

## THE ISLAND FIDDLER



Joe and William Kearney of Sturgeonon  
with Matilda Murphy on the piano.

Newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society  
No. 7, October 1982

## Fiddlers Notes

While the Rollo Bay concert is long past, we can't miss the chance to thank the Eastern Kings Fiddlers for the great effort that goes into making this annual event a success once again this year. . . . Up west, the Prince County Fiddlers hosted a stimulating spring get-together in Summerside. Jim Beairsto, the fiddling 82-year-old barber from Kensington, led off the music with his rendition of The Mason's Apron. . . . The experience of playing at the New Brunswick Highland Games in June was pleasant for those who participated. A group also played at Victoria Park on Canada Day.

The CBC-TV show, 'Sounds of the Island,' will be on soon; unfortunately, plans to have segments of traditional and oldtime performers seem to have fallen through over the summer. . . . Island Folk Festival, a day of such Island performers, will be held November 6 at Westisle School in Elmsdale. Along with singers from across the province, there will be fiddlers and other instrumentalists.

George MacIntyre is now wired for sound, which doesn't seem to hold him back at all. . . . Allister MacGillivray's book The Cape Breton Fiddler sold 1500 copies in its first three months. . . . Our newsletter was featured along with information on our Fiddlers Society in a recent issue of a monthly magazine called New Maritimes. . . . We are sad to read in the local press of the financial and other problems of the Belfast Pipe and Drum Band, the last pipe band on the Island. It would be nice if our Society could assist in some way. . . .

### Obituaries

Since the last newsletter we have lost two prominent old-time musicians and former bandleaders in Pius Blackett and George Chappelle. George of course was in the first edition of the Merry Makers on the 'Kelly & McInnis Show' on CFCY and later had a national CBC network spot from CFCY with the Merry Islanders--the spot that Don Messer, who replaced him, used as a springboard to success during the war years. Pius later had George in his Eastern Rhythm Boys, a popular dance band. The photo below shows George on fiddle and Pius on Hawaiian guitar at the Sunnyside Dance Hall with the Eastern Rhythm Boys.



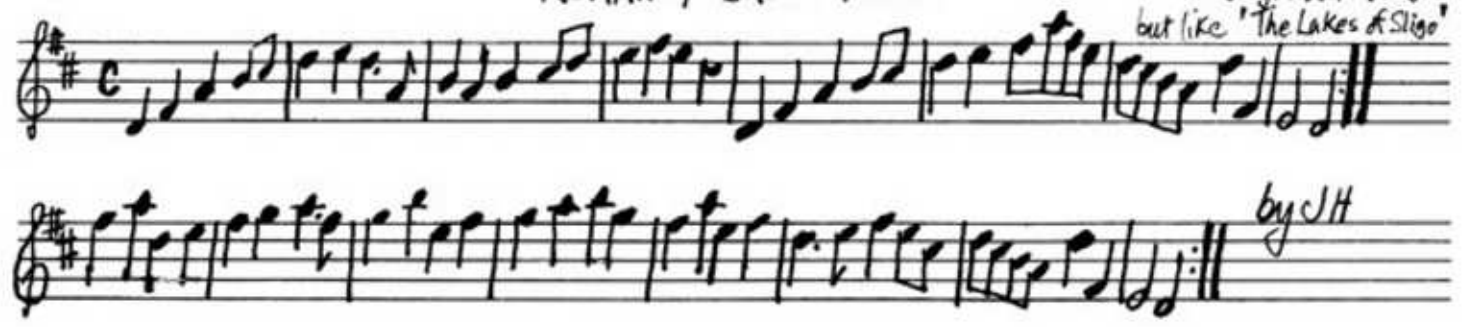
# Tunes To Try

played by the KEARNEY BROTHERS - REEL - NOTATION & ARRANGEMENT by: STAN WEBSTER



## KEARNEY BROS. POLKA

- origin unknown but like 'The Lakes of Sligo'



## Wilfred's Fiddle Jig

by Dan R. MacDonald  
Cape Breton



## Brothers of the Bow: Joe and William Kearney

Joe and William Kearney from Sturgeon have been fiddling together for about sixty years. They play many older tunes, among them some in the now little-used "high bass" tunings. They finger most tunes with two or three fingers --assisted in A by the high bass, which they associate with Jack Webster from whom they learned some tunes. Their fiddling is solid and straightforward, highlighted with a danceable swing and excellent timing. Their music is a link with an older style of fiddling which is rarely heard here today.



