

# John Allan Cameron: The Godfather of Cape Breton's Celtic Music

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**Figure 1: John Allan Cameron (guitar) with Bill Lamey (fiddle); the boy behind with arms crossed is Jerry Holland. Highland Picnic Games, Brocton, Massachusetts, 1963. Courtesy of Paul MacDonald.**

We're delighted to welcome as our guest the gregarious guardian of the Gaelic, John Allan Cameron!

– Bill Langstroth, *Singalong Jubilee*

Cape Breton Island is known today as one of Canada's focal points for Celtic music and culture. While this reputation grew from the success of musicians such as the Rankin Family, the Barra MacNeils, Ashley MacIsaac, and Natalie MacMaster, their trail was blazed, in good measure, by singer-guitarist John Allan Cameron. Born in Inverness, Nova Scotia, on December 16, 1938, Cameron led a fascinating life, and his musical versatility allowed him to perform traditional Cape Breton Scottish music, ballads, new Canadian folk songs, and country music with equal aplomb.

Cameron's career as a folksinger, guitarist, television personality, and promoter of Canadian song flourished during the two decades between the folk revival of the 1960s and Maritime Canada's "Celtic Wave" of the 1990s. There was something daring about Cameron's proud display of his Cape Breton roots, a defiant willingness to play Celtic music "when Celtic wasn't cool".<sup>1</sup> His untiring dedication to traditional music and his efforts to get it into the Canadian media explain why Cameron became known as "the godfather of Celtic music".<sup>2</sup>

Cameron was born into a musical family, and was raised in Glencoe Station, Nova Scotia, a tiny com-

munity between Judique and Mabou. His uncle was the legendary Cape Breton fiddler Dan R. MacDonald, and his mother Kate and brother John Donald played the violin; other siblings, Alex, Jessie Ann, and Marie, are known as fine Cape Breton-style pianists. His mother also sang Gaelic songs, some of which Cameron would later record. The family listened frequently to Celtic music on radio station CJFX, and John Allan and John Donald were inspired by the variety of fiddlers they heard, from Angus Chisholm to the nationally-broadcast music of Don Messer.<sup>3</sup>

John Allan began picking up the violin at age 12, but became interested in the guitar at 13. Cameron's father agreed to purchase one for him, but was warned that the instrument would be taken from him and sold if he didn't work hard at learning it. Whether or not such motivation was needed, the young John Allan progressed quickly, and was accompanying fiddlers at dances and weddings within two months. Accompanists were in short supply in the community, and Cameron found ample opportunity to hone his skills with local fiddlers.

By the end of his teens, Cameron found himself caught between two callings: music and the priesthood. In 1957, Cameron moved to Ottawa to study with the Order of the Oblate Fathers, and continued with his studies until 1963. However, Cameron couldn't shake the feeling that God had other plans

for him, and he missed performing the music he loved. In 1964, he received a special papal dispensation to leave the Order without being ordained.

Cameron moved to Antigonish, Nova Scotia, to earn his B.A. at St. Francis Xavier University. While there, he met up with Gus McKinnon, who hosted a radio show on the local station, CJFX. Cameron and McKinnon connected through music, attending various events through the summer. McKinnon offered John Allan a job at the station in the fall, allowing Cameron to co-host his show for three mornings each week. This provided an important point of entry into the world of media for Cameron, who later dedicated his third album, *Get There By Dawn* (1972), to McKinnon in acknowledgment of his generosity. Also at the University, Cameron performed with a vocal group called the Cavaliers.



**Figure 2: John Allan Cameron, second from left; Gus McKinnon at the microphone. Opening of Glendale Hall, Glendale, Nova Scotia, 1963. Courtesy of Paul MacDonald.**

Cameron's next brush with the media came in 1967, while in Halifax doing his Bachelor of Education. Cameron auditioned for a spot on *Singalong Jubilee*, CBC's popular folk music television show (1961-74), broadcast from Halifax. Cameron impressed host Bill Langstroth with his charisma and

musical energy, but even more with his unique dedication to Cape Breton folk repertoire, both vocal and instrumental. Cameron's style beggared comparison; literally no one on the North American folk scene was performing in such a concentrated way the Celtic music of Nova Scotia in the national media.<sup>4</sup>

Cameron's early image, as seen on *Singalong Jubilee* and his first album cover, was as a kilted Cape Bretoner. Kilts were not at all common attire in Cape Breton, but during Nova Scotia's extensive re-branding as an assertively Scottish province, the decking out of local performers in tartan clothing was sometimes used as a key marketing ploy for tourists. Cameron, eager to popularize Cape Breton repertoire among a wider audience, may have felt that a colourful and distinctly Scottish visual hook was needed to help audiences place what they were hearing.

