

COUNTRY MUSIC PERFORMANCE IN NORTHERN
NOVA SCOTIA: AN OCCUPATIONAL STUDY OF
ART FITT, VERNACULAR CRAFTSMAN

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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AN OCCUPATIONAL STUDY OF ART FITT, VERNACULAR CRAFTSMAN

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study of musical performance and its context examines the local scenes in which it occurs. Drawing on materials from academic and popular sources as well as fieldwork and interviews, the claim is made that country music is not only a mass mediated phenomenon but also a highly meaningful form of located expression in the vernacular milieu of working class Pictou County, Nova Scotia. The reflexive ethnographic presentation in the study also uses biographical detail to suggest the dilemmas of being a native observer.

Using the ballad and folksong study of W. Roy Mackenzie (1883-1957) as a starting point, the analysis points to ways in which contemporary country music inherits elements of earlier narrative song forms and shows how those forms take root in one place. In doing so, a distinction is made between the inclusive term country music and the categories within it which are meaningful to local residents and their musical taste communities: bluegrass, honky tonk, old-time, and country rock. Such categories are not genres in the usual sense, but together make a complex of musical canons.

The focus is on one country music craftsman and his

occupational folklife, his work world. Art Fitt's apprenticeship in a musical coal mining family and at house parties in Stellarton provided early skills which he later employed in professional bands across Canada. He now earns his livelihood as a one man band and running talent contests for amateur singers. These performances are held at taverns, lounges, clubs and Legions, mostly in Stellarton, Westville, and New Glasgow. His public performance is contrasted with his brother's more domestic performance style.

The career of Art Fitt is shown to be substantially unlike that of famous stars. His knowledge of the cultural environment provides him with special skills which he employs to succeed in the business of performance. It is shown that his ties to his audience, and to the larger local community, condition his repertoire and make him an effective organic intellectual.

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DEDICATION

This one's for Mum
Katharine Relief Williams Mackay (1913-1994)
who didn't believe me at first
but continued to believe in me.

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Chapter 1

HILLBILLY AND COUNTRY MUSIC AS A SUBJECT OF FOLKLORE STUDY

1.1 The Focus: Sources of Knowledge, Levels of Analysis

This study of the working life of a country music craftsman is predicated on a number of knowledges and presumptions. Some of these knowledges and presumptions are academic, some are in everyday terrains which involve people and traditions operating at considerable remove from academe. It is the connection between these two realms of understanding, the academic and the everyday, which is one core focus of this analysis.

Any analysis of social life is ultimately an account of the intersubjectivity which links the analyst to the object of study, the "take" which is offered in the final report. Yet in the realm of popular music performance and in that of the world of work, participants typically have a highly developed explanatory system for their activities. Some among these participants have specialized in the explication of technique, the collection of memorabilia and other artifacts, the recording of life stories or the listing of important facts. The co-existence of these forms of knowledge and the expertise which they embody, on the one hand, with the tradition of academic enquiry on the other,

is both apparent and yet often overlooked.¹ A singular delight of folklore study is the frequency with which, by comparison with other disciplines, the knowledge of those without formal training is taken as seriously as the most pedantic academic inquiry.

The academic approach used here derives from a number of fields, disciplines, and schools of thought. It is centred on perspectives from folklore study but includes methods and insights from social history, sociology, ethnology and more recent discourses which might be called cultural studies. I hope that this broad analytic net lends comprehensiveness rather than merely eclecticism.

I will also employ, in the following account, certain everyday knowledges and presumptions, which, taken as a whole, amount to another perspective. Such a perspective is comparable in some respects to an academic discipline, though based concretely in the country music world and its developing self-consciousness.² As with many subjects of

¹ Such alternate or popular knowledges have been richly used not only by folklorists but by social historians. Probably the most important figure writing in English for a new reading of the past using such sources is E.P. Thompson, who died in 1993. His Customs in Common (1991) is a model of such usage and should be read by all folklorists. Bryan Palmer (1993-94) provides an illuminating overview of Thompson's work.

² Musicians' own usage of categories of occupational status is abstracted into a model by Neil Rosenberg in "Big Fish, Small Pond.." (1986) It is his usage, which

interest to folklorists, country music and its performance has repositories of information and interpretation which continue to provide a certain base of knowledge for participants, both active performers and others involved in the "scene."³ These repositories also define in an ongoing way a kind of emergent mythology⁴ about origins, history, and meaning in a given tradition.

In the first instance, such an emergent mythology takes the form of a rather complex account, rescuing experience in the form of oral history, which is the raw material of a record of the tradition. Such information and interpretation often serve a practical purpose in the terrain itself and partly because of this practicality are often overlooked or disparaged in academic

distinguishes among apprentice, journeyman, craftsman and celebrity, that is employed throughout this study, and elaborated more fully in chapters 4 and 5.

³ The 'scene is meant here in the sense defined by Spradley and McCurdy: "A cultural scene is the information shared by two or more people that defines some aspect of their experience." (1972 22)

⁴ By mythology, I mean of course a general framework of understanding by which the world as presently known has come to be, through which narratives of origin, cause and development become comprehensible. Without meaning to enter definitional debates, I wish at this stage to simply make clear that I do not mean mythology to denote falsehood.

treatments.⁵ The repositories to which I refer here include amateur historians, collectors, media personalities, senior craftsmen and the concrete forms which their knowledge takes in their collections, publications, work, and memories. As with every craft performance, each competent practitioner embodies a certain distillation of such repositories, and part of the job of this study is to tease out the form such embodiments assume in the case of Art Fitt, as well as their sources and reflections in his tradition and context.

Except for some book-length biographies of well known stars, there are only occasional treatments of professional musicians which combine academic priorities and methods with a concrete use of biographical and other popular information sources.⁶ With the possible exception of Charles Keil's

⁵ Such repositories of expertise are common for a range of folk practices: printed guides, manuals, reference works and comparable accounts for various forms of folk medicine and folk belief in the shape of widely distributed materials such as astrology charts, guides to homeopathic medicine and narratives of UFO experiences; the conscious repetition, collection and publication of jokes and dialect forms in language as forms of local colour and elements of regional identities; the amassing, classification, display and evaluation of antique and material culture items.

⁶ The University of Illinois Press series Music in American Life includes the most notable of such studies, including Townsend (1976); Porterfield (1979); Williams (1981); and most recently Snow (1994). This last book, Hank Snow by Hank Snow, as it was co-written or seriously edited by two writers (see bibliography), shades toward the next category. Most biographies of well-known performers are co-

Urban Blues (1966) and the work of Barry Lee Pearson (1984, 1990), there are no studies after which the present one could be said to be modeled. It can be noted that the studies of blues musicians by Keil and Pearson benefitted from a certain "politics of appropriateness" which country music has rarely enjoyed in folklore circles or elsewhere (see 1.3 and 1.4 below).

In the history of North American folksong study certain forms and styles have been privileged over others. Aesthetic judgements by collectors and commentators as well as the politics of traditionality in folksong study and revival have skewed attention away from musical forms that appear to be tainted by modernity, professionalism, or widespread popularity. A longstanding set of presumptions have considered real folk music to be "of the people" and free of certain types of external contamination in the form of commercial distribution of musical items, active participation by professional performers, or the agency of public tradition conservation such as happens through ministries of tourism, chambers of commerce, municipal governments, heritage commissions and the like. The

written or ghost written by professional journalists but are presented for popular consumption to fans as autobiographies, such as is the case with Cash (1975); Haggard (1981); Lynn (1976); Mandrell (1990); Nelson (1988); and dozens of others.

recognition that such exclusionary criteria would limit folk music to a largely domestic performance context has allowed the tainted cousins of pure tradition to be today more commonly taken as subjects of study.

Country music, as generally understood, has from its beginning as a recorded form in the 1920's, been commercially organized and is increasingly dominated by professionals, musical and otherwise. On these two counts, its recorded form and its dominance by professionals, country music is a particularly awkward form of "folk music," comparable in these respects to the blues.

Yet it has been argued that contemporary country music is the only living folk music in Canada today. in "Country Music: The Folk Music of Canada," (1988) Greg Marquis comments:

I believe that country music, one of the most pervasive North American musical forms, is the mainstream folk music of contemporary Canada. The "folk," the Canadian born of Anglo-Celtic origin, have, with few exceptions, abandoned traditional music to a small number of performers, record collectors, and folklorists. (291)

...in an age when the popular hit of last year is this week's shopping mall music, country and western is also one of our few musical links to

the past. In this sense it is truly our modern folk music. (308)

Such a suggestive overstatement has a large component of truth and clearly challenges the presumptions noted above. To test the claim that country music is a folk music, a definition of folk music is required. The study which follows is, in a sense, an elaboration and refinement of such a definition, in one specific local and regional context.

The study will delineate the major forms of vernacular music in Pictou County and the contexts in which those musics operate as working idioms. Historical sources for these vernacular styles will show ways in which Pictou County and the surrounding area of northern Nova Scotia has reflected larger currents in the evolution of popular music, many common to the Maritime provinces and some common to all of North America. Yet the area has simultaneously had its own forms of selection, emphasis, and unique development. The key focus for the presentation of contemporary country music culture will be the working life of the only individual in the area who makes a living from his performance of country music. Analysis will include an exploration of the venues and clients for Art Fitt's "gigs," and a comparison of his approach to music to that of his brother Pat, who is an amateur performer.

1.2 Approaches to Ethnographic Refinement

From the point of view of most song collectors in North America, those with either academic or commercial intentions, the music of ordinary people has repeatedly come up short in its quotient of expected or desired types of music. Academic collectors, entrepreneurs and those concerned with the direction of culture have often approached the realm of folk performance with a set agenda, hoping to underscore certain kinds of theme, style, or form for the sake of intellectual, commercial or political gains. Such expectations derive from priorities of the academy, the state, publishers or other sponsors, and perhaps most importantly, from the aesthetic of the collector, stated or unstated.

A re-thinking of such "entry mentalities" is presently the subject of vigorous debate in all of the social sciences, nowhere more strenuously than in anthropology. "The greatest discipline of the twentieth century," as folklorist Henry Glassie has called anthropology (1983 126) might be expected to confront the challenge of premeditated fieldwork, as an exercise in its own identity, for a number of reasons: anthropology has focused on cultures (and often through languages) very different from those of the

investigators, the field has a longstanding professional expectation of holistic ethnographic accounts, and its highly developed and jealously guarded "schools of thought" are the stuff of endless and almost unavoidable debate. These factors, in addition to the cultural role of imperialism and the Eurocentric focus which that imperialism has fostered, have all contributed to a massive body of cultural information whose premises and categories of analysis are largely of etic origin.

This dilemma over the truth-value of anthropological evidence is exemplified by the controversy over Margaret Mead's early fieldwork which resulted in the classic Coming of Age in Samoa (1928). In Margaret Mead and Samoa, Derek Freeman (1983) has suggested that the young people in Samoa simply did not live in the manner which Mead described. James Clifford (1986 102-03) claims that even this controversy amounts to two competing yet equally etic and inadequate accounts overwriting the lives of young Samoans, each with its own lesson to claim, two generations apart. In her admirably candid recollections of those early years in fieldwork, Mead herself (1972) brings her colleagues up short for their continuing under-preparation of young anthropologists heading for the field, and suggests, citing another fieldworker: "How anyone knows who is anybody's mother's brother only God and Malinowski know." (151)

Without meaning to be especially metaphorical, it appears, or to assert a linguistic paradigm for other social relations, Mead continues:

But at the same time one has always to remember that the pattern one discerns is only one of many that might be worked out through different approaches to the same human situation. The grammar you work out is not *the* grammar but a grammar of the language. But as it may be the only grammar anyone will ever make, it is crucial that you listen and record as minutely and as carefully as you can and, as far as possible, without reference to the grammar you are tentatively putting into shape. (156)

Folklorists have generally been more cautious in their interpretive schemes than have anthropologists. Perhaps the ancestry of folklore in literary study encourages a satisfaction with the telling of significant detail and with textual precision. Perhaps the geographic accessibility of the culture being described made the notes, queries, collectanea, and transcriptions more cautious in the domestic field of folklore than the foreign lands of anthropology. Whatever the case, grandiose theory has not been the diverting force in folklore that it has been in many of the social sciences; in fact it has been suggested

that folklorists have neglected interpretive theory and concentrated on mere technique,⁷ making the field more of a profession, one might say, than an academic discipline.⁸

Yet the choice of arenas worthy of interest, the selection of some items and the neglect of others, the form and coloration of annotations and introductions, even the basis for a taxonomy using the breakdown into genre, type and version, all attest to ways in which folklore study slices the ken of its interest. Most crucial work in folklore analysis is based on fieldwork, where, as Bruce Jackson has all too honestly pointed out: "Changing one's definitions is always more difficult than ignoring the evidence." (1966 x)

Impulses from postmodernist and discourse theory have fed the rethinking of field conclusions in important ways and the emergent focus is a much more reflexive approach to field investigation, one in which the researcher's aims, personal bias, individual manner, culture of origin, and

⁷ Rosemary Zumwalt (1988) portrays the development of folklore in the U.S. as a kind of battle between its anthropological and its literary arms in which no head ever emerges. Citing Ben-Amos' commentary on Dorson's rundown of folklore theory, Zumwalt points to the "neglect of theories and philosophical issues." (142)

⁸ In the United States the significance of employment for folklorists in the public sector outside of academe has led to an ongoing debate and adjustment of the field to its economic place. Parameters of employment probably supplant certain important theoretical forays.

"Heisenberg uncertainty principle"⁹ are explicitly introduced and seriously considered both in the mentality and comportment through which the field is approached as well as in the eventual analysis.

The idea at the base of post-modernist analysis, current in the study of literature, is that there really is no text of a fixed sort. Rather a text is formed with each "reading," i.e. the act of encountering a sentence, a quilt, a song, even the silence of another person, is the text, with all of the fleeting and ephemeral suggestions which that connotes. Meaning in interpretation emerges from the gathering of significant fragments, capturing reverberations, incanting allusions, portraying context. One of the effects of such style in analytic commentary is to resurrect the kind of elitism which made intellectual debates before the middle of this century largely the preserve of the privately tutored and a privileged upper middle class. However, aside from the fetishism of language and a kind of competition for degrees of subtlety, this new code of interpretation integrates the investigator's experience, insight, technique and object of study into a

⁹ Deriving from the dilemma in physical investigation by which one cannot simultaneously measure the location and velocity of an object, as to do either must distend the other, Werner K. Heisenberg's principle has come to denote the inevitable impact of the shadow of the investigator on the object of study.

kind of collapsed whole which is meant to be reflexive and dialogic:

Because post-modern ethnography privileges "discourse" over "text," it foregrounds dialogue as opposed to monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer. In fact, it rejects the ideology of "observer observed," there being nothing observed and no one who is observer. There is instead the mutual, dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts. (Tyler 1986 126)

The precursors to such soft techniques were often presented as a separate and complementary commentary, literally another book. Marcus and Cushman (1982) refer to recent forms of these commentaries, especially those in which the investigator "went native" as "confessional fieldwork literature" which is "at best seldom more than tenuously related to their authors' ethnographic enterprises." (26) In the classical literature of anthropology, by contrast, the questions posed in the separate account, though perhaps occupying a more humanistic slant than the main study, stood at the very centre of methodological concerns in the field. There is Evans-

Pritchard's oft-cited short "Introductory" to The Nuer (1940), in which he recounts a conversation with a tribesman which drives him crazy with its circularity and, complaining eventually of "symptoms of 'nuerosis'," (13) leaves the reader wondering, among many other things, what the tribesman thought of him. Anthropologist Laura Bohannan, who wrote Return to Laughter as a work of "fiction" under the *nom de plume* of Elenore Smith Bowen nonetheless introduced it thus:

I am an anthropologist. The tribe I have described here does exist. This book is the story of the way I did field work among them. The ethnographic background given here is accurate, but it is neither complete nor technical. Here I have written simply as a human being, and the truth I have tried to tell concerns the sea change in oneself that comes from immersion in another and savage culture. (Bowen, 1954, xviv)

In Bohannan's case, she had herself published ethnographic treatments of the same people, the Tiv, as did her husband, Paul Bohannan.¹⁰ In a tradition reaching back to at least Malinowski, such personal reactions to the field experience

¹⁰ Charles Keil also worked among the Tiv, from which came Tiv Song (1979). One anecdote from his fieldwork which involved a storytelling contest in which his role as host was determining is recounted by Bruce Jackson (1987 73-74).

were considered separable writing tasks which would risk mutual contamination if integrated.

The folklore publications which best reflect this tradition of separate but equally interesting commentaries are those of W. Roy Mackenzie (1919, 1928), whose work was carried out in the same part of Nova Scotia as my own. Mackenzie's classic description in The Quest of the Ballad (1919), though rife with the sort of allusions one might expect from his training at Dalhousie and Harvard universities, is not only a garden of contextual delights for ballad and folksong study, but an unparalleled ethnographic portrait of everyday life for the elder denizens along the Northumberland shore of Nova Scotia during the early years of this century. The ring of truthful detail which informs Mackenzie's description derives in part, I would suggest, from the fact of his boyhood spent in River John at the end of the last century on that same Northumberland shore in the northwestern corner of Pictou County. His work and its relevance to, even impact on, my own study is elaborated in Chapter 2.

An approach which integrates collected data, considered analysis, and insight based on lengthy personal experience remains rare in academic treatments, though the increased usage of the first person in formal presentation is an indicator of its acceptance. The work of Bascom Lamar

Lunsford and Vance Randolph might be considered pioneering efforts for the American South in that they were both in many respects of the same people as they studied, and neither were academics. Mackenzie and later Helen Creighton worked their native geographic territory of Nova Scotia in their collection and therefore necessarily had their work coloured by the personal experiences of a lifetime. In all of the above cases the collectors were native to the area, though it seems apparent (from their level of literacy alone) that class differences between collector and informant were generally immense.¹¹

I do not wish to suggest through this commentary that most previous forays into the field are flawed by narrow visions and ethnocentrism, and that "this researcher" will escape such trappings. Rather the intention of stating the problem is to provide a critical perspective for the reader through the statement alone, and to equip the study which follows with some of the more powerful recent insights on the dialectic of depicting cultural scenes.

One method of trying to portray the scenes as vividly as possible in a manner which is ethnographically sensible

¹¹ For accounts of the work of these pioneers, see, respectively: on Lunsford (Jones 1984); Randolph (Cochran 1985); Mackenzie (Lovelace 1977); and Creighton (Creighton 1975). For a depiction and critique of Creighton's relations to the collecting environment which especially emphasizes class and political issues, see McKay (1993).

will be to cast my own observations on the fieldwork process into the recounting of the materials which form the focus of the study. In doing so, occasional personal recollections will also be offered as context for the line which links this text to the place being described.

1.3 Genres, Hit Parades, and Singing Communities

Ordinary people who are musical have always been catholic in their taste. They take and keep what they like from whatever source to which they have access, they refashion old songs and make up new ones, they overlook others, and they shape, in each community, a syncretic amalgam into a canon or canons, a circumscribed but undulating well into which they regularly dip (Bohlman 1988). In the singing communities of North America, this well may include songs from American minstrelsy, classical ballads, local compositions, obscure ethnic songs, "parlour" songs, church and gospel music, Tin Pan Alley and other popular sources (including country, rock, blues, rhythm and blues and easy listening pieces), even accessible classical music sources, all mixed up with apparent impunity. After all, it has been largely academics and corporate tabulators who have created respectively the genres of folksong and the categorized commercial popularity charts. Neither genres nor separate charts necessarily have a consistent pattern or set of criteria, either among themselves or across the academic/commercial gulf which separates the two. Yet everyone who encounters or participates in song performance employs some manner of distinguishing one form of song from

another, the first distinction usually being whether the song is liked, i.e. whether the song is stimulating, pleasant, appealing, interesting, good, or worthy. Whether a song is liked, in short, is a complex judgement.

Folksong scholars have long been concerned with the classification of song genres and types. Such classifications are characteristically based on text, theme, function, or musical style. Yet field collectors have often been impressed with the way in which local performance cuts across such categories, a classical ballad following a Hank Williams song with apparent indiscrimination. This is not to say that the "folk aesthetic" makes no distinctions, rather that folk distinctions have their own imperative. Though he struggles with the nature of that imperative, Glassie (1970 7; 52-53), for example, offers a dizzy, though not uncommon breadth in the repertoire of Oaksville, New York's Dorrance Weir, and comments on the selection process:

The collector must work in an environment where the same conservatism supports attractive things like the singing of old ballads and unattractive things like racial prejudice and a hatred of education. Too often when he encounters the bearers of tradition he is like the Haitian urban romantic who loved the country but resented the existence of the peasants in the countryside:

wondering how such degenerate people could know such beautiful folklore items, the collector snatches the texts he was looking for and retreats to civilization before getting to know the people; in the safety of his study he can assign numbers to the text and the text to a name in a headnote and to Redfieldian puppets in a skimpy introduction. (53)

In large part, for the members of a local community and its performers, a good song is a good song. Yet this formulation is too simplistic in itself. The canon or well into which local people regularly dip may not have explicitly defined criteria, but it does have criteria. More importantly, each well has local rainfalls, new users, periodic contaminations, and antiseptic treatments that are considered necessary by its users. At times, the well may apparently go dry, only to refill with fresh water, sometimes from runoff, sometimes from an invisible underground spring. Some users also have larger buckets, some have rain barrels at the corner of their home. And, to extend the metaphor ozonically, some of the descendants of former users of the well now have running water (radio, television, stereos) and therefore have no use for the old wooden bucket in the community well. There will be times, in any song community, when the deep narrow well of folk

musical sources seems inaccessible for want of techniques of recovery: "the pump don't work cause the vandals took the handle." ¹² But only a true calamity will cause the walls of the well to cave in, forcing the dry local folks to move to an entirely different source.

Though this well metaphor may be stretched a bit thin, the point is that any particular musical mix in a given geographic area is a unique confluence of synchronic and diachronic factors. Each such confluence could be considered a canon, or, as suggested below, a set of canons.

In making sense of such canons, three important questions of contemporary folklore study come into relief, namely: (1) What is tradition, what is creativity, and how does the intersection between the two operate? The answers to this question lie primarily in the relation between an individual performer and that performer's community, including that performer's community of reference. (2) What is the relation between folkloric processes and "mass-mediation"? As the issue is usually framed, this question asks about the nature of relations between folk and popular culture(s). This multi-faceted problem is ever-present and has no answer. It can be said with confidence that it is a rare folklore study which is unaffected by this question;

¹² Bob Dylan. "Subterranean Homesick Blues." Bringing It All Back Home.

the folk-mass juncture is a subtext not only of any study of our culture but of the culture itself. (3) What is the relation between genres and canons, and to what extent is the makeup of canons a conscious or directed process? Put more generally, how do communities shape and declare their traditions, and how does the leadership of that process operate?

Subsuming these questions are two political\economic axes which directly affect not only the processes of folklore but all cultural issues. Those axes are class relations, and the relation between centres and peripheries.

This study speaks to each of these issues, sometimes directly, at other times not so directly, but primarily from the perspective of the role played by those whose occupation is in the cultural domain, specifically making a living from musical performance before small live audiences.

1.4 Folklore Study and Country Music Scholarship

Since D.K. Wilgus placed hillbilly music on the main stage of folklore scholarship with his editing of the "hillbilly issue" of the Journal of American Folklore in 1965, that antiquated form has received much attention from folklorists. Most of that scholarly interest, which had been foreshadowed in occasional pieces by Herbert Halpert, Charles Seeger, and Wilgus himself in earlier years, was directed to the role which hillbilly recordings played, usually inadvertently, in the preservation of genuine folk songs, those which were presumed to have survived in the communities of origin of hillbilly performers, primarily through oral transmission. The hillbilly recordings, then, could be thought of as modern broadsides¹³ and as having similar effects on the continuation of their folk sources as the broadsheet form had on oral ballads, primarily that of freezing the versions into cardboard replications of the variation which was disseminated through the mass medium, or so it was claimed. With respect to lyrical consistency,

¹³ In his "Introduction" to Transforming Tradition, Neil Rosenberg (1993 12) attributes the first explicit comparison of hillbilly records with broadsides to a Wilgus article in 1951: "A Note on 'Songs from Rappahannock County.'" JAF 64 (1951): 320.

this was as true of the printed broadsheet as it was of recordings. This claim also underscores the fact that mass or popular culture did not arrive with the electronic media, but rather was endemic in any part of society where literate citizens had access to the printed form, a point which the scholarship inspired by Marshall McLuhan has fine-tuned.¹⁴

This early focus on hillbilly records brought interested academics to the realization that hillbilly music was not simply an aberration (and to many an abomination) superimposed by commercial interests over the musical culture of isolated rural people, but rather that hillbilly recordings were in part a commercial means of reflecting and disseminating musical cultures, one which left a hard record of its content, just as had broadsides in earlier decades, of a complex living form. That automatic archive, accumulated without special intention, has proven to be a rich source for research and understanding.

Some of those scholars looking at hillbilly music (who now include historians and sociologists, even anthropologists) bemoaned the tardiness of academic attention to the hillbilly form and tried to recreate performance contexts as well as biographical and compositional details several decades after their

¹⁴ Among important early forays into such McLuhanism, see Stearn (1968) and Theall (1971).

occurrence. Too bad, it was suggested, that the value of hillbilly performances, repertoires, recordings and personalities was not recognized earlier, when the information was fresher and the participants more vibrantly active.¹⁵ Occasionally older performers have been dragged out of semi-retirement or non-musical jobs to perform again for renewed audiences after decades of neglect; typically such performances are part living archive, part entertainment. Successions of media of transmission for songs (from broadside through compact disc) and the musical styles which they disseminate, rarely gain the nod from folklore scholars in the period during which those media and styles become massively employed by the population. Norm Cohen has repeatedly alluded to the implications of this oversight:

The generation that admitted broadside balladry as possibly relevant to folksong closed its eyes to the sheet music of Tin Pan Alley. The collectors who opened the canons to those nineteenth-century parlor ballads refused to accept hillbilly and

¹⁵ One could draw a parallel between the expansion of academic interest from song as item to the form of its performance on the one hand, and the enlarged interest in conversational analysis and ethnographies of communications rather than only established genres of oral literature, on the other. That is, the development of scholarship around country music has shared a larger drift in folklore study.

blues music. Today the folklorists who study hillbilly and blues records are slow to accept current radio- and TV-disseminated rock music (1981 22).

With specific reference to the style of music being considered in the present study, Cohen asserts:

...the commercial descendents of hillbilly music are still thriving in contemporary country music. Although it may not sound like folk music to most of us, it is indubitably the continuation of hillbilly tradition... It would be a shame if we lost interest in one of the most accessible experiments in folk process at this crucial moment in its development (1986 494).

Philip Nusbaum (1974) has gone so far as to suggest that country music has actually displaced balladry in functional, textual and stylistic terms (see 2.4 below). Nusbaum claims that country music has stronger connections to older ballads than does even contemporary balladry. Of course, hillbilly recordings and contemporary country music have drawn substantially not only from the narrative song tradition, primarily a 'domestic' one, but also from a number of more public styles or 'assembly' traditions such as dance and church music, travelling shows and itinerant

performers ¹⁶ as well as from any number of popular sources which might inform a regional canon as noted in 1.3 above.

Yet there is a generalized presumption that folk music and country music are two entirely different entities. Revival folk performers will typically sneer at anything associated with country music: it is seen as overly formularized, musically pedestrian, right-wing in sentiment, sexist in attitude, depressing in message, and generally as of little interest save as a source of parody. Country music is usually also seen as being "from" the southern United States, and its popularity elsewhere as a product of unrelenting commercial promotion of an alien low-brow culture which usurps local tradition.

Anita Best, for example, describes the country music which she heard on radio in Placentia Bay during the 1950s and 1960s as appealing to the youth such as herself, but also as foreign, threatening, and somewhat treasonous. The adults in her family and community were debating the

¹⁶ This essential distinction between domestic and public traditions is clearly delineated by Ives (1977) with special reference to the repertoire which men developed through their exchanges at winter lumbercamps, a social and collective context, as against the 'domestic' repertoire, mostly of women, those narrative pieces sung chiefly to their children. Wilgus and the Cohens made a comparable distinction for the roots of commercial hillbilly music. Malone (1987: 421-25) provides a thorough summary of the literature on this latter question. For a succinct presentation of the issues see Cohen and Cohen (1977).

accuracy of radio versions of familiar songs:

I listened to these mysterious debates with only one ear, because I was hoping they'd put on 'Roses are Blooming' or 'The Mountie's Prayer.' Pretty soon the Carter Family and Hank Snow gave way to Patsy Cline and Jim Reeves. We sang the Hank Williams songs with the most intense devotion, although there was always a vague uneasiness on us - it was the kind of feeling you get when you pretend not to recognize someone you know across the street. ("Introduction" to Lehr, Come and I Will Sing You, 1985 xi)¹⁷

Questions around the formularized nature of country music, its simple musical form, and the content of its messages, are addressed in some measure when I investigate its operation as a vernacular form. But the question of the regional, or perhaps more accurately, located character of country music, has become an issue in the critical literature around country music.

¹⁷ In the complex of competing powers and styles which cultural mix, hegemony, and syncretism involves, the very Placentia Bay tradition which Best sets against imported country music is itself the source of resentment in a southern shore (Newfoundland) community such as Calvert, where "stage Irish and country and Western...remain the most popular music" but "fiddle music...and songs about resettlement" are felt to be foisted on them. (Pocius, 1991 276-277)

Peterson and Davis (1975) have argued that country music has been so dominated by artists from the American south, especially that stretch from Tennessee through Texas, that the music must be seen as a regional form which has been disseminated elsewhere. Malone (1979) makes much the same claim. Yet as early as 1965, Wilgus, referring to the origin of country music in the South as a "myth in the best sense of the word," points out:

Early hillbilly performers came not only from the lowland and upland South, but from the Great Plains and the Midwest - and eventually New England, Nova Scotia and Alberta. That the first important hillbilly radio show originated in Chicago cannot be explained solely by the presence of Southern migrants. Its manifestation was of the South; its essence was of rural America. Southern hillbilly music seems but a specialized and dominant form of a widespread music... (1965, 196)

The resonant effect of the dominant hillbilly-country recordings on regional musics outside of the American south is undeniable, as is the tendency toward regional selection from that dominant repertoire. In an area of investigation only now beginning to take coherent shape, the study of "northern" country music is nonetheless on firm footing.

