the movement from ‘active’ to ‘passive’ musical expression in Newfoundland vis-à-vis shifts in the province’s political, technological, and educational realms: confederation and politicians, radio technology and broadcasters, as well as the folk revival movement and folklorist academics.³ The shift in power from local communities to provincial, federal, and corporate authorities redefined Newfoundland’s identity. As Newfoundlanders became passive in the creation of their own musical identity, government, broadcasters, and outsider folklorists (who came to Newfoundland from Britain, the United States and Canada) became key figures in the expression of Newfoundland’s culture.

Confederation changed the structure of community life in Newfoundland as increased industrialization destroyed close-knit communities, affecting the traditions of local composers and musicians. In turn, Canadians consumed, rearranged, normalized,

² Folk music is often highly contested in its parameters as a genre. For the purpose of this study, folk music will be considered as Philip Bohlman defines it: Folk music involves an active creator of music and a community which recreates the piece over time. It must be linked with a community’s history, and balance authenticity and change; a piece must remain authentic to its original form, and yet can endure subtle changes. See Philip Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 1-33.

³ The shift from active to passive musical expression refers to a shift from complete freedom to compose and perform one’s song without outside pressures (in this case politicians, radio broadcasters and scholars) which encourage the alteration of one’s composition through musical re-arrangement, rearrangement of performance styles, and an emphasis on consumer culture.

and indigenized Newfoundland's culture as their own.⁴ Federal and provincial resettlement programs were created in Newfoundland throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and relocated families of isolated communities to industrialized city centres.⁵ Government authorities simultaneously worked to develop major city centres and new industry in order to modernize and bring the province 'up to date' with the rest of Canada. For example, the Federal document "Canada's Happy Province" (1966) exemplifies such perceived industrial improvements of post-Confederation Newfoundland:

700 settlements that were, until the coming of Confederation, almost as isolated and remote as they had been a century before, have been linked up to the road system...[and improvements include]...industrial development, the highest birth rate in the world, improved education and public health care, and a new pride in their own culture and history.⁶

⁴Jeff Webb, "Repertoire and Reception: Musical Culture in St John's Newfoundland, 1930-1945," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 42:2 (2008): 121.

⁵The Resettlement program of 1953 and the Resettlement Act of 1965 were combined efforts of both the Federal and Provincial government. The programs aimed to relocate rural isolated communities to larger city centers in return for \$600-\$1000 payment per family, on the stipulation that all within the community would relocate. Various communities were affected, including Flatrock, Ireland's Eye, Garden Cove, Dark Cove, Tack's Beach, and Anderson's Cove. See Noel Iverson and Raph Matthews. Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies 6: Communities in Decline: An Examination of Household Resettlement in Newfoundland. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1968.

⁶*Newfoundland: Canada's Happy Province, The Remarkable Story of Newfoundland's Progress Since She Joined the Canadian Federation* (Government of Canada, 1966), 6.

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The Canadian government encouraged Newfoundland to transition from being economically ‘uncivilized’ to being ‘modern’, allowing Canadian businesses to infiltrate and dominate Newfoundland’s economy, while providing no protection for local industries during transition to confederation.⁷ Vulnerable local industries, accompanied by resettlement initiatives, threatened to destroy local community and community traditions, undoubtedly linked to traditional folk music songs of the region.

Traditional music was affected by these industrial changes in various ways. Most Newfoundland towns were isolated communities of third generation Irish, English, Scottish, or French descent; on the basis of specific accents, colloquial sayings and mannerisms, a Newfoundlander’s specific origin and community was easily recognizable.⁸ For example, the Codroy Valley of Newfoundland is a Roman Catholic community including people of Irish, English, or Scottish descent. Community members are known to be fiercely independent, self-reliant, and egalitarian. Furthermore, the area is known for satirical folk songs related to local matters such as fights, thefts, objectionable behaviour of entrepreneurs, and problems of love. A local musician of Codroy Valley, Paulie E. Hall, exemplifies the qualities of Codroy Valley music in his song ‘The Bachelor’s Song’ through his satirical lyrics and his lament for lost love.⁹ Communities such as the Codroy Valley were distinct from one another and so were their traditional folk songs, as close-knit communities in pre-Confederation towns were often reflected in

⁷ Raymond Benjamin Blake, *Canadians At Last: Canada Integrates Newfoundland as a Province* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 96.

⁸ Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), xxvii.