The successful *Singalong Jubilee* audition convinced Cameron that performing music was indeed his calling. After spending one year teaching school in London, Ontario, he quit and began performing his English and Gaelic folk songs, as well as fiddle and pipe tunes (picked out on his signature instrument, the 12-string acoustic guitar) at folk festivals like Mariposa and Newport, and honed his act in countless taverns and pubs across Canada. He signed a deal with Apex Records and his albums *Here Comes John Allan Cameron* (1969) and *The Minstrel of Cranberry Lane* (1970) quickly followed.

The 12-string acoustic guitar would be John Allan's main instrument through much of his career. Though not especially common among guitarists in Atlantic Canada, the 12-string gave Cameron's recordings a distinct sound, a crisp and bright jangle when used for accompaniment, and a shimmering, chorused sound (because of the doubled strings) when playing fiddle and pipe tunes. His technique of using a thumb-pick and constant down-strokes is wonderfully idiosyncratic, since most Celtic guitars in Cape Breton use flat picks and alternate up-and-down strokes. Fiddler, guitarist, and long-time Cameron bassist Allie Bennett elaborates, "He used to use a thumb pick. And I used to call him the 'bionic thumb', because it was just amazing the speed he could get with all just down strokes. I mean, I play most of the tunes with a flat pick myself mostly, but back in those days, all he knew was this thing called a thumb pick. So, that made him very unique as well."<sup>5</sup> His strength as a guitarist is further noted by Celtic music historian Sheldon MacInnes, who observed that Cameron could convincingly imitate the ornaments and cuttings of the pipes and violin, and could use them motivically in both his lead playing and accompanying.

One of Cameron's ambitions was to bring Atlantic Canadian folk music to a wider audience. By

1970, Cameron built up enough of a reputation among central Canadian country fans that he could pack a large audience into Toronto's main country venue at the time, the Horseshoe Tavern. Jack Starr, the proprietor, was duly impressed with Cameron's talent, and managed to get Cameron on spot on the Grand Ole Opry.<sup>6</sup>

Cameron's appearance in Nashville was one of the early glories of his career. Celtic music was certainly not common at the Grand Ole Opry, and Cameron was not sure whether he should wear his kilt, which he had donned so proudly on the cover of his first LP. As Virginia Beaton and Stephen Pedersen recall,

Cameron had been pacing about backstage before his solo spot, nervously wondering if maybe the kilt wasn't a bit too much, when he ran into fellow Opry guest Ernie Ashworth. Ashworth had just scored a hit with a single called "Talk Back Trembling Lips". He was wearing a cream-coloured suit with a repeating design of big red lips, plus the title of his song patterned all over it ... Cameron decided that if Ernie Ashworth could appear in that jacket, he, John Allan, was going to wear his kilt.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in his Highland gear, Cameron appeared on Nashville's coveted stage, picked out the melody of a bagpipe tune on his 12-string guitar, and then launched into a fast-paced version of one of his standby songs, "Anne". Though the appearance and sound John Allan must have caught the audience a bit off guard, they loved it, and Opry host Roy Acuff gave Cameron more airtime than the usual three minutes, including a brief interview. The success of his appearance owed much to Cameron's trademark combination of humour, enthusiasm, down-home charm, and fearless pluck. *Singalong Jubilee* host Bill Langstroth once noted of Cameron, "He had more nerve than Dick Tracey. He could just step into a situation and make it work for him."<sup>8</sup>

Things were now on the upswing for Cameron, who was taken on by Anne Murray's management company, and signed to a new deal with Columbia Records. Cameron's first major-label release, *Get There By Dawn* (1972), set the course for the next phase of his career. In keeping with earlier releases, there were still Child ballads, rollicking pub tunes (notably "I'm a Rover, Seldom Sober"), 12-string guitar renditions of fiddle and bagpipe tunes, but Cameron added songs into the mix from contemporary songwriters from Canada (Bruce Cockburn, Paul Grady) and Ireland (Tommy Makem, Pecker Dunne, Dominic Behan).

The musical mix of *Get There By Dawn* shows how Cameron aimed to reach a wider audience. There were definite connections to John Allan's Cape

Breton roots, not just in the repertoire, but in the sounds of the fiddle and bagpipes that graced some tracks, and in the accent and diction with which Cameron spoke and sang. His arrangements, always dominated by the sparkling acoustic sound of the 12-string, nevertheless brought in sounds from country music (the waltzes and two-step feels; dobros and slide guitars; the Hank Williams-style falsetto breaks in the voice), and folk-rock (the backbeat; the occasional vocal harmonies). It was a sound that worked in small-town pubs, folk festivals, country venues, and concert stages.

*Lord of the Dance*, released later in 1972, followed in a similar stylistic vein. The title track is adapted from the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts", with new sacred lyrics added in 1967 by Sydney Carter. Cameron's loving rendering of the beautiful Gaelic song "Chi Mi Na Morbheanna" ("Mist Covered Mountains") is a standout track.