Simon Bronner suggests:

... country music had an independent and continuous development in areas outside the South incorporating existing folk traditions. Furthermore, regional characteristics evolved from a selection of commercially disseminated music from contiguous areas in addition to popular sources (1978 2)

The astounding direct impact of the records and radio play of such artists as Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Kitty Wells on the style and repertoire of musicians in the Maritimes continues even today. Just as astounding and direct, however is the continuing impact of commercially successful performers from the region such as Wilf Carter, Hank Snow, and Don Messer, whose regional influence is multiplied because of their roots in the Maritime Provinces.¹⁸ The model which Rosenberg (1976) first developed to interpret the regional mix underscores the special role played by such celebrities in the creation and popularization of styles and songs in what is essentially an aesthetically conservative arena.

¹⁸ The most concrete illustration of the direct effect of one star's style on a local performer in the Atlantic region is Michael Taft's portrait of the career of Jimmie Linnegar in Newfoundland (1981), a career based on his ability to sound just like Hank Snow, even to the point of replicating his mistakes.

Somewhat closer to home still, Cape Breton fiddler Winston Scotty Fitzgerald remains the model for many fiddlers in eastern Nova Scotia, including Ned Fitt, Art's father, and to a lesser extent for fiddlers throughout the Maritimes. Those in southern New Brunswick may pattern their fiddle-playing after Ned Landry of Saint John, and so on down to quite a local level where the nuance of technique and style may be directly observed or even taught face to face. Most country performers cite members of their family, despite the obscure performance record of such kin, as primary influences. The pattern is one of concentric circles of influence, with occasional segments attaining disproportionate impact due to their aural accessibility through either a privileged or a widespread mode of dissemination. The critical factor in having an impact on others is literally to be heard and appreciated. Impressionable youth who are acquiring their musical skills will learn from whatever they hear and like. Kenneth S. Goldstein (1982) has argued that in the case of the British folksong revival, available recordings have supplemented and augmented the sources of repertoire and style available from relatives and community, rather than replacing those more traditional sources. There is every reason to believe that the same complementarity applies to country music in Nova Scotia.

It is the syncretism that country music achieves which makes it so fascinating. Country music is local, yet it is global. It is made up of recorded originals, their forebears and covers, yet there is always a rich cultural statement "under the covers." Beyond its intrinsic interest, country music has become a kind of synecdoche for North American rural and small town life. In "The Hillbilly Movement" (1968), D.K. Wilgus makes the claim, often cited, that all folklorists who are interested in current or collected folksong in America should know and understand hillbilly music. He continues: "...more important is the wider recognition of the significance of hillbilly music in the total American culture." (271) Without misplacing his intention, it can readily be suggested that such can also be said of country music in Canadian culture.

The formal study of country music, as with so many fields of current concern in folklore, is complemented by a vast popular literature (cf. "supernatural" belief, folk art, contemporary legend), especially in the form of "fanzines" and commercial biographies (portions of the repositories referred to in 1.1). As well, there are many serious amateur collectors and documenters of the ongoing country music phenomenon. Analysts from fields other than folklore have looked at aspects of country music such as the economics of the industry, careers of high-profile

performers, messages contained in the lyrics of the songs, relationships of country music to other popular musics, and stylistic currents over time.

A handful of investigators, most notably William Ivey, James P. Leary, George H. Lewis, Peter Narváez, Richard Peterson, Jimmie N. Rogers, Neil V. Rosenberg, and Charles Wolfe have recently concentrated on elements of contemporary country music performance. All of this literature is now coalescing into a kind of country music studies movement with a skeletal organization. The Country Music Foundation in Nashville and the annual conference in Jimmie Rodgers' hometown of Meridian, Mississippi are two strong legs for such a skeleton in the American context. As a form which clearly has both folk and popular elements, country music has been shown to have a powerful capacity to fold patterns together, with media, regional, community, and personal factors all affecting ongoing repertoires, the mix reflecting both the exposure to certain forms and the cultural concerns of participants. The working language that is country music is a widespread vernacular with its promoters, its nay-sayers, its ordinary participants and now finally its serious students.

Chapter 2

ENTERING THE PICTOU COUNTY VERNACULAR

2.1 The Vernacular Form and Country Music Fans

In her revealing study of the use of the "commonplace" in Newfoundland ballad singing, Debora Kodish not only presents recurrent themes which must be undressed from the refrains of the local ballad repertoire in order for meaning to become clear, but also suggests a kind of oral formulation in performance which draws on commonly useful descriptive phrases. In the course of this textual surgery, Kodish makes the larger point of suggesting the power, inclusiveness, and apparent contradictions of the role which the vernacular plays:

... at the core of the vernacular is the double notion of indigenous and unfree. Possessed of its own logic, in dialogue with the other voices of its time and place, native but not free. The vernacular stresses mixture where most usages of the term "folklore" have stressed pureness. It is therefore useful to draw upon this sense of the vernacular for consideration of songs that are themselves mixed, local reshapings of popular or international songs, and that are realized in different ways by Newfoundland men and women. (1983 132)

Deriving from the Latin "vernaculus" meaning native, the notion of vernacular was first applied to local spoken languages, often unwritten ones, into which holy texts were eventually translated in order for relatively unlettered

masses to gain acquaintance with learned messages. In this usage, vernacular meant much the same thing as patois or argot. Carried across genres, vernacular has come to refer in architecture to the polyglot creations of folk building, and in music to refer to what happens "on the ground," i.e. the music which ordinary people make, regardless of the varied origins of that music.

The term vernacular has gathered status as a kind of buzzword of relevance in its recent usage, but the idea of vernacularity contains key emphases for understanding any strong working idiom which lives and grows in regular performance among ordinary people. Such a vernacular idiom has almost no formal record or cohort of critical literati to give it a form and structure with explicit etic definition. Vernacular music is a sort of amorphous clamour toward dialogue, refracting the pitch of the street toward the ears of those who would deign to listen from the shelter of established critical vehicles. Vernacular forms take shape in process and rarely accommodate existing taxonomies. By definition, all vernacular forms challenge the perimeters of defined genres and are the embodiment of cultural expressions which demand generic refinement.

Country music is a rich example of a vernacular discourse in that it is a fluid and multivariate form functioning as a shell for a variety of musical expressions.

The contours of country music change with the vagaries of style as they vary over time and across regions, with the aesthetic predilections of a given performer, and with that performer's preferred repertoire. Country music is finally, in any given performance, what an audience accepts as appropriate and legitimate in the context, despite wildly different stylistic characteristics; it is this final form of inclusion and exclusion, that declared by an audience, which shapes a hegemonic vehicle over time. The overarching domination which hegemony implies is, in the case of country music, limited but real. Notwithstanding my discoveries about the limited scope of the term country music in Pictou County (which are reported in the next chapter), country music is the key identifying concept for a wide musical terrain, and its topographic features are collapsed into a "landscape" when a hegemonic form spreads widely and inclusively. Such hegemonic forms frame up over time and consolidate with their popularity. For example, the smooth, innovative, relaxed but polished sound of the late fifties and early sixties, epitomized by Jim Reeves and Patsy Cline, became the hegemonic form of the Nashville Sound.¹ This stylistic umbrella succeeded the honky-tonk form of a few years earlier represented by Hank Williams and

¹ The best succinct overview of the rise and decline of the Nashville Sound is Ivey (1982).

Kitty Wells.

The repertoires and stylistic characteristics of each popular music form, with rock and jazz as much as with country, have taken shape in fits and starts, with dramatic additions to the features of the canon at certain stages in the history of the form as well as periods of stagnation and consolidation intervening between important innovations.² Hegemonic forms within each idiom act as broad sweeping gestures toward vernacular musics and thereby form one powerful input toward the definition of a community's musical canons.

But beyond these generic, hegemonic and literal aspects of a vernacular music, a pervasive vehicle such as country music not only occupies a broad section of musical terrain but also falls out as a common part of conversational rhetoric. In Pictou County one can frequently encounter lines from country songs and references to well-known country music personalities in ordinary conversation among persons who have no direct connection to professional country music performance. A knowledge of country music here might be compared to a knowledge of certain

² The relatively complicated pattern by which some sense can be made of waves in the history of each "named system" in a vernacular musical tradition was for some years an ongoing challenge for Richard Peterson (1972, 1975). The name "named system" is from Rosenberg, Transforming Tradition 177-182.

professional sports in some male companies or of soap operas or popular movies and their stars in other circles, serving as a part of the everyday vocabulary, part of a dialogic code in which the content of a popular culture system is the basis for idioms, allegories and analogies in everyday life. To interpret such a vernacular discourse in its own or other valid terms requires a thick acquaintance with its forms and foibles as they operate among participants. To pretend knowledge of these particulars during conversation in a study of this sort is likely to eventually become self-defeating or embarrassing. Even in the midst of conversation, an easy acquaintance on the researcher's part with names, musical forms and songs can be as important as would be such acquaintance with specific local geography for a regional study. This kind of information is, is short, a kind of insider knowledge with which an effective observer must have at least a passing acquaintance.

The study of fans is itself a developing field of study which commonly unites textual, ethnographic and semiotic insights.³ In his useful delineation of forms of fan "productivity," John Fiske distinguishes among the semiotic,

³ A recent treatment of fans which takes their active engagement with a community of admirers as a base point is Jenkins (1992). Lewis (1992) is a representative collection of recent, largely British scholarship on fans in the form of eleven short studies.

the enunciative, and the textual ways of making meaning from the texts of a popular culture form. The enunciative is a form of meaning-creation or meaning-enhancement which may actually be generative in the formation of the fan and might often be most adequately depicted in ethnographic ways, but always acts directly in a shared social and usually oral milieu:

The talk of women soap-opera fans has been widely studied ... to show how the meanings and evaluations of characters and their behaviour in the soap-opera are related more or less directly to the everyday lives of the fans. Indeed, much of the pleasure of fandom lies in the fan talk that it produces, and many fans report that their choice of their object of fandom was determined at least as much by the oral community they wished to join as by any of its inherent characteristics. If colleagues at work or at school are constantly talking about a particular program, band, team or performer, many people become drawn into fandom as a means of joining that particular social group (Fiske 1992, 38).⁴

Typically, however, music fans do not adopt an attachment to a cultural item through a bald social motivation such as Fiske suggests, but rather select songs, singers and styles from the welter of forms available according to a complex of aesthetic, regional and biographical criteria. The resulting mix functions to provide solace and identity for the fan in personal terms and a form of meaning in cognitive

⁴ Gerald Thomas (1980) provides a fascinating account of the interactive effects of soap opera fandom and traditional oral narratives in the case of French Newfoundland.

terms. The meaning may be equivocal, the solace temporary, and the identity borrowed, yet the music holds an emotional importance for the fan which may also serve as a foil in social interaction.

Fans of country music, as of other forms of popular expression, vary in the intensity of their commitment to, degrees of participation in, and extent of knowledge about, their preferred style of music. The extreme end of this variation is illustrated in a number of colourful stories about fans, and descriptions of their commitment to certain artists and their work.⁵ The popularity of Moe Bandy's version of "Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life" could serve as an illustration of the sentiment.

But country music fans are widely reputed to be among the most loyal. Once established, the country music performer can enjoy quite a stable career compared to those in other forms of popular art. One widely known song can propel an artist to celebrity status. As Rosenberg (1986) has pointed out, this status is reversible, though such

⁵ One of the most entertaining stories of fan commitment in country music is that of the Johnny Cash fan, Bill Patch of Oklahoma, who crafted the car described in "One Piece at a Time." The song tells of an auto plant worker who smuggles an entire Cadillac out of the plant over a period of years. The resulting composite model, made of parts dating from 1949 to 1973, is a rather odd-looking vehicle. After the fan presented Cash with the vehicle, a film of the presentation was used in Cash's stage show. See Dellar and Wootton (1984 112).

reversal seems less common for country musicians than for others. Many country musicians successfully continue professional performance for decades, though most fans know them only for one big hit, their "signature song:" Dave Dudley for "Six Days on the Road;" Lynn Anderson for "Rose Garden;" Freddy Hart for "Easy Lovin'." The more cynical pop culture critics refer to such artists as one-hit wonders. But these country music performers, it should be pointed out, are characteristically seasoned professionals with polished road shows and a broad repertoire.

Perhaps more important than such commitment to lesser known celebrities, however, is the loyalty that many country fans have to the idiom, or the genre, even though, as we will see in Chapter 3, that loyalty may take an even more delimited form. In countless lounges and taverns across North America, country music is the staple for bar bands as well as for celebrities with local, regional or national status. Every such venue is likely to sponsor discussions among patrons as to what is "really country." For them, music is primarily country music, the axis around which all other musics turn. When a sub-set of the large vehicle of country music takes a hegemonic role, loyalties may become much more specific and precise, defining a special form in terms of region, gender, musical style, or even language. The very serious fan may be the person who will drive

hundreds of miles to see a performance, garner an encyclopaedic knowledge of the personal life of a favourite performer or collect their complete recorded works, quarrel with family or friends over the position of the radio dial, or adopt an imitative dress code, in particular that of the stylized cowboy or cowgirl. This kind of devotion to a romantically conceived lifestyle or to a particular artist can easily be seen as a mania, where passion for the object of identity or admiration supplants that for work, family, or community. When one's "Daydreams About Night Things" are focused on someone (or something) one has not met or touched, the form of attachment which it expresses deserves a commentary which separates the average fan and casual young "wannabe" from true fan-aticism.

A full devotion to such an idealized figure or lifestyle, as sometimes happens with fans of popular culture forms and its heroes, could be understood as reflecting a kind of impotence. The grandeur of the idol thrives on the projected energy of the idolatrous. The impact of the star is proportional to the selflessness of the fan. As Buck Owens remarked in his recorded Carnegie Hall concert: "It takes people like you to make people like me."

The Frankfurt school of critical analysis, using a creative combination of Marxist and Freudian notions, sees in such projective idolatry a common need to find real human

contact in a harsh impersonal world, contact which engenders meaning and asserts control, if only vicariously. For such analysts, the object of admiration becomes a kind of vessel into which is poured the alienated energies of a subordinated populace, class, or class fragment." Access to such an object is possible through obsequious adoration, fortunate social placement, the payment of a fee, or imitation. Whether such an object is a living human being, a dead one, or altogether inanimate is of little consequence. The important element is the attachment, the dependence, the projection of potency. In One-Dimensional Man, Herbert Marcuse points out how people "find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed..." (1964 9) Such commodities are the objective embodiment of relations among people. This embodiment of relations may be in revered commodities, it could be channelled toward a cultish social group or identity, but may just as easily, perhaps more readily, be embodied in revered persons. Car and star may not be very different from each other. The projection of special powers or exalted status, even charisma, onto the "other," be it

* See especially, among many relevant works using this focus, Adorno (1941), Fromm (1955), Reich (1946, 1948), and Marcuse (1964) for the key ideas and most important statements.

deity, idol, lover, or star is a profound statement of the self-perceived inadequacy of the worshipper or maniacal fan.

Erich Fromm draws these connections in The Sane Society:

Just as in the case of religious idolatry, he has projected all his richness into the other person, and experiences this richness not any more as something which is his, but as something alien from himself, deposited in somebody else, with which he can get in touch only by submission to, or submergence in, the other person. The same phenomenon exists in the worshipping submission to a political leader, or to the state. (113)

One Newfoundland fan, after driving 200 miles to see a 1988 Merle Haggard concert in St. John's at which "The Hag" performed for exactly an hour, remarked in a local radio interview that he had often wondered whether he would ever get the chance to be close to a guy like Merle Haggard. "Today is the day!" he exclaimed, providing a lucid illustration of the kind of "contagious magic" on which highly committed fandom depends. The incorporation of popular music items into the individual psyche and the ensuing "ownership" of a performance item or the performing personality by a fan through the experiential "flash" of recognition, so succinctly outlined by Adorno over fifty years ago still makes sense in cases like this.

But such formulations speak of extreme, though perhaps archetypal cases. Not all country music fans enter Dolly Parton or Hank Williams Jr. look-alike contests (though such

contests exist); nor do they all stand in line five mid-winter hours waiting for tickets to a George Jones concert to go on sale, as a long line of people did in St. John's, for instance, in February of 1987. Only some can name all of Tammy Wynette's husbands or cite the Hank Williams discography by rote. Only for the most devoted, those like the original "urban cowboy" Dew Westbrook, on whom the blockbuster movie is based, is country music the kind of code which Aaron Latham describes: "Country music is the city cowboy's Bible, his literature, his self-help book, his culture. It tells him how to live and what to expect." (22) For lesser fans, country music is more like a handbook of proverbs, a secular advice column, an aural tabloid.

The form which a vernacular tradition in music assumes is, once again in Kodish's terms, "native but not free." It is traditional and it is innovative, it is in a place yet only partly of a place, it is creative yet it is typically also imitative, it gives voice to local concerns yet draws images from impossibly romantic locales, it is participatory and idol-forming at the same time. As with a patois, the vernacular uses a vocabulary which bridges centre and periphery, or in the case of country music, links peripheries through centres. Scotty Fitzgerald and Scotty Stoneman, Hank Snow and Hank Williams, Rita MacNeil and Reba McEntire all walk across the figurative stage in Pictou

County, bringing Big Pond, Cape Breton, together with Mount Olive, Alabama.⁷

The language of feeling, of love and lovers, of loss and pain, of family and the past, of fears and hopes, all circulate in the cauldron of the vernacular; conversations are meaningful through it, evenings are spent sharing it, life is interpreted by means of it. In the idiom of country music are elements of a life philosophy and an ideology. As Leonard Cohen said when asked why he has always liked country music: "Because it's true."⁸

⁷ Big Pond, Nova Scotia, is the original home of Rita MacNeil; Mount Olive, Alabama, that of Hank Williams. In the paired names, the Scottys, Hanks and Rita/Reba, the first in each set is a Nova Scotian, the second from the southern U.S.

⁸ On Friday Night Live hosted by Ralph Benmergui, CBC Television, February 12, 1993.

2.2 Intersections of Biography and Ethnography

As I grew up in the area where I also conducted this research, it was often presumed in conversation that I was well acquainted with some specific bit of information which I could not possibly be in any definite way. I often had difficulty, for example, recalling an event of delimited local importance or the name of a musical performing act from ten or fifteen years earlier.⁹ In this respect, my own role as fieldworker and interviewer was temporally unusual in that I was somewhat older than my prime informants. Hence, some of my local knowledge was from a period before their recollection. For instance, I remember the founding of local radio station CKEC in the early 1950's, whereas Art and Pat Fitt could not.

My joint knowledge with the Fitts was from our youth during the mid-fifties to mid-sixties and the period 1987-94, during my research for this report. But there is a gap

⁹ Such local events as unusual weather or highway accidents are typically recalled with vivid detail by local residents, but hardly reported "abroad." For example, about 1985 Willie Nelson's tour bus had a highway collision with a local vehicle near Truro in which the local man died. I happened to be visiting at the time, so when this incident came up in conversation, as it did a couple of times in the following years, I was able to recognize and situate the incident.

of about twenty years, from about 1964-86, the period during which the Fitt brothers grew up and became young adults, while I was living several figurative worlds away from Pictou County. Art Fitt was out of the area during about ten years of that period (approximately 1973-83), working as a professional musician. As a result, he and I share a status as part outsider, particularly as we both spent some of those formative years in Ontario and share knowledge of that country music scene. This touchstone has sometimes guided Art's comments to me, I think, by his making references to relatively obscure Ontario artists (someone of the status of Terry Carisse, for example) as well as in his candid references to certain local attitudes. By contrast, his brother Pat Fitt has always lived in the area, and his knowledge and framework are continuous and uninterrupted, but circumscribed.

Methodologically, the coverage of this scene in an effective manner has been a challenging field project. To converse knowledgeably of country music performance in Pictou County has been, for a non-resident of the area, one of the most demanding expectations in the research task. I tried my utmost to be acquainted with the local scene so as to avoid being treated as an outsider novice, a complete stranger, in the type of information I was provided. If a local fan or musician mentioned the name of a relatively

obscure performer, either contemporary or from years past, my effective fieldwork would be jeopardized, I felt, if I could not normally recognize the person and what they represented in the conversational reference. This sort of knowledge is very idiosyncratic to a local area and literally impossible to acquire in any other fashion than hanging out a lot in the right places and with the right people. A reference library of the vernacular is but an enticing oxymoron.

When I first returned to Pictou County with this project in mind, I had already spent about twenty years following country music carefully. As an eager and curious fan, I knew a number of the finer distinctions made by musicians, fans, and others active in country music, though this understanding had arrived slowly.

When in about grade three, I was made to sing "Your Cheatin' Heart" with classmate Jessie Perry in front of the entire student body of the Sutherland's River Elementary School (thirty-odd students spread over seven grades in one room), I had no idea that this was country music and that it was distinguished from other types of music, let alone that the song was composed by the "hillbilly Shakespeare," Hank

Williams.¹⁰ This was simply the music which we all knew. In part, we all knew this music because of our reception of the most powerful radio station in the Maritimes (and a CBC affiliate), CFCY Charlottetown, the programs of which during the early 1950's included not only Don Messer and His Islanders, but the weekly "Shur-Gain Amateur Cavalcade," which featured many child entertainers. I later became hooked on the country music form when I first heard Johnny Cash on local radio station CKEC New Glasgow. While still a child, I bought the 78 rpm single of "Ballad of a Teenage Queen" b/w "Big River,"¹¹ cajoled my father into taking me to see Cash when he performed at the New Glasgow Stadium (circa 1958), and argued relentlessly with my friends about how much better he was than Elvis Presley. Our musical debates of that time now sound much the same as those which occurred throughout much of the continent while rock and

¹⁰ The example of "Your Cheatin' Heart" is also offered by Robert Cantwell in his composite sketch of the American suburbanite born in the 1940's whose school might include a "schoolmate with a southern accent, whose father had come from Kentucky to work at the foundry or the auto plant - and who, to your amazement, brought a giant flat-top guitar to the fifth-grade talent show, playing and singing in a piping voice "Your Cheatin' Heart"." (Cantwell in Rosenberg 1993 47) The significant difference between Cantwell's depiction and my own, of course, is that Cantwell offers the example as culturally "other," whereas in the Sutherland's River Elementary School the song was, through some rather complicated appropriations, ours.

¹¹ Johnny Cash 78 rpm phonodisc Quality 1692 U-284.

roll put its permanent face-lift onto popular music.

It was only as a student at King's College, Dalhousie University in Halifax in the mid-sixties, however, that I realized that there were segments of the population who either had no direct acquaintance with country music or refused to take it seriously. I rapidly became aware that higher education and country music rarely mixed. After dabbling in blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and folk revival, I finally admitted that the aesthetic centre of my musical preference was country, and have identified myself as a country music fan ever since. Having begun this musical sojourn in Pictou County, where my father still lives, I returned there for this study.

For my first seventeen years, then, as I grew up in Pictou County between the late nineteen forties and early nineteen sixties, rural Pictou County was virtually my whole world. Since 1964, I have never lived there, though I have visited for days or weeks at a time each of the thirty years since I have left.¹²

When I began fieldwork in 1987, I was simultaneously shot backward, time-capsule like, to the cultural and emotional world of my childhood, but was also entering a

¹² The development of my fandom and identity with country music bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the pseudonymous John MacDonald in Ladenheim (1987).

completely foreign social space and cultural scene. During the intervening years, I had lived in four other provinces; worked in industry, construction carpentry, lobster fishing, bartending, and professional organizing; completed two university degrees; lived in Montreal about ten years; and spent most of my working life as a teacher in post-secondary institutions. Pictou County had become for me about two parts memory and one part novelty.

One of the fortuitous, but complicating factors of doing research in an area of sparse population, where my parents still lived, and where I spent my formative years, is that relations among important respondents and family can intersect. Faces and names from high school and earlier kept peeking over the wall of my often reflexive observations.

As it happened, Art Fitt's sister came to work as care worker and housekeeper for my ailing parents. For a period of about two years, off and on, I would see Cathy Fitt (Ross) when I came home, stayed with my parents and conducted more fieldwork. To a much larger extent than would otherwise have been the case, I had a direct conduit to the musician in whom I was most interested for my thesis research "on country music in Pictou County" through his garrulous sister. I learned details of her own musical activities and some of the family history from her, and, as

it happened, accompanied her to a couple of country music events, including one of her brother's performances, and met others through her.

On one such occasion, Cathy invited me to accompany her husband and herself to a show/dance. This incident in particular captures the essence of such contradictions as my dual roles as researcher/grownup local child thrust in my direction. It was at Diamond Jim's tavern in Westville, on New Year's night, 1990. This was one evening when my prime respondent and focus of my study, Cathy's brother, was not the performer. Rather, the very popular live act this evening was Halifax-based Hal Bruce and his Hired Hand Band, a regionally popular and successful touring band with a repertoire of largely up-tempo country and retro-rock, a very good dance band.

At such events, one must make conscious decisions about the role one wishes to play, striking some kind of balance between invisibility (fly on the wall) and a real person. I was simultaneously fieldworker, Cathy's friend, member of the audience. These roles were at times contradictory.

Cathy asked me to dance. I accepted. It had been many years since I had jived or twisted on a Pictou County dance floor, and even more since I had first tentatively reiterated my sister's 1, 1-2 waltz instructions. I now danced, if it could be called that, in a kind of free-form,

middle-aged disco style, shaped by my Montreal experience. So I danced a couple of numbers.

Before describing this awakening event, there is one more detail, having to do with personal presentation: dress and comportment. I am not what would normally be considered a stylish dresser, but I do live in Montreal, where the art of sartorial presentation is highly institutionalized. While in Pictou County, I spend most of my personal time in the country, at or near my parents' home in Sutherland's River, where I grew up. When on an occasional trip to town (New Glasgow), 8 miles away, for day-time errands, I can dress "rural casual," and look much like any county dweller. For an evening out, however, I no longer have a wardrobe such as other forty-five year old patrons would wear to Diamond Jim's. In short, most local people would recognize me as being from away.

While dancing, I had noticed a man of about 55 years, dressed in a white undershirt under a plaid jack-shirt which hung loosely over clean grey work pants going down to his open 10 inch kodiak style work boots. He had about a week of grey stubble on his face, a cap, and a muscular, but slightly tipsy and glassy-eyed air of confidence about him, broad shoulders and thick hands. I would call him handsome, with a somewhat cocky man-about-town air. He was flirting with several women, and clearly known by most others on the

dance floor. Glancing about the floor while dancing, his eyes and mine had met a couple of times, but I was cautious not to prolong the gaze and therefore challenge him. My youthful experience had taught me how little it can take in such circumstance to start a fight, and I had no inclination. How would I write that one up? Folklorist beaten up on dance floor!

During a short break between dances, as I stood on the floor beside Cathy, whose apparently jealous husband was eying us from the sidelines, this other man approached me directly. He walked straight across the floor to me, stopped about 15 inches from my face and asked: "Where the fuck are you from?" The scramble of possible responses through which my defensive mind searched lit on what seemed to be the safest, truest, and most disarming. "Sutherland's River," I responded. He eyed me for half a minute, then silently turned and walked away. The music began, and I returned to my middle-aged disco dancing. It was as if the whole event was in slow motion, a scene from a film. But I chatted with him on the way out a couple of hours later, and he was quite friendly; the kind of guy whose sandpaper grip softens over a three minute handshake in the cold Westville night.

This incident made me even more acutely aware of the potential treachery of mixing while observing, and of the

naivety of thinking that just because I was from there, I was able to blend in like another half-finished glass of draft beer.

2.3 Mackenzie's singers and Pictou County History

The now classic study of vernacular song traditions in Pictou County, though not named that at the time, was done three generations ago. W. Roy Mackenzie (1883-1957), who grew up in River John (see map), undertook a pioneering effort of song collection and reportage between 1908 and 1928. Most of the fieldwork appears to have been done just before World War I in the western part of his native Pictou County and in Colchester and Cumberland Counties which lie to the West of Pictou County along the Northumberland shore toward New Brunswick. Mackenzie collected songs during summer recesses first from his Ph.D. studies at Harvard, later from his teaching duties at Washington University in Missouri.

There are a number of parallels between Mackenzie's efforts and my own, most precisely perhaps at a biographical level. Little is known of Mackenzie's early life save those scant details which he himself provides in his books and articles and in the sympathetic portrait drawn together by Malcolm Laws in the Foreword to the reprint of Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia. He grew up at the end of the last century entirely in River John, it seems, where his father ran the family shipbuilding business. River John at

the time was a bustling community thriving on the commerce of the Northumberland Strait and the Gulf of St. Lawrence beyond. Young Roy used to hang around old Ned's cobbler's shed and it was here that his affection for the old ballads first developed. Or did it? It seems apparent from notes and introductions in his work that these old songs would have remained but childhood memories were it not for the inspiration and intense encouragement of George Lyman Kittredge, who taught Mackenzie at Harvard. Kittredge himself had, of course, been taught by Francis James Child, so a proud and longstanding legacy in the literary study of ballads spilled directly onto the young Mackenzie's lap.

