

The “Gaspé Sound”: Fiddle Music from Two Anglo-Gaspesian Villages

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Figure 1: Cyril DeVouge.

As we wrap up the final phrase of “Le reel des esquimaux”,¹ Cyril DeVouge turns to Brigid and comments on my playing: “He’s got the Gaspé style.” Brian Morris and Brigid Drody sit behind their Dreadnought guitars.

BD: Yeah, he does, yeah.

BM: Yeah, it’s comin’.

BD: He’s picking it up from Erskine’s tapes or ...

CD: [to Brian] You used to play a mean fiddle too.

BD: [to Cyril] No, his dad, his dad. (DeVouge, Drody, and Morris 2010)

It is a warm May afternoon in Cyril DeVouge’s room at the *Résidence Youville*, a riverside nursing home in the older area of Châteauguay, Quebec, a suburban neighbourhood on Montreal’s South Shore. The three of us sit facing Cyril, cramped between the modest furnishings – a bed, fold-out table, and La-Z-Boy recliner – and the instrument cases lying haphazardly on the bed and floor. Cyril has confused Brian Morris with his late father, Erskine Morris, a locally well-known fiddler from the English-speaking Irish village of Douglastown on the Gaspé coast. Cyril DeVouge (Figure 1) was born five miles east of Douglastown in the neighbouring fishing village of

l’Anse-à-Brillant in 1915. In the late 1950s, he met Brigid Drody while playing fiddle at a house party in Murdochville, a mining town in the peninsula’s interior. Both were working at the mine, Cyril as a driller and heavy equipment mechanic and Brigid as a secretary in the accounting office. Cyril, Brigid, and Brian’s parents all relocated to the Montreal area from Gaspé in the 1960s and spent time in the rural Châteauguay Valley area just south of the metropolis. Together, they share ties of kinship, and common cultural experiences across nine decades and 600 miles, from the English-speaking villages at the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula to the cosmopolitan bustle of Montreal and its nearby fertile farming communities along the Châteauguay River.

Brian and I are meeting Cyril for the first time and for the past five months, as Brigid noted above, I have been trying to learn the Gaspesian fiddle style of Brian’s father, Erskine Morris. I take Cyril’s assessment that I “have the Gaspé style” as very generous, and feel that Brian’s qualification that “it’s comin’ ” to be a more realistic account of my progress. Beginning with a brief introduction to the Anglo-Gaspesian community of Douglas Township, this article aims to introduce the reader to a local musical culture little-

known outside of this community and its diaspora through a social history of the “Gaspé Sound”. I consider both formal musical structures and people’s engagement with these sounds in their everyday lives (Berger 1999, 22-25; DeNora 2000). Inspired by ethnomusicologist Louis Meintjes’ ethnographic strategies (2003), I write “outward from performed utterances, musical gestures, and storied moments” (15) engendered by the “Gaspé Sound” in order to represent how it has been culturally situated in the past and present, acting as both a constituted and constitutive force of the community’s social life (DeNora 2000; Turino 2008). Using ethnographic reflexivity (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 14), I consider how my own engagement² and reengagement with this sound’s “performed utterances”, as a fiddler seeking to learn this style, has engendered a dialogical and reciprocal space to receive and share in understandings of this music and its cultural contexts (14-15) with Brian Morris, Brigid Drody, and Cyril Devouge. I conclude with a brief contemplation on the contemporary cultural landscape of English-speaking Gaspésians from the Douglstown area³ and the sonic and social resonances of the “Gaspé Sound” in the present day.

1. A Brief History of the Gaspé Coast and Douglas Township

For brevity’s sake, I will focus on the settlement of English-speakers around the Bay of Gaspé at the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula (Figure 2, n.b. the Bay of Gaspé is circled). However, it is necessary to note that the peninsula is the historic homeland of the Mi’kmaw and it was in front of a group of indigenous peoples that Jacques Cartier erected a cross, claiming Canada in the name of the King of France on July 24, 1534. Small numbers of French and French-Canadian fishermen who surreptitiously settled on this seasonal fishing grounds during the 17th and early 18th Centuries⁴ were deported to France in 1758 with the British conquest of New France and Acadia (McDougall; Mimeault and Sinnett 2009, 50-55, 80-83) during the Seven Years War.