By the mid-1970s, Cameron reached a high point of public visibility, appearing frequently on television. He hosted the Halifax-based CBC show *Ceilidh* in 1974, and then got his own *John Allan Cameron Show* on CTV, broadcast out of Montreal, which ran from 1975 to 1976. He managed to book folk music stars such as Tom Paxton, Roger Whittaker, Bruce Cockburn and a young Stan Rogers. Cameron was selected to host the Juno Awards in 1976. He also released a double album in 1976, *Weddings, Wakes, and Other Things*. This record contained three tracks by the rising Cape Breton songwriter Allister MacGillivray, and his song "Tie Me Down" provided Cameron with a Canadian adult contemporary radio hit, and Cameron's version of "Song For the Mira" helped popularise MacGillivray's well-loved Cape Breton anthem.

In 1978, Cameron started his own Glencoe record label, and released an album, *Fiddle*, with the Cape Breton Symphony, a group featuring Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald, Wilfrid Gillis, Jerry Holland and John Donald Cameron. His first Glencoe solo album, *Freeborn Man*, followed in 1979, which put a renewed emphasis on traditional Cape Breton and Scottish songs, like "Mary Mack", "Mingulay Boat Song", "Sound the Pibroch", "The Broom O' The Cowdenknowes", and Gaelic tunes like "Tha Mi Sgith". However, a few contemporary tunes from songwriters like his friend Stan Rogers ("Make and Break Harbour"), and Cape Breton's Fred Lavery ("Fisherman's Song") rounded out the album.

Cameron again fronted his own variety show, this time on CBC, during 1979-80. As with his earlier shows, the format was music and variety, and featured singer-songwriters and traditional performers from across Canada. Ratings were respectable though

not spectacular, and the show was cancelled after one season.

During the 1980s, Canada's media and music industry were changing, and Cameron struggled to keep the pace he had sustained during the 1970s. A reworked version of *Weddings, Wakes and Other Things* was released in 1981 under the title *Song for the Mira*, and a *Best of ...* collection was released in 1982. Cameron was not able to licence his own material from his time on Apex records, so his first two LPs were not represented on this collection. Anne Murray's management declined to renew their contract with Cameron, so in 1984, he signed with Entertainment Management Corporation, which seemed unsure what to do with a folksinger from Cape Breton. One angle they attempted included booking Cameron as a children's music act.

Cameron's only all-new album during the 1980s, *Good Times*, was an attempt to update his style by working with a Nashville producer, a full band, and a sound that leaned more towards modern electric pop. Cameron knew that he needed more radio play to stay in the game as a professional musician, and he searched for a style that would be compatible with the country and easy listening formats that had occasionally embraced him in the 1970s. However, this new sound did not really gel with Cameron's preferred material or his unadorned, "everyman" style of singing.

Despite this, his reputation as a critical figure in the Canadian folk revival and in Maritime Celtic music led to new honours and opportunities in the 1980s and 1990s. He began a twenty-year tenure as honorary chieftain of the Highland Games in Fergus, Ontario, in 1985, was given a lifetime achievement award at the 1995 East Coast Music Awards, and was given prominent billing during the first two Celtic Colours festivals back home in Cape Breton. He performed for Canadian Forces overseas in the late 1980s, a service in which he took great pride. He continued to be a popular performer at summer folk festivals, and branched out into acting with theatre companies in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of the "Celtic Wave" of the 1990s, as many of the Cape Breton artists he had mentored or influenced in the 1970s and '80s were beginning to take flight (the Rankins, Ashley MacIsaac, the Barra MacNeils), Cameron released a new album, *Wind Willow* (1991). This was a return to his acoustic style, and featured the typical mix of ballads, Celtic tunes, new singer-songwriter fare and his deft 12-string guitar playing. A three-volume retrospective set, *Classic John Allan*, followed in 1992, further promoting Celtic music's godfather at this critical moment in the Maritimes' music history.

Cameron's last album, *Glencoe Station*, was released in 1996, and featured "My Cape Breton Home", which was co-written by Cameron himself. An autobiographical account of his journey from Cape Breton to Ottawa to pursue the priesthood, it narrates his eventual decision to dedicate his life to the music and culture he grew up in, and loved dearly.

Cameron's contributions to Canadian culture were acknowledged by the Canadian government in 2003, when Cameron was given the Order of Canada, one of the highest civilian honours. His work, which had always proudly celebrated his regional heritage and its traditions, was publicly honoured as a matter of national significance.