Mackenzie had already studied at Dalhousie University in Halifax (as did I, as did my mother, and her great uncle George) before going on to Harvard for graduate work, where his mother's brothers had studied after growing up in Durham, Pictou County, a few miles from River John. Roy Mackenzie was returning from Ph.D studies in Boston to an area where most people did not enter high school. Yet for a Nova Scotian to go off to the "Boston States" in search of greater things had been a common pattern among some families for generations. As Gerald Pocius reminds us in the context of small coastal communities on the Avalon Peninsula of eastern Newfoundland, saltwater communities have been mobile for a long time: "Calvert men travelled - and sometimes

worked - in places up and down the eastern seaboard of northern North America. Travel by boat linked each community with the world." (1991, 278) My great, great uncle George, who grew up in Sutherland's River, had moved to New England in 1879 and remained there, two of my great aunts, who were contemporaries of Mackenzie, spent some years there, and so had uncles of Mackenzie who were contemporaries of my uncle George. Many families had such strong ties. The unique part for Roy Mackenzie was his level of education; he was to go on in later career as a philologist and Shakespeare specialist, well remembered in Missouri as head of the English Department at Washington University in St. Louis until his retirement in 1952. One of his singers, Sandy Rogers, recognized a certain educational gulf when he wondered what the good gentleman wanted to write down these old songs for: "a great scholar like you, that's got he's house full o' books about hist'ry and portry?" (Mackenzie 1919 111)

In his travels about the countryside, Mackenzie was often accompanied and introduced by his cousin, Owen Cameron, who was a medical doctor. The immediate status thus derived ensured that they would not be abruptly chased from the property, as might unwelcome strangers, but it also meant that Mackenzie's form of participant observation was somewhat in the British tradition of the parson and the

gentleman visiting the hearths of simpler folks. On one occasion, Mackenzie found himself on the trail of an old singer named Bob Langille who had, in the absence of sufficient "coin of the realm," tried to pay another doctor friend with the singing of ballads. Old Bob lived with his two aged sisters. In the company of this unpaid doctor, Mackenzie "set out one morning for the humble abode of the ancient trio." (Quest, 42). Mackenzie was introduced, old Bob responded cordially, and then disappeared:

After I had given a fairly complete account of my parentage, occupation, and place of abode in answer to the insistent demands of the sisters, Bob reappeared, having in the meantime exchanged his tattered "cow's breakfast" for the more ceremonial headgear of an antique felt hat. This he continued to wear, except for the brief intermission of dinner-time, during the rest of the day, in honour of his visit from two professional gentlemen. (43)

Several of the songs which Mackenzie transcribed were taken from his own and his mother's recollections of the singing of housemaids in Roy's home of origin and in the Eaton home at Durham where his mother and her brothers had grown up. It is clear from the information provided that Mackenzie's background was privileged to an extent which borders on a cultural aristocracy. In fact, his widow and former colleagues describe him in exactly those terms: a perfect gentleman, erudite, understated in his learning yet dramatic in personal style, with a special flair for the linking of

"gown" with "town." Mrs. Mackenzie recalls that the River John home of Richard Hines, who contributed more songs to the collection than any other single performer, was always welcoming:

We spent evenings with Dick and "Mammy" for years. He had sailed on some of Roy's Grandfather's ships, and Roy to him was a well beloved prince for whom he would do anything, and our evening visits were events to be cherished. (Ethel Stuart Mackenzie in Laws, "Foreword," VII)

His work is important for the determined and exacting methodology he employed. He bounced through the back roads relentlessly with his wife as enthusiastic but patient companion as well as co-transcriber, and they were meticulous in their recording of exact wordings, pronunciations, and in some cases the tunes (42 of the 162 in his collection). This careful rendering to print of ballads and other songs collected orally from Nova Scotia was a task shared by Phillips Barry, Arthur Huff Fauset (whose work centred on black traditions), and Helen Creighton, but Mackenzie's Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia was the first book-length treatment, and he was the second to print any such material. A perusal of the sources and collections to which Mackenzie referred in putting together his song collection (xxxvii) does show that, although he had collected the songs nearly twenty years before he published them, the intervening period (1908-1928)

had witnessed a flurry of publications of this sort, including collections by Belden, Campbell and Sharp, Cox, Gray, (John) Lomax, Pound, and (Alfred) Williams (in England). It turned out, in other words, that Mackenzie's own original interest in the old songs was shared by a growing scholarly community, and ten years after he had been named chair of his department and was fully ensconced as venerable professor of Shakespearean language, he published his song collection from those who, like Little Ned, benefitted from "complete and hereditary illiteracy:"

(Quest, 34)

"...the hoary-haired singers who still remember the days when ballad-singing was a dignified means for entertaining a respectable company, and not, as it is now, the chance possession of a few queer old people who continue to dishonour their grey locks by chanting songs that up-to-date people have no time or inclination to listen to." (Quest, 227)

The Mackenzies' faithful care in transcription and his early recognition of its importance is complemented by a wonderful gift to contextual study, a learned yet entertaining descriptive account of their collecting efforts, The Quest of the Ballad, from which the description above is excerpted. In it, he reveals his own intentions, describes the people he met in his travels, portrays the attitudes held by local people toward ballads, and admits to the methods by which he extracted and recorded them. He

also provides a capsule history of population changes and ethnic composition in the area.

There were very few people who still sang the "rowdy songs." (Quest 91) Those who did were reluctant to perform them for a stranger, let alone one who appeared dignified and was known to be highly educated. Mackenzie also discovered the difference between a formal and an associational memory for his informants. His encounter with Sandy Rogers says it best. Having complained that after Mackenzie's previous visit, he had begun to sing while raking the hay, and before he knew it, he was scattering hay "hell, West and crooked," Rogers exhibited a wildly distractive mnemonic technique:

"Dang it!" roared Sandy. "I can't think of it while I'm settin' back in me chair. If I was out on the rake, drivin' up and down the field, I'd blame soon give it to ye." He suddenly leaped to his feet. "You set still for a minute," he commanded, and rushed out into the yard.

I peered cautiously through the window, and beheld a stirring spectacle. Sandy was marching resolutely up and down the yard, with arms waving and hair and beard tossing wildly in the nor'east gale. His lips worked spasmodically, and at times a bellowed word or syllable came driving in through the rattling panes. Presently he made a rush for the door, and I had barely time to resume my seat and replace my pipe when he hurtled himself through the room, flung himself into his chair, and broke into a raging and irresistible torrent of song. (112)

I cite this lengthy passage, as I find both the image and its depiction to be entertaining, instructive, and moving.

It describes the most enthusiastic recalling which Mackenzie encountered. Sandy Rogers and his brother David had a fierce competition over whose rendition of a ballad was the correct one, with David sometimes accusing Sandy of "enormous crimes against truth, correctness, rhyme and metre." (114) The brotherly rivalry echoed across the twenty miles which separated their homes, and Mackenzie dutifully travelled that road. Elder brother David Rogers had been a neighbour of "Little Ned" before moving to Pictou, and provided four classical ballads and six others which Mackenzie transcribed for his collection. Inexplicably, Mackenzie included no songs from Sandy Rogers in his collection, despite the colourful portrayal he provided of Sandy's singing.

David Rogers was an old man, undoubtably in his eighties, for whom the old ballads were living forces and truthful accounts. He was adamant about the replication of exact phrasing, as were all the singers whom Mackenzie encountered. Rogers and his brother saw themselves almost as vehicles of song rather than as singers. Their rivalry was over the correctness of a rendition, though another informant gives a colourful account of an all-night song-matching marathon in which the greater number of songs declared the winner (229).

For this old man, who would have been a young man in

the mid-nineteenth century, recollection took special effort, as it had been so many years since he had sung the ballads, or anyone had shown any interest in them. "Little Ned," his former neighbour, had been a man who religiously made his hut a mansion of ballads, caring little what others thought. He would set his shoemaking aside, particularly if he had a little nip of "rational stimulant," (34) and sing the "old songs," i.e. the ballads, by the hour. It was Ned's father in turn who was the legendary singer of the area, who "could sing steady all day and never sing the same song twict (sic)." (38) The generation of their parents, then, was the last whose community accorded these songs living status. They would have been first or second generation immigrants; David Rogers and Ned Langille would probably have learned their ballads by the 1840s. The period which their lives spanned witnessed immense economic, social and cultural changes in the area. Most of those who sang for Mackenzie resolutely ignored the modern world, were "loners," and were seldom literate: a "scholar" to singer Bob Langille was one who could read a broadside (235).

Most of the singers of classical ballads which Mackenzie found were of French Huguenot background, and had come to Nova Scotia via Switzerland during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Ned Langille's grandfather was definitely among them. The French-speaking migrants

assimilated within the population of mostly Scots, who had begun to arrive in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The signal date for Scottish immigration was 1772, when the ship Hector arrived in Pictou harbour with about 200 souls aboard, from Inverness in central northern Scotland. The Huguenot arrival coincided with the stern Presbyterianization of the local Scots population, which had begun in 1786 with the arrival of Gaelic-speaking (and Gaelic writing - he was an admired poet)¹³ Dr. James MacGregor and continued through the next forty or so years. David and Sandy Rogers' father would have grown up in that era.

The "godless" songs, the English and Scottish Popular Ballads, were actively discouraged by most of the Scots population, and they were taken up, along with a fervent British loyalty, by the Huguenots who were often their servants. The popularity of the ballads among the servants, Mackenzie suggests, is one of the reasons that they were dropped so quickly by the Scots.(242)¹⁴ But the Christian

¹³ See Charles W. Dunn's Highland Settler (1953, 1991) for an excellent treatment of Scottish settlement and customs which includes commentary on important Gaelic speaking figures like MacGregor. Dunn was a Harvard professor of Celtic Languages and Literatures, but shows no acquaintance with (or interest in) Mackenzie or his work.

¹⁴ This collecting of the old ballads from house servants is startlingly reminiscent of the sources tapped by pioneering English folklorists, namely "old nurses and milk-

church, particularly Presbyterianism (in which I was raised), was an active force against them as well. Easter Ann Langille, whose father had rewarded her plucking of his white hairs (a regular duty) with a ballad or two, commented to Mackenzie: "I s'pose I oughtn't to sing songs like that... and me a member o' the church." (91)

Another ethnic component was the influx of New Englanders, both before and after the American Revolution. Those coming after were often given land grants as Loyalists, and were an important shaping force on the history of the Maritimes, most particularly in southwestern New Brunswick, but also in many pockets throughout Nova Scotia. My ancestor, Nicholas Purdue Olding, whose diary is still extant, was the great grandfather of my great, great uncle George and was among these Loyalists from New England. He worked his grant of land on an island in Merigomish Harbour, into which Sutherland's River flows. The fervent British loyalty expressed by several of Mackenzie's singers, even those of French extraction, attests to the strength of Loyalist sympathies in the area.

Those of European origin were accompanied from the earliest settlement by a very small number of African slaves in other parts of Nova Scotia, but the primary influx of

maids."

blacks to northern Nova Scotia was as free persons in the Loyalist tide of the 1780s (Pachai 4). They remain an important part of the demographic and cultural mix, as will be seen in 4.2 and 5.3.

But there were other forces at work as well. The community of River John had been, until nearly the turn of the twentieth century, an important ship-building centre, Pictou even more so. Fishing, farming, lumbering and sawmilling had long been staple livelihoods. But the area was not quite the backwater which Mackenzie made it out to be. From Mackenzie's acquired perspective of Harvard scholar, these queer old people may have seemed to be living at the ends of the earth. River John is not the end of the earth, as the current joke goes, but you can see it from there. Actually, some facts suggest otherwise.

In the days of "wooden ships and iron men," a phrase still commonly heard in the area, Pictou had been the busiest harbour on Northumberland Strait and the most important Maritime port facing the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It was a lively centre of commerce and transport. Originally located through Micmac legends about hills on fire, coal had been discovered upriver decades earlier, and by the 1860s the area was producing 237,000 tons of coal annually, about

one third of Nova Scotia's output.¹⁵ This sponsored the first railway of British North America, a six-mile stretch to Pictou harbour. In 1873, the first Siemens open hearth steel furnace in North America was built in Londonderry, some forty miles West. By the 1880s, foundries, forges, and machine shops were established in New Glasgow, which remains today the commercial centre and largest town in the county. An open hearth and blast furnace were built in Pictou County in the 1880s. New Glasgow was at that time the leading Canadian producer of steel, and industrial capital multiplied six-fold during the decade of the 1880s. By 1885, there was a network of railways throughout the Maritime provinces. By 1891, iron and steel, brick, glass and tile were being manufactured in the area. A tax-funded non-denominational school system had been established in 1867.

Precisely one hundred years earlier, the scene for some recent arrivals had been this:

The Pictou settlers spent the remainder of the season in putting up shanties and planting seed. Little crop could be raised that year, and they added to their provisions by hunting and fishing. In the spring the men walked through the forest to Truro to get seed to plant. As there was no path, they had to blaze a trail as they went. They carried home on their backs what seed was planted that year, and again the crop was too small to

¹⁵ The outline of economic history for the area comes largely from Erskine, 1968.

provide sufficient food. Accordingly, when the next year came round, and they went to Truro again for seed, they brought back only the eyes of the potatoes and so were able to carry enough to raise a much larger crop. (Searly, 120)

During the rapid industrialization of the towns in Pictou County, improved acreage in the surrounding countryside declined and that which remained productive turned increasingly to wool rather than foodstuffs, a pattern which must have been all too reminiscent, to the Scots among the population, of the motive force for the Highland clearances. Most of these changes in economic life and lifestyle happened in one short generation (1860s to 1890s) and the prosperity reversed almost as rapidly. Political policy, changing markets, and consolidation of capitalist interests elsewhere led, by the turn of this century, to a "depressed region," with a net out-migration, a pattern which only reversed for the Maritimes as a whole in the 1970s. Aside from wartime booms, the economy of the area has never fully recovered.

This flash of modernism came and went during the adult lives of Mackenzie's singers. These were not processes they read about or heard of from afar. It would be their sons and daughters who worked the mines and steelyards, moved into the miners' row housing of Stellarton and Westville, and travelled the first trains. Their children or

grandchildren would have been the first to attend publicly accessible schools and often move to Halifax, Montreal, Boston and later Toronto to get work. From the perspective of 1910, one long lifetime must have looked like several. Small wonder that the old songs seemed like echoes from the distant past.

2.4 Some Links: Folk to Country, Ballad to Lyric

Pictou County was, at the time of Mackenzie's work during the first two decades of this century, recoiling from the peak of a once vibrant and burgeoning industrial economy. The rapid boom from the 1880s until almost World War I was followed by a process of deindustrialization, or perhaps more precisely, disarticulation,¹⁶ which continues even today. Through the two world wars and on into the 1980s, steel processing continued sporadically, particularly in the manufacture of rail cars at Eastern Car (the "car works") in Trenton and bridges by Maritime Bridge in New Glasgow. Coal mining and heavy industry continued in fits and starts, mostly under the employ of Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Corporation, later a part of Besco and finally a part of Dominion Steel and Coal (Dosco). Coal mines were operated in Stellarton, Westville, and Thorburn, until the 1960s, when the last of them was closed about 1970. The

¹⁶ The term of preference for political economists and historians since the mid-1970s has been de-industrialization. Its unidirectional implications overlook the way in which a continuing uneven development may have its own chaotic inter-regional or even international logic. Disarticulation is meant to describe a partial dismantling of an economy through its forced dependence on external economic needs. See Sandberg (1991 129), who borrows the term from Samir Amin.

Westray mine in Plymouth operated for a few months in 1991-92, but ended in the disaster of May 9, 1992, when an explosion of methane gas closed that mine forever and took the lives of 26 miners with it (see Comish 1993).

Though the county has had a roller-coaster economy similar to many centres in underdeveloped regions, the area today has a population of approximately 50,000 people and is now fairly prosperous relative to others in Canada's Atlantic provinces. Some ship-building continues in Pictou, and there is a coal-fired power generating plant in Trenton, but today there are two major industrial employers, Scott Paper in Abercrombie and Michelin Tire at Granton, though much of the work force is under-employed in the primary sectors of farming, fishing and woods-work, directly reflecting what sociologist James Sacouman has called semi-proletarianization, and geographer Larry McCann has more benignly described as voluntary occasional participation in the paid labour force. Perhaps significantly, there is no city or university in the immediate area. Pictou County, then, is today a regional centre which revolves around five towns: Trenton, Stellarton, and Westville cluster next to New Glasgow, the largest of the towns, at the mouth of the East River where it dumps into Pictou Harbour, and Pictou is downstream at the entrance to Northumberland Strait.

Pictou County, Nova Scotia, is probably best known, if

at all, to folklorists and folksong scholars as the source for Mackenzie's pioneering song collection and his insightful, if somewhat elitist, commentary on his collecting efforts, described above. Some of Helen Creighton's songs were also collected in the general area, though most of her informants from mainland Nova Scotia were from the other side of the province along the Atlantic coast in the regions known locally as the Eastern Shore and the South Shore. The legacy of their informants now intersects with styles which are disseminated through modern, especially electronic, media, creating syncretic musical forms, in particular a broadly influential variant of country music.

What can readily be seen over the two generations separating Mackenzie's singers from those of today is the constancy of cultural concerns expressed in songs of "the folk." The debates over degeneration, rationalization and other (rather loaded) depictions of the process of evolution from traditional ballad through broadside, local and "secondary" ballads, hillbilly and country music, tend to obscure a singularly important feature of this evolution in song: the relative continuity of theme. Though the process is one which moves from a narrative to a primarily lyric focus, it can easily be seen nonetheless that certain themes recur with dogged consistency. Such thematic continuity is

not immediately apparent at the textual level; rather the concerns of the group are manifest there, but able to be understood only through a relatively elaborate interpretive focus. Roger Abrahams considers these formations

"tropisms:"

The manifestation of these patterns involves rejection of certain forms or subjects, as well as acceptance and elaboration of others. Such reactions function more covertly than overtly. Inasmuch as the reactions are conditioned by internal state (of the group and its culture) confronted by external stimuli, the metaphor of the biological organisms seems most appropriate. Consequently, I have termed these positive or negative reactions "tropisms." (Patterns, 448)

Abrahams goes on to specify the approach:

The burden of the interpretive process is to show how the folklore of the group reflects and casts light on other aspects of its culture, that is, it must go one step beyond the articulation of patterns to the point where the patterns are meaningful in an holistic context. Tropisms, even tropotypes, are meaningless in isolation; they must be related to other facets of the cultural life of the group. (449)

Abrahams goes on to treat themes contained in Child ballads found in North American tradition, suggesting that we can "back into" a kind of moral or valuational theme by looking at the attitude toward relationships between men and women in song, the "mental frame" through which the structure of expressive forms on the topic is worked. This is an elaboration of the implicit assertion made by many

scholars about the evolution of the "secondary ballad" through the continuation of the "ballad idea." Somewhat less platonically, the "emotional core" (in Coffin's terms) of a traditional ballad is retained, though the form of the song may change significantly in a number of fairly predictable ways. Those changes, in general terms, are seen to be due to the effects of print (we might add disc) on oral tradition, general trends in folk art, and personal factors of individual performers. (Coffin, BTBNA, 1) Both Coffin, and Roger Renwick's supplement to The British Traditional Ballad in North America in the revised (1977) edition explicitly exclude reference to recordings in their notes on variation, though Renwick admits the importance of such work:

I have also followed previously set limits and not dealt with phonograph recordings. This is an area so in need of systematic data gathering, sorting, transcription, and codification that it deserves nothing but the best treatment. Rather than attempt an incomplete and haphazard sortie into that field, I have simply declared it outside my boundaries, so that when someone does take that particular plunge the results will be a deservedly seminal work, not a *pro forma* one. (189)

In the Mackenzie collection we have, from the classical repertoire, for example, "Young Beichan" (CH 53). This story of intrigue and betrothal has the woman seek out her lover after seven years separation, travelling a great distance to unite happily with him. The syntagmatic

structure could be plotted through Proppian functions, though the outline is rather more simple than with most tales.

"Beichan" belongs to a group of ancient ballads and romances, of which one, "Hind Horn" (CH 17) is among the oldest in the Child canon, and has also been collected in Nova Scotia by Helen Creighton. In "Hind Horn," the branding-recognition tension (J²-Q in Propp's terms) is what propels the narrative. Kittredge summarizes the themes:

-the long absence, the sudden return, the appearance under disguise at the wedding feast, and the dropping of the ring into a cup of wine obtained from the bride - (Sargent and Kittredge, from Child, 31)

But "Hind Horn," the ballad, is itself just a fragment of a much longer romance, in some (apparently earlier) forms composed of thousands of verses, and appearing in several European languages. The further compression and elimination of action, toward lyric, from this ballad set is found in a common North American secondary ballad "The Turkish Lady,"¹⁷ clearly derived from "Young Beichan." "The Turkish Lady," printed twice by Mackenzie, concentrates not on the extended separation of lovers and long journey, nor,

¹⁷ The "Turkish" reference had always sort of mystified me until I saw Charles Wolfe's suggestion of what might be obvious to an historian: "Two other Kentucky favorites deal with Anglo-Turkish conflicts, probably dating from the sixteenth century and the Ottoman Empire." (1982 7)

as Buchan's talerole analysis of "Beichan" reveals ("Propp's Tale Role," 171) on the heroic overcoming of the "opposer" father. "The Turkish Lady" instead has only one scene and two active characters. That scene is a dialogue between the woman and the foreign man, culminating in this final stanza (version A):

She dressed herself in rich array
And with the young man sailed away;
Unto her parents bade adieu.
By this you see what love can do
(Mackenzie, BSSNS, 67)

Whereas the older ballad left such conclusions to the feelings of the beholder, whose connotative oral understanding could read meaning from a story, the modern, broadside-derived version of the story emphasizes the underlying lesson with a concluding homily. Yet there can be little dispute that the "tropist" functioning of the two is comparable, with the important difference that family opposition to the romance is missing in the derivative form.

Such concern with fidelity and with the identification of one's true love partner is found, in fact, in a whole group of broadside-derived ballads in the Mackenzie collection (nos. 63-71):

...in which the lover, after being absent for some time at sea or in the wars, returns and tests the fidelity of his sweetheart, who for some reason or other fails to recognize him, while he pretends to be a stranger and plies her with requests to accept his advances and forget the absent Johnny or William. Only when he proclaims his identity

is he recognized by the maiden, and as a rule the tellers of the tale make no attempt to motivate the preliminary deception. (67)

Fowke points out that all of the variants of "Hind Horn" which Child printed came from Scotland between 1810 and 1828 (1965 179), and all commentators note that in North America it is found almost exclusively in the Northeast. Jamie Moreira (1991) identifies 23 song types in this "broken token" cycle from the Child and Laws classifications, of which 17 have been collected in the Maritime provinces. Moreira also convincingly argues that the story has special existential relevance in seagoing communities because of the necessary long separation of lovers and spouses. The theme is one which has many variants reaching back to antiquity, presumably because it speaks to fundamental yearnings and fears. Echoes of similar feelings show up in other occupational traditions such as coal-mining. In ordinary circumstances a miner is not away from his loved ones for as long a period of time as are seafarers, though as mine tragedies so dramatically declare, one day may be forever.

As with "The Turkish Lady," these modern ballads concentrate on the one scene, that between the heroine and the returned lover. "The Single Sailor" (Mackenzie no. 63), also known as "A Pretty Fair Maiden in the Garden" (see Renwick 1980) has a number of oicotypes in various regions

of North America, and was recorded by several country music performers, as recently as 1966 by Bill Monroe. (D. Green, 1971, 10-17) Another part of this song complex, derived perhaps directly from "Hind Horn," is Hank Snow's "Broken Wedding Ring":¹⁸

A cowboy with his sweetheart stood
 beneath the starlit sky.
 Tomorrow he was leaving for
 the lonesome prairie wide.
 She said "I'll be your loving bride
 when you return some day."
 He handed her a broken ring
 and to her he did say:

"You'll find upon that ring, sweetheart
 my name engraved in gold;
 And I shall keep the other half
 which bears your name you know."

Three years had passed, he did not come
 and Nell will wed tonight.
 Her father said an earl would make
 their happy home so bright.
 The lights were gaily glowing as
 they stood there side by side
 "Let's drink a toast to this young man
 and to his lovely bride."

yodel

Just then there stood within the door
 a figure tall and slim;
 A handsome cowboy was their guest
 and slowly he walked in.
 "I'll drink with you a toast," said he
 and quickly in her glass
 He dropped a half of a wedding ring
 then anxiously he watched.

¹⁸ The connection to Hank Snow's song was first pointed out to me by Neil Rosenberg. See following notes for details.

She tipped her glass and from her lips
 a ring fell shinin' bright;
 The token she had longed to see
 lie there beneath the light.
 Though years have been between us, dear
 love's won its last long fight;
 It's you my cowboy sweetheart and
 my Jack I'll wed tonight.

yodel

(my transcription from: My Nova Scotia Home.)¹⁹

Hank Snow's "composition" retains a striking proportion of the essential narrative elements of the older ballads within the song complex. Many of the broadside versions clip the early part of the story and have the woman approached by the disguised lover as the first active scene, retaining, somewhat ironically, the feature usually cited of the classical ballads of beginning the story "in the middle of things." In other respects, Snow's song reflects quite different conventions.

Stylistically, the yodel stands out. The yodel had

¹⁹ Tracing Snow's song is complex. Kealy (1973 382) claims that Fowke collected it as "an Ontario lumber camp song," though it does not appear in her Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods of three years earlier. Kealy then cites a contribution of Fowke's to WF 21 (1962):249-250, called "American Cowboy and Western Songs in Canada." At another point, Kealy says that Fowke's text is in Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario (1965) and cites pages where it does not appear; nor does it appear on any other pages of that work, though "The Old Beggar Man" does (80-81). Her notes to that song (also in the complex) make no mention of Snow or the Cowboy version (179). Given that Kealy mistakes Edward D. Ives for the ultra-modern composer Charles Ives (365), I gave up on Kealy's sources, realizing that his references were a mess.

become by 1941, when Snow recorded the song²⁰, not only a Swiss-derived novelty performance routine which was popular in various travelling variety shows, but, as especially developed by Snow's Nova Scotian contemporary, Wilf Carter, a cowboy thing, or more exactly, a vocal flourish on many commercial cowboy style recordings. As for the cowboy himself; in place of the sailor or soldier or other errant who forms the protagonist in related songs, this is ultimately pure popular culture in origin. As Malone (1993) has so colorfully elaborated, early country performers were entering a world of professional entertainment for which there were no appropriate occupational models. The ready availability of shaped vessels of public consciousness allowed these performers to pour their energies into a professional identity using cowboy and hillbilly stereotypes, and thereby utilize borrowed imagery to establish a place in the entertainment world.

The father in Snow's song plays a more moderate and accepting role, it seems, than in traditional variants, serving more as facilitator to her getting hitched in

²⁰ The mystery of Hank Snow's "Broken Wedding Ring" is somewhat resolved by Fowke's presentation of "The Cowboy's Wedding Ring" in CFMJ 3 (1975), as recorded from a Manitoba family. Her notes there say: "Thanks to Neil Rosenberg and D.K. Wilgus, it has been traced to a Hank Snow recording made in Montreal, February 8-10, 1941, issued as Canadian Bluebird B-4696, and re-issued on RCA Canadian Camden CAS 2257, 'My Nova Scotia Home'" (where I heard it).

whatever manner possible than actively opposing a romance. If my transcription is accurate, the unsuccessful suitor being an "earl" is a powerful throwback to the terminology of feudal estate systems so common in the classical ballads. A more pedestrian possibility is that the poor guy's name was Earl, a common given name in Nova Scotia. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, when the returned lover-cowboy is waiting for the lady to recognize the half-ring in her glass of unspecified "toast," he does so "anxiously." Though anxiety may underlie such a wait in the older variants of this song cycle, such qualifiers as "anxiously" would pound in the heart of the listener rather than be laid out orally in the "text" for all to hear.

The wandering and return, the threat to wander, the chastisement of wanderers, and the regret of wandering, as well as the dilemmas and insecurities funded by lovers who have lives of their own, all feed into contemporary themes in country music. Interestingly, a recent study of the characteristics of successful country songs found:

By a rather large margin, the single most important element in successful women singers' records is the rambling theme. ...On close examination, we found that in most cases the woman is not the "rambler" in the song: rather she is singing about the rambling ways of an important male in her life and the resulting problems or sadness that he has caused her. (Jaret, 121)

This continuing concern with the drama of the return

and identification of an estranged lover appears to have been bifurcated in many recent country music songs into two types of lament: those that long for home, and those that bemoan a lost love. In part, this reflects the process of fragmentation that has so often befallen longer narrative types in modern times, though the process is exacerbated by the demands in the popular music industry for three - minute recordings.

But these modern songs function in similar fashion, draw on like emotions, and seek a comparable type of dramatic and emotional resolution as the earlier ones. The preconditions for the drama are different, derived from the experience of a forcedly mobile labour force in the case of "songs of home"; and in the case of unrequited love, the obstacle is no longer characteristically the physical separation by great distance (requiring a heroic journey) or the opposition of family members to the love relationship (so prevalent in traditional balladry) but more thoroughly existential conditions of relationships, those having to do with the exigencies of modern lifestyle and the free reign of emotional autonomy so emphasized in modern culture.

The heroic feats which the modern lamenter is willing to attempt in order to reconcile feelings of loss are truly journeys of a different kind, journeys of will, of identity. In modern country songs, rather than combatting wits over

who, between spouses, will "get up and bar the door" (Child 275), the hope is that recognition of the singer by the loved one will lead him/her to block out all those contrary forces, "Make the World Go Away," and "Just Get Up and Close the Door."

In short, there are both functional and thematic threads reaching forward from the ballads and broadsides to the contemporary mainstream of country music. But just as Mackenzie was concerned with sorting out the ballad wheat from the broadside chaff, so do I make distinctions of a different order within and between repertoires (see Ch. 3)

Many academics and a good deal of the public have assumed that country music is, in places like Nova Scotia, an imported form, one that grew out of the American South and culminated in the hegemonic "Nashville Sound." General histories of country music, and especially the best known history by Bill Malone, have underlined this monogenetic view. Yet study after recent study which looks at repertoires of local old-time and country musicians in other parts of the continent find quite a different story. Rather than the monolith of style and repertoire which the mass society hypothesis would expect, researchers with an historical or folkloristic ear find each region of North America to have its own particular kind of country music. Selecting from the media-disseminated mainstream, adding

from local tradition, mixing styles eclectically, and continuing musical styles that have generations of time-depth, each area weaves its own pattern in live performance.

