

Music Collection

Metis Music

Traditional Metis Music

The roots of the Metis run deep in Canada and reflect a heritage defined by two poles: the French and the First Nations. Historically, the Metis are a people born of the many alliances and marriages between French-Canadian trappers and Native American traders that defined the fur trade. Listening to the comprehensive Smithsonian Folkways CD *Plains Chippewa/Metis Music from Turtle Mountain*, one can hear the French-Canadian song "Les Menteries" in a version exactly similar to one recorded by Quebecois trad singer Andre Marchand of La Bottine Souriante. What makes this more remarkable is the fact that the Turtle Mountain Reservation is situated in North Dakota, surely not a state known for its francophone heritage. One also hears powwow singing from Turtle Mountain as well as old-time fiddle standards like Irish Washerwoman

Metis culture blends elements from both traditions but is wholly different from both. This syncretic nature of Metis culture is readily apparent in Metis music and dance.

Perhaps the best example of Metis music drawing from French and Native sources is the tune "Red River Jig." The Red River Jig is something of an anthem for traditional Metis music and most fiddlers have a version of it that they play, usually for stepdancers. The tune itself comes from the French-Canadian tune "La Grande Gigue Simple." Though the term "jig" usually refers to a tune in 6/8 or triple time in the Scottish/Irish tradition, the Metis use of it is an anglicization of the French "gigue," a stepdancing tune in duple meter.

La Grande Gigue Simple, the Québécois tune, is first and foremost a crooked tune. Most tunes written for dancing in Anglo-Celtic music have a repeated binary structure (an A part and a B part). These two parts have an internal structure that usually results in a specific number of measures. Crooked tunes move outside of these boundaries, by incorporating extra measures, adding extra endings, or drawing out the final beat of the tune. Metis crooked tunes can be even more crooked than Québécois tunes. Scholar Anne Lederman has proposed that the crooked nature of some Metis tunes may ultimately come from the influence of Native American song structure, specifically the songs and rhythms of the Plains Indians which is based more on the idea of music as a series of continual beats, rather than phrases of grouped beats/notes as would be found in Québécois music (Lederman 1991). Metis music also has other elements of Native American culture, from the rattles placed in some fiddles to the belief that certain versions of tunes belong to certain fiddlers (Lederman 2001).

Among Metis fiddlers today, **John Arcand** is a respected figure. With a clean, fluid bowing style and a large repertoire of traditional tunes and original compositions, Arcand provides a wonderful introduction to Metis fiddling on his CDs ***Thru the Years*** and ***Traditionally Yours***. Arcand also presents the John Arcand Fiddle Festival every year, giving away over \$10,000 in prize money to fiddlers and jiggers from all over Canada and the US. Highlights from his festival and interviews with Arcand can be found on the video ***John Arcand & His Métis Fiddle***.

Another excellent fiddler, and a friend of John Arcand, is **Calvin Vollrath**. Though Vollrath is not Metis, he is an excellent fiddler and frequent collaborator with Metis artists. Perhaps the best introduction to the joy and spirit of Metis fiddling is his ***Live in Randy's Kitchen*** recording. A cassette tape release only, the recording captures an extremely lively and rowdy house party at Randy the Fiddlin' Fireman's house. Arcand and Vollrath hold forth on tune after tune as the party gets more and more out of control. Great fun.

To sample a wider variety of Metis music, one should turn to the ***Drops of Brandy*** collection, four CDs of exhaustively compiled music from a wide variety of Metis fiddlers. Michel Loukinen's excellent film, ***Medicine Fiddle***, is also a good jumping-off place. The beauty of ***Medicine Fiddle*** is that it provides a glimpse into Metis culture that can only be

attained through the medium of film. It is not a work of scholarship, for little context is provided and the names of the musicians aren't provided until the end of the film. It is a wonderful series of snapshots into the lives of the Metis. You'll leave this film with a much deeper understanding and feel for Metis culture and with images of the land and the people burned in your mind.

Metis fiddling, like many other Canadian fiddle styles, was created for dances. These dances range from called square dances to exhibition-style choreographed dance and, of course, the Metis jigging, a specific style of stepdancing. The Metis jig is a rather unassuming style of stepdance, far removed from the flashing feet of Riverdance that so many associated with traditional stepdancing. It's similar to French-Canadian stepdancing, or the older Scottish styles of stepdancing found on Cape Breton Island. ***Medicine Fiddle*** provides a nice look at Metis dance, as does the video ***The Dances of the Metis***.

Artist	Title of Item	Type	Province	Library	Call #
Arcand, John	John Arcand and his Métis Fiddle	Video	Alberta	Odegaard	Videorecord GDI 002
Arcand, John	Thru the Years	CD	Alberta	Odegaard	In Process
Arcand, John	Traditionally Yours	CD	Alberta	Odegaard	CD JARC 001
Boyer, Hap	Fiddling Metis Style	CD	W. Canada	Odegaard	In Process
Gabriels Crossing	Aboriginal Fiddling	CD	W. Canada	Odegaard	CD TIM 001
Keplin, Ryan	Metis Fiddlin'	CD	Manitoba	Odegaard	CD SUNS 003
Lafferty, Richard	Richard Lafferty, The Muskeg	Video	Northwest Territories	Odegaard	Videorecord GDI 001

	Fiddler				
Maytwayashing, Cliff	Native Fiddling Fever	CD	Manitoba	Odegaard	CD SUNS 002
Various	Drops of brandy : an anthology of Métis fiddle music	Book	Saskatchewan	MLLC	M1678 .D76 2002
Various	Drops of Brandy and other traditional Metis tunes	2CD	Saskatchewan	MLLC	CD 9121, v. 1 + 2
Various	Medicine Fiddle	Video	Canada	Odegaard	Videorecord UCEMC 38154
Various	Plains Chippewa/Metis Music from Turtle Mountain	CD	United States	MLLC	CD 2200
Various.	Fiddle Legends	CD	W. Canada	Odegaard	In Process
Various.	Old Native & Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba	2CD	Manitoba	Odegaard	Ordered
Various.	The Dances of the Metis: Li Dawns di Mitchif	DVD	Saskatchewan	Odegaard	DVD MRC 001
Vollrath, Calvin	Calvin Vollrath, 30th anniversary	DVD	Alberta	Odegaard	DVD CCCP 001

	celebration				
Vollrath, Calvin	Live From Randy's Kitchen	CD	Alberta	Odegaard	In Process
Vollrath, Calvin	Metis Style Fiddle	CD	Alberta	Odegaard	In Process

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