Joe: When I got first started on the violin, the fiddle we call it, I couldn't sit on a chair yet. And we had a step to get upstairs in the house, and I used to sit on it. At the first of it I used to have to steal the fiddle from my brother William when he was away, because I'd break the strings. And then he'd come home and of course I'd have the first or second steel broke. Well, the young fella was at the fiddle. So that was all right. Finally, I got the sound of a fiddle. And I never left her alone, I started scratchin' at her. Well, it was pretty hard to tell what I was hitting. But finally, "Redwing" was the first tune that I struck. And I wore it out.

Anyway it went on then and of course, the girls--my father picked up an organ, I suppose I'd be twelve years old when we got it. And we were all home, and we used to go out to little parties, my father used to take us along, and so finally good enough, we started picking up the fiddles a little longer. And then the girls got striking the odd chord on the organ. Well, it was away we go.

My father had an idea of music, he could play the accordion. But he never played a fiddle, any more than pick it up and rasp it. He pretty near could tell you when you were right or wrong.

William: Didn't my father buy the fiddle from Jim Condon. Jim used to come up to our place for a few days, he was driving the Rawleigh wagon at that time, and he'd carry the fiddle with him. He was a very nice player, Jim, he was from Souris. So [father] thought we should have a fiddle, so he bought us the fiddle I think, for five dollars. A hard fiddle to play on--we didn't know that then.

Joe: At dances in the late 1920s we'd mostly have an organ [for accompaniment]. It was mostly set tunes then, slow jigs. Four or five jigs for the Lancers. We were mixing in some reels, and picked more up later on. I didn't go in for the name of the tune.

William: We'd go round the dances, at about 13 or 14, and there weren't many fiddlers at that time. We did not get too far waway, not like now; no cars then, horse and wagon. One of the things I remember about dances during those times was the dust the dancers would kick up. Of course, the dancers were six to eight deep around the floor. Gus Jamieson and Alex Jamieson were about the only fiddlers [we heard] then; they were of our line. There was Jack Webster, but we never connected with him then.



Addie Stewart was a good player, he used to play at our parties, he had all those old tunes. My, he was a nice player. We picked up a lot of tunes from Addie. There was a good player down home, George Kennedy, but he'd have to hum with the fiddle you know. He wouldn't [just] come in here and sit down and play, but he'd play and he'd hum. But he was a good player. You had him at a dance, there'd be lots of noise--he could make it for you.

#### Different tunings

Joe: That's one fault we got. You take anybody going to play Big John McNeil--I've got to shift her. [To ADAE] for Johnny Cope and Soldier's Joy and the like of that. Well then, when I go up to Big John McNeil, I've got to pull up the third string [to AEAE]. And it pretty near puts everything else out, it puts the guitar out. You hate to be playing Lord MacDonald's Reel [standard GDAE tuning], and then have to play Johnny Cope, and then have to play Big John McNeil or Speed the Plough. You see, it's three different shifts.

From when I told you there, I went away on the dredge, I was away for ten years and I never played it. It's only here lately we've started to pick it up a little. And the PEI Fiddlers have certainly encouraged that.

[Thanks to Joe and William for their stories and music, to Stan Webster for his assistance, and to Gerard Murphy and family for their hospitality.]

Interview by JW  
Transcription by JH



## I Soon Lost My Pavement Nerves

The following short piece edited from Laurie Lee's novel, As I Roved Out One Midsummer Morning, is about the first street-music experience of a young English fiddler in the middle 1930s.

This section tells of his attempt at "busking," which takes place in the English port city of Southampton. Now read on....



As I'd been sleeping in fields for a week, I thought it was time I tried a bed again, so I went to a doss-house down by the docks. The landlady, an old hag with a tooth like a tin-opener, said it would cost me a shilling a night, demanded the money in advance, treated me to a tumblerful of whisky, then showed me up to the attic.

Early next morning she brought me a cup of tea and some water in a wooden bucket. She looked at me vaguely and asked what ship I was from, and only grunted when I said I'd come from Stroud. Then she spotted my violin hanging on the end of the bed and gave it a twang with her long blue nails. 'Well, hey diddle diddle, I reckon,' she muttered, and skipped nimbly out of the room.

Presently I got up and dressed, stuck my violin under my jacket, and went out into the streets to try my luck. It was now or never. I must face it now, or pack up and go back home. I wandered about for an hour looking for a likely spot, feeling as though I was about to commit a crime. Then I stopped at last under a bridge near the station and decided to have a go. I felt tense and shaky. It was the first time, after all. I drew the violin from my coat like a gun. It was here, in Southampton, with trains rattling overhead, that I was about to declare myself. One moment I was part of the hurrying crowds, the next I stood nakedly apart, my back to the wall, my hat on the pavement before me, the violin under my chin.