Unfortunately, not long after this peak moment, Cameron received alarming news. His health had been questionable for a few years, and visits to specialists had been inconclusive. In 2005, at age 66, he was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia and bone marrow cancer. Benefit concerts in Halifax and Glace Bay were held by Cameron's friends and fellow musicians – from Rita MacNeil to Fred Lavery to the Barra MacNeils to Jerry Holland – hoping to raise money as well as spirits. After some efforts at treatment, Cameron passed away on November 22, 2006, in Scarborough, Ontario.

John Allan Cameron's legacy lies in making Cape Breton's Celtic traditional music a known and loved genre across Canada. He was not Cape Breton's first recording artist by a long stretch – fiddlers had made commercial recordings as far back as late 1920s and 1930s – but he was the first to probe its commercial potential beyond a regional audience and make Canadian Celtic music a viable alternative to American-dominated country and folk styles. Cameron's heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s coincided with Trudeau-era cultural and media policies, which included Canadian Content regulations on radio and television, as well as efforts to promote and disseminate Canadian culture and heritage. Though these do not explain Cameron's career motivations, they are factors in explaining his access to the media and the importance of his turning a regional, traditional style of music into something worth promoting nationally.

He was a hero to many of the young Maritime musicians who followed and became stars in their own right. Cameron was generous in sharing the stage with new talent, and artists like the Rankin Family, Dave Gunning, and Ashley MacIsaac benefited early in their careers from Cameron's promotional boosts. Ashley MacIsaac, commenting on the lasting influence of Cameron's career, told *Celtic Heritage* in 2005, "the next generation will discover who John Allan was and will play his music".<sup>10</sup> In 2010, Dave Gunning, an emerging singer-songwriter

from Pictou County, Nova Scotia, released a tribute album of Cameron's best-loved songs and tunes, and embarked on a tour featuring members of Cameron's band, in an effort to capture something of his sound.

Cameron's sound, of course, was important – the gently lilting Cape Breton accent, the 12-string guitar – but even more important was the personality that shone on stage, something which no audio recording can ever quite capture. His ability to win over an audience with his disarming humour and outgoing enthusiasm revealed the soul of a born entertainer. His son, Stuart, commented,

He loves to entertain people. Music can even be secondary. Like, if you go to a Tom Jones show, you are guaranteed to be entertained whether you like the music or not. You go to a John Allan Cameron show... My dad said, you know, I never claimed to be the greatest singer, but I know how to entertain. That's what it's all about for him – entertaining people.<sup>11</sup>

But in the end, Cameron was more than an entertainer; he was a proud and passionate folk musician and folk revivalist, who believed in the beauty and integrity of the Scottish-Canadian traditions in which he had been brought up.

### Selected Discography

*Here Comes John Allan Cameron*. 1969. AL7-1645 Apex

*The Minstrel of Cranberry Lane*. 1970. AL7-1650 Apex

*Get There by Dawn*. 1972. ELS 382/ES-90089 Columbia

*Lord of the Dance*. 1972. ELS 383/ES-90102 Columbia

*Weddings, Wakes & Other Things*. 1976. 2-GES 90343

*Freeborn Man*. 1979. CSPPS 1432/GMI-002 Glencoe

*Song for the Mira*. 1981. CSPPS 1640/GMI-003 Glencoe

*The Best of John Allan Cameron*. 1982. GAMC 3004 Great Atlantic Music Co.

*Good Times*. 1987. FR-019 Freedom

*Wind Willow*. 1991. MSCD 9128 Margaree Sound

*Classic John Allan, vol 1-2*. 1992. MSCD 9231 Margaree Sound

*Classic John Allan, vol 3*. 1996. 02 50444 Margaree Sound

*Glencoe Station*. 1996. 02 77657/5049 21 Atlantica Music

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Greg Guy, "Honouring John Allan: Musicians, Friends Get Together to Help Out the Godfather of Celtic Music," *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, 2005.

<http://www.scotland.com/forums/music-art/22757-honouring-john-allan-cameron.html>, accessed February 17, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Quill, "John Allan Cameron Made Celtic Cool," *Toronto Star*, 20 May 2006; Cassandra Szklarski, "Cameron's Vitality Remembered at Music Funeral," *Canadian Press*, November 28, 2006.

<http://www.iandavies.com/jacam-profile.htm>, accessed February 17, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Beaton and Stephen Pedersen. 1992. *Maritime Music Greats: Fifty Years of Hits and Heartbreak*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 96.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Janice Evans, dir. 2006. *Celtic Soul: The Life and Music of John Allan Cameron* (DVD). Halifax: Creative Atlantic.

<sup>6</sup> Beaton and Pedersen, 99.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Evans 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See Richard Green and Florence Hayes, "John Allan Cameron," *Encyclopaedia of Music in Canada*. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/emc/john-allan-cameron>, accessed March 27, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Unknown author, "The Godfather of Celtic Music," *Celtic Heritage* 19/3, July/August 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Evans 2006.