The simplest of such "localizations" is the mere insertion of local place names or even person's names into a song which has broad currency. The next most complex way to "localize" songs lyrically, and a common formula in much of North American folksong is to invent parodies, both humorous and serious. (Narvaez, 1977) A parody simply puts new words on an old air such as has been done in the rich broadside tradition as well as by hymn-writers and union troubadours. More complex forms of inheritance involve the continuation of not only specific melodies, but tune families, as well as themes, character types, typical and typically liminal situations, places and relationships (Renwick, 1980). When even an untrained ear listens to the folk-derived music of one part of the world, its region or continent of origin can be declared immediately. Traditional musical style has place in its fabric.

As with landscape, history, even food, a generalized tradition only takes hold among people with its particularization. Landscape becomes a sense of place, history becomes local tradition, food becomes the family and community menu. In a like sense, the vast reservoir of vernacular musical traditions takes hold among people in a

given area through the appropriation of some styles and songs (by implication the rejection of others), and the addition, retention, and invention of yet others. It is a process whereby cultural values find a place in aesthetic expression.

According to Philip V. Bohlman, the set of songs which are performed in a given area could be considered a folk music canon:

...those repertoires and forms of musical behavior constantly shaped by a community to express its cultural particularity and the characteristics that distinguish it as a social entity. (104)
 Implicit in canon-formation are the origins of repertoires, the community's indigenous classification system, and the roles played by musicians - and, more important, the location of all these factors in a variety of modern contexts. (105)

We see in Pictou County a layering of musical canons, each with a solidly felt aesthetic, a network of musicians, and a coterie of followers. Radio and records help to shape these patterns, but there remains a dynamic by which each such canon draws from parents and grandparents, speaks to local issues, and tickles the fancy as only an in-joke can. Much as the daily discussion of "the story" after the television soap opera in Newfoundland shapes its function in the intercourse of everyday, country music is not merely something passively consumed, but rather an idiom to be used in formulating expressions - something which is owned as

surely as one's car or the clothes one wears. Country music takes its concrete shape as a result of its place; its history particularizes it.

Chapter 3

CONTEMPORARY VERNACULAR SONG TRADITIONS IN PICTOU COUNTY

3.1 Categories of Local Music: Learning the Emic

Taxonomy

I was aware that my starting point, a stated interest in country music, would lead me to a fairly broad spectrum in Pictou County. But I did not anticipate the degree to which each of the participants around the county would identify with one style of country music, to the exclusion of most others. The music which I had identified by then as a generic category was, in the context of northern Nova Scotia, super-generic. Where I expected inclusiveness in the common project called country music, I instead found a heterogeneous group of sets, each one marking itself from the others. The boundaries here were more tightly specific than those of other contexts I had experienced, especially those of central Canada (Ontario and Quebec) where country music normally subsumed a myriad of different musics, some of them altogether separate in form and history, creating with those other musics a sometimes uneasy but usually cooperative shared territory and community. But in Pictou County, each

style of country music formed a congeries of identities and loyalties, every one had its form and its performance. Each of the four musical styles outlined below had its own community.

The etic category "country music" had some relatively subtle emic dimensions, and perhaps this was as it should be. From the insights of cognitive and linguistic anthropology, a contradiction among apparently similar forms should have been anticipated. As the time-worn linguistic examples of Inuit views of snow and ice and the Arab specification of types of sand illustrate, fine distinctions have an emic force when the mapping of an environment flows from precise local knowledge. An outsider has only passing acquaintance with such a lexicon. If the super-generic term country music is music itself in many social circles of Pictou County, the category borders on the unnecessary. Most active music scenes make distinctions within styles and therefore within and between repertoires. The taxonomy developed by Casey, Rosenberg and Wareham (1972) for such distinctions (elaborated in Chapter 5) combines "folk" and "folk analytic" categories, as does my breakdown of forms elaborated below.

An appropriate analogy might be the conception among non-academics that a professor is a professor. According to this conception, if one professor writes a book, that book

has a certain truth value and status regardless of the method, discipline, rigour, scholarly acceptance, or school of thought of its originator. Within universities, where professors write books, each such book is immediately assigned not only to its discipline but to its school of thought and methodology in order for its meaningful emic categorization to occur. In short, it is a truism of culture that meaningful distinctions are made in each specific environment, and they are non-transferable. Each set of cultural categories must finally be acquired experientially and inductively for their deepest understanding to be felt. It is, of course, the delineation of culturally specific distinctions and taxonomies derived from careful ethnography that is the content and aim of ethnoscience.

It was Murray Smith of New Glasgow who first poked some holes in my generic umbrella. I had approached him in his role as co-ordinator and the central energy source of the Pictou County Pickers, and told him that I was doing a study of country music in the area. With a wry smile and a slightly bellicose tone, he told me that he couldn't help me with country music, but that he sure could tell me about

bluegrass: "Bluegrass isn't country music."¹ In this attitude, Smith represents the ultra-traditionalist position which is devoted to bluegrass only on acoustic instruments. He considers country music to be a completely different form.²

I had just come from a music store in downtown New Glasgow, where my same approach had led Ray MacDonald, a forty-ish employee at A & R Music, to list a dozen or more musicians and half as many bands (past and present) from the area which had played large dance halls and made recordings over the past several years. We talked about the Bluecats and the Haggart brothers, Harold MacKenzie, Cameron MacDonald, Wally Rice, and Johnny Walsh, all of whom had

¹ From an interview on July 25, 1988, with Murray Smith at his workplace, the C.P. Smith home furnishings store, a family business, of which he is president and General Manager, in New Glasgow. Smith is an example of the sort of repository referred to in chapter 1, as he has written a column in the Canadian Bluegrass Review, and represented there the "conservative" side of the bluegrass spectrum as a musical "purist."

² On this question of the taxonomy of country musics, opinions vary widely. Each boom in general popularity leads to a more inclusive stance in the industry as a whole, reflected in remarks such as the following from Waylon Jennings: "The one thing about country music is that it's a lot more than just one style. You have country blues, bluegrass, Western swing, and now we're starting to have country jazz." (Wilson 35)

local performing careers in years past.³ The more recent and popular of the bands to which Ray MacDonald referred were what one "old-time" aficionado refers to as "Beatle bands," i.e. bands composed of four instruments or pieces, with three electric guitars (bass, rhythm and lead) combined with drums (see 3.5). When I asked Ray to describe the style of these bands, he used a number of well - known commercial acts to anecdotally indicate the aesthetic: bands such as Alabama and Exile; singers such as Mel McDaniel, Charlie Daniels and Randy Travis. The artists whom he mentioned were largely in a recent tradition that has been called "Southern Fried Rock."⁴

"The key is dancing. People like to get up and dance. Country is the big thing," Ray MacDonald explained, but even people in popular country bands have regular jobs and play for dances on the weekends. It is the surfeit of such

³ The currency of such names is an example of the kind of esoteric information with which the casual visitor could never be fully acquainted. My talk with Ray MacDonald, one of the first such inquiries in the present study, was rather tense for me in that I was desperately making mental notes and later written ones on the names which came forward and trying to form some pattern for their retention. In order to continue a meaningful dialogue, I feigned a more thorough acquaintance than could in truth be claimed. Of the names cited here, those which were most meaningful and familiar to me and to many others outside of Pictou County were Jim and Don Haggart, whose single "Pictou County Jail" was a charted Canadian hit in 1972/73. See Ch. 4 for more detail.

⁴ For example, from a few years earlier, Southern Fried Rock 33 1/3 rpm phonodisc K-tel NC 537 (1981).

"weekend warriors" which made Art Fitt such an interesting focus for this study. What were the factors, I had to ask myself, which allowed one musician from among them to become a professional craftsman earning a good livelihood from musical performance alone?⁵

When Ed MacIntosh, a young Stellarton singer and guitarist gave an open-air concert of "country music" to a crowd of about 150 people at Carmichael Park on New Glasgow's West Side (of the East River) July 7, 1988, the crowd was about as varied as a sultry summer evening could provide. People were lying on the grass, carrying lawn chairs and sitting on verandas across the street. There were old people who needed help to sit down, babes in arms, toddlers, skate-boarders, some in bermuda shorts and a few stragglers who looked like the street was their home. MacIntosh performed widely appreciated regional "anthems" such as "Farewell to Nova Scotia," "Sonny's Dream" and "Song for the Mira."⁶ Interspersed with these songs were soft-

⁵ In the usage here, professional craftsman is not a contradiction. The idea of craftsman is explored in Chapter 3 below. Professional is meant here in the most basic sense: done in a manner which earns a livelihood.

⁶ "Farewell to Nova Scotia" is the vernacular title for "Nova Scotia Song," collected from several singers of Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore by Helen Creighton, who printed a composite of the variants in Creighton and Senior (1950). The first broadly popular recording of this unofficial anthem of the province is by Catherine McKinnon, and is re-

pop tunes, John Prine and Chris de Burgh compositions, as well as "the longest song I've ever learned," Eric Bogle's "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda"⁷ which was sent by Ed "out to senior citizens." His repertoire included a political parody to the tune of "Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home?" in which (former Prime Minister) Brian Mulroney, who was "parachuted" into this "safe" seat to represent the district for the Conservative Party in the House of Commons, replaced Mr. Bailey. An older hard-core country music fan would not recognize a single tune as being "really country," yet Ed's show was promoted as a concert of "country music." I later discovered that Ed MacIntosh is a nephew of Art Fitt, the artist who is the centrepiece of this study. Ed's mother is one of Art's sisters. The broad swath of MacIntosh's repertoire could very well have been influenced by his older and more established uncle.

This welter of sounds, from acoustic bluegrass through danceable country rock to eclectic "country music" concerts,

released on Something Old, Something New. "Sonny's Dream," composed by Ron Hynes in 1976, and made a "hit" by the Sons of Erin, is also recorded by Hynes with the Wonderful Grand Band on The Wonderful Grand Band and Living in the Fog. "Song for the Myra" by Allister MacGillivray can be found on The Garrison Brothers, Songs and Stories among several recordings. All three of these songs appear on George Brothers Atlantic Sons & Daughters.

⁷ This evocative depiction of a tragic campaign carried out by Australian forces in the Dardanelles during WWI is recorded by Bogle on Scraps of Paper.

and a handful of other styles are commonly subsumed by the term country music. Yet an ear for the "emic" focus of participants in the styles must hear categories which are much more specific and delimited. Mary Hufford (1986 41), drawing on terminology which Timothy Cochrane learned from fishermen, talks of "slashers" who cut their distinctions too finely, and "lumpers" who generalize their categories too freely. Taxonomies are invariably threatened by these extremes, yet I wish to concentrate here on a mapping of vernacular musical styles as I was informally taught them in my Pictou County fieldwork since 1987. The categories were inductively derived after several dozen encounters of the sort sketched above; their naming follows a course recognizable to the more serious fans as well as most performers and commentators.

There are, by my present reading, four essential styles in the Pictou County area, namely: 1. Bluegrass (see 3.2) 2. Honky- Tonk (see 3.3) 3. Old Time (sometimes Old-Tyme, see 3.4) 4. Country Rock (see 3.5).

3.2 Bluegrass

Local **bluegrass** thrives under the aegis of the Pictou County Pickers. They are in large part amateur or at most semi-professional pickers (with a few soft-voiced singers) who gather at the Abercrombie community hall (a former one-room grade school such as the one where I sang "Your Cheatin' Heart") on the first and third Saturday evenings of each month every Fall through Spring just to play together.⁸ Such clubs and events have become part of the bluegrass tradition:

... statistics indicate that the kind of interest needed to sustain clubs is most often encountered in the peripheral areas, in locales where there has been some exposure to bluegrass over a long period but which are not saturated with festivals and bands.

Although some of the clubs publish newsletters, promote festivals, and arrange concerts, all are involved in arranging situations for members to play music regularly - picking or

⁸ The description of an evening with the Pictou County Pickers at Abercrombie is based on an evening spent with them on 7 January, 1989.

jam sessions.

...Emphasis is upon egalitarian music-making: younger musicians who are just learning are encouraged to attend and participate. At such sessions, audiences are not generally expected or catered to although a few friends of the musicians may drop in occasionally. (Rosenberg 1985 365-66)

The repertoires are in the straight-up bluegrass mould, and participants are a conscious and intentional community, driving as far as 40 miles (from Truro to Abercrombie) to attend. Though bluegrass is the focus, they do, as Murray Smith pointed out in a kind of spiritual tone, "share a lot of things."

These evenings are spent in an indoor form of 'parking lot picking,' which is the heart and soul of the bluegrass experience and ethic. In warmer climes of a summer evening in late June, such as at the farm of Edgar and Eunice Kitchen in Summersville, West Virginia during their annual bluegrass festival, one might witness a picking scene such as that described by Bruce Watson:

... late in the evening, about sundown, the guests open battered instrument cases, take out guitars and banjos, and the pickin' begins.

Beneath the oaks and maples behind the stage, a small circle of strangers resurrects a melody as

old as the hills. A bone-thin mandolin player in striped shirt and cowboy hat juggles the jaunty tune and hands it to a burly man in a baseball cap with a banjo slung across his belly. The banjo rings as his chubby fingers run the tune up the neck and slide it to the fiddler, whose sweetly flailing bow seems a part of his arm. In four-part harmony (and a little discord) the band sings mountain songs - "Sunny Side of the Mountain" and "Mountain Dew." When they unpacked their instruments they were strangers. But after a few songs, they know where they stand and what they stand for. They believe in the gospel according to bluegrass. (1993 69-70)

Though the adjectives might be a bit rich in this depiction and the romance of the encounter overstated, the essence of this scene is the spirit of bluegrass. (Neil Rosenberg pointed out that this passage by Watson actually "quotes" a number of passages from well-known bluegrass songs.)

These Pictou County Pickers are mostly in their '40's and '50's, almost all play an instrument (though there is a wide range of proficiency) and these Saturday night gatherings are clearly events which are anticipated with great relish. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the music and the atmosphere is very much that of parking - lot

picking. All instruments are acoustic, and the players float, chat, rest, and gather in little huddles of 2, 3, 4, 5, and occasionally 6 musicians. About a dozen players were there the evening I joined them: approximately 6 guitarists, 2 banjoists, 2 fiddlers, and one bass player, Murray Smith on upright. Usually one person is expected to "carry a tune" by beginning it, keeping it rolling, and ending it. The ending sometimes has a special little flourish with the tune's protagonist hitting a calculated discordant note, bringing chuckles all round, or sometimes doing a tight little run on the strings which betrays a special practice of the ending lick.

Those whose playing is a bit hesitant usually hang around the outer edge of the huddle, play more softly, and occasionally turn their backs to the group to try a run or a chord sequence once again on their own. Some songs break up in laughter midway through, others seem to have no ending until desperate glances around the circle signal a decision to fade out. Almost all the players are men, though wives and a few other friends are welcome to share the chat, make and drink coffee, and enjoy the atmosphere.

There is much talk of bluegrass music as well as catch-up chatter. As an outsider I was welcomed by Murray and introduced to several people in the course of the evening, all of whom were warm and receptive, though not always very

talkative. Sometimes my surname alone (a common one in the area) was good for about ten minutes of talk. The night I attended there was a schedule of future meetings available as a brochure, as well as detailed instructions on how to make a picnic table. The evening had something of the feel of a religious revival meeting, and any errant soul who had seen the light enough to darken the door was welcome. Donations were also welcome.

In discussion with the pickers, I often mentioned country music, and the invariable response was somewhat akin to the way many Newfoundlanders or Quebecois(es) respond to the mention of Canada. That is, country music was seen to be "out there," quite separate, as if it were another land, an associated but separate land. One participant admitted that he used to listen to a good deal of country music some years ago, but that was before he discovered bluegrass.

The big annual event for the Pictou County Pickers is the Nova Scotia Bluegrass and Old-Time Festival in Ardoise, about 150 miles West of New Glasgow, every July. The 1988 festival was advertised on local radio (CKEC New Glasgow) as promising "a good sound system, good entertainment, and lots of security." And, though the mixing of bluegrass with old-time was a bit bothersome to a few of the pickers, the security was probably welcome, as these appeared to be very clean-living people. The importance of security also

underlined a bad recent memory of the Atlantic Folk Festival, held annually for several years at a farm in the Rawdon hills in central Nova Scotia. Its demise came about 1980 after serious public drunkenness complicated by bad weather and occasional violence led to its cancellation.

But the "scene" of bluegrass is primarily non-professional performance founded on a style which emerged from some of the professional stringbands of the 1940's and 1950's, notably Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys, as well as Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys (Rosenberg 1967). Bluegrass has evolved over four decades into a self-defined genre with participation very close to its centre. There is a bluegrass royalty among recorded artists, of whom Bill Monroe, as undisputed founder of the form and therefore "father of bluegrass" would be the unchallenged king; the rotating members in his band, the Bluegrass Boys, are obvious members of his court. His court would also include a number of the best known stringband acts from the 1940's forward, some highly derivative, others less so, of whom the crown princes would be Flatt, Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys in various incarnations. In more recent years, their "newgrass" inheritors, from J.D. Crowe, Ricky Skaggs, The Country Gentlemen, David Grisman

and Tony Rice to Bela Fleck and Alison Krauss⁹ have established the margins of the form in popular and jazz circles with significant authority.

Yet in the Pictou County context it is not these stellar entertainers who define the form so much as the fact of living performance by tentative pickers in the Abercrombie night. "Jimmy Brown" is their newsboy and Nova Scotia has moons just as blue as those of Kentucky.¹⁰ Murray Smith's wife Rena explicitly speculated on the cultural similarities between the southern Appalachians and their topographical northern extremity in the Maritimes, suggesting that the two areas had an unusual natural affinity by virtue of a similar geological and social history.

When I asked about public performances by members of the Pictou County Pickers, a couple of people said that the only venues that were realistically available were bars, and that they weren't interested in that kind of atmosphere. It is precisely "that kind of atmosphere" which is the

⁹ See Rosenberg 1992 for a review of recent bluegrass/newgrass recorded performances.

¹⁰ "Jimmy Brown the Newsboy" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky" are both standard bluegrass tunes. The latter, written by Monroe and also recorded by Elvis Presley in 1954, reflects in its performance and recording history many of the changes in popular music during the 1950's (see Rosenberg 1985 120-23).

traditional stage for the next form of country music to be discussed which I found in Pictou County. Yet locating advocates/performers of this style proved difficult, as will be shown.

3.3 Honky Tonk

Honky-Tonk is at the other end of the spectrum with respect to the type of lifestyle associated with the music. Honky-tonk is the music of the smokey bar and the life of tortured relationships, lost home places, wild night life, excessive drinking, tragedy, lost opportunity, fantasies of adventure and litanies of disappointment. It is the music which Bill Malone and other stalwart fans of the hard driving East Texas - derived style might call hard-core country. These songs of "hurtin'," "cheatin'," and even occasionally love, are often played with a shuffle beat and some electric instrumentation. Recognizable artists in the tradition are Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, Kitty Wells, Loretta Lynn, and significantly for these Nova Scotians, Hank Snow. Snow is a Nova Scotian who began his career in Halifax in the early 1930's and still occasionally tours the area, though he makes his home near Nashville. As a pioneer of the form and a star of legendary status, Snow forms a conduit through which the regional form of honky-tonk identity is localized and legitimated.

The honky-tonk sound (and ethic) is at the core of the "new traditionalism" in country music and is perhaps most recognizable in the music of Randy Travis, Dwight Yoakam,

Ricky Van Shelton, Reba McEntire, Travis Tritt, Alan Jackson or Keith Whitley. It is probably instructive for the fate of the music and its demarcation from bluegrass and old-time that the most accessible description of honky-tonk is one which calls up superstars to denote styles. As the most widely disseminated of the musical styles emanating from the country music fold during the commercial breakthrough which hillbilly music first enjoyed during and immediately after World War II, it was this honky-tonk mould which led to the stereotype of country music being about crying in your beer over lost love and singing the songs through your nose.

The stereotyped contents of honky-tonk songs are encapsulated in a riddle joke which I first heard from one of my Montreal college students about 1991: Q. "What do you get when you play a country song backwards?" A. "You get your wife back, you get your house back, and you get your truck and your dog back too."¹¹ Perhaps it was all the fault of Webb Pierce, whose Nudie suits, guitar-shaped swimming pool at his home in Nashville and his Cadillac (or Pontiac?) studded with silver dollars made a virtual self-

¹¹ Jestng with the claims made about the hidden messages in popular rock music, this joke showed up with several variations in the early 1990s, including one reprinted from Newsweek by the Montreal Gazette: "What do you get when you play country music backwards? You get sober, get your job back, your dog comes home, you get your wife back." (Gelman E3)

parody of the excesses of the nouveau rich lifestyle of the country music star. Pierce's ostentatious wealth, all earned by singing songs such as "There Stands The Glass" and "Back Street Affair"¹² in his pinch-nosed delivery throughout the 1950's, made this form of Nashville-dominated country music and the lifestyles which surrounded it such an easy target for sophisticated commentators. The ultimate recent parody of this form is Toronto artist Greg Curnoe's claim that in order to be a country and western singer, you must have the wrong hair¹³ (Bowering 1993). It is, not surprisingly, the honky-tonk song which has become the standard target of country music parody in a tradition grounded in Steve Goodman's ("You Don't Have to Call Me Darlin', Darlin', But) You Never Even Call Me By My Name."¹⁴

In the 1950's and '60's, before the advent of FM broadcasting and specialized radio, honky-tonk country was one of the predominant musical sounds on the local radio station, CKEC New Glasgow. Most of the honky-tonk country

¹² The most accessible recording by Webb Pierce of these songs and a number of his other best known hits from the period are in duet with Willie Nelson on In the Jailhouse Now.

¹³ George Bowering cites Curnoe on this in his reading from his tribute to Curnoe, The Moustache, on CBC Radio's Morningside.

¹⁴ Found on Steve Goodman, Steve Goodman, "You Never Even Call Me by my Name" was a radio hit for David Allan Coe c.1980.

hits from the United States were played on CKEC, but there were also local country music emissions, including a weekly show in the sixties by a New Glasgow window-washer and man-about-town, Harold MacKenzie. Harold billed himself as the happy, roving cowboy, performed a handful of songs in his 15 minute segment, and always closed with an inspirational tune for "the sick and shut-in." Strongly influenced by Hank Williams in tone as well as in musical style, MacKenzie was a kind of tragi/cheerful everyman of the sort which Hank Williams Sr. became when he filled the shoes of 'Luke the Drifter',¹⁵ in his secular sermons. Sometimes literally advertising medicine such as Hadacol, these "health and happiness" country music segments were broadcast in many forms throughout North American local radio, serving as a sort of electronic medicine show to isolated rural and small-town residents across the continent.

During those decades of the 1950's and 1960's, then, the honky-tonk style which dominated country music in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, did so through intermediaries at each significant level. The largely American recordings were played on the local radio station, with a special emphasis put on the local (Nova Scotian) boy who had made good in the

¹⁵ Though his handlers did not encourage it, Hank Williams often gave homiletic recitations in his live performances. A collection of them can be found on Luke the Drifter.

big time. Hank Snow even performed cowboy stunts on horseback when he toured the area with his entourage in the 1950's. The songs which he and other stars made famous were performed on CKEC by Harold MacKenzie and in live variety shows and living rooms around the county by unknown amateurs and parents. Occasionally a local performer would sing his/her own compositions, and of course many hoped to themselves become a Hank Snow.¹⁶

Today local cable television carries a country music show in the honky-tonk vein, hosted by Felix Bernas, and a number of others who perform hard country are known by older people in the area. Yet I could find no public performance of straight honky-tonk except for the occasional promotional gig by artists such as Cameron MacDonald, who had recently performed at the door of a local Woolco store to draw customers.

This is not to say necessarily that live performance in this tradition has disappeared; rather that it has gone somewhat underground or become more "domestic." It finds little place in paid public performance, yet continues to

¹⁶ See, again, Michael Taft (1974). In the 1990's, when Elvis impersonators have conventions among themselves, such derivative careers may seem unexceptional. Perhaps it is a matter of degree and scale.

flourish in kitchens, bedrooms, nurseries ¹⁷ and garages, it seems. Evidence of this is the recurrence of songs from this arena in the talent contests which Art Fitt holds (see 4.4 below).

When I asked Ed MacIntosh, after his "country music" concert in the park, about an older style of country music, what might be called the honky-tonk or hard-core country represented by say, Hank Williams songs, he said that such music tends to be sung at house parties or privately rather than in a large public forum, and generally by older people. There is an ironic parallel with "ballad hunting" in this veiling of the "older" songs in a "domestic" tradition rather than a public or "assembly" one. The honky-tonk sound, growing out of smoky barrooms, is apparently now a kitchen or family music. I rather expect to find an earnest desire among such performers to pass the tradition on so that the legacy continues, if only in the form of one voice over a strummed acoustic guitar. Some of these older honky-tonkers had careers in music for a time and made recordings, but local talk has it that most of them have had a losing bout with the bottle these last few years. Such a fate, for the performers who not only sing the songs but live the

¹⁷ cf. Bess Lomax Hawes' comments on the thematically diverse group of songs used as lullabies, some as far in subject matter from sleeping babies as one could imagine (Hawes in Brunvand 1979).

themes of honky-tonk, is all too congruent with the contents of the music.

3.4 Old-Time

Old-Time music is the third distinguishable form. Though it meshes a bit with both honky-tonk and bluegrass, old-time comprises a small range of styles, mostly with the early hillbilly sound, i.e. the sound derived from the first two decades of hillbilly recordings between 1922 and 1943.¹⁸ Old-time includes solo and accompanied fiddle music, sometimes in the commercially dominant southern U.S. styles, but more commonly in regional styles closer to home, such as those in the Scottish Cape Breton tradition (often with rhythm piano as accompaniment) or that which was defined and disseminated by a legendary band from the Maritimes, Don Messer and His Islanders (Sellick 1969). This "downeast" style has many nuances, as elaborated in 4.2 and 4.3. Old-time also includes stringband music outside of the bluegrass mainstream and much of the hillbilly repertoire. Old-time music can include most mainstream country up to the beginnings of the "Nashville Sound" in the 1960's. Fiddle and steel guitar are often predominant to the extent that to outsiders these instruments are the

¹⁸ This period was delineated as the classic hillbilly period by contributors to "the Hillbilly Issue" of Journal of American Folklore (1965), edited by Wilgus.

hallmark of the "whiney" sound and are liable to be the harbinger of a Webb Pierce or one of the Hanks singing through a clothespin on his nose. This last form of old-time, as the above examples suggest, shades into the honky tonk style described above. The old-time aesthetic excludes almost any commercial country music of the past thirty years or so, though each aficionado will often have a soft spot for one or two artists from that stable, someone the likes of George Jones, Merle Haggard or Emmylou Harris.

One anecdote from my conversation with the regional "high priest" of this orientation can serve as an indication of the reigning aesthetic. Fred Isenor is an old-time musician, music collector, former radio host, musical columnist with the regional publication Rural Delivery, and promoter of old-time music. He is a well known expert, and suggested about 20 names of Pictou County musicians who at that time were not familiar to me. Fred told me of having received records by Tammy Wynette and Willie Nelson as Christmas presents. The following summer, when Bob Fuller, who is the heart and soul of old-time music in Montreal, was visiting Fred and scanning his record collection in the "traders" section, he noticed the unopened records. Fred apologized for having not even listened to them once. Fuller's response was "Why would you open them? Who would

want to?"¹⁹

The old-time sound was for some years most broadly served by a weekly radio show on CKCL Truro and re-broadcast on CKEC New Glasgow. The show, recently discontinued, was hosted by the same Fred Isenor, who lives in the village of Lantz, about sixty miles southwest of New Glasgow. Isenor reports that Wilf Carter requests outnumber any others to this day. Carter is the most important well-known star who receives recognition by the old-time people around northern Nova Scotia. Sometimes known as Montana Slim, Carter is also a Nova Scotian, has been recording since the early '30's, and still tours the area on occasion. Hank Snow material before his sound got too "Nashvillized" also satisfies the old-time aesthetic. Both Carter and Snow, who have become big fish in big ponds, i.e. stars for all of North America, are doubly revered for Nova Scotian old-time fans because of the localist emphasis in their populist culture.

The other occasion where old-time music is the norm is at country dances, which occur regularly in two or three small villages around the county, each about a half hour drive from the nearest town. Such hinterland communities as Lower Barney's River and River John hold these dances in

¹⁹ From an interview with Fred Isenor at his home in Lantz, Nova Scotia on 22 December, 1988.

one-room schoolhouses which have been converted to community halls. These events were traditionally spirited by a fiddle and piano, now it seems often by fiddle and electronic keyboard. Some of these country dances now hire semi-professional electrified four piece bands who play contemporary country music, with a mix of rock-tempo songs and waltzable slow songs. The underlying expectation at these events is danceability, as most performing bands recognize, and as Ray MacDonald first reminded me (see 3.1 above).

3.5 Country Rock

Country Rock, it could be argued, has been at the centre of commercially successful country music for two decades or more. This music drives the country hit parade and generally has a younger following. Industry insiders have suggested that the fertile ground for country rockers was left open by the abandonment, during the 1980s, of the mainstream soft-rock audience by pop music bands, whose clamour for disparate styles such as rap, punk, grunge, and heavy metal, left the great washed listeners with no other accessible sound.

An important precursor to the current form of country rock was the "outlaw" movement, which formed up as a sort of "old turk" rump group on the periphery of big time country music, Nashville style, during the 1970s. The preeminent figure was Willie Nelson, who at the time was an established and very successful songwriter, having written "Crazy," which had been a runaway hit for Patsy Cline, and "Hello Walls," a hit for Faron Young, both about 1960. Nelson was however, a frustrated star, having felt underestimated as a performer and angered by the increasingly stilted constrictions of Nashville recording methods and career management. With Waylon Jennings, who had always styled

himself the "Nashville Rebel,"²⁰ the Glazer brothers, and a handful of other, largely younger musicians, many of them patriotic Texans, an open-ended style, mostly country rock, broke the stranglehold which Nashville had exerted on many of country music's most popular performers for a decade or more.