⁹ Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives and John F. Szwed, *Folksongs and Their Makers*, (Ohio: Bowling Green University, ND.), 153-157.

local art and music.¹⁰ Resettlement programs broke apart these communities and dispersed them amongst larger integrated cities. The shift from local community identification to a communal provincial identification with Canada affected the way in which traditional folk music was composed, performed, and appreciated. Isolated communities in Newfoundland had promoted oral traditions and intimate performance of folksongs, but the advance of roads, resettlement, re-population, tourism and industrialization prevented intimate communities from passing down folk songs orally.

Radio's presence in Newfoundland altered and replaced the style of traditional music. Commercial and government sponsored radio encouraged the reinterpretation of traditional Newfoundland folk song into a classical style by prioritizing airtime for these reinterpretations over original local performances and recordings, and by promoting jazz and popular music over traditional and local music. Classical versions of folk melodies became prominent on Newfoundland broadcasts, not coincidentally at the same time as Confederation. Classical and popular styles of music were viewed by the colonizing agent of Canada as the 'civilized' approach to music-making.¹¹ If Newfoundland's folk music was to be inducted as a Canadian 'symbol,' it had to be rearranged to meet Canada's standards of what constituted 'civilized' sound.

Several classical re-arrangements of traditional Newfoundland folk melodies composed in this time period include *Rocky Harbour and Sandy Cove: A Newfoundland Suite for String Orchestra* (1950) by George Frederic McKay of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Paul Woodford, *We Love Our Place O' Lord: A History of the Written Musical Tradition of Newfoundland and Labrador to 1949* (St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1988), 209.

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Washington, Newfoundland Rhapsody for Concert Band (1956) by Howard Cable of Ontario, the chamber orchestral piece Fantasy on a Quiet Theme (1961) by Neil McKay of British Columbia,¹² and Four Fantasias on Canadian Folk Themes for Orchestra (1967) by Robert Fleming of Saskatchewan.¹³ All of these works exemplify the re-arrangement of traditional folk music to art music form, allowing outsiders of ‘proper’ musical training to assimilate the traditional sounds of Newfoundland to what they considered to be a worthy composition. In fact the Canadian government and the Canadian Broadcasting Commission both supported this re-arrangement initiative: Howard Cable’s Newfoundland Rhapsody was commissioned by CBC and thus broadcasted within Newfoundland and Labrador on mainstream radio stations throughout the period; Fleming’s Four Fantasias on Canadian Folk Themes for Orchestra (1972) was commissioned by the Canadian Centennial Commission in 1972, and offers a strong example of government involvement in the musical re-creation of Newfoundland folk music.¹⁴ Through the rearrangement of folk melodies by outsider voices, including CBC and the Canadian government, authorities appropriated confederated? Newfoundland as Canada’s newest symbol.

Corporate radio also promoted the re-arrangement of Newfoundland folk music into classical formats. For example, between February and April 1935, VONF (Voice of Newfoundland) broadcasted a series of six recitals of sea shanties and folk songs from international repertoire, performed by

¹² Edith Fowke, “A Reference List On Canadian Folk Music,” *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 1 (1973): 52-53.

¹³ Robert Fleming, *Four Fantasias on Canadian Folk Themes for Orchestra* (Canadian Centennial Commission, 1967).

¹⁴ Ibid.

classically trained musicians.¹⁵ Cultural interventions of this nature were led through a partnership of government and broadcasters: Government funded commercial stations, and broadcasters chose the music that coincided with the government's view of what was 'Canadian.'¹⁶ Radio broadcasters also disseminated popular music that had no connection to local music. Jazz and pop songs, brought over by soldiers from the U.S. and Europe stationed in Newfoundland during WWII, crowded Newfoundland's air waves.¹⁷ For example, the program schedule for VONF on 3 May 1939 included Swing Music, Jazz, 'Hill Billy Music', Percy Faith Orchestra, Kentucky Minstrels, and Jackie Songs of the South.¹⁸ The globalization of Newfoundland's musical culture made traditional local music vulnerable. It floundered while popular and classical music succeeded on Newfoundland radio stations.

While corporate radio imposed strictly foreign or rearranged music, community radio stations became the mid-century advocate for traditional Newfoundland music. Although community radio stations continued to support and play local folk music, corporate radio stations undoubtedly dominated the airwaves. Corporate radio stations' ability to overpower local radio stations in turn silenced the voice of traditional music on the island. For example, ethnomusicologist Judith Klassen argues that unlike corporate stations such as VOXM (Voice of the Common Man) and VONF, community radio such as VOWR

¹⁵ Jeff Webb, "Repertoire and Reception: Musical Culture in St John's Newfoundland, 1930-1945," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 42:2 (2008): 122.

¹⁶ Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 100.

¹⁷ Webb, "Repertoire and Reception: Musical Culture in St John's Newfoundland, 1930-1945," 117.

¹⁸ Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949*, 79.