Figure 2: Map of Gaspé Peninsula

The first English speakers, merchants and discharged soldiers from Wolfe’s forces, began settling around the Bay of Gaspé in the early 1760s. The influx of American Loyalist refugees into Quebec between camps at Montreal and Trois-Rivières following the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) led to the planning and surveying of two new townships on the Gaspé coast to resettle some of the displaced families (McDougall). Douglas Township (which includes the neighbouring villages of Douglstown, Haldimand, Seal Cove, l’Anse-à-Brillant, and Bois-Brulé) was the second township settled.⁵ Most of the 25 families of Loyalist refugees and discharged British soldiers who arrived in Douglstown in 1785 and 1786 had left by the turn of the 19th Century, seeking closer access to the main fishing grounds near Percé or more fertile lands in Loyalist settlements elsewhere in Upper and Lower Canada (White 1999). By the turn of the 19th Century, the Atlantic salt cod empire of Channel Island merchants Charles Robin and John LeBoutillier came to dominate the local economy, bringing new settlers from Jersey and Guernsey into the surrounding communities through to the early 20th Century (Mimeault and Sinnett 2009, 101-115; Ommer 1990).



Figure 3: Douglstown Origins.

Douglstown’s principal growth before 1830 was driven by intermarriage between the town’s eight remaining families (see Figure 3), who were of Irish, Irish-American, French-Canadian, Channel Island, French, and English descent (White 2000). During this time, the Catholic religion and English language came to predominance in the village. Despite any early bilingualism, by the 1830s the town had become a centre of linguistic assimilation for several French-Canadian fishermen who were marrying Douglstown women (LeMoignan 1967, 29). Dougl-

lastown remained religiously Catholic and identified strongly with their English-language⁶ and Irish cultural heritage until the 1960s (ibid., 30). The neighbouring Anglican village of l'Anse-à-Brillant (or Brilliant Cove) was much smaller than Douglstown. During the 19th and early 20th Centuries, despite their diverse cultural backgrounds (French, English, Scottish, American, Channel Island, and German), its residents had also all become unilingual English speakers (Girard-Snowman 2014).⁷

The 20th Century decline of the peninsula's three principal industries (fishing, lumbering, and mining) was a source of massive rural-to-urban outmigration from the Gaspé Peninsula to urban areas throughout North America. Anglophone communities were most significantly affected in proportional demographic terms (Bélanger, Desjardins, and Frenette 1981, 562) falling from their peak proportion of 50 percent in the mid-19th Century to 12 percent by 2006 (Rudin 1985, 183; C.A.S.A. 2010, 7).

2. The Gaspé Sound

I first heard the “Gaspé Sound” on my computer speakers one evening in early November 2009. Two years earlier, I had met Brian Morris, who was playing lead guitar at a bluegrass and old-time jam I hosted from 2005 to 2010 at Grumpy's Bar in downtown Montreal. Playing country music in Montreal during this time, I frequently encountered older Anglophones from rural Quebec – a demographic previously unknown to me as a recently transplanted Ontarian who had come to the city for graduate studies in electrical engineering. Given my interest in the musical culture of southern Appalachia, I wondered if Quebec's rural Anglophones might also possess any history of playing/creating fiddle music. When Brian Morris mentioned to me during a jam in 2007 that his late father, Erskine Morris (Figure 4), was an old-time fiddler from an Anglo-Gaspesian village, my interest was naturally piqued. I asked if he might have any home recordings of his father that I could listen to.



Figure 4: Erskine Morris.