The live performances of outlaw style performers tended to be large parties, with "rednecks" and "hippies" breaking codes of exclusion with each song. One pundit referred to the audiences of this period as "hickies," i.e. hicks and hippies in some odd amalgam. Most of the music could be danceably played with a basic rock and roll stage setup of bass, drums, rhythm and lead guitars, with space left for harmonica, keyboard, fiddle, steel guitar, or horns, if they were available.

It is these "Beatle bands"²¹ or to be more impartial, amplified dance bands characterized typically by lead,

²⁰ Jennings starred in a movie by that title in the mid-1960s. The story is a version of the fable of a hopeful young singer arriving in Nashville with a guitar on his back, and his travails with the demands of the industry and his own sensitivities. It could serve as an earlier mirror image, a kind of straight version, of Robert Altman's film Nashville (circa 1976).

²¹ "Beatle band" is a term used disparagingly by hillbilly musician, promoter, and aficionado, Montreal's Bob Fuller. Among other well-known activities, Fuller is the founder and host of Hillbilly Night, which until its relocation in 1992 was held every Monday night at the Blue Angel Cafe in downtown Montreal.

rhythm, and bass electric guitars with drums, that are at the centre of the fourth style of music which is separately meaningful in Pictou County. Band names like Four Wheel Drive or Country Express say it all. The music is primarily what I would call country rock, ranging from rockabilly to soft rock to music of contemporary bands like Alabama and Pirates of the Mississippi.

This is the only style of the four outlined here which provides a significant partial livelihood for a number of musicians. They play mostly dances, sometimes in large places like rinks, and hire out for benefits. They are well known around the county, and have an up-tempo public profile. The priority in most of their repertoire is danceability, and they work up current country and country-esque hits as these hits begin to become requests at their gigs. Some band members have been full-time professionals in the past, travelling the club circuit around the Maritimes or farther afield, but now that they are a bit older (30's and 40's) and usually have a family, they stick to weekend work. Such musicians have become, as the lingo of performers has it, "weekend warriors."²² They play often and draw good crowds of young to middle aged adults.

²² The term "weekend warrior" probably derives from the U.S. usage where it originally referred to the National Guard. Neil Rosenberg informs me, where of course the usage was quite literal.

To the person on the street (and perhaps to Murray Smith) this is country music.

To those who have no direct connection with performing or an active fan community and therefore with the detailed workings of any one of these four styles, all of the above are country music. Yet in the internal workings of musicians and serious fans around Pictou County, they are all quite separable: the honky tonkers, the country rockers, the bluegrass players and the old-time aficionados often hardly know one another, and rarely do their styles mix. A 25 year old dancer at the New Glasgow Stadium (the rink) on a Saturday night, moving to the amplified electric sounds of Four Wheel Drive performing "Guitars, Cadillacs," "That'll be the Day" or "Hillbilly Rock" has quite likely never heard of Bill Monroe, Wilf Carter, or Webb Pierce. Similarly, someone who listens to Fred Isenor's old-time radio show probably has no knowledge of Marty Stuart or Pirates of the Mississippi. But country singer Ed MacIntosh is an eclectic musician with little direct commitment to any of these, though he has a broad musical acquaintance with all of the styles. MacIntosh's uncle Art Fitt, though he has spent his entire working life as a country musician, feels no special allegiance to any one of the four forms, though he too performs a repertoire which includes songs from each. As will be elaborated below (Ch. 4) it seems as if successful

professional performance may require a kind of inclusive repertoire and tolerant attitude of a sort which suggests a sort of "above all that" disposition. There is a manner in which a performer who becomes a known personality through paid public performance should actively combat the narrow image and limited audience which strict adherence to one style might create. For paid performers who wish to continue being such, a looser and more inclusive identity serves both performance criteria and career intentions. Ed MacIntosh, Art Fitt (and Jock Mackay) can all get along quite well within the supergeneric label of country music, but just as a politician or other public figure must tread softly on the margins of internecine differences among communities, so also must the performer with reach.

Though all of these styles could be loosely included under the "etic" umbrella of country music, allegiances to only one sub-set or canon are intensely felt. These canons are neither survivals from ancient sources nor resurrected with "folkness" as an aim. Rather each forms an ongoing idiom in flux, selecting and adding within a local mould. The essential meaning of each canon is derived in performance and intentional community, and activated as a component of identity. Outside of the intentional taste communities who form the active core for these styles, however, many casual fans take a more catholic view of the

tradition as a whole.

Chapter 4

PAYING DUES: OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE OF A COUNTRY MUSICIAN

This chapter will examine one full-time country musician making his living in performance, primarily in bars, in northern mainland Nova Scotia. I will outline the family and community roots and context for some of the requisite skills of professional music performance, describe one series of events which Art Fitt, as a country music craftsman and entrepreneur, organizes, and suggest some parameters of local professional performance which distinguish it from other performance levels and from other surrounding occupations. In particular, I will look at Art Fitt's organization of local talent contests, and show how they serve to augment the depth of his "reach," which could be viewed as intensity of "market saturation," or, more colloquially, his "rep," or reputation. Finally, focus in this chapter will explore some of the dimensions of musical performance which distinguish Art Fitt, professional entertainer, from his brother Pat Fitt, amateur musician and songwriter.

4.1 Working Musicians: Ranges of Influence, Levels of Success

A number of rural and working-class occupations have served as well-springs of lore for folklore study; one thinks especially of railroaders, cowboys, truckers, waitresses, fishermen, farmers and farm wives. Those occupations which have gained such attention either have a strong traditional component in the skills necessary to do the job effectively, or else because of their peculiar job conditions, were known to have a large body of interesting and romantically attractive lore, such as songs, legends, and jokes, deriving from their work.

The professional country music performer operates in a work world which not only sponsors a good deal of lore about itself but is also the medium through which much of the song lore about other working worlds is transmitted. It is somewhat ironic that folkloristic studies of country musicians have tended to dwell on either celebrities or amateurs in the field, rarely on the "ordinary exception," the professional craftsman with a limited local or regional reputation.

Studies of celebrity performers, on the first hand, may

be undertaken for a number of reasons: the importance of such performers as influences on others, the assured market for publications on well-known names, perhaps even the availability of biographical details. There are at least three separate book-length biographies of Johnny Cash, at least two of Dolly Parton, a good handful on Hank Williams, and so on. This literature forms, along with fanzines and tabloids, "inside story" exposé paperbacks, country music television productions, and merchandise which is sold at concerts and festivals, a chain of connection between the fan and the star which serves as the country music counterpart to the Hollywood and popular music industries. It was the star system of Hollywood movies which defined the method which has since been adopted by the music industry:

Their cult primarily subsists on specialized publications. Although there are no theater magazines, dance magazines, or even music magazines devoted entirely to actors, dancers, or singers, movie magazines are devoted essentially to the stars. In regular, official, and intimate communication with the kingdom of the stars, these publications pour out upon the faithful all the vivifying elements of their faith: photographs, interviews, gossip, romanticized biographies, etc. (Morin, 71-72)

In the years since this passage was written in the late 1950s, these dream machines have adhered in serious manner to musical performers as well. Hollywood may have pioneered such production of fan affection through images because their stock in trade was, after all, images. From the

relative ingenuousness of fan clubs and posters on the bedroom walls of adolescents through trivia games and collections of memorabilia and halls of fame and honour, the star system in popular culture is now well nourished and highly institutionalized.

The stories of these high profile performers as a collective portrait forms a teleological pattern by which the early life of each one portends a great future. Each story then details the unfolding of that great future. The best such stories include tragic interludes or even, as in the cases of Hank Williams or Spade Cooley, tragic ends.¹

But the fable of musical success is one in which humble beginnings, uncanny natural gifts, and indefatigable determination typically lead to a life of fame and luxury, surrounded by glamorous friends and truly unbelievable material possessions.² The telling of the story allows the listener (reader) to vicariously share that fame and luxury.

¹ The story of Hank Williams' last days and death at age 29 has been told many times, most definitively by Roger Williams (1981), briefly and poignantly by Ralph Gleason (1974). Less familiar is Spade Cooley's story, which is graphically and luridly detailed by Riese (1988), Ch. 5, "The Foot-Stomping King of Western Swing," pp. 113-124.

² One thinks here of the ante-bellum Georgian manors preferred by Nashville superstar exurbanites in places like Hendersonville, Tennessee or, more humbly, personalized and inlaid guitars, elaborate "Nudie" suits, or hand-tooled leather apparel, the more sensational of which are housed as icons (and incentives?) at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville.

Dolly Parton has repeatedly told interviewers, as explanation of her flamboyant appearance, that when she was young, she wanted to live in a fairy tale, so now that she can afford it, that is exactly what she is doing. The other side of such fairy tale worlds is that for each of the star personalities, everyday events, experiences, even skills are by-passed. The celebrity world is irretrievably beyond the mundane. Though he loved his Cadillacs until the day he died in the back seat of one, Hank Williams never had a driver's licence. At age thirty-five, Elvis Presley had never been inside a bank: "As a youngster he was too poor; and when he was older, he was so successful that other people took care of such matters." (Newton 151) This separation from everyday routines, which is required of celebrity status, works at odds with the humble public image expected of all country music performers. Even the most outrageously successful must portray themselves as just plain folks. As Reba McEntire explained to tens of millions of television fans: "I like to win awards 'cause it means I'm loved and accepted. Don't everyone want to be loved and accepted?"³ There is a surrealism to this process which the casual viewer or outsider notices immediately.

³ This statement was part of McEntire's acceptance speech after winning several awards the same evening on the American Music Awards January 27, 1992.

When academics write the books, biographies of high-profile stars are handled differently from their "pulp" counterparts in that cultural origins of performers tend to move toward centre stage, documentation is more careful, and appendices abound. What had been merely an exciting life becomes a document of social history. Yet typically the fable and the teleology remain intact. The career and impact of the performer are portrayed in the onward and upward tone which their stellar status legitimates. Such treatments are appropriate for their subject, but the potential subjects for such treatments number at most a few dozen for each region; a working presumption is that the personality profiled is already familiar to the public. The book is presented in response to a curiosity. Beaton and Pederson's Maritime Music Greats (1992) is a recent example of a popular treatment of a handful of regional stars which adds a slight veneer of academic interpretation to a retelling of the fable for Wilf Carter, Hank Snow, Don Messer, Stompin' Tom Connors, Gene MacLellan, John Allan Cameron, Anne Murray, Carroll Baker and Rita MacNeil.⁴

⁴ For a more substantial estimation of Maritime Music Greats, see Mackay (1993). A slightly more careful but generically more generous Canadian counterpart to Maritime Music Greats is Adria's Music of our Times which profiles: Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLauchlan, Jane Siberry, and k.d. lang. Readers who pay attention to adult-oriented popular music in Canada will recognize most of the seventeen

Because of the high profile of these artists, a public interest is assured before a single word is written. Each of these high profile musicians could easily have a book-length biography arouse significant public interest; some already already have their life story in print.⁵ They are celebrities.

There is the other extreme. The attraction by researchers to "unknown" amateur performers could be motivated by the desire to "complete the record" for the unsung much as oral history adds a crucial popular dimension to history that is otherwise framed almost exclusively from documents. Giving voice to the voiceless can also be driven by romantic inclinations through which their very obscurity is an index of their "importance," reflecting a kind of reverse snobbery. In general reflecting the kind of ethic which held no interest for the commercial, the popular, or the professional (see 1.3 above), folklore studies of amateur folksinging often used to treat the performer as a kind of instance of the folklore item, "the individual singer being merely the deputy of the public voice" (Friedman, x) rather than a living, thinking component of

personalities in these two books.

⁵ For Messer, see Sellick (1969); Snow, see Snow (1994); the others do not, to my knowledge, have book-length biographies.

folklore transmission and creation. Sowing the ground which was so effectively broken in Roger Abrahams' work with Almeda Riddle (1970),⁶ Thomas G. Burton's Some Ballad Folks, for instance, is introduced by Herschel Gower thus:

...instead of speaking vaguely of the nameless, faceless members of the singing, dancing throng and printing the millionth variant of "Barbary Allen," the modern collector has an opportunity - even an obligation - to record a number of culturally crucial autobiographies in his own time....they will give biography a new dimension; they will enlarge the province of the literary historian; and they will surely validate some of the conclusions of the anthropologist. (1981, xvi)

The study of such low-profile performers is an important focus for the understanding of regional, local, and domestic song traditions and is of course the only arena in which the the most "folkloric" of song traditions may occur, those in which the "breakthrough to performance" remains a musical conversation in a fully amateur setting.

Between these two extremes of stellar professional or celebrity on the one hand, and obscure amateur local

⁶ The balance, precision and perhaps most importantly the honesty of Abrahams' "Afterword" to A Singer and Her Songs remains a model, even though, in the context of the present discussion, Granny Riddle was no longer an obscure or unknown performer when Abrahams undertook his study. Even more honest, and pertinent to the present study, is his comment elsewhere the same year as A Singer... was published: "We have repeatedly raided the arts of our country neighbours in our incessant attempts to renew our sapping cultural vitality; and we have done so while maintaining a profound social distance from the performer-artists of these groups and their accustomed audience." ("Creativity...", 6)

performer on the other is the ordinary working musician, the journeyman craftsman, who is the focus here. In large population centres, this level of performance for a musician is not terribly uncommon. A city of hundreds of thousands of persons or more can support a number of such musicians in several musical styles, just as such a centre can support plumbers, sign-makers, luthiers, editors, professional sports teams and many other specialties which arise and are sustained by the large, heterogenous population which an urban centre with a modern division of labour affords.

Those living in outlying areas, however, may only rarely specialize to the point where a livelihood can be extracted from such an expertise as country music performance. Typically, country music performers have a day job and perform their music as "weekend warriors"; in country music, such day jobs are characteristically in semi-skilled labour, especially industrial work or the traditional trades and their spinoffs in modern workplaces. This is an occupational profile which also, incidentally, in the only empirical study of this type which I have encountered (Dimaggio et al.), characterized the American country music audience circa 1970:⁷

⁷ I do know of one ex-bank manager in Montreal, Glenn Fournier, who became a full-time country musician, specializing in Hank Williams songs; his career first began to take shape, as far as I can determine, at the famous Blue

They are generally over-represented among unskilled service workers and are *predominant* in the skilled and semi-skilled blue-collar occupations.... Framing a composite, country music fans are urban-living, white adults with rural roots who are established in home, family, and job, but are content with none of these. (49-50)

This profile of fans remains essentially the profile of the pool from which country musicians emerge, and shares most demographic markers with Canada's recently urbanized working class (Porter 1965).

With a few recent exceptions, the classic path to a stellar career for a country music performer has been to follow an ever-expanding range of influence from local notoriety through regional to national and international recognition. Rosenberg's elaboration of this process (1986) points specifically to the interactive pattern wherein a musician's status on the hierarchical continuum of apprentice, journeyman, craftsman, and celebrity involves constant adjustments and skill-honing, depending on the size of the market being worked. The many obstacles to the completion of this path toward success usually lead to early retirement or semi-retirement, i.e. moving to (or back to) another occupation while keeping the music as a sideline. Except for the few who are very successful, being a full-time country performer is a young person's game and a

Angel café (now defunct) in Montreal, of "Hillbilly Night" fame.

demanding job.

Art Fitt is the only country music craftsman who performs as a solo act for a livelihood in the area around Pictou County, Nova Scotia; in fact, it appears as if he may be the only musician of any type who makes a living at music in Pictou County. Art Fitt has travelled extensively under the bright lights of eastern Canada and beyond as a member of several touring bands, starting as bass player with Jim and Don Haggart, who careered wildly to international acclaim and an appearance on the Grand Ole Opry in the early 1970s after "Pictou County Jail" became a hit for them.

Walt Grealis, then publisher of RPM Weekly, the Canadian music industry magazine somewhat comparable to the American Billboard or Cashbox, described their music in interesting terms on the liner notes to the Haggarts' first album, I'm Coming Home: "... simple fare with much emphasis on message. Ballady, sometimes cornball - but good country and it communicates, even to the middle of the road listener." It is not the Child canon, nor the Coffin or even Laws form of ballad, and Mackenzie might scoff, but the songs are indeed "ballady":

They locked me away
 inside a little institution
 Where broken hearts and minds were all I seen.
 There I sat alone
 until my brother came to see me
 And brought me cigarettes and magazines.

Thirty days in Pictou County jail

I got to know the preacher
 who would come by on the weekend
 To talk to me and pray with me awhile.
 He would ask the Lord to bless and
 keep me out of trouble
 And paint upon my face a kindly smile.

Thirty days in Pictou County jail

When night would come I'd think of home
 and how I'd like to be there
 And of the lady that I left behind;
 She was waitin' patiently
 And bakin' pies and weepin'
 The greatest gal a guy could ever find.

Thirty days in Pictou County jail.

(my transcription, from I'm Coming Home)

The song itself, written by Jim and Don together, is a virtual microcosm of the "evolution" of the ballad form, with one stanza of narrative, the story from which is never completed; homiletic sentiment in the form of an encounter with established faith through the second stanza; a final lyric stanza evokes primarily a feeling, and, this being country music, the feeling is of yearning, loss, and love.

Stories of the Haggart boys abound in eastern Pictou County, their original home. There was the boy of about 14, sitting on the tiny gravel beach beside the swimming hole at the foot of Park's Falls, near Thorburn, who, between surreptitious swigs on a bottle of beer, claimed to live beside Jim Haggart at French River, about five miles East. Ray MacDonald at H & R Music in New Glasgow described the

Haggarts arriving home in a rented Cadillac, "all dressed up" and wearing cowboy hats after "Pictou County Jail" had become a hit. Ray claimed they are now finished musically, that they had been a "flash in the pan," and added that if Jim Haggart was going to play in an upcoming reunion of the Bluecats, with whom he had once played, someone would have to bail him out of jail in Toronto, according to stories he had heard. The legends of their fate will continue.

Whenever the Haggarts were mentioned, Art Fitt would figuratively shake his head at the wasted talent and lost opportunity. Art says that Don Haggart lives in Truro, N.S., is still writing great songs, and remains a very nice guy. Jim appears to have been demanding, self-centred, undisciplined and disorganized, but also wielded his power as the older brother and band leader until the demise of their professional life together.

Art Fitt's introduction to the country music school of hard knocks was rapid. In working with the Haggarts, he had bypassed the *hors d'oeuvres* and plunged directly into the main course. By about age 20, he had seen the extremes of high and low which country music can deliver, but was determined still to do his level best at a solid career.

Art went on to play with Ronnie Prophet for some years, and shared a stage with Gene Watson, Charlie Pride and Red Sovine, among others. During the final segment of his

career "away," he had his own band Riverboat, and his last band, (Art Fitt and) Stallion worked mostly the Maritime circuit, primarily Halifax. When his family was young and he had been on the road for about ten years (from the age of 18), he returned home and pursued a solo career in the work that he loves. In Rosenberg's terms, Art had been a local apprentice moving rapidly to national journeyman, and then a regional craftsman. He was starting to become, in the early 1980s, at about age 30, a local celebrity: "... a move to a small market means a rise in status. A journeyman in the national marketplace may 'retire' to a secure niche as a local celebrity." (Rosenberg, "Big Fish, Small Pond." 160)

4.2 Biography: Family and Context

When Art Fitt was growing up in Stellarton in the 1950s and '60s, he could hardly have conceived of being what he is now: a successful professional country music entertainer. Not only has he become a professional musician, but, using almost exclusively his own resources and organizational skills, he is probably the best known country music performer in Pictou County. Everyone knows Art Fitt, or at least everyone know who Art Fitt is. In other words, he is rapidly becoming a local celebrity, wherein he is known for being known. Outside the immediate area (an orbit of approximately 80 miles, 4 counties) he is remembered by some few who recall his earlier career, but is not widely known.

The Stellarton of Art Fitt's childhood still had the air and lingering reality of the coal-mining company town it had been for about five generations, since 1827 (Ryan 83), complete with miners' row housing and a company-sponsored professional baseball team.⁸ Local radio production (as distinguished from regional radio reception) began about the time Art was born in the early 1950s when CKEC New Glasgow

⁸ Halifax writer and historian Ken Clare explained to me in August, 1991, that the Stellarton baseball team of the 1950s recruited players from the southern United States, who flew the Confederate flag and perhaps had an (as yet unresearched) musical influence. Clare and Colin Howell of St. Mary's University are researching the history of popular culture, particularly baseball, in Pictou County, and in other parts of Nova Scotia.

joined the airwaves; when he was a pre-adolescent, the county's longstanding "dry" status was reversed and public ale-houses or taverns became legal, this just after local families were first turning to the new form of glowing hearth, the television set. It was during these changes that Art Fitt's parents gave him his first guitar, when he was about ten years old. From then on, it seems, Art and his guitar were inseparable. His older sister Cathy reports that when she was a teenager, Art was always playing his guitar "too loud" while she was trying to talk on the telephone.

Art's father Ned was a miner and fiddler who also played piano. He fiddled in the "down east" style of Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald (in later years presumably, as they were contemporaries)⁹ and Ned has built and repaired fiddles, as well. Though Ned retired from both mining and

⁹ Fitzgerald (1914-1987), along with Don Messer, remains the fiddler whose influence is most legendary. He had played with Hank Snow in Halifax in the mid-1930s, and his fiddle recordings were widely disseminated as re-issues on the Celtic label from the 1970s. Cape Bretoner Angus Chisolm, whose fiddle recordings from the mid-thirties through early 1950s were also influential, moved to Massachusetts, where his style was emulated by the Cape Breton Acadian emigré Joseph Cormier, who played Scottish music. All of them were mentors to Jerry Holland, born (1955) in Massachusetts of a New Brunswick father. Jerry Jr. returned to Cape Breton to join John Allan Cameron's Cape Breton Symphony and become recognized there as a virtuoso. Thus the "Boston States" connection came full circle.

fiddling some years ago, Pat Fitt¹⁰ reports that he can "rattle out a tune" or two, despite his arthritis, when he is in the mood. He is a spry 81 years old, still takes a strong interest in his family's music, and loves to dance and do fine wood-work. Ned's brother Lester, as well as their father (Art's grandfather) were also fiddlers,¹¹ and their mother played the button accordion. The grandfather, a coal miner by occupation, also sang, Pat remembers, all the time; inside or outside, day and night, busy or idle, grandfather Fitt sang, mostly older "traditional songs" like "Annie Laurie," "Darling Nellie Gray," and "When You and I Were Young Maggie." Pat refers to this tradition of song as "eastern music," and attributes the family's musicality primarily to this grandfather.

Virtually the whole family is musical. Ned's wife, mother of Art and his eight siblings, played steel or hawaiian guitar, piano, and harmonica. Her brother, Joe Pat

¹⁰ Much of the information on the Fitt family comes from Pat Fitt, who is not only older than Art, affording him a deeper memory, but blessed with more free time. Art is an extremely busy man.

¹¹ An interesting sidenote is the pattern of fiddling fathers spawning professional musicians: others which come to mind are Dorrance Weir (see Glassie 1970), Carroll Baker, "His Nibs" Harry Hibbs, and Vern Cheechoo. Vern's Cree father, Sinclair Cheechoo of Moose Factory, plays in a Scottish style, derived, no doubt from Hudson's Bay employees. But I digress.

MacDonald, was "as near as you could get to Hollywood entertainment in Canada." He was a "fabulous singer, a fabulous dancer," and could imitate anyone from Al Jolson to Winston Churchill and Harry Trueman, but was "one of the town drunks." (Mackay Tape T22A) Pat plays guitar and "cordeen," pump organ and electronic keyboard, sings and makes songs. Three of the sisters used to perform as the Coal Miner's Daughters when Pat was on CKEC as the "Singing Miner." The oldest brother Neddie (Ned Jr.), whom I have never met, fiddles and plays guitar, and is reputed to have the best singing voice in the family. Pat's daughter Bonnie had a semi-professional singing career from age 11, though she has given it up, and two nephews, one of them Ed MacIntosh (see 3.1), perform publicly. The family is so musical on all sides that I learn more of the inventory every time I speak to one of them.

The scene for playing music, aside from the family home itself, was house parties on Friday night, after the week's work (the five day week had been won through a three month strike in 1947).¹² In Pat's earliest memories, these parties were always in the kitchen, always involved

¹² Ryan (1992, 85) tells of this strike briefly. In Coal in our Blood, such information as the history of organized labour and community life among Pictou County coal miners is succinctly and accessibly presented, along with veteran miners telling their own story.

drinking, and always moved on in the later evening to "talking pit." All the grown men were miners, "pit plugs" Pat called them, and they would begin to swap stories and brag of their achievements underground: "they'd be loadin' coal all night," Pat jokes. Judith Hoegg Ryan (1992) explains that these sessions of talking pit had gone on since at least the time when Ned Fitt had been a child, and that they moved from the kitchen to the front step in summer, but the lubrication was always abundant:

Even during Prohibition, liquor was available. Until 1916, Stellarton bootleggers imported it from Halifax. After that fortress fell to the troops of abstinence, rum was run into Pictou Harbour. At night kegs would be lowered over the ship's side, to be stealthily picked up by local purveyors in rowboats. A gallon of bootleg rum cost \$10, and the miners could make two gallons from that. (42)¹³

The parental generation in the Fitt "extended family" who sang, played, and told stories at these weekend parties during the 1950s included an aunt who always sang the same two songs: "Jolly Miner Boy" and "Out Behind the Barn." Pat explains that he heard the former (see text in 4.5 below) "umpteenth hundred times." Without doubt there were other mining songs at those gatherings, though none have surfaced

¹³ Among the "troops of abstinence" a generation or so earlier were my great, great, aunts and uncle who, eight miles out in the country from Stellarton, organized and ran adolescent temperance clubs, which were primarily social gatherings. See Relief Mackay (1986: 172-183).

for me yet.

As a natural outgrowth from family-based house parties, the Fitt boys began playing other house parties as guests, jamming with other musicians at those parties, and gaining a reputation for their proficiency. At this stage, the boys knew how to jam and keep an audience, yet they always brought their guitars home for their father to tune. In the earliest of those days, Art explains, the older boys would be out, and "I'd be at home with Dad, playing accompaniment." Ned's exact ear for pitch is probably also what led him to play a limited number of tunes on his fiddle; however, those that he did play, he played very well, Pat says. Though I do not have the chronology exactly straight, it seems that at about that time both Art and Pat, sometimes together, began also to provide music by invitation at special events like weddings. In any case, Art went professional, i.e. made his living at the music, just before he turned eighteen, while he was still "a shy little boy, a ten year old in an eighteen year old body," because "there was nobody around that you could learn anything from," nobody that could "teach you things." Even today, Art carries his father's perfectionism. Art says that he will write down the lyrics to three or four songs at a time, and work on the arrangement. If he cannot nail down a rendition that satisfies him, he will leave it aside: "If

I don't feel I do a song properly, do it justice, I just won't do it." When he had his own bands, Art emphasized songs with vocal harmony, with members of the band singing separate simultaneous parts. In order to do that competently, Art pointedly underlines, "you have to hear it." In the exactitude of musical performance skills, it is clear that Art learned a good deal from his father, and he enjoyed the surplus benefits of being the baby of the family, enabling him to lock in his father's aural sensitivity through extended time at his side.

Another early influence was a black man, a member of the only black family in Stellarton, according to Pat.¹⁴ When Pat was 3 or 4 years old, Russel Minnis lived nearby, and was always singing and playing his battered old guitar that sometimes had only four strings. Russel did old railroad songs, and Pat was fascinated by him. Russel's mother owned two houses and was very well liked by the Fitt boys. Tragedy struck the Minnis family, though, when "someone burnt" both houses. Despite public promises,

¹⁴ There was, and still is, a sizable black community on the east side of New Glasgow, centred in Priestville, also called the Vale Road, i.e. the road to Thorburn. Though there has been a flurry of more recent publications, the most comprehensive ethnography of such communities for the period under consideration here is Frances Henry (1973). A more recent authoritative overview of blacks in the Maritimes is Pachai (1987). On the country music tradition among Maritime blacks, see Rosenberg (1988).

Russel and his mother lived out their days in institutions: Russel in Riverton (the mental hospital), and Mrs. in an old age home. Art wrote a song about her and the tragedy and sang it to her in the home. Pat told me this story, and sang Art's song:

The old coloured lady sat there all alone
 Not a person would visit, not a call on the phone
 But I don't care what the people might say
 She's my friend and I love her,
 I guess it's my way.

The old girl I speak of was a lovely old soul
 No-one even noticed this person was old
 She worked hard every day
 and came home and worked, too;
 I tell you this woman was seventy-two.

Her house was burned,
 all that was left was the flues.
 People ignored her just like an old shoe.
 Oh, the mayor of the town
 said we'll find her a house
 But even in eight years a house couldn't be found.

If all you good people had stuck to your word
 She wouldn't be boxed in like a bird or a squirrel
 The old girl is now livin'
 in the home for the aged;
 Next trip she takes will prob'ly be to her grave.

If all [false start]
 You know you good people, you're going to grow
 old;
 And whenever you die, God help your soul.

(My transcription from Mackay tape T21B)

Art points out that he often has mixed crowds of black and white patrons, especially "down east" in Guysborough County, and including, I noted, contestants in the talent shows, and suggests that "if half the crowd will be black, you gotta be

doing something right." In the same breath, he reiterates comments often heard about the full and complex sound he accomplishes as a one-man band: "Jeez, how can one fella do that?" people will ask. (Mackay tape T11B)

It should be pointed out that, in addition to his clearly open attitude toward "racial" social mixing, an accomplishment worth noting in the face of the racial hostility that was so common in Pictou County during the 1950s, Art also underlined what has been called the "double burden" of women's work:¹⁵ "She worked hard every day and came home and worked, too." The song, written some years ago, augments his claim that "I'm for the women's movement." He made this claim while explaining how certain local entertainers gain notoriety by using "foul language" on stage: "I would never start doin' that." Such sensationalism is not only distasteful and disrespectful in mixed company, he is suggesting, but is among the "gimmicks" used to draw people to a performance. "I'm not braggin'," he says, but "if bands were smart, they'd be watching what I'm doing." He has been doing it for about 8 years, he explained in January of 1992, yet still "people don't take me seriously." He lowers his voice and leans toward me a

¹⁵ The textbook presentation of this issue is Armstrong and Armstrong, The Double Ghetto (1984). See also Luxton (1980).

bit over our table at Tim Horton's Donuts: "I've got a tighter sound."