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(Voice of Wesley Church Radio), which was committed to “[their] kind of music remaining essential,”¹⁹ imagined community unity²⁰ and in turn allowed for the maintenance of local folk songs. Economic strains, however, put a hold on local community stations’ attempts to conserve traditional folk music. Historian Jeff Webb found that community radio stations were unable to afford airing live music (which the majority of local Newfoundlanders favoured over music industry productions²¹) as it was too expensive for local stations that lacked large audiences.²² Although corporate radio stations had the means to play the live music their listeners desired, they aired live reproductions of folk songs in choral, orchestral, or popular styles.²³ In this instance broadcasters imposed their personal taste on Newfoundlanders rather than catering to local interest, exposing themselves as authorities of imposition rather than agents of the community. The Commission of Government echoed the demise of local stations by deciding in 1934 that independent radio was not the best means to engage Newfoundland’s population and took over VONF and BCN (Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland).²⁴ The BBC advised this commission, stating that little talent existed in Newfoundland and arguing that public broadcasters must rely

¹⁹ Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949*, 215.

²⁰ Judith Klassen, “I Am VOWR: Living Radio in Newfoundland,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 22:1 (2007): 208-209.

²¹ Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949*, 72.

²² Webb, “Repertoire and Reception: Musical Culture in St John’s Newfoundland, 1930-1945,” 121.

²³ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁴ Klassen, “I Am VOWR: Living Radio in Newfoundland,” 207.

exclusively on imported entertainment.²⁵ This corporate control was furthered with the advent of Confederation. In 1949, the BCN went from Provincial to Federal control, becoming part of the CBC.²⁶ Under the authority of broadcasters and government officials Newfoundland's traditional folk music was disregarded as if it were an uncivilized sound.

Radio broadcasters altered and controlled what material Newfoundlanders were exposed to. Yet radio was not the only way in which authorities directly affected traditional folk music. The folk revival movement encouraged folklorists to study and document "native" Newfoundland folk music, which led to mass distribution of songbooks inside and outside of Newfoundland. Folklorists appeared in Newfoundland in the 1920s and became an increasingly dominant authority in the identity creation of traditional music throughout the twentieth century. While various folklorists impacted the identity of Newfoundland's traditional music, the most influential of Newfoundland's folklorists were Gerald S. Doyle and Kenneth Peacock. Doyle was a native Newfoundland businessman who collected folk songs from 1910 to 1930, while Peacock was a Canadian scholar who collected pieces for the National Museum from 1965 to 1970. Peacock and Doyle both had personal biases that influenced what type of music they collected and how they interpreted it. The music collected by them became available to a large majority of Canadians and Newfoundlanders. With the ability to reach a large number of people, many of them seeking a concrete definition of Newfoundland's cultures, Doyle and Peacock made decisions in their songbooks that created a

²⁵ Webb, "Repertoire and Reception: Musical Culture in St John's Newfoundland, 1930-1945," 126.

²⁶ Klassen, "I Am VOWR: Living Radio in Newfoundland," 207.

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consumable stereotype of traditional folk music in Newfoundland.

Gerald S. Doyle compiled twenty-five traditional folk songs into a songbook published in 1927, which he titled *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland*.²⁷ The songbook, the first of its kind in Newfoundland, was distributed to locals and tourists free of charge.²⁸ It promoted his vision of Newfoundland culture while concurrently advancing his business through an abundance of advertisements that appeared throughout the book. As Doyle's songbook was the first mass-produced songbook of Newfoundland's traditional music it had the greatest impact on tourists and locals alike, creating misconceptions of what Newfoundland's traditional folk culture was. Despite a vast abundance of Newfoundland folk music, Doyle's *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* consisted of a meagre twenty-five pieces. This limited collection imposed a generic stereotype rather than a complex web of differing songs based on varying community origins and experiences. Through mass distribution Canadians and Newfoundlanders were able to obtain physical copies of traditional music; previously, traditional music had been regional and passed down through oral tradition. Sheet music threatened local music, as it enforced how a song should be performed and discouraged improvisation or creativity in performance. In turn Canadian tourists consumed the twenty-five pieces as the primary 'authentic' Newfoundland sound. Canadians and tourist perspectives on Newfoundland music (inspired by Doyle's choice of twenty-five generic songs) created unshakeable stereotypes of Newfoundland's traditional music both within and outside of the province, and forced

²⁷ Gerald S. Doyle, *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland*. (St. John's Gerald S. Doyle, Ltd., 1927).

²⁸ Rosenberg, 55-73.

Newfoundlanders to grapple with the identity crisis of another culture rearranging their musical identity.