Two years later, having digitized a tape of his father's music, Brian emailed me a few selections. The music exploded from my speakers. I was totally unprepared for the music's caliber. Recorded at a rowdy family reunion in Douglstown in 1984, the music, driven by a heavy bow and sharp foot percussion, was at once passionate, powerful, and controlled, syncopated to extremes that I had yet to encounter in fiddle music. The closest words I could find for these sounds were “old” and “French”. I wanted to

learn this music ([Audio Clip 1, “Tommy Rooney's Jig”](#)).

2.1 Stutters

Listening to these first tunes, I was struck by the “stuttering”, almost funky aesthetic, which somehow maintained a powerful drive. Weeks later, slowing the music down on my computer, I realized that much of the syncopation was achieved by strategical-

ly de-emphasizing or dropping the *first* or *third* note in a group of four consecutive eighth notes. Notes were often de-emphasized by quietly bowing a note on the adjacent lower string before returning to a full-volume note on the higher string on the off-beat, thereby creating a *perception* of two consecutively accented off-beats. Listeners I have met often describe this technique as sounding like a stutter. Meghan Forsyth has encountered the same technique and nomenclature in her work with Acadian fiddlers, who considered the technique central to the music's "Frenchness" (Forsyth 2012, 361). Likewise, my first reaction to Erskine's music was that, despite its generation by an English-speaker, it possessed some internal "Frenchness".

The tendencies for musicians and early scholars to conceptualize musical sounds as possessing fundamental sonic "essences" rooted in ethnicity, race, or language are often situated in broader discourses of cultural "authenticity", a well-documented phenomenon in ethnomusicological scholarship (Nettl 1964, 180; Meintjes 2003; Nettl 1983). My encounter with these sounds before my immersion into the academic world of ethnomusicology sparked my curiosity about cross-cultural influences in Quebec and the role of English-speakers in the province's musical *patrimoine*.⁸ My expectation just before opening the first mp3 file was, I suppose, to encounter something more stylistically "mass-mediated" and "anglophone", à la Don Messer. I was very surprised by what actually sounded both "authentic" and "French".

To find out more about the people and cultures behind these sounds, I emailed Brian several times a week in the months following this first email. Because of the music's calibre, I felt it would be worth sharing this music with other fiddle aficionados online, so I proposed to Brian in early 2010 that we co-create a blog about his father's music. We launched the blog on March 7, 2010, and our first posts used tracks from the 1984 family reunion recording, combined with information provided by Brian.⁹ Three days later, Brian wrote a short introduction to his father and his music for the readership (Morris 2010b) (used with author's permission):

Who Was Erskine Morris? - An Introduction by Brian Morris

Erskine Morris was an old time fiddler who was born in Douglstown Gaspe, Qc in 1913. Erskine was the second child and first boy in a family of six girls and four boys. Being from a large family, Erskine had to leave school at a young age to help support the family. He worked with his father for a number of years as a fisherman in summer and lumber camps in the fall and winter.

At the age of 13, he started playing the fiddle after hearing his mother singing tunes while clogging. She was his biggest influence at that time, because he could imitate her melodies while he was learning to play. He learned to play his first tune, Fat Molasses, from his mother's singing. She also taught him the footwork which would become a very important part of his playing. He also learned tunes from local fiddlers Joe & Charlie Drody. Joe in particular was a big influence because he knew many French Canadian tunes.

By the age of 16 he was already playing in public. Because he developed such a highly syncopated and driving playing style, he was highly sought after for parties and dances. For the next 13 years he played many dances, before enlisting in army. At that time, he left Douglstown for good only to return occasionally for vacations and family reunions.

After the war, they settled in Montreal where he continued to play the fiddle for family, friends, and relatives. He spent many hours learning new tunes and developing variations to old tunes. He had a repertoire of approximately four to five hundred tunes.