Art is the only family member to become a full-time professional, though with significant support and concrete help from members of his family. There is even a way in which Art, as young brother, has been propelled forward in his career by others in his family, in somewhat the same way that younger members of other families get a university education.

After a childhood in such an apprenticeship, Art's skills were quite well honed, but even while working as a professional, he continued to learn both positive and negative lessons, some from among the best in the business, in his opinion. In his full-circle journey from his father's knee through house parties, weddings, bars and stadia, to other provinces and across the country, back to the familiar scenes of his youth, Art has managed to become a prophet with honour, to bring lessons, both musical and existential, home to his own county.

4.3 The Working World of Art Fitt, Entertainer

Having worked from his teen years until his late twenties in professional country music bands throughout Eastern Canada and beyond, Art Fitt found life on the road and the lifestyle which he had adopted while living it to be stretching him toward burnout. "I've been across Canada more times than I've been home," he quips. He had a young family and the travel, nightlife and drinking were taking their toll on his family life. With encouragement and a grubstake (financial help) from his brother, Art returned home to Pictou County. He worked for a short time with the Department of Highways, but almost immediately began performing solo gigs part time. Using all the technology he could afford, at first just a guitar and sound system, he was soon in such demand that he quit his day job. His sound reproduction now has a bi-amplified output and an electronic rhythm section, as well as a foot-pedal bass and a modest set of light boards. He spends about \$1500. per year renewing and improving his equipment, on average, though a new guitar can set him back more than that in itself.

He plays private parties such as weddings and Lodges (Elks and Moose) as well as a circuit of "licensed" (liquor-selling) clubs and taverns, including several Legions. At first he worked only in Pictou County, but as a hedge

against saturation, he now regularly travels to play in several other towns across four counties, occasionally as far away as Cape Breton to the East and Amherst to the West. He acts as his own agent and impresario, handling every aspect of his own performance, though he has one helper for the set-up and hefting of equipment, trouble-shooting during performances, and driving long distances. He has recorded two solo commercial albums (cassettes) which are sold in local record stores, but mostly from the stage during his performances. In his earlier career, he had also recorded with his band Riverboat, but, though he intends to get me a copy, I have not yet heard those.

"I see myself as a businessman," he remarks, and his entire persona and firm grip on the economics of his work reinforce that identity. Art credits Ronnie Prophet, with whom Art worked for about nine years off and on, with showing him most of what he knows: "I couldn't pay him what I learned." First, he learned from Prophet how to entertain, not just present music. In this, the legendary Chet Atkins concurs, having dubbed Prophet "The Greatest Entertainer of All Time." (Delaney 1994) To entertain effectively, Art learned, you have to "use what you've got," i.e. play to your strengths, which leads Art to note that he (Art) is a "damn good rhythm [guitar] player." Although he obviously plays all his own lead guitar, he doesn't consider

himself especially good, even admitting "I'm not a guitarist." His brother and many others would disagree, but Art is very likely still judging himself by the more exacting standards of professional "road" bands and studio work. "I have to watch what I'm doin'," he says, "I have to try the songs." This use of strong suits and avoidance of songs which he feels he can't do well is a continuation of his father's lessons and allows him an easy confidence in the songs which he chooses.

It is such confidence which Prophet also taught him in non-musical aspects of performance, and this could be considered the second fundamental lesson gleaned from Prophet. Art describes Prophet as a master at joking around with the audience, loosening them up and making them feel comfortable. This was a slow lesson for Art to learn, as he was very retiring as a youth, he claims, and relied too much at first on the short-hand of alcohol to gain confidence. Now a master himself at stage patter, he says: "If you can joke with a crowd, you've got it made." (His skill at this is elaborated in Chapter 5.) Art points out that other local performers do not develop their stage manner: "They don't talk to the audiences. They don't even announce their songs." This is a manner which, given the widespread diffidence in the male culture of Pictou County, Art himself might have assumed had he not developed more outgoing skills

in his time "away."

Art notes that some young artists can go to the other extreme and take wide publicity early in their career too seriously, as happened with the Haggarts.¹⁶ People think they are going to be a star when "God almighty, they haven't played a bar yet...How can you learn if you think you're the best now?...You can't do business that way." The point is to have a balanced attitude, be "confident, not cocky, humble, not shy." It is like being a carpenter or a plumber, he says (writing my thesis for me), and also uses the analogy of "good fighters [boxers] from this area. It's all a matter of attitude."

The third thing Art learned from Ronnie Prophet is a clear and hard-headed business sense. Prophet generally is his own agent, though while Art was with him, he acted as booking agent for a time. Art still has his agent's licence, and served as agent for other musicians while working out of Halifax. He had hired some of the best musicians for his own band, and found himself being called by the musician's union to suggest acts for other gigs, and

¹⁶ Art's comments on other local performers can be sharply critical, and his intimate knowledge of personal histories with respect to both "up and comers" and well-known performers from past years is such that he has asked for my confidence on those remarks, which I respect here. Hence, names are not used, and, when his opinion corresponds to that of others I have spoken with, I generally use the plural to describe it, as in "people say that..."

sort of fell into the business. When he returned to Pictou County, he managed three separate DJ (disc jockey) acts to be hired out for parties. The management of these acts came to be a burden, however, and Art found that the jockeys themselves tended to play their personal favourites rather than what was wanted by the crowd. Art's basic logic in all of this, as learned from Ronnie Prophet, was: "Why pay somebody else 15%?"

But Art has developed his economic acumen for the local scene with a rigour, energy, and thoroughness which even Ronnie Prophet would have to admire. He advertises local wares through small signs on stage for an annual fee. This fee paid for the re-upholstering of his gear recently, and not incidentally puts Art in ongoing contact with other small business people, as evidenced by our discussion at Tim Horton's Donut Shop in January of 1992 (Mackay tapes T11 and T12). Throughout our discussion there, Art was greeting and bidding "see ya" to others, and on at least two occasions confirmed details of signs or other minor terms of contract or barter.

Art is never still. When performing, he admits: "I'm workin' my arse off...doin' four things at a time." He has to start the (programmed) drums with his foot and play bass at the same time, also with his feet, while continuing his patter, and having the next song at the tip of his tongue:

you have to "punch in quick; that way there's no dead air." But off stage, Art is never still either. Aside from jogging near-marathon distances for a pastime, Art is continually finding ways to broaden his zone of performance opportunities and consolidate those which he has developed. He claims to have personally developed the week night market for local clubs, largely through the talent contests.

He offered his first talent show at Thompy's in the Aberdeen Mall, New Glasgow: "It just took off - bang, there was a crowd. None of us thought it was gonna take off that quick." Yet within three or four years, you couldn't drag a crowd to Thompy's with a team of horses. Having lost favour with audiences, the new management at Thompy's spent \$100,000 dollars on decor, and put a "piece of Plywood" for a stage. Art now holds the New Glasgow talent nights at the Legion. He often has to bite his tongue when he sees how some clubs are operated. He says that one place can be empty while across the street another is full, and the cause of the difference is management. This is one important reason why Art usually handles his own advertising and controls the setup and sequence of his own performance.

Art had his worst year of ten in 1992-93, largely because of the economy, he thinks (see 5.2 for other explanations). He will cut prices, and even perform free to open "new territory," in his words, or retain a scene that

he thinks still has potential. Otherwise, he fears, "guys will go to records." He points out that he does not qualify for small business loans from government to consolidate his enterprise as easily as others from "another country," i.e. recent immigrants.

Art is proud of regional music and has witnessed certain forms of it flourish. He thinks that Stompin' Tom Connors has capitalized on a minimal talent, and as a consequence, the public "wouldn't give a serious fella a chance." He mentions specifically Terry Carisse, Eddy Eastman, and The Family Brown, all of whom have had respectable but modest careers in Canadian country music, but have no dramatic gimmick. Overall, "Canadians don't buy Canada," Art says. Anne Murray is a big exception, he thinks, because "she had something that the world wanted."

There is something essential in Art's attitude toward the music of Cape Breton. Perhaps it comes in part from his father's reverence for the Scottish fiddle style there, maybe he has learned this in his gigs "down east," in Guysborough and Cape Breton. He often comments on the relative sophistication of audiences in these areas, and thinks that Rita MacNeil is wonderful. He faults others for not seeing past her appearance, and says: "She has a heart the size of her." He has recorded her "Working Man," a song about coal mining, on his recent cassette release,

Stage Album. He credits John Allan Cameron with opening a lot of doors for other musicians.¹⁷ He sees the country music of eastern Canada gaining a new strength, and says that it used to be, speaking especially of the artists cited above, that they were "just Cape Breton songs, that's all they were. Today, you're not just a Cape Bretoner singin'." The way he phrases it suggests as much an ethnic as a regional identity which finally has gained appreciation outside the ghetto, so to speak. This recognition is no small feat, for "Capers" or "Capies" were in my boyhood the butt of jokes for us "sophisticated" mainlanders; the cycles of jokes which are told as "Newfie" or "Pollack" jokes elsewhere were for us jokes about Cape Bretoners. For all I know, those in New Glasgow may have told jokes about us "hicks." So operates the pecking order of "ethnic" humour and *blason populaire*.

In his comments on Cape Breton music, Art Fitt is suggesting that Cape Breton is analagous to perhaps Memphis, where Elvis Presley first gave Rock and Roll a broad popular face; to Liverpool, where the Beatles were formed; or to Nashville, where modern country music was defined. Each of

¹⁷ This respect for J'n Allan (as his name is pronounced in Cape Breton) is shared by Art's Nephew, Ed MacIntosh: five of the songs I saw Ed perform that one evening appear on two Cameron albums which I happen to have, four from side A of The Best of John Allan Cameron, including the two John Prine songs which Ed performed.

those cities has come to be metonym for a style of music. In like fashion, with the recent success of talented prodigies such as fiddler Ashley MacIssac, who at about 20 years of age has worked with Philip Glass and Paul Simon, Cape Breton may very well make serious and recognizable contributions to music in general.

For a locally made music to be respected, it must be presented with dignity, Art feels. He harbours no excuses for sloppiness in its presentation, even at the visual level. His brother Pat points out that when Art performs, everything has a clean professional appearance: all wires and cables are tucked out of sight or taped securely, his equipment is upholstered, and he is always, even off stage in his personal life, a natty dresser. Pat comments:

You'll never see Art looking sloppy. Like me, I'll go to town with my work clothes. You'll never see Art like that. He's always right dressed up. He's always buying new clothes. You should see his closets; he spends more on clothes than I spend on my mortgage.

(notes of a conversation, 29 December, 1991)

Art takes a more and more active role in his community, one which often makes large claims on his limited time. He works as a counsellor for alcoholics, has produced a drug awareness video and, as elaborated in Chapter 5, Art takes his civic role seriously. This link between a small

business livelihood and community service does have its reciprocal benefits, but Art is clearly also intent on giving something back to the community which he feels has given so much to him.

4.4 The Talent Contests

The one aspect which appears unique in the organization of his work-world, for there are other one-man bands, is the talent contests which he organizes and co-sponsors. They are held every second Wednesday evening throughout the spring and summer at Diamond Jim's Tavern in Westville and sometimes at other venues such as the New Glasgow Legion. The 10 winners from these contests, held over a period of twenty weeks, become finalists in a gala event in late summer, held in 1991 on Sunday, August 11 at Branch 28 of the Royal Canadian Legion, Stellarton. The Legion, having the licence and rules of a private club, is one of the few places that a large number of people can legally drink on a Sunday without buying a meal. It also has a powerful built-in advantage of having both personnel and the physical layout to handle such an event, without special provision. It is this finale of the talent contests which I will describe in some detail in order to suggest a few things about the successful management of resources in a career such as Art Fitt's.

The event begins at 7:00 p.m., but all the tables are occupied by 6. Legionnaires are managing the door, the bar, the seating and the canteen, Art Fitt has just arrived in his pickup truck for the last of several trips to the hall,

and within a half hour the hall is full to the fire limit with about 500 buzzing people. By now Art is clearly the host and prime organizer, walking from table to table, coffee in hand, greeting, introducing, eyes constantly darting to the big picture: the whole room, the entire event.

He is a handsome, confident man in his late '30's, dressed tonight in grey flannels and navy blazer. He confers regularly with the Legionnaires and his personal assistant, who acts as messenger and technical assistant. His two physical touchstones, though, are the stage from which he will perform, host, and accompany the contestants, and the first table by the entrance, where his father sits in the corner chair facing the rest of the hall. The rest of that first table is occupied by his sister, sisters-in-law, aunt, and a few friends of the family, for which I qualified on this occasion.¹⁸

The second table from the door soon fills with other sisters and their friends. Though this is Art Fitt's event, it is also clearly not only a community event of some importance and popularity, but one in which the connection

¹⁸ At this point, I had gotten to know Art fairly well. At one point early in the evening, he made special mention from the microphone of visitors from Montreal, Jock and Danielle. My cover was blown! Though this announcement had no material effect on my observations, it did make my note-taking a bit more conspicuous.

between the two is his large family. They are there in force, and are almost as active as he in moving from table to table, greeting and joking. In Ned Fitt's case however, people come to him. Art's father has a steady stream of acquaintances dropping by, shaking hands, buying him a beer. Somewhat later, this line of acquaintances will be largely female (including his daughters), waltzing him off to the dance floor. Generally, when someone arrives at Art's father's table, Art drifts off to another table, and attends to another organizational detail. They are, in a sense, father and son together, "working the hall" together, in tandem.

Some of the conversational buzz includes fingers pointing to the front of the hall, beside the stage, where sits a large oak buffet, made by Ned Fitt. This is the prize for a raffle, the winning ticket for which is to be drawn during a break in the middle of the evening.

The taped music, mostly outlaw variety (Waylon and Willie, see 3.5) is slowly increased in volume and shortly thereafter the house lights dim, stage lights are up, Art Fitt is in position, and it's 2 for the show. Art opens with the regional anthem, "Sonny's Dream," written by Newfoundland's Ron Hynes. He reminds the audience that "this ain't River John," suggesting that this is the big time in the town of Stellarton, and unlike the country dances at the

community hall of River John on Saturday nights, where two of the contest judges sometimes play, we are in for a serious night of "Sunday best" entertainment.

He tells those gathered: "The more you drink the better I'll sound," and launches into "The Race is On," "Dumas Walker," "Oh, Lonesome Me," and a fine medley of "Back Home Again" with "Detroit City." "During this last song, the hall is one large choir on the refrain, and Art, hootenanny - style, stops singing:

"I wanna go home, I wanna go Home ..."

Art, toward the end of the response which his silent call engendered says: "Now let's do it together... That's what she said." A few more recent songs about broken promises and a fortified dancing fool, and the audience is warm.

Before the contest begins, Art announces and displays the prizes, all of which will go to the winner: a white hollow-body Fender electric guitar, a piece of Austrian crystal glass, and a number of other smaller prizes. He introduces the 3 judges, one of whom is his nephew, a semiprofessional musician, and the other two are **Ron and Shirley**, a husband and wife duo who perform at old-time dances on fiddle and electronic keyboard. Art explains that of the 10 contestants, 7 are now present (some are working, but expected), and he breaks into "Wildwood Flower" to begin

the contest. Even today, for many of those present, "wildwood Flower" is probably the first guitar tune learned, assuring a longevity of legacy for "Mother" Maybelle Carter, whose guitar run in the recording by the original Carter Family is one of the most famous in country music. In playing this, the tune which many pre-teens stretched their arms over an old hollow-body guitar to learn, Art is framing the amateur nature of what will follow.

Five contestants do their stuff, then there's a break during which a "glass turkey" (40 oz. of whisky) is raffled off. Art returns to the stage and dedicates a song to a couple who are moving to Halifax: "Hillbilly Rock," followed by "The Wanderer." The whole evening, except for the contest segments proper, is punctuated by birthdays and wedding anniversaries.

The winners are announced, and Art takes over the music again: "Life Turned Her That Way," "They Call Me the Fireman." Art then calls on the contest winner, Margie MacDonald to sing the last waltz, "Daddy, Tell Me 'Bout the Good Old Days." During the last waltz, a fight breaks out, and before most people notice it, Art is saying: "Come on folks, stay on the dance floor, we'll get a good old jig."

Art later explains that this is the first time there has been a fight, and he will be talking to the Legion President about it tomorrow. He said "I saw trouble brewing

all night." As an entertainer, he handled the incident with cool aplomb in classic honky tonk fashion, namely, keep playing and try to keep the people dancing.

I would like to draw a few tentative conclusions about Art Fitt's total performance and organization of his work life. The first has to do with familial connections. Art is not just another performer, not even just another local performer. He is a Fitt, son of Ned, brother to 8, all of whom live in the county, many of whom were at the talent night finale. They collectively serve as intermediary between his role as performer/celebrity and the larger community. Not only is Art the father of kids in the same schools and activities as dozens of other parents, he is Ned's boy, who is doing well, plays fine, and works hard. His father's friends, his sisters and sisters' friends, their husbands and children and neighbours are all part of a complex network which negotiates between Art Fitt, the celebrity, and those in the county who can barely keep the tune in "I wanna go home" ["Detroit City"]. Hundreds of people that evening shook his hand, introduced a friend or neighbour who shook his hand, shared an anecdote. The shaken hand is the same one which shook Charlie Pride's hand and Gene Watson's hand and Ronnie Prophet's hand. It's good medicine, this contact, and though few ask for autographs or rip off his shirt, it is clear, despite all the winners,

that Art Fitt is the man of the evening, the one who touches and is touched. Contagious magic has many levels.

In this mediation by family, it might be noted, is a kind of synthesis of domestic and assembly traditions, blurring the line between these analytically distinct forums of musical tradition in the context of clear celebrity status.

Further, his performance and role suggest the need to refine the definition of occupational status in country music performance. Yes, he is a local celebrity, a big fish in a small pond, a local/regional craftsman, but his working of the local scene has a kind of intensity and particularistic knowledge which is both unusual and the key of his success. Each of his contestants has brothers and sisters, neighbours and friends, kids in little league, uncles in the legion. This was not a Randy Travis concert, or even the smokey rink at which Newfoundland's Simani might perform. This was one very large living room. By sponsoring the contests, Art is employing a kind of strategy which might be drawn more carefully in linguistic or architectural terms. He masses, then he pierces, he consolidates and opens, he performs then encourages performance, he sings then handles a fight, he follows a declarative with an interrogative, his frame has windows. The hearth of his own performance remains central, but the

house of his performance world keeps having rooms and stories added, tilts and lean-to's attached.

Neither cowboy nor industrial worker, not a star nor merely a party favourite, the craftsman country performer, who is the bread and butter of live country music, must be a bit of all these things while employing a highly specific cultural comportment appropriate to the job.

4.5 The Leisure World of Pat Fitt, Entertainer

"I'm just a thumper," Pat announces as he begins to tell me about his own music and that of his family. "You were a professional musician yourself sometimes, weren't you?" I asked him. "If you mean I was paid, yah: a fella gave me a dollar one time to sing a song. Another fella gave me twenty to stop." In fact, though, Pat has played publicly, occasionally for recompense, a number of times over the years. He was the first performer at the Bonna Vista tavern in New Glasgow some years ago when their licencing status changed to allow it; he used to play at the Steelworkers' Hall in Trenton; he has done "Christmas Daddy" shows on CKEC radio, and was for a short time in 1968 or 1969 "The Singing Miner" there.

On another occasion, Pat almost had a job at C.P. Smith's "home furnishing" store, the one now operated by Murray Smith of the Pictou County Pickers (see 3.2). They had a new organ on display as a promotion item, and Pat sat down and played it until a circle of people had gathered. Presuming that he was playing from the printed music in front of him, a book with "old favourites" such as "Swanee River" (Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home"), they offered him a job playing for the store to draw attention to the organ. However, when they learned that he could only play

by ear, they refused to hire him. "I done myself out of a job," he laments. This story emerged when Pat had brought his electronic keyboard and "cordeen" to my parents' house once, and my sister had sat down and played a tune from the Presbyterian hymnal, reading as she went, in her light, musical, but somewhat deliberate way. Pat commented that his playing didn't sound "refined" like that, but that if he heard a tune he liked, he just sat down and played it. When he played that day at my parents' house, raising envious eyebrows on the Mackay side, one difference became clear: when struggling for the melodic line with his right hand, Pat's rhythm chording with his left hand never broke stride, the song remained "clappable" and danceable throughout. My sister or myself, drawing on the limited musical literacy gained from our piano lessons of many years ago, will find the melody note by note, letting the rhythm slide when necessary, in order to get it "right." Pat's skill, derived from many years of performing for groups of people rather than relentless solo practice, was to hold the "rhythm track" of familiar songs down steady, while others could, when necessary, keep the song running on the melodic front.

Pat had learned how to play piano in a week, he claims, by just sitting down and doing it after carefully watching someone else play. But competence on other instruments did not come so easily. When he tried to scratch his way toward

music on the fiddle, despite his father's advice that "there's as much music in the middle of that bow as there is at the end," he was never able to master bowing technique, and Pat's wife Noreen gave up on Pat's likelihood of success on the instrument just before Pat himself did. Pat's "instrument," though, the one which he plays most in public, is the accordion. In typical Pat fashion, he tells how a friend of his had a "cordeen" but couldn't drive a car, Pat had a car and couldn't play "cordeen." They traded. After he had stowed it in the closet for a few months, he took it out, taught himself how to play, and has never looked back. Others now tell him that he is "next to Harry Hibbs on the cordeen."¹⁹ He has also given the mandolin and banjo a try, but didn't get very far on either, he claims.

Pat's "professional" experience "wasn't like Art does; I was among the drunks," he explains, referring especially to his time playing at private parties, the Steelworkers' Hall, and the tavern. One of the reasons that Pat has never felt at ease with performance at such scenes is that he did not have a stage setup, no equipment or barrier between himself and the milling patrons. I suggested that maybe

¹⁹ Harry Hibbs (1942-1989) was a Newfoundland accordion player of great renown in Eastern Canada. The large part of his live career was performing for expatriate Newfoundlanders like himself in Toronto, particularly at the Caribou Club there. His ten or so LP recordings sold well in the Maritimes.

nobody was really listening to the music. "And the ones that were listening thought they owned you," he points out. "With drunks slobberin'" and others hanging around to drink the free beer that was sent up to "grease the fiddler," in this case the accordianist, others hoping for a chance to sing or fight, the evenings grew rather ragged. Having stopped drinking some years ago, just as has his brother, Art, Pat has no interest in this scene whatsoever anymore.

Pat's original interest in becoming a musician was partly for the social role that playing would bring him. When he saw a good guitarist become the focal point of a party, when "everybody in that house paid attention, took notice," he recalls, "I didn't know it back then, but I said to myself: I'm gonna learn to play that guitar." He continues to perform occasionally on request for social gatherings or for benefits, usually turning down payment when offered.

Pat's daughter Bonnie was a prodigy; at age 11, she was a local country star of sorts, and made a couple of "single" recordings, one of which sold about 4,000 copies locally (an immense number, considering the size of the market). Performing in public, for "20 people or 2,000 people," as well as in the studio, came very easily to Bonnie, and she sang with an adult poise of adult themes. She was a natural, Pat explains: "When she sang, people stopped

whatever they were doin'." She had some broad exposure, and a number of opportunities, but her youth made a career in country music awkward at a number of levels. At one point, they met Red Sovine through Art. They pitched a song of Bonnie's to Sovine, hoping that he might record it or pass it on to another high-profile artist. "I wouldn't touch that with a 10 foot pole," was Sovine's response, meaning that Bonnie's interpretation was just too good to interfere with. He took the tape back to Nashville, saying: "You'll be hearing from me." Red Sovine fell dead a few days later, and they have never known what happened to the tape.

But Pat and Noreen felt that they did not want to make any enduring commitments to the music business on their daughter Bonnie's behalf, they did not want to "sign her life away." As it turned out, Bonnie showed decreasing interest in performance as she grew up, and has left it behind altogether. She studied at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish where she met her present husband, Newfoundlander Chris O'Leary. Chris graduated with a music degree from "X", specializing in classical tenor voice performance. His professors had encouraged him to turn professional and he declined. Instead, Bonnie and Chris are raising a family in the house which Pat built for them next to his own at the old Idema place on the Lamont Road. What is cause and what is consequence in all of this, Bonnie's

tale, is difficult to determine.

Pat began to compose songs after he moved out to the country from Stellarton, first to Telford, at a house once owned by local character "Louie the Lord" Livingstone. Some of the boys in Telford had the habit of relieving neighbours of surplus possessions when they weren't home, but they were finally caught. Pat wrote a song called "The Telford Bust," which tells that story, and "the local fellas got a kick out of that." He continued making songs in the narrative style, many of them humorous, what he called "Stompin' Tom type" songs, another of which was about the travails of a local game warden. He simultaneously created lyric songs in a more straight ahead country mode, some of which became Bonnie's recordings. His most recent song, though, has a much more serious theme, and it is the background and text of it which I will describe here.

Pat Fitt, unlike his brother Art, has generally worked at other things for a living, and provides for a good many of his own needs by being very self-sufficient, handy with tools, and a barterer. He lives back in the country on the Lamont Road between Egerton and Telford, about three miles from Sutherland's River. In this circumstance, Pat and his family can survive on a low cash income.

His working life began much as it had for generations before him, as a miner. As a teenager, having dropped out

of school before reaching grade 5, Pat was showering at the McBean mine wash-house after fighting a local forest fire one summer day in 1966. A foreman of the mine recognized him as a Fitt, and asked him if he was as good a worker as his old man. "Twice as good," Pat replied, and he went underground the next day, all 118 pounds of him, he remembers. His father was not pleased. As so commonly happens among miners, fathers are at least ambivalent about their sons following them into the pits. By the time of Pat Fitt's generation, many older miners were no longer optimistic about the safety or economic security of the mines. They were only too accurate in these assessments. Except for occasional minor strip-mining (surface dug operations), all of the local mines had ceased operation by 1970, "when the government shut off the money flow," Pat explains. Ned Fitt had quit mining in 1952 after an explosion at the MacGregor mine in Stellarton killed nineteen men. By the time of the Westray disaster of 1992, 244 men had died in the coal mines of Pictou County. Pat felt nonetheless that it "was part of me that had to go there," a feeling often expressed by young men from mining families. Retired Stellarton miner James Johnson told Judith Hoegg Ryan: "In about two years you went from a boy to a man, regardless of your age..." (1992, 89). Pat Fitt came of age in exactly this way, remaining in the mine for

just over two years. He says it was "the best job I ever had," in that the camaraderie and teamship was like nowhere else he has known. But he told me recently that he only came to realize the kind of worry that he was putting his parents through after the Westray explosion, when he spent about a week, day and night, with a close friend, Elwood MacKay, whose son was trapped and lost underground. Elwood's other son, Joe was a spokesman for the miners after the explosion.

It was in this context that Pat Fitt wrote a song about Westray. He wrote the song in about a half hour, as he usually does if the inspiration comes, but kept refining it for a couple of reasons. He avoided names in the song in case anything he said could have legal repercussions. At a more directly human level, he was particularly sensitive to the feelings of the families of lost miners, and avoided all details of the actual event, including the date, in his final version of the song. He also wanted to avoid "gettin' into the blood and guts of it." When he had finished the song, he went to his friend, Elwood, sang it for him, and said that if for any reason, he (Elwood) did not want him to sing the song, that would be the end of it right there. Elwood approved, so the song continues:

There's stories been told about coal miner's gold
In the Foord seam under our town.
It's injured its name, caused death, caused pain

The Foord seam under our town.

Twenty-six men trapped underground
Fathers, brothers, husbands and sons;
Twenty-six men trapped underground
In the mine they call Westray.

It's dangerous, they know,
it's a tomb of solid coal
The Foord seam under our town.
It's injured and maimed, caused death, caused pain
The Foord seam under our town.

Twenty-six men trapped underground
Fathers, brothers, husbands and sons;
Twenty-six men died underground
In the mine they call Westray.

Now everyone knows you can't mine that coal
In the Foord seam under our town.
Too many has tried, too many has died
In the Foord seam under our town.

Twenty-six men trapped underground
Fathers, brothers, husbands and sons;
Twenty-six men died underground
In the mine they call Westray.

The statues now stand, they hold all the names
Of the miners lost in our town.
That stone can't replace one smilin' face
Of a miner lost in our town.

Twenty-six men died underground
Fathers, brothers, husbands and sons;
Twenty-six men died underground
In the mine they call Westray.

(My transcription, from Mackay tape T21B)

Pat had hoped that Art would record the song, and that it could be used as a local fund-raiser, but the support they called on to make the recording was not forthcoming, so the record was never made. The song clearly fits into a pattern of composition which specifically deals with mine disasters,

such as (at least) five locally made songs dealing with the Springhill disasters of 1956 and 1958 alone (from Neil Rosenberg's collection), as well as the more widely known song by Peggy Seeger. O'Donnell (1992, 137-147) prints these six, and many others dealing with mining disasters.

It was Pat himself who pointed out that such "event" songs were part of the musical fabric in his father's time: "If there was an accident, there was a song written about it," hearkening back very clearly to the broadside tradition. Pat added at that point, early in our interview that much "local folklore...[has been] lost forever." This last comment by Pat made me realize more clearly that, aside from the organic intellectualism he exhibits in songs such as the Westray one (elaborated in 5.4 for his brother), Pat has also become a sort of meta-informant.

Over the past few years I have gotten to know Pat Fitt quite well. His wife Noreen worked for my parents for a short time as a care-giver in the house, beginning, I think, as a replacement for Pat's sister Cathy (with whom I had gone to a couple of events, as described above in 2.2). Pat also helped out my parents in innumerable small ways, and one or both of them dropped by the house often, Pat especially when I was home, it seems. He took an interest in my research project, and began offering information without my prompting. We often swapped notes on music as

well as on musical events and preferences. We came to have a good rapport. He was fascinated by my family history as presented in my mother's book Simple Annals (Relief Mackay 1986), which was based on family letters written from the mid to late nineteenth century. Pat was particularly taken with the story of my great, great uncle George, who went "off to the States, and never came back." Before he left home, while he was still a boy, George had carved his initials with a diamond ring on the dining room window, where they remain. He died rather mysteriously in New York at age 41. Pat says that maybe by the next time I'm home he will have written a song about George. This is one bridge across the current which divides our rather different worlds.