Mass distribution of Doyle's songbook changed the style and sound of traditional music of Newfoundland. Folklorist Philip Hiscock, who has extensively researched the evolution of the traditional folk piece Tickle Cove Pond from pre-Doyle to its inclusion in *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland*, found various changes, both structurally and culturally, to the piece after 1927.²⁹ When Doyle printed lyrics in his songbook, he fixed music that was meant to be malleable and change subtly overtime.³⁰ For example, Doyle was forced to make the decision of gender. In practice, Newfoundland folk music had traditionally used either gender interchangeably because performers were both male and female.³¹ Furthermore, performers of traditional folk music often altered range and texture to fit their vocal capabilities.³² Yet once Doyle's songbook became the dominant narrative of Newfoundland's traditional music, individual interpretations of songs such as Tickle Cove Pond became close if not identical to Doyle's.³³ Doyle wrote the music for many voices and performed the tunes in this manner, reinforcing his assumption that Newfoundland social gatherings consisted of a group of Newfoundlanders drinking and singing together. This assumption was misinformed, as social performances most often consisted of a

²⁹ Philip Hiscock, "Taking Apart 'Tickle Cove Pond'," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 29 (2002): 38.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 54.

³² Ibid 42.

³³ Ibid.

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solo vocalist.³⁴ Because Doyle's songbook was distributed and used across Canada, Canadians interpreted the music they read in *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* as representative of the province's traditional music. Canada normalized and indigenized this music as its own; a sound far from the original traditional folk music of Newfoundland.

Kenneth Peacock, a Canadian composer and music collector employed by the National Museum of Canada (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization) to collect for Newfoundland, published his songbook entitled *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* in 1955, post-confederation.³⁵ Peacock collected through the summers of 1951-52 and 1958-61,³⁶ his final collection totaling over 700 songs from most regions of the island.³⁷ Peacock's vision of Newfoundland as a community based around romanticized old-world traditions and lifestyles affected the kinds of songs he chose for collection. Though he collected a vast amount of music from the island, Peacock only recorded music from rural locations,³⁸ and concentrated his research on the west coast of Newfoundland (such as his collected songs from St. Paul's),³⁹ avoiding a large majority of Newfoundland's population in the process.⁴⁰ An anti-modernist

³⁴ Rosenberg, "The Canadianization of Newfoundland folksong; or the Newfoundlandization of Canadian folksong," 55-73.

³⁵ Peacock, *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. (Ottawa: National Museum of Man Bulletin 197, 1965)

³⁶ Rosenberg, "The Canadianization of Newfoundland folksong; or the Newfoundlandization of Canadian folksong," 55-73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Anna Kearney Guigne, *Folk songs and Folk Revival:: The Cultural Politics of Kenneth Peacock's Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. (St John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research 2008), 99-100.

³⁹ Peacock, 196-197.

⁴⁰ Rosenberg, "She's Like the Swallow: Folksong as Cultural Icon," 84.

at heart, Peacock's field notes and research omit and ignore the forced modernization of Newfoundland post-Confederation.⁴¹ He imagined Newfoundland pre-Confederation as "the timeless world of tradition, a world Canada had left behind,"⁴² and disseminated his interpretation of the culture and society to Canadians through interviews in newspapers, radio broadcasts, and reviews of Newfoundland recorded music.⁴³ Thus Canadians began to stereotype Newfoundlanders as ancient and timeless – as well as backward – simultaneously celebrating and mocking the culture. Ultimately Newfoundlanders were forced to perform a cultural juggling act between illusions and reality.

Folklorists such as Peacock and Doyle made choices that affected the way Newfoundland's folk music was conserved, and thus how it would be remembered in the future. But they were not the only authorities who had an impact on the memory of Newfoundland's traditional music. Radio changed how music was composed and performed, as broadcasters and technology overwhelmed local societies. Radio broadcasters became the voices that decided the form, style, and way Newfoundlanders listened to their own music, destroying the process of community involvement and altering the form of music from folk to popular. The physical music (sheet music as well as recordings) that was altered through technology and folklore collections is linked to the changes in lifestyle Newfoundlanders experienced post-Confederation. This change was a result of many resettlement and urbanization programs conspired by the Provincial and Federal Governments. Together, Confederation, radio technology and folklorists who controlled the folk revival movement threatened the preservation of traditional music in

⁴¹ Peacock, 196-197.

⁴² Guigne, 21.

⁴³ Ibid.

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Newfoundland. The shift in power from local communities to provincial, federal, corporate and educational authorities redefined Newfoundland's culture. As music is essential in the creation of a collective community's identity, and culture, these key figures altered and restricted the way in which music was created, experienced and remembered, and consequently threatened the cultural foundation of a people.

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