I was surprised to learn that "Fat Molasses"¹⁰ ([Audio Clip 2](#)) was Erskine's first tune and that he had learned it from his mother's *lilting*.¹¹ I found the tune metrically and rhythmically complex, and struggled for weeks just trying to hear where the downbeats were. The tune is a *brandy*, a triple-metre reel found in some older French-Canadian repertoires but exceedingly uncommon in most other North American fiddle styles. Erskine freely improvises both stutter patterns (i.e., de-emphasizing the first and third eighth notes) on top of the basic melody during his performance at the family reunion (Figure 5, measures 2, 6, 8, 11). I locate my early struggle to hear the downbeats in "Fat Molasses" in my own musical conditioning. Previously only having encountered reels in duple-time and confronted with Erskine's use of syncopated "stutters" that create the illusion of accented upbeats, my sense of the downbeat and "the barlines" was confounded. Brian was surprised at my difficulties "getting" this tune. For him, having heard his father frequently play "Fat Molasses" while growing up, the tune was one of the simplest his father played; it wasn't about counting beats or bars, but simply "feeling" the music (Brian Morris, Personal Communication 2010).

Responding to a post on *The Fiddle Hangout*,¹² where I announced our new blog to the website's readership a week after its launch, a New Jersey fiddler named Jimmy Allen posted a recording of Cyril DeVouge that he had made while visiting the Gaspesian fiddlers at Pembroke in the early 1990s. The music on the recording immediately struck me.

Cyril's syncopation was so intense that the music bordered on a calypso feel ([Audio Clip 3](#)). Tracing the I, IV, and V chords, the melody is almost *built around* the “stutters”. Whereas Erskine used stutters to create a tightly syncopated sound, Cyril's feel was

much looser and more playful; nevertheless, upon hearing this track, Brian remarked: “I was just listening to that mp3 of Cyril DeVouge. No mistaking, it's the Gaspé sound for sure” (Morris 2010a).

Fat Molasses

– As Played at the 1984 Morris Family Reunion, Douglstown, Quebec –

Violin tuning = AEAE Traditional. Arranged by Erskine Morris
Transcribed by Glenn Patterson (March 2014)

Figure 5 shows the musical score for "Fat Molasses". It is written for violin in the key of D major (two sharps) and 3/8 time. The score is divided into two systems, A and B. System A contains measures 1-6, and System B contains measures 7-12. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes with some syncopation. Measure 6 has a first ending, and measure 7 has a second ending. Measure 12 ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Figure 5: “Fat Molasses”.

2.2 Footwork

In my early efforts to learn Erskine's music, Brian emphasized the importance of the foot percussion, telling me in an email that:

I remember Dad telling us he wasn't playing at Wakeham Homecoming any longer because the people in charge insisted that he play standing. His footwork was such an important part of his playing which they didn't understand. (Morris 2010a)

The first percussion pattern involves rocking or beating between the heel and toe of one foot “on the beat” and tapping the other foot on the second off beat, giving a quarter note plus two eighth note rhythm. A second “double toe” pattern taps the toe (or heel) of the non-rocking foot between the beats of the rocking foot to create a steady stream of eighth notes. In North American contexts, the use of foot percussion patterns (instead of simply tapping on the beat) are often read as a marker of French-Canadian identity and cultural influence (Lederman 1988, 207). In [Audio Clip 4](#), we hear the tight interplay between feet and fiddle as Erskine plays “Fat Molasses” unaccompanied on a home recording he made in February

1978. I have filtered out the high frequencies of a 40-second sample of this track in [Audio Clip 5](#) so that the listener can clearly hear Erskine's use of both patterns, especially the “double toe” pattern. Learning the footwork again highlights the difference between just “feeling it” and my history of learning music analytically and procedurally. Indeed, whenever I ask Gaspesian fiddlers how they learned the footwork and how long it took them to “get it”, their responses so far have invariably been that it just came naturally and was never something they consciously thought about “getting”. They seem surprised that I would need four years to be able to successfully execute the basic pattern while playing.