During a discussion/minor jam in my parents' kitchen one evening, I played "The Times They Are A-Changin'" on my harmonica. Pat didn't recognize it, so I identified it and played some of it again, in case the musically repetitive opening had overlaid the melody too fully. No, he didn't know that one. I explained that it was a Bob Dylan tune. "Who?" I trotted out all the contextual information I could, mentioning Joan Baez, folk revival music and protest music in the 1960s, as well as "Blowin' in the Wind," in case there was a problem with my pronunciation or something. I played a bit of the tune for the third time. Nothing

twigged. He had never heard of Bob Dylan; no bridge. The net which reaches so deeply can also be very narrow. I was reminded of Glassie's thesis once again:

In general, folk material exhibits major variation over space and minor variation through time, while products of popular or academic culture exhibit minor variation over space and major variation through time. The natural divisions of folk material are, then, spatial, where the natural divisions of popular material are temporal; that is, a search for patterns in folk material yields regions, where a search for patterns in popular material yields periods. (Glassie 1964, 33)

I teach this idea by distinguishing the deep and narrow from the shallow and wide, suggesting long history, limited scope, and thick acquaintance in the former; rapid turnover, broad dissemination, and the common denominator in the latter. Glassie was of course referring to material culture in his generalization, but the model generally holds for other culture items. Pat Fitt doesn't know Bob Dylan, but then Bob Dylan doesn't know Pat Fitt. Pat's deep, thick, intimate knowledge of where he comes from and what his community means allows him to compose local songs which an outsider could never create. Bob Dylan has served as both a sponge and springboard for so many musical styles and intellectual traditions that whole books have tried to straighten them out. It is the nexus between these two realms, the popular and broad on the one hand, the traditional and located on the other, which is the analytic

focus of Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

"IT FEELS LIKE I'M CHEATING:" LEISURE, LIVELIHOOD AND CRAFT IN COUNTRY MUSIC

5.1 Career Profiles in Popular and Country Music

The general public knows country music largely through its high profile variant: well-known stars and their well-worn songs about working class life. These "three minute soap-operas" sung by established country music stars, mostly American, form a kind of meniscus over the fluid body of living country music, dominating the radio and video presentations through which the broad public becomes acquainted with the music. Such established artists will typically sell discs in the hundreds of thousands of copies or better, will have at least one hit recognizable to the casual fan, will play to live audiences numbering in the thousands or in the tens of thousands and have at least a dozen people (or as union contracts might define it "full time equivalents") whose livelihood depends directly on the artist: other musicians in the band and in the studio, record producers and sound engineers, song writers and

publishers, bus drivers, roadies, concessions operators, security guards, live sound board operators, agents, promoters, lawyers, photographers and video directors.

I used to talk somewhat cynically about the Michael Jackson industry and the Madonna industry. As a gesture suggesting the scale of such megastars, consider that, when the Pope and Michael Jackson both visited Montreal during the same season in 1984, the papal advance crew had to interrupt Jackson's crew, already installed at the Olympic Stadium, to interpose a performance platform within Jackson's superstructure. The Pope's platform was deconstructed after his performance, whereupon the Jackson crew resumed their task of building up the stage to approximately seven stories. The overhead for one such performance would be several times my annual teacher's salary, as would the promotion budget for one Garth Brooks album.

As the reigning mega-star of the current boom in country music, Oklahoma's Garth Brooks is known for the drama and scale of his live performances. He has been known, for instance, to bound off the stage and fly through the air fifty feet over the heads of an audience, suspended by a cable from a complex superstructure; then smash his guitar into kindling before meaningfully singing about the guy who fears that he is about to beat up his wife or about

the sort of love which gambles on "two of a kind, working on a full house." It is enough to make the faint-hearted wilt. His three capacity audience shows at Texas Stadium in Dallas, on September 23-25, 1993, involved the following preparation:

A crew of over 600 professionals worked on the show using 50 miles of electrical cable, over 5,000 sheets of plywood, 7,500,000 watts of power, 150,000 pounds of speaker cabinets and cables, and three-and-a-half miles of heavy gauge chain to hang the super-structure housing equipment. The show required over 40,000 man hours to complete production after 60 semi-tractor trailers were used to haul the equipment to Dallas. (Wood 1993)

"Awesome was the word used by...his own mother," according to the same report. Aside from such obvious questions such as why these resources were not used to feed refugees or fund important research, it does also beg any question of country music humility. Despite his performance antics and the scale of his career, Brooks has claimed in interviews that if ten people show up for a performance and want to hear his music, he will play.

The point of these illustrations is that in this, the third widespread popularity boom for country music since the 1950's,¹ some of the country cousins have entered the same

¹ The three major waves of widespread "crossover" popularity for country music over the past forty years have been, by my reading, in brief: (1) that which developed about 1960 after country music lost favour to rock and roll, and was epitomized by figures such as Jim Reeves, Patsy

economic big leagues as other popular musicians. Though the demographic profile of country music fans is somewhat distinct, and the country music business does have unique features, the political economy of certain career structures in country music is not significantly different from those in other popular musics. That political economy is partly determined today by the role of videos and therefore of visual image, and is increasingly determined by concentration in the ownership of the means of cultural production, particularly the giant record companies.

The world of contemporary commercial country music typically involves a high velocity in the vertical patterns of careers. In this context, high velocity means that many performers gain and lose temporary star status, come and go, are made and unmade with rapidity. Vertical mobility, upward and downward, can be fast, with unbelievable glory or pitiable ignominy waiting for those who travel the fast track. In a mould conditioned also by Hollywood, fanzines, and professional sports, performance careers are commonly seen to be wildly successful, with star status, or

Cline and Don Gibson, whose "uptown" songs remain extremely popular and have entered the country music canon; (2) the urban cowboy craze and soft country renditions about 1980, represented best by artists such as Kenny Rogers, Anne Murray, John Denver, and Olivia Newton-John; (3) the current crop of country rock artists such as Garth Brooks, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Mary Chapin Carpenter.

completely inconsequential - failures.

It is this musical world to which Simon Frith, British sociologist and popular music analyst, refers when he suggests that the traditional "pyramid" of career advancement (elaborated below) has been replaced by what he calls the Talent Pool:

The dynamic here comes from the centre. There are no longer gatekeepers regulating the flow of stardom, but multinationals "fishing" for material, pulling ideas, sounds, styles, performers from the talent pool and dressing them up for worldwide consumption. The process is, from both the musicians' and audience's point of view essentially irrational. Who gets selected for success seems a matter of chance and quirk, a lottery, and success itself is fragmented, unearned, impermanent. The "creative" role in this pop scheme is assigned to the *packagers*, to record producers, clothes designers, magazine editors, etc.; they are the "authors" of success, the intelligence of the system.

"Audience" now describes the group delivered to advertisers and the media by music; it exists as any sort of collectivity only in this act of collusion. To put this another way, community is now defined by style: performance/audience relationships exist only as they are mediated. (Frith, "Picking up the Pieces," 1988, 113)

By emphasizing the unseen hand of "the system" in arbitrarily pushing forward items for intentional taste communities whose members are guided toward a kind of manipulated bricolage,² Frith is here systematizing a

² Adapted from the French (where it can also mean home handiwork), bricolage is used in cultural studies to indicate a sort of patchwork meaning system which employs disparate physical emblems. Derived from Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (1966 16-22), one of the best usages of the

prevalent attitude into a sociological ideal type, painting hard lines around a vaguely held resentment that mass culture has really taken hold. He suggests that large companies collapse the most marketable of genres, clubs, styles, musicians, independent records ("Indies"), markets, videos and ideas into a "lowest common denominator" product which is in turn massively disseminated to whomever in several countries can be separated from their attention span and a few bucks. For the top end of the entertainment political economy and for the most widely spread of cultural products this model may provide some essential insight and a kind of map for the process. This perspective helps to explain what is meant by the "royal we" when someone like Canadian country music star-in-the-making Michelle Wright says, as she did recently, that the song "Take it Like a Man" did very well for "us"¹ and explains what "we" are going to do next, with reference to her individual career. The "we" of course refers to the production, management and promotion team of which she is the figurehead, though not necessarily the guiding force.

Frith's model, which suggests an appropriation by the centre of selected cultural products from the periphery,

notion of bricolage is Hebdige (1979).

¹ Canadian Big Country Awards broadcast on CBC television, 30 May, 1993.

helps to explain also how it is that fads can occur in popular music, this year drawing from reggae or Cajun, next year from punk or delta blues, continually renewing the apparent relevance of popular musics by siphoning influences from marginal scenes. Such a dynamic incorporates new or naïve energy, especially from younger artists, into a marketing plan for a refined product. This kind of cultural repressive tolerance is analogous, incidentally, to the recruitment and circulation of members of a political elite.⁴

⁴ Analysis of these elements of elite formation and maintenance in the political arena, grounded in the work of Pareto and Mosca, is admirably summarized by Bottomore (1964).

5.2 Musical Cottage Industry: Craft and Community

What Frith's model overlooks is the everyday operation of cultural products, the working and machination of songs, for example, in the week to week life of living people in their families, peer groups and communities. There is in the life of a cultural product a second level of appropriation (leaving aside for the moment the question of how cultural products originate) in its use by ordinary people "on the ground." Not only do ordinary and far-flung communities and their musical sources contribute dynamism to the ongoing qualities contained in popular music and listen passively to widely marketed musical products, they also take the music back selectively, use it, chew it, consume and digest it, repeating the meaningful songs over and over. People make some of those songs "theirs" in a mediated yet real way. If a particular song which is frequently played in a given area did not begin its career there, it takes fresh root there through a series of agencies, one of which, along with jukeboxes, radio play, and television videos, is the live local performer.

While Garth Brooks is flying over Texas Stadium to the delight of 100,000 rollicking young fans, the country music umbrella over his head also covers a single mother surviving

on social assistance, or a quadriplegic who has been wheeled in to a concert, as they sing along with Cape Breton's Rita MacNeil performing her own song "Flying on Your Own." Rita is a hero to those who have survived large obstacles, partly because she has dealt with a litany of "downers" which would defeat most mortals, and that litany is part of the way in which her fans know and accept her. It is this level of meaning which is so often ellipsed by widespread publicity for musical items whose *raison d'être* is pure exchange-value.

The machinery of pop music dissemination connects items and regions at the top in the sense that a broadly diffused recording collapses great distances and becomes familiar in many places simultaneously. Almost any urban or suburban teenager on earth, certainly in developed countries, will know, for instance who Sting or Michael Jackson is. Even Nova Scotia's Anne Murray (a favourite in China) would be known by several hundred million people speaking a dozen or more languages . But there is little lateral association across regions unless the intermediary of the big-time record industry makes that link, usually inadvertently. Hegemonic forms such as "cowboy culture," the Nashville Sound, or the "New Country" of the 1990s arch over local tradition and implant themselves, bypassing the intervening geography. It is this capacity, of course, which so

empowers modern media. Starting with the printed page and continuing with forms of sound, image, and digital transmission, there need be no human conduit for culture to transmit, take its place in an environment and begin to mesh. Unlike the classic form of historic-geographic distribution, most profoundly illustrated by the Indo-European family of languages, cultural exchange and diffusion today is no longer analogous to the game of telephone, where a message is transmitted from one person to the next in whispered tones around a circle, until the originator gets the garbled or transformed result at the end of the circular chain of transmission. It is now commonplace, for instance, for musicians to record "together" without ever meeting: the whisper is now digital.

When the "Western" music of Quebec began with the early recordings of Willie Lamothe, Marcel Martel, and others, in the 1940s, most of their "covers" (with lyrics in French) were of songs by Hank Williams, Gene Autry, and other high-profile American artists from the South, not those of the artists in Ontario or the Maritimes, nor even those from Vermont, New York, Maine, or New Hampshire, their geographic neighbours. Billy Ray Cyrus's monster hit of 1992, "Achy Breaky Heart" is sung in French, and has even been recorded in Italian by Quebecer Stef Carse. The song spearheaded a renewal of "country dance" in (mostly line) formations

across the continent, and was referred to recently in a small newspaper in Mont Laurier, Quebec, as the "Heaky Breaky Dance."⁵ "Heaky" here has no meaning in French, but is merely a reflection of the exchange of aspirant "h" in English-French 'omonyms. Macaronic adoption has many twists.

This process by which songs jump great distances and land on solid ground here and there is not, as one might first suspect, limited to those forms whose essential origin is defined through mass dissemination. While dissecting a recent influential British study by Pickering and Green (1987), James Porter reminds us, in his masterful, though dense, critique of recent Anglo-American folksong scholarship:

The issue of popular idioms that transcended "local" music making, and their diffusion, needs to be addressed, if only to counter the assumption that local styles in England, or even in the English-speaking regions of Britain, are entirely independent of one another. The long connections and communications between widely spaced regions make it difficult to insist on the "uniqueness" of local styles. Where regional idioms exist, they do so cheek by jowl to other, "imported," "oicotyped," styles in various stages of modification. This has been the case particularly since the 1920s, when newspapers and radio began to transform the local view of regions in relation to the world outside. This development is also characteristic of indigenous English-language repertoires and styles in North America.

⁵ "Du country à son meilleur." L'Echo de la Lievre. 43.4 (17 juillet, 1994).

(1993, 81)

Porter is too cautious when he restricts the process to the English language. Just as "the dissemination of tales is not greatly hindered by language frontiers" (Thompson 1946, 435), neither, it seems, is the movement of songs. The key focus for any attempt to read the process must be, as Porter reminds us, oicotypes, in some general sense. Song canons working in a given context invariably grow up from the area and simultaneously draw from hegemonic forms, while occasionally contributing substance to the hegemonic vehicle.

Country musician Art Fitt of Pictou County, Nova Scotia, is not a high roller such as the Pope, Michael Jackson or Garth Brooks, nor could his career fold overnight - it shares almost nothing with the careers of Billy Ray Cyrus, or other such mercurial figures. Neither his career nor his personality is particularly volatile, though stories which he and his brother tell suggest that it was once otherwise. He makes a comfortable livelihood by working hard, in a sense saturating his local scene with performances, in terms that are ultimately determined by him in partnership with the local entertainment economy.

Concretely, he performs solo, playing guitar and singing, accompanied by foot pedal electronic bass and an electronic drum machine. One of his performance roles,

then, is as a one man band in several different legions and bars in a handful of small towns in northern mainland Nova Scotia. His other performance role is as organizer, master of ceremonies, and sole accompanist for a series of talent (i.e.singing) contests through the spring and summer months in some of those same establishments, culminating in an annual grand finale singing contest in August.

In order to make a living sufficient to support his family in the manner to which they have become accustomed, Art performs several nights a week for 50 weeks a year, he arranges all his own contracts, with one helper he moves and sets up all his own equipment. Onstage, he sets up several signs advertising local businesses whose wares would be of significant interest to the clients of the bar where he is performing, such as a Stellarton taxi company and a pizza joint. He travels to his gigs in a diesel one ton cube van with sleeping quarters inside and a huge business card, so to speak, on the side of the box. With gear loaded in a storage area in the very back he sometimes drives two hours each way to do a show, but he always goes home at night. This last cardinal rule, going home at night, is one of several promises he appears to have made to himself when he gave up life in the fast lane and playing on the road. He sells cassettes of his performances at a number of local stores, but the bottom line for making a living in this kind

of entertainment business, according to Art, is to work on Saturday night. If you don't work Saturday night, you don't make any money. Next most important to Saturday night is Friday night, and after that Thursday. In Art's case, he usually plays Diamond Jim's Tavern in Westville on Wednesdays, he works Tuesday if he can, and Sunday afternoons are often good at the Legions. Art is basically never home in the evening, except on a few Mondays or Tuesdays. He shares with many others who work in the "leisure industries" a lifestyle in which he works when and where others go to relax and have fun. While the movie version of the country music performer has him partying along with the bar patrons, not very many who do so are still building their reputation for professional reliability in their third decade of performance. Art has very consciously separated his work as a performing artist from any suggestion of partying. Having retired from one long performing party of about ten years duration on the road, during which he did gain a kind of regional celebrity status, Art now works soberly and carefully, as methodical as any craftsman who takes pride in his handiwork.

As a craftsman, Art assembles the fleeting product of musical performance using contemporary tools, namely the electric guitar and other electronic instruments, and applies to his performances both the sensibilities of the

artist and the honed skills of the artisan, including his rhetorical skills and joke-telling capacity, for instance. If a distinction is made between an art and a craft, the craft is generally seen to be more practical, to enjoy a concretely discernable function. An art product is seen to have purely aesthetic appeal and is often considered to be, by definition, useless. I like the distinction made, in a discussion with Peter Gzowski on CBC television, by Newfoundland artist Christopher Pratt: art is something you can piss on, craft is something you can piss in.

In a commonsense approach which has been hewed by training as both a jazz pianist and sociologist, Howard Becker, calling it a "folk definition," offers:

...a craft consists of a body of knowledge and skill which can be used to produce useful objects: dishes you can eat from, chairs you can sit in, cloth that makes serviceable clothing, plumbing that works, wiring that carries current. From a slightly different point of view, it consists of the ability to perform in a useful way - to play music that can be danced to, serve a meal to guests efficiently, arrest a criminal with a minimum of fuss, clean a house to the satisfaction of those who live in it. (1982, 273)

Craft work, which in my understanding includes both handicrafts and the traditional trades such as carpentry and engine mechanics, is generally learned through an apprenticeship, formally or informally, over a period of years. One works with a master or masters until one attains

journeyman status, gaining skills while typically also earning. This is the pattern elaborated by Rosenberg (1986) which has the journeyman move, with increasing confidence, skills and status to the position of craftsman and in the most successful cases, celebrity. The role of celebrity, of course, is both demanding and reversible, and may therefore be, to the veteran free-lance performer, not particularly attractive in itself.

Through the experiences outlined in Chapter 4, Art Fitt has been through all those stages, and then some. He is today known for his reliability and competence, is proud of this reputation, and is disdainful of entertainers who gain short-term success by capitalizing on performance gimmicks or who simply "run on empty," i.e. either short-circuit the appropriate training, or mishandle a journeyman's responsibilities. Just as a carpenter recognizes that, in a sense, he is only as good as his last job, Art consistently directs all his skills and energy to the work at hand: tonight's "gig," next month's bookings, and security for next year. He has decided to occupy this local niche and simply annul any more widespread celebrity status. Still today, about ten years after retiring from the regional to the local scene, Art regularly turns down relatively lucrative offers to go on tours farther afield.

This rejection of career moves which would clearly

advance his status defy the model, what I have called earlier the fable, of how the star performer is "discovered" and made. This is because, while consciously reaching toward his local community, Art's career works and develops through lateral diffusion rather than vertical penetration. In order to do this, however, Art must not only be an artist and performer but also an entrepreneur. He must manage the small business of Art Fitt, entertainer. In this, Fitt is like many other country musicians, especially those at the journeyman level,⁶ who must not only develop and play their music and stage show, but manage an enterprise which involves many intangible factors and typically the livelihoods of three to five band members and perhaps another person or two. In the context of a flagging economy, as well as moral and legal proscriptions against drinking and driving, with the consequent awkwardness for many clients to attend and enjoy themselves freely at the venues where Art plays, such a venture is taxing.

Canadian country musician, Larry Mercey (formerly of the Mercey Brothers), citing the two factors noted above,

⁶ Bill Monroe, father of bluegrass, managed his band in the early years, and "ran his business as a building contractor would," (Rosenberg 1985, 48-50) though he was not particularly suited to the task, nor did he like doing it very much. The "heads up" organizational skills needed for effective management of this sort are in notoriously short supply among many musicians.

claims that the "middle ground" of full time country musicians which once thrived in Canada, is facing elimination. Fearing that only big stars and part-time local musicians will survive if the trend is not reversed, Mercey, after noting that fine art and high culture, by contrast, often qualify for subsidies from the public purse, calls for a concerted effort by audiences "to preserve an important part of our heritage and culture." (Mercey 32)

Art Fitt, as petit-bourgeois entrepreneur, is not unlike a farmer, self-employed plumber, or small store owner-operator, in that he owns and works with his own means of production, and is therefore economically independent in the strict sense. As with other members of this class fraction, however, his independence is partly illusory in that the larger market forces which circumscribe his operation are entirely out of his hands and driven by the needs of concentrated capital. Just as the "cost-price squeeze" has decimated the number of farmers making a full living as independent operators and just as chain franchises are coming to replace the corner store, so Art Fitt, in the service sector, must compete with other magnets for the entertainment budget of people's disposable income. As a whole, the petit-bourgeois sector has declined in numbers and in income throughout this century in Canada (Johnson 1972), but there remain successful avenues in "niche

markets," and in highly specialized and innovative products and services, especially those operating on a small scale which require a high level of client awareness. Art's secret has been to keep his costs of production low, continually explore new markets, and maintain a very high level of quality control. His "client awareness" is a sub-text of this entire study, and it is his working class origin which provides him with the special knowledge enabling him know his audience so precisely.

Structurally, then, Art Fitt is not only a self-employed craftsman in a service occupation, providing entertainment by contract and serving as a certain form of organic intellectual,⁷ he is doing so while bucking a trend for his class stratum and in the industry of which he is part. Not only that, Art does very well. He is often booked months in advance, and makes a very respectable livelihood at his craft. The depiction of his musical skills and repertoire, work style and business strategy, as described here, are evidence of a consummate professional with an important role in Pictou County culture.

In outlining the traditional model for career

⁷ This powerful but hazy concept, "organic intellectual," is drawn from Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, and is best explicated for our purposes here in the seminal "Notes on the Historical Application of Marxist Cultural Theory," by Tim Patterson. My usage is elaborated in 5.4.

development toward success in the popular music arena, Frith uses the Pyramid shape as a schematic in which the numerous local live performers occupy the broad lower rungs and superstars are at the apex. Art Fitt is no longer reaching for that apex. He instead attends to the business of making a solid predictable living doing what he loves - playing music. Art has managed to make a living at his music continuously and almost exclusively since he was a teenager. A lot of water has passed under his bridge, but his alternatives were limited. His father, though also a fiddler, had spent his working life in the coal mines of Pictou County; Art's brother Pat had worked in the mines, as well, but Art has never mined coal, nor did he want to. A few months before the Westray mine disaster,⁸ Art told me after a long evening of playing for a mid-week audience of about 40 people in the New Glasgow Legion that he felt that he was cheating by making a living at something which he loved so much to do. Little did he know, as the son of a miner's family, just how profound that cheating would turn out to be.

⁸ For an excellent account not only of the Westray disaster, its causes and consequences, but of working life underground as seen by an experienced miner and draegerman, see Comish (1993).

5.3 The Performance Scenes

From childhood through adolescence, Art Fitt was engaged in an apprenticeship which honed skills that became his basic "bag of tricks" as a musician. Those fundamentals were augmented through his professional experience in the venues where country music is routinely played, mostly bars. The youngest member of a musical family, Art was "learning chops" and adopting "licks" virtually his whole life. In this respect, once again, the analogy with the traditional trades such as carpentry, even housework, come to mind. Learning in this way and at such an early age assures a confidence with tools, a way of seeing, a capacity to judge problems and challenges, a strategy of employing skills which makes the performance of the appropriate craft act in a given circumstance come second nature. Such early exposure deepens his repertoire, enabling him to know older songs which other musicians his age often do not know; he mentioned, in this context, for instance, "The Great Speckled Bird," the song which launched Roy Acuff's career in 1936. Art recognizes that this capacity is unusual and makes him adept at performing for older audiences, such as wedding anniversaries for octogenarians. Fundamental skills

such as timing and singing in key were developed long before he made one dollar at his music. The singers in Art's talent shows often lack those same skills, and though their artistic drive may be strong, they are often weak in the fundamentals of the craft. In beginning to learn the elements of "occupational folklife," in McCarl's terms, there in the family home, Art was, without knowing it at the time, grounding himself in "the complex of techniques, customs, and modes of expressive behavior which characterize a particular work group." (1978, 3) As other members of the Fitt family were at most occasional paid performers, Art's training at this stage could only in retrospect, however, be seen as anticipatory socialization for an eventual career. It was the scenes described below in which Art developed full craft capacity, and those scenes, or their analogues, continue to provide performance opportunities during which such skills can be refined. The occupation of musician is itself a form of expressive behaviour with its explicit conventions, so the performance scenes described here were especially important in developing, in McCarl's terms, requisite techniques and an awareness of the customs surrounding appropriate performance and the social role of performer.

The bridge between the Fitt family home and the enlarged domestic atmosphere of a house party was an easy

one in Art's case. With his father fiddling and his two older brothers playing along, usually on guitar, his mother and sisters presumably joining in, it was easy for Art, much the same as with the tentative pickers of bluegrass at an Abercrombie jam, to find a spot. As the youngest of the family, he was able to learn at his own speed without the responsibility of carrying the song, and he could absorb the collective musical wisdom of those jamming. He had, as it were, the "advantage of the retarded lead." He could start, in a sense, where they left off, just as any new player in economic production can bypass the outdated ideas and equipment of their forbears and weathered competitors; an enterprise can make a perfectly good computer, for instance, without ever having made an adding machine or typewriter, as IBM discovered when "clones" of their personal computers presented a serious challenge to the giant company. Art Fitt became a kind of repository of his family's music, first in the home and then at the frequent house parties which mining families held in Stellarton in the 1950s and 1960s. Art was recognized from very early on as the real musician, the flexible and gifted one.

Pat Fitt talked repeatedly of the implicit competition among musicians at such parties (what would have been called a "time" in Newfoundland). Virtuosity was clearly admired, but the prevailing ethic was to display it discreetly, not to

"show off" skills. One imagines that such was the case in typical households which Mackenzie might have visited about 50 years earlier; even then, singing contests were rare exceptions, but at ordinary gatherings, everyone present knew the person among them who could truly "sing all night and never sing the same song twice," a phrase which has become legendary among song collectors. The solo performance of such ability might be only rarely called upon, but everyone knew who could do it.

Pat Fitt explains that even "a Chet Atkins" with a modicum of honour would leave the guitar silent rather than embarrass a lesser player. This ethic frames the possibility, of course, that others in the room who knew of someone's skills might cajole them into performance, rendering the ultimate power over what would be heard that evening to the listeners, rather than to an open competition of eagerness and egos.

In that same community, and at some of those same parties, competitive forms of "talkin' pit," eager egos looking for a musical stage, family tensions and amorous threats could all spill out into violent encounters, usually fist-fights between men. Pat talks about miners arriving at the pit on Monday morning with black eyes and split lips from fights among themselves, and then, Pat points out, become the most dedicated and cooperative work-mates

imaginable. On a revelrous Friday night, fists could fly, and the man who could "handle himself" was given a chance to show how. At least one cousin of the Fitts took this capacity to more formal arenas as a boxer, and, as evidenced by Art's appearing on one occasion in a jacket with an "Albion Boxing" emblem on it, amateur boxing remains a popular passion.

I will not try to explain it here, but there is a good deal of anecdotal evidence for coal-mining towns engendering high levels of sporadic interpersonal violent encounters. Such town are "tough." Hockey games between local teams and those from coal-mining towns of Industrial Cape Breton, particularly Glace Bay, invariably ended in bench-clearing brawls, or so our memory has it. As a boy in Sutherland's River, I occasionally encountered the boys of Thorburn, the mining town three miles up the road, usually when they arrived in "gangs" to swim in "our river." The older boys in our community, if they could not accompany us, always warned us to travel in "twos" or more, keep one hand near a weapon, or have one eye on an escape route, and to never leave belongings unguarded. The Thorburn boys were mean, tough, and ruthless, we learned, as our particular *blason populaire*. Sutherland's River boys, by contrast, I learned at about age ten from my neighbour, Wade MacDonald, are a different sort:

Straight as an arrow without a quiver
Are the rats from Sutherland's River.

(I only "got" the pun in quiver many years later.)

Though this discussion might appear a bit diversionary, it does provide context not only for the canalization of competitive energies into singing contests such as Art Fitt hosts, but also for his calm and competent handling of the fist-fight at the Stellarton Legion during the talent contest finals described in Chapter 4. Though that outbreak was not a normal occurrence, neither was it aberrant, and the skill Art employed in controlling the fight was a learned one every bit as much as his chord changes. Not only did Art know, almost instinctively, how to handle the fight on the floor in front of him, he had seen it "brewing all night," suggesting a precision in his "reading" of the audience which a less experienced, perhaps nervous performer might lack. His ability to "read" the audience, his "literacy" here, his knowing the grammar of the room allowed him to isolate one large predicate in a sea of adjectives.

A fight at the end of a dance has a long tradition. When I was a teenager, I went to Friday night dances at the I.O.O.F. Hall in New Glasgow. By late in the evening, the talk was usually not if there would be a fight, but between whom (frequently between blacks and whites) and where (usually up by the railway tracks). Byron Weeks told me

that when he saw Hank Snow perform in Alberton, Prince Edward Island, probably in the 1940s, the format was first Hank, then a dance with a fiddler, then a fight." Such rowdy atmospheres are highly reminiscent of the honky tonk joints of the American deep South, especially the Oil boom towns of East Texas from the 1940s to 1950s, where, it is said, the band had to be protected from flying bottles by a chicken wire screen. "Staying out of trouble" is a learned skill which I acquired as a youth (see 2.2 above) and Art employs as second nature.

