

Soul Music at the Gaelic College

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS --

"Ladies and gentlemen, Fiddler Number Two Hundred and Two!!" cried Burton MacIntyre into the microphone, holding up the hand of a sheepish-looking boy of 10 or 12. "What's your name? Where you from?" The boy was named Kyle MacDonald, and he came from Strathlorne, Cape Breton. His presence meant there were 202 fiddlers playing together on the stage at the Nova Scotia Gaelic College on that late-August afternoon, ranging in age from six to 83, and that fact symbolized a great cultural triumph. No wonder Burton's voice almost trembled with happiness.

The Cape Breton Fiddlers Association was founded in 1972, amid dire predictions that fiddling would vanish from Cape Breton within a generation. The established fiddlers were aging, and fiddling itself was considered a rustic anachronism, a primitive music which would be left behind as Cape Breton moved irreversibly into the world of rockers and rappers and Top 40 radio. The Fiddlers Association was formed to reverse this trend, and it began by holding a massive concert in the hamlet of Glendale in 1973. The Glendale concert was a broadside of defiance: the fiddle would *not* die in Cape Breton.

The Association encouraged concerts, workshops, kitchen parties and networking, and it lured the young into fiddle lessons; the Gaelic College event marked its 25th anniversary, and one of the performers was Stan Chapman, a celebrated teacher. His students included Ashley MacIsaac and Natalie MacMaster, who were themselves only part of a whole cadre of fine young musicians -- Jackie Dunn, Tracy Dares, Wendy MacIsaac, the late Tara Lynne Touesnard, and others.

Today's Cape Breton fiddlers appear in touring revues, TV specials, and billboard advertising -- and not just in Canada. Natalie MacMaster played at St. Ann's on Thursday evening, at the beginning of the first concert in the four-day festival, but she left early for a flight to her next European tour. And on the Sunday afternoon a ripple of excitement passed through the crowd when the audience noticed the young man with the ruddy beard, pork-pie hat and dark glasses: Ashley MacIsaac, home to provide piano accompaniment for his sister Wendy's fiddling as well as fiddle accompaniment for some of the young step-dancers before performing a set on his own. Today a youngster like Kyle MacDonald can dream of becoming not a rock star, but a brilliantly successful fiddler or vocalist like "Natalie" or "Ashley," as they are universally called in Cape Breton, or the brothers and sisters who make up The Rankins and The Barra MacNeils.

As a result, the most striking feature of this festival may be the wealth of superb *young* fiddlers, most of them demonstrating the same kind of showmanship which Natalie and Ashley have brought to Cape Breton fiddle music. Jennifer Roland is just 20, and she has electrified the Maritimes this summer playing with the Cape Breton Summertime Revue. Kendra MacGillivray is 25, and Wendy MacIsaac slightly older, and they are already doing national broadcasts and recordings. I had never heard of Kimberley Fraser, 16, before I went to St. Ann's, but she played superbly -- as did Dara Smith, a 17-year-old from Antigonish. I also heard Dwayne Cote for the first time, a fiddler with classical training who played with astonishing virtuosity, an established master at 31.

The Gaelic College itself has benefitted from the cresting wave of interest in Celtic music, and the widespread need to feel rooted in a society which grows more rootless by the day. This summer, its courses drew students from 28 American states and seven other foreign countries, and almost half of them studied fiddling. (The College, the only one on the continent, also offers instruction in Gaelic language, piping, dancing, weaving and other arts and crafts.) Nor is the fiddling a narrowly Scottish thing; the fiddlers include Mi'kmaq, Acadians, Irish, Ukrainians -- people from all the Cape Breton communities.

Fiddling, says one observer, is "Cape Breton's soul music."

We need to know more about the way such creativity arises and is nurtured. History is full of clusters of excellence, places where a critical mass of practitioners came together, competing and stimulating and criticizing and ultimately pushing their crafts to new heights. Paris in the Twenties, the Elizabethan stage, the early Maritime shipwrights, Silicon Valley, the Australian film industry. Such clusters often prove to be great generators of wealth, but they appear to be driven by culture and by love -- the kind of love which impels volunteers to spend 25 years converting a dying homespun music into a living treasure which enriches all the world.

Maybe the information economy is ultimately driven by passion. What a nightmare for econometrics X and what a delight for the rest of us.

-- 30 --