As Brian continued sending me music, I was surprised that many tunes that Erskine had picked up locally had Irish-sounding titles¹³ despite sounding more “French” than “Irish” (to my ears) in their melodic, rhythmic, metrical, and structural characteristics. Given my initial interest in tune origins, I wanted to know about Erskine's Irish Gaspesian fiddle mentors, Joe and Charlie Drody, and where their “French” sound came from.¹⁴ Brian mentioned that Joe Drody's daughter, Brigid, lives in Howick, Quebec in the Châteauguay Valley and that she would

know a lot about this music, as she has played backup guitar for fiddlers throughout her life on the Gaspé coast and around the Châteaguay Valley. We visited Brigid in May 2010 and between the tunes of a seven hour jam session, she shared her memories and knowledge about Douglastown musicians and step-dancers.



Figure 6: Brigid Drody.

Brigid Drody (Figure 6) was born on January 1, 1937, in Douglastown into a large musical family. Her father, Joseph Drody (1884-1965, Figure 7), was a fisherman, lumberman, local carpenter, and boat builder who, along with his brother Charlie (1888-1972), learned fiddle from their great uncle, James Henry Walsh (1830-1899). When I interviewed Brigid for an oral history project in July 2013,¹⁵ she described for me her father and uncle's music:

GP: So your dad was playing fiddle in the evenings?

BD: Yep, he would pick it up in the evenings. And when Mama would go over to Uncle Horace's, to her old home, Papa would go in the parlor, in that room, and he would play the fiddle, but not loud, he would just – you could hear him – but he'd close the door and play ... He was very quiet. Uncle Charlie was a nice fiddler too, yep, he was good. He was a livelier fiddler than Papa. Well Papa could be lively too, if he had a couple of gins [laughs] ...

Both her father and uncle were frequently called upon in the middle of the night to provide music for the town's younger residents after the dances finished at the parish halls in the communities around the Bay:

BD: And I remember waking up at night ... there'd be a dance at the council hall, the little community centre there, and when the dance was over they would all get in their cars and come in, and I'd be sleeping upstairs and I could hear them downstairs. But they'd move the table out of the middle of the floor and square dance and have fun.

GP: How late would this be?

BD: Oh maybe till 3 or 4 in the morning [laughs].

GP: And how often did this happen?

BD: Well, quite often, usually after the dances. Douglastown and Haldimand had square dances. (Drody 2013)

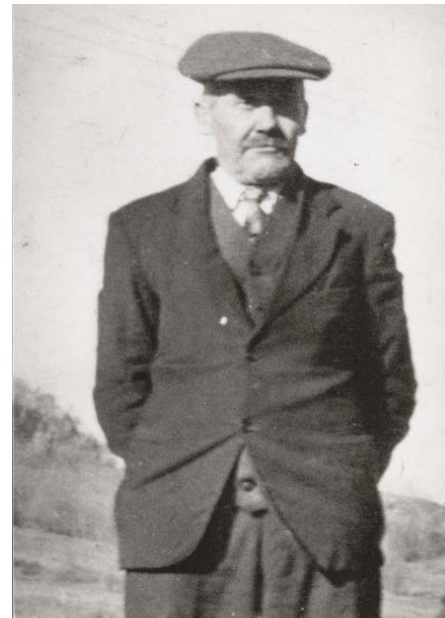


Figure 7: Joe Drody.

“Hall dances”, or public square dances at local parish halls, were a principal form of community entertainment between 1930 and the mid-1960s, and took place in parish halls owned by Protestants in the neighbouring communities of Haldimand, Wakeham, and Sandy Beach.¹⁶ Although attending these dances was forbidden by the Douglastown's Catholic clergy, many residents nonetheless risked being denied communion should a priest have discovered they were at a “Protestant dance” the night before Mass (Drody 2011).

2.3 Guitar Accompaniment

Brigid's musical siblings included brothers Joseph, Anthony, and Johnny, sister Kathleen, who played the fiddle, and