Art must face such threats even in the song contests. He explains that some contestants and their admirers - eager, proud, and perhaps drunk, who feel that their performance was not given its due, can get quite feisty. Art has even received a death threat over the contests. This is one of the reasons that he has appointed judges for the talent contest finale. He explains that those in the room are too often guided by the passion of a performance, or by the quality, in its broadest sense, the tone, or timbre of a voice, especially if it has a resonance with that of a familiar loved star, such as Randy Travis. Art explains that the judges were asked to consider singers' timing, pitch and presentation. Nonetheless, between 1992

⁹ From a discussion with Byron Weeks, father-in-law of folklorist Richard MacKinnon at Sydney, 19 March, 1989.

and 1993, Art changed the method of judging winners in the ordinary contests at Diamond Jim's. After all of the contestants have performed, Art now calls the name of each performer, and the audience is to clap for their favourites. The bartender serves as decibel meter, and therefore final arbiter of the contest. This relieves Art of one cumbersome obligation, and makes his ride home a little safer.

In addition to this awareness of potential fights, Art Fitt, from his long experience in private "wet" (drinking) parties at weddings and Legions, as well as barrooms, has a precise knowledge of the musical preferences of his audience. When he played John Allan Cameron's strathspey "only for Charlie," he was explicitly doing what he ordinarily does without comment every night on stage. He is, in this instance, drawing a personal dedication level of repertoire onto the stage.¹⁰ To suggest the subtlety of such nuance, consider the way in which İlhan Başgöz, at a performance in a Turkish coffee house in 1967, came to understand a mystifying change in repertoire:

¹⁰ In responding to a request for one person's favourite song, Fitt satisfies the fourth level (of seven) in the taxonomy of repertoire which Casey, Rosenberg, and Wareham (1972) outline for outport Newfoundland "times." Combining folk and "folk analytic" categories which move from the most social and public to the most personal and idiosyncratic, this study also comments, as Art Fitt did, that performing is much like being a politician (397), audiences having segments, as do constituencies.

...a young singer thirty years old, was performing folk songs...to an ordinary coffee house audience. A shift took place during his performance as the *asik* suddenly began to sing exclusively *uzun hava*, which can be translated into English as 'blues.' This pattern continued until the end of the session. I did not understand the reason for this sudden change from the pleasant to the tragic. At the end of the session the singer explained to me that a rich and noble person who had lost his wealth following a tragic event had entered the coffee house and sat at one of the tables. His life tragedy was known to all present, including the singer, so that he is treated with extreme tenderness and respect. No one wants to injure his pride of his feelings (sic). The singer considered it disrespectful to sing joyful songs before a person struck with such tragedy. Consequently, he selected songs which he believed pleasing to this guest. This person's presence in the audience entirely dominated part of the session. This would have remained unnoticed had the singer not related to me the impact of this person's presence. (Basgoz 1975, 155)

Though this description clearly refers to a smaller and more homogeneous community than those gathered in Westville and Stellarton, and even though Basgoz can more legitimately apply a full-blown oral formulaic approach (Foley 1988) to the study of such singers, the essence of this encounter and those of Art Fitt in small public performances is the same. Throughout an evening's performance, Art is welcoming new arrivals: "How ya doin', George?" "I wasn't gonna start until you got here, Mary." He punctuates the evening with greetings, jibes, and asides, occasionally even having a brief conversation from the stage if the evening is slow.

Garth Brooks does not and could not do this in the venues where he performs.

It is important for studies of repertoire and performance to attend such venues. Though the range of types of pub, tavern, saloon, and club is broad, the "great good place" (Oldenburg) remains an important focal point for community performance, and serves as an important nexus between home and community. As such, the community gathering place shares some of the special ordinariness of the local festival, which, until recently, had not been carefully examined by folklorists. Though the study of custom, such as was more commonly done in European, (including British) studies, pointed to ritual acts and their historic reverberations, little ethnographic work actually detailed the full context of ordinary adult vernacular play. In his "Foreword" to Falassi's Folklore by the Fireside, with reference to the author's treatment of the (non-domestic) counter-veglia at *la bettola*, the "drinking place," Roger Abrahams points out:

...we know that the coffee house, the rum shop, the saloon, and the pub have a similar importance [to male community gathering spots in African, Asian, and Amerindian folklife] in the social and cultural ecology of European and Euro-American communities; but again we have few actual ethnographies of such play-behavior or ceremonies therein. Thus, we know very little about the situation of creativity and community comment in such public places of gathering, to say nothing of the more private occasions in which men and women,

old and young, are brought together in any symbolic landscape to interact, play, perform, ceremonialize, and make fun. Is this because folklorists have not taken the time to sit and observe in such places long enough to be able to write the rules for these occasions?
(1980, xi)

Perhaps Abrahams protests too much,¹¹ but there remain a number of impediments to effectively doing such studies, one of which is the danger of violence described above.

In an attempt to get a valid grip on the repertoire of someone working as Art Fitt does, one need make some distinctions. Given the length and variety of Art's career to date, the relation between his active and his passive repertoire is complex. Though he could probably do it in his sleep, having played with the Haggarts, I have never heard Art Fitt perform "Pictou County Jail" (see 4.1 for text). He could probably sing several of his brother Pat's compositions, though I have never known him to do so. He occasionally calls up songs that he most likely heard first in his family, such as his modified "Mother" Maybelle Carter version of "Wildwood Flower," which he invariably picks at

¹¹ Abrahams' comment could almost serve as an introduction to his own work of that period, represented by "Shouting Match at the Border" (1981) and a flurry of other studies beginning about then, including the collection Celebration (1982), edited by Victor Turner. Kodish (1980) provides a fascinating treatment of liminal space between home and community in the life of English village women, using Flora Thompson's account as data. In short, there has been a response to Abrahams' call.

the beginning of a talent contest. But as he learns a small handful of new songs each month, deriving largely from his selection of current "jukebox" country hits, so in ordinary performance, must some earlier songs fall into the passive vault. His winnowing over twenty odd years has provided him with some reliable chestnuts, the impact and popularity of which he knows well. He has customized his performance of some of these, and, incidentally, effectively competes with the "sampling" style of recording which has come into vogue in recent years, by joining songs with the same beat into medleys. In doing so, he is often joining not only particular songs, but decades, and therefore generations. If, in the space of three or four minutes, he can induce fond memories of a teenage summer for a mother and for her daughter simultaneously, he has profoundly touched the space between them, he has "joined" them at the table.

In order to make such a connection with an audience, Art must be an effective messenger, he must be believable. He must bring the songs into the room as the incorporation of the song, he must "occupy" it. As many reports have underlined, Hank Williams always claimed that the most important quality in a "hillbilly" singer must be sincerity. Jimmie N. Rogers (1989, 17) has combined this element of performance with other presumptions inherent in the effective rendering of poetics to suggest that country

singers have a "sincerity contract" with their audience. In fact, there are a good number of successful country singers who do not, by most people's standards, have good singing voices (Roy Acuff and Kris Kristofferson are often mentioned). Though folklorists should not need George Lyon's reminder about singing, others might. In the context of a review of A Celebration of Heritage: Songs of Labrador, a recording by June Baikie and Kelly Russell, Lyon says of Baikie's voice:

Lacking strength, Baikie tends to wobble in the middle of long notes, a typical failing of untrained singers. I use the word "failing," simply because it will trouble many potential listeners, especially those who have not listened widely to field recordings. She seems to sing from the head and throat, rather than from the chest, much less the whole body. This is not an uncommon singing style, though it has gone out of style in most of North America since the various permutations of *bel canto*, music hall, and other stage-based vocal techniques came in. Before the performance of song became a matter of reaching many people in large halls, there was no need to produce the volume that must be taken as the primary characteristic of what most folks would call "good singing." (32)

Perhaps this is also what Breathnach meant when he referred to the "impoverishing effect of pub-style singing." (1977, 126) The contestants in Art Fitt's singing contests often have the style of vocalization which Lyon describes, augmented by an occasional "concert hall" outburst of the most confidently rendered lines, usually the refrain or "hook." The chorus of such voices in a singalong portion

turns Art's participatory numbers into events of strong meaning.

When Art Fitt lets his voice trail off from the microphone at Diamond Jim's, he is not especially replicating a style of participation such as might be suggested with the term hootenanny. His audience probably shares no identification with the kind of unison singing which chorused the folk revival. Were he to be offering "If I Had a Hammer" or "Blowin' in the Wind" as mini-anthems through which their voices might rise together, some few would recognize such songs and hum in a vague and polite way, but this would not be "their" music in the same way as "I Wanna Go Home" ("Detroit City"), "Dumas Walker", or "The Race is On." Though in his own performance of songs, Art may dip into bluegrass, old-time, honky-tonk, and country rock, as described in Chapter 3, the essential core of his participatory repertoire is a selection of country hits over a span of origin reaching back about 50 years. He will mix these with regionally favoured (and flavoured) pieces, but the common denominator is their "traditionalization" in the lyric and melodic memory of the people in the room. The songs which Art can "hand over" to that room have been listened to, hummed and whistled hundreds of times by those who now softly sing out loud over the clacking of pool balls and the clinking of beer glasses. The songs are simple in

tune, predictable and repetitive in rhythm, meaningful lyrically, and reach deeply into the "biological aesthetic," calming with familiarity, suggesting the same sort of fluid swaying, like trees in a breeze, which "Blowin' in the Wind" sets in motion in other rooms at other times and places.

It has repeatedly impressed me how often the song "Release Me" has been played as a requested slow waltz of a late evening in rooms such as this: gaggles of middle aged and older couples entwined like the formulaic rose and briar, softly padding the floor with the synchronized grace which can only come from many years of sharing whole lives: "Please release me, let me go; I don't love you any more." At first blush, this appears a truly incomprehensible contradiction. Yet of course it is not. The lyrics do not really demand separation, there will be no lawyers on Sunday morning. The sentiments to which the song gives voice rise up in dozens of picaresque ways day after day. Frustrations build in loops of *quotidien* mini-drama, until one member of a couple may say something which they regret, or perhaps worse, say nothing, and do something which they regret. Instead, the immense drama of the song absorbs the strongest of those feelings, says it out loud and puts it on the table, right there beside the glass of beer and the phone bill. The singer claims to have found a new love "whose lips are warm while yours are cold." Perhaps that new love

has only walked by on the street, carried out the groceries, played in a soap opera, sat on the same bus. This sentiment in the song is part of what is usually called the "cheatin'" theme. In a society where serial monogamy is becoming the norm, the threat of other amorous partners is of course real. But for that couple on the dance floor, waltzing tightly as they have for perhaps 20 or 30 years, the song exorcises the fears and threats. Now that we've cleared the air, one member of the couple might suggest after hurt feelings have been recognized by the partner, let's go out and hear some good songs: "Release me and let me love again." In short, there is a cathartic function in such songs, most especially, I would argue, in those which repeat the cheatin' and hurtin' themes.

In this manner of profiling crucial concerns in highly dramatic fashion, it might be recalled, the functioning of these songs is not unlike that of ballad stories, in that the acts depicted in those songs are not meant as prescriptions for deliberate action, as in, respectively, for instance: infanticide, "The Cruel Mother" (Ch 20); adultery-motivated double murder followed by suicide, "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard" (Ch 81), let alone dying (literally) of heartbreak, as in "Bonny Barbara Allan" (Ch

84).¹² It is the point of such drama in each case to cast important elements of human dilemma into higher relief, to gain a view of the forest by temporarily witnessing some truly immense trees.

¹² Variations of these ballads which included the dramatic actions cited were among the sixteen classical ballads collected by Mackenzie.

5.4 Of Taverns and Intellectuals: The Vernacular at Work

When you walk through the door at Diamond Jim's in Westville early in the evening, say eight o'clock, the pool cues hesitate, just for a second, as their handlers size up your presence. You know immediately that you are playing by their rules, and you had better call your shots fairly. There is a quality to such hard-edged working class environments that declares them special turf. The pub scenes described above did not exist in Pictou County, at least legally, in W. Roy Mackenzie's day. If they did, he might very well be asked, as I was, where the fuck he was from. Perhaps, as Abrahams implies in his comments on the analogues of the Tuscan "counter-veglia," such scenes are rather too uncontrolled and perhaps even threatening to scholars who might appear effete, foreign, or nosy. I often arrived before Art on "talent night," and that first hour or so before Art came in was some of the toughest field work I have ever done. Maybe I over-reacted a bit, thinking that instead of one hand on a notebook and one eye on my tape-recorder, I should, as I was instructed in boyhood to do, have one hand on a weapon and one eye on an escape route. I remember feeling relieved when Art arrived; he legitimized

my presence as an ethnographer.

I had considered, when I first settled on Pictou County as my research locale, hunting out the descendents of Mackenzie's informants and profiling their participation in music, whatever it happened to be. I still think of that as an interesting project, and did begin some questioning and genealogical tracing. Lloyd Tattrie, whose band plays at local dances, including the community hall at River John, may very well be a descendent of the Ephraim Tattrie, "Little Eph" from Tatamagouche, who sang and recited for Mackenzie; I don't know yet. But I do know that the active music scene was centred elsewhere, and I settled on Art Fitt as a focus for three reasons: (1) using what in community power studies is called a "repute analysis," or "snowball sampling,"¹³ I kept coming up against the names of Art and Pat Fitt; (2) Art made his living as a country musician, so I could study the work of a competent craftsman who had mastered his economic role; (3) he ran the talent shows, which would inherently give me a simultaneous view of some forms of amateur performance otherwise accessible only in

¹³ Developed first by Floyd Hunter in his study of Atlanta, Georgia, this method locates a local elite by asking a "panel" of involved citizens who wields power. Those persons named are then asked the same questions and the resulting pyramid forms the sketch from which operational community power can be detailed. My question was something like: "Who plays country music around the county?"

private gatherings.

But Mackenzie's shadow accompanied me nonetheless. As my pen raced over my little notebook in the dim tavern light at Diamond Jim's, noting songs and other details, I realized what a task it had been for Mackenzie and others of his era to transcribe the texts of songs as they were being sung; small wonder that he had his wife take every second line. Each semester, back "home" after another round of graduate course work, I got closer to the insides of Diamond Jim's, the Glasgow Pub and Thompy's bar in New Glasgow, the Stellarton and New Glasgow Legions. On August 2, 1991, my wife Danielle and I spent an evening at the Glasgow tavern, which faces the tracks where the New Glasgow Railway station used to be. Here is an unexpurgated excerpt from my notes:

Fri. 2 Aug., 1991

I sat at the Glasgow tavern, N. Glasgow. The band with no name again, I think, doing some country and Rock 'n Roll standards. The bar had a mix of people: white and black, men and women, barrel-chested bumless men, ruddy faced; big doughy women, and some drawn faces, sideburns out of Gunsmoke, an underlay of violence, working class lumpen.

Danielle commented on the absence of racism...if true, quite a change in the 1 generation since I left.

Songs: Oh, Lonesome Me, I'm Gonna Knock on Your Door, Here in the Real World, Before the Next Teardrop Falls (with the Spanish Verses), Whiskey-Bent and Hell Bound, Blues Stay away From Me...and several country rockers, Steve Earle style.

Walter Williams, a short casual black guy, danced with Danielle several times. At the 3rd time, he gave me a nod and smile, I acknowledged acceptance of the dancing.

Several guys I recognize from high school, though I can't put names on them.

Walter was sitting at a table of mixed black, white and brown. At the end of evening, 4 of them remaining, 2 white guys, 2 black, softly singing a few songs together, including "I saw the Light."

This scene is barely 100 yards up the tracks from where the Friday night fights happened 30 years earlier, perhaps between some of these same people, their older brothers, their uncles, or their fathers. "Racially" mixed tables were almost unheard of then, but then taverns did not exist. Some of the songs are newer, but the musical styles of 1991 are much the same as when I was in high school. But examine my adjectives: same, white, black, barrel-chested, bumless, ruddy, big, doughy, drawn. Then comes "an underlay of violence": there it is again. Now the adjectives in the songs: lonesome, your, real, next, whiskey-bent, hell-bound. There is an immediacy here the insides of which I may never share. Again my adjectives: short, casual, black, several, third, black, white, brown, white, black. There was more going on in that room, and in my perception of it, than a few Friday nights will ever reveal, even to a supposed "local" like myself.

Six months after this scene, I attended one of Art's talent contests at the New Glasgow Legion, this time alone. I took a couple of photos of Art performing, using a flash, so all of the 50 or so people present would have noticed me.

At the end of the evening, a table of women in their thirties, including the winning contestant, Edith Parks, were chatting energetically. One from the table called out to me: "Are you with the Raiders?" It would be difficult to mistake me for a professional athlete, but I did feel, on occasion, like a raider.

Edith Parks said she had learned how to play guitar from "that Johnny Cash song that starts out slow and picks up speed." "Rock Island Line?" I guessed. "That's it. That's the only way to learn." She is the mother of three, aged 13, 11, and 8, living on social assistance, she offered immediately. Her friend explained that Edith started to sing recently, after her divorce, as a way of meeting people. Her favourite singer is Tanya Tucker.

By about this point in my research, I had begun to explain my task to people such as Edith Parks and Walter Williams as "writing an article on country music," and leave it at that, unless they asked more about it. When I did explain further, their parting good wish was often something like: "good luck with your book." Then Roy Mackenzie grabs my arm, so to speak, and disarmingly suggests:

It is a very obvious truth that simple amusements can be honestly appraised only by the simple. Those of us who are sophisticated may be heartily entertained by such amusements, but we cannot accept them in the spirit of the persons for whom they were originally planned... When the child himself turns his hand to verse, we look

upon the result with merriment, derision, or tenderness, as the case may be, but always with a distinct sense of our own superiority. And precisely similar is our attitude towards the popular ballad. We laugh at the "quaint language" in which the forlorn maiden expresses her sorrow for the loss of her beloved butcher boy, instead of feeling that this would be a very beautiful way for us to express our emotions if we were placed in the same tragic situation. For this, obviously enough, we sophisticated persons are not to be blamed, any more than is the ballad-singer when he senses the superiority in our hearing and refuses to expose to our possible merriment the songs which he loves and honours. (Quest, 12)

What Mackenzie recognizes here, in his Victorian\Edwardian framework, is that intellectual culture operates on at least two levels. His vantage point in this passage, and throughout his writings, vacillates from an infuriating patronization of the world of ballad singers to a deep respect for their skills, ethics, and beliefs. He knows that the songs he encountered explain things for the singers and once did for their communities: they are "true" in the deepest sense. He also knows that as a person of high education and refined taste, his understanding is a very different one, but no less "true." The territory between these truths is the ground on which social classes appropriate and mark their holdings. In the largest sense this is a struggle for societal control wherein sets of ideas, between periods of immense disruption and dislocation, strive competitively for hegemony. In the workings of this competition, some players can employ

immense resources, others almost none, and the most powerful are typically most conscious of their strategy until the struggle begins to take a political form. At that point the drive to "overcome" gives shape and immediacy to strategic interventions in this ideological realm, as programmatic elements of emergent class fragments. A good case in point could be that of women's ideas over the past thirty or so years, as they moved from "The Feminine Mystique" to a societal push to eliminate masculinism. But in the realm of music, control of both its form and content is a serious matter partly for the reasons which Keil suggests:

...it seems to be the case across cultures under capitalism, that the further and faster people lose control of their daily lives and working conditions (moving from farm to factory, from craft work to assembly line), the more they want to hear and feel control in their music. Alienated from their bodies during the working week, they require reintegration, recreation at the weekend polka dances. Their work/play dialectic shapes the style. The deep push for "control" in the music styles of the proletariat comes from the powerlessness of the working class but the specific forms control will take have an ethnic dimension that might be called "streamlining." ("Slovenian Style..." 1982, 47)

Directing the contours of such streamlining is the job of organic intellectuals. Gramsci's outline of intellectual roles, as elaborated by Patterson (1975) in the cultural, especially musical, realm, was bifurcated into the traditional and the organic. The former, according to Patterson's reading of Gramsci, consisted of "philosophers,

scientists, theologians, political theorists, artists...a seemingly free-floating, independent, class-like group.*

(275) Mackenzie's stratum would readily fit into this category. The organic intellectual, by contrast, has a more directly functional and administrative role, which in its bourgeois form "includes high level civil servants, industrial managers and technicians, specialists in law and finance, and the organizers of culture, both public and private." (275) Working class organic intellectuals are the counterparts of these latter, standing in apposition, so to speak, with their class-mates in the hegemonic realm. The strongest examples of organic intellectuals for Patterson and other commentators are labour leaders and radical clergymen. But Patterson includes traditional musicians such as fiddlers and local songmakers among the organic intellectuals of the working class because of their direct social interaction with communities while performing in expressive roles which coalesce a collective spirit. He excludes country musicians from organic intellectualism because of the mediation of their role by mass dissemination and the division of labour which that entails. If this study has one unmistakable conclusion, it is that such an estimation of country musicians overlooks the ordinary exceptions such as Art Fitt. He works in the local environment as a musician by echoing much-loved refrains,

singing stories and feelings, shaping the county song repertoire, as well as providing a stage for and occasionally tutoring those who strain for expression.

Art Fitt is an "unmediated" musician in this sense. His normal musical role, his usual work, is as performer, master of ceremonies, promoter of unrecognized artists, and often now spokesman and man of the community. In this respect he is of course more than a paid performer, he is a whole person comprised of a series of concentric circles through which he regularly glides.

Who among us does not wish to have fulfillment and life role coalesce into one meaningful gestalt, to pour our best and truest and most vital energies into the things which we do best? If we can simultaneously make our living and be sincerely and widely known for the best of our creative work, why would we settle for a mere job? Coffin recognises this when he underlines, using almost spiritual imagery, a key truism for all those who travail on this great green earth:

In fact, when one considers the fullness of meaning of words like *occupation* and *employment*, *vocation* and *calling*, and perhaps most of all, *living*, it is obvious that they signify much more than the nature of the labor for which one is paid. These words have spiritual denotations that mean the way a man lives in the broadest sense, not merely how he makes a living. They suggest that what a man is called to do brings him the most satisfaction. ("Introduction" to Coffin and Cohen 1973, xxxiv)

Art Fitt is increasingly active in civic matters, such as charity drives and relief funds, and contributes his time and skills to an immense number of benefits. He is acutely aware, I feel sure, though he has never spoken to me explicitly about it, of his expanded role as community servant, role model, and occasional guiding force.

Art Fitt's journey to this role took him up the status ladder, where he shared stages and rubbed shoulders with widely known stars. He has told me more than once that his hardest lesson has been to learn how frail their makeup was, to recognize in heroes the tragic flaws, to really see the hypocrisy and self-indulgence which so often drives them. Perhaps his most important message as an organic intellectual is just that - not that the ambitious should not strive for deserved success, but that out there, farther than the eye can see, where the streets are said to be paved with gold, that gold is embedded in jagged boulders of hard quartz. In order to bring that message, though, Art had to journey for seven or more long years on the high seas (or open prairies), and return disguised as a beggar. He removed his disguise and started from scratch, let his people see that he had kept his half of the ring safely in his pocket all that time. One day in Halifax, when he examined the ring he had carried from his beloved county, it appeared a bit pale and wan. He knew then that his home

place was being led to a false altar, that he must return:

"I wanna go home."

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CFMJ = Canadian Folk Music Journal
JAF = Journal of American Folklore
JCM = Journal of Country Music
WF = Western Folklore

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Interview, 11 August, 1993.
- Mackay T14A & B Art Fitt. Performance, Talent Contest,
Interview, 11 August, 1993.
- Mackay T15A & B Art Fitt. Performance, Talent Contest,
Interview, 11 August, 1993.
- Mackay T21A & B Pat Fitt. Interview. 8 August, 1993.
- Mackay T22A & B Pat Fitt. Interview. 8 August, 1993.
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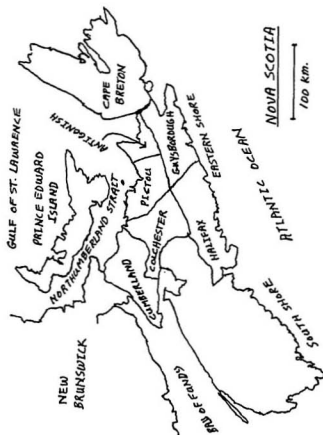
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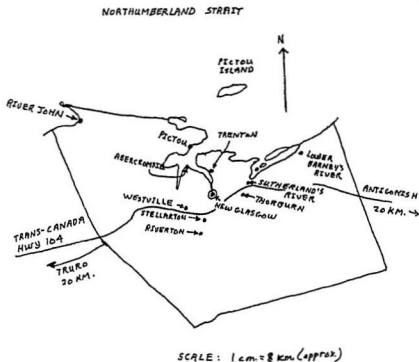
APPENDIX I

Maps



Map 1 Nova Scotia, with counties.

*Counties Indicated for Northeastern Mainland
of Nova Scotia
Map by Jock Mackay 1994*



PICTOU COUNTY, NOVA SCOTIA

Map by Jack Mackay 1994

Map 2 Pictou County, Nova Scotia, with relevant communities.

APPENDIX II

Photographs

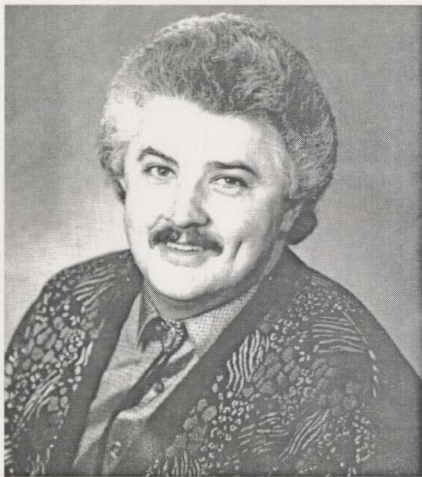


Photo 1 Promotional photo of Art Fitt (reduced).



Photo 2 Art Fitt at work, Diamond Jim's, 11 August, 1993.
Note signs on stage.

Photo by author.



Photo 3 Art Fitt's recently acquired diesel cube van with sleeping quarters and sign on side.
Photo by author.



Photo 4 Diamond Jim's tavern, Westville.
Photo taken 12 August, 1993, by author.



Photo 5: Stellarton Legion.
Photo by author, 12 August, 1993.

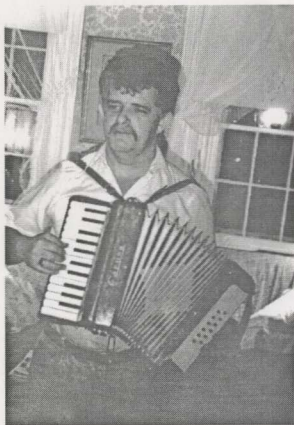


Photo 6: Pat Fitt with "cordeen," at Mackays, Sutherland's River. George's window, centre right.
Photo by author, January, 1992.



Photo 7: From left: author, Relief Mackay (my mother), Pat Fitt.
Photo by Agnes Dawson, 9 January, 1992.

APPENDIX III

<p> SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS \$ BOOKLET \$ \$ BINGO \$ \$ SATURDAY & SUNDAY \$ \$ NIGHT \$ \$ TRENTON RINK \$ \$ JACKPOT \$ \$ \$1000 TO GO \$ \$ \$5.00 FOR 6 CARD BOOK \$ \$ REGULAR BUS SERVICE \$ \$ LOTTERY #A26558 \$ SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS </p>	<p> Printed Matter CANADIAN LESION  BRANCH #28 STELLARTON SUN., AUG. 11 OPEN: 2 p.m. - 10 p.m. DARTS — 2:30 p.m. UPSTAIRS "TOP TEN ART FITT TALENT NITE" 6 p.m. - 10:00 p.m. MEMBERS & THEIR GUESTS — PROPER DRESS — ADMISSION: \$3.25 (GST INCL.) GOVT ID'S UPON REQUEST </p>
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Thompys

LOUNGE & DINING ROOM

THURSDAY

RECESSION NIGHT

FRIDAY

LADIES NIGHT

SATURDAY

BRUCE WHEATON

\$2.50 COVER CHARGE

GOVT LIQUOR STORE ID'S UPON REQUEST

DIAMOND JIM'S

— WESTVILLE —

WEDNESDAY

"ART FITT"

TALENT NIGHT

THURS., FRI., & SAT.

"JUST US"

— NO COVER —

Printed matter 1:

advertisements from New Glasgow Evening News, showing Art Fitt's ads and his competition for "entertainment dollars."

ART FITT TRIVIA

Art and his one time band "Stallion" have been nominated two years running for band of the year in Canada. He was also nominated twice for vocalist of the year in eastern Canada.

Art has two singles to his credit, "Raining In Dallas" and "Bend On The River"; one album with the band "Riverboat", and his own stage album.

Art is a very versatile entertainer, playing many different instruments, one being the piano accordian, which he just completed an instrumental album featuring the accordian and guitar selections.

Art's stage show is second to none, with up-beat music that keeps you on the dance floor. You will hear no "dead air" when Art is performing, he flows from one tune to the next. The most common remark from people who see him for the first time is, "That guy sure does earn his money."

Most who have not seen him perform think of this as a small little one man show, but don't let that fool you. Art has as much equipment or more than some bands you see on the same circuit. As a matter of fact, he has two men with him to help set up equipment and lighting.

Art plays all types of engagements, from lounges to wedding anniversaries. He can adapt to any crowd.

Art entertains four nights a week on an average of 50 weeks a year, which means he has no shortage of work.

Art Fitt is one of the hardest working entertainers this area has ever had the pleasure of listening to. If you have not seen him perform, go out, treat yourself. You won't be sorry!

Art has also worked with performers such as:

Suzanne Somers (from Three's Company)
 Charlie Pride
 Del Shannon
 Mel Tillis
 Drifting Cowboys (Hank Williams Sr.'s Band)
 Lee Marlow
 (Whisperin') Bill Anderson
 (Late) Red Souvine

The Family Brown
 Terry Carisse
 Eddie Eastman
 Memphis (Elvis Presley's vocal group)
 Dallas Harms
 Bob MacGrath (from Sesame Street)
 Ronnie Prophet
 Ronnie Hawkins
 Johnny Paycheck

Show and T.V. Credits:

Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, Ont.
 Montreal Children's Hospital Telethon (CBC)
 Maritime Country (A.T.V.)
 Coffee Break (A.T.V.)
 Ronnie Prophet Tour Newfoundland 1981
 Ronnie Prophet Tour Ontario 1982
 Ronnie Prophet Tour Western Canada: 1983

Printed matter 2:

promotional information sheet for Art Fitt,
 entertainer.