The first notes I played were loud and raw, like a hoarse declaration of protest, then they settled down and began to run more smoothly and to stay more or less in tune. To my surprise, I was neither arrested nor told to shut up. Indeed, nobody took any notice at all. Then an old man, without stopping, surreptitiously tossed a penny into my hat as though getting rid of some guilty evidence.

Other pennies followed, slowly but steadily, dropped by shadows who appeared not to see or hear me. It was as though the note of the fiddle touched some subconscious nerve that had to be answered--like a baby's cry. When I'd finished the first tune there was over a shilling in my hat: it seemed too easy, like a confidence trick. But I was elated now; I felt that wherever I went from here this was a trick I could always live by.

I worked the streets of Southampton for several days, gradually acquiring the truths of the trade. Obvious enough to old timers, and simple, once learnt, I had to get them by trial and error. It was not a good thing, for instance, to let the hat fill up with money--the sight could discourage the patron; nor was it wise to empty it completely which could also confuse him, giving him no hint as to where to drop his money. Placing a couple of pennies in the hat to start the thing going soon became an unvarying ritual; making sure, between tunes, to take off the cream, but always leaving two pennies behind.

Slow melodies were best, encouraging people to dawdle (Irish jigs sent them whizzing past); but it also seemed wise to play as well as one was able rather than to ape the dirge of the professional waif. To arouse pity or guilt was always good for a penny, but that was as far as it got you; while a tuneful appeal to the ear, played with sober zest, might often be rewarded with silver.

Old ladies were most generous, and so were women with children, shopgirls, typists and barmaids. As for the men: heavy drinkers were always receptive, big chaps with muscles, bookies and punters. But never a man with a bowler, briefcase or dog; respectable types were the tightest of all. Except for retired army officers, who would bark, 'Why aren't you working, young man?' and then over-tip to hide their confusion. Certain tunes, I discovered, always raised a response, while others touched off nothing at all.



## Watch For "Sounds of the Island"

New TV Variety Talent  
Showcasing Island Talent  
On CBC This Fall

All in all, my apprenticeship proved profitable and easy, and I soon lost my pavement nerves. It became a greedy pleasure to go out into the streets, to take up my stand by the station or market, and start sawing away at some moony melody and watch the pennies and halfpennies grow. Those first days in Southampton were a kind of obsession; I was out in the streets from morning until night, moving from pitch to pitch in a gold-dust fever, playing till the tips of my fingers burned. When I judged Southampton to have taken about as much as it could, I decided to move on eastwards. Already I felt like a veteran, and on my way into town I went into a booth to have my photograph taken.

I still have a copy before me of that summer ghost--a pale, oleaginous shade, posed daintily before a landscape of tattered canvas, his old clothes powdered with dust. He wears a sloppy slouch hat, heavy boots, baggy trousers, tent and fiddle slung over his shoulders, and from the long empty face gaze a pair of egg-shell eyes, unhatched and unrecognizable now.

## Radio Notes

Lots of good listening on CJFX (580 kh) these days. "Scottish Strings," now called "Ceilidh Time" and hosted by Ray MacDonald, is heard weekdays from 6:05 to 7:00pm. a 40-minute increase in airtime. Gus MacKinnon still hosts "Scottish Strings" on Saturdays from 7:30 to 8:00 pm. Well done boys! Following from 8:00 to 9:00 pm Saturdays on CJFx is a new program called "Celtic Fringe". Hosted by Cape Breton piper Ian MacKinnon, the show features a nice variety of Scottish and Irish music.

New Glasgow's CKEC also recently expanded their "Sweet Music" program from 30 to 40 minutes. It's hosted by Rod Mackey from 6:20 on Saturday evenings. The "Highland Fling" program on CIGO Port Hawkesbury is on at a new time on Sunday--6:10 to 6:45 pm.

The Eric MacEwan Maritime Radio Show features a fine variety of Maritime recording artists, with many fiddlers included. The syndicated show is heard on CHTN from 7:00 to 9:00 pm Sundays, and is also on CJRW in Summerside.

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Many thanks to TOOMBS MUSIC STORE, Charlottetown, for their continuing support.

Photo credits: Eastern Rhythm Boys courtesy Jim Hornby and the late Pius Blackett, Kearney brothers courtesy Gerard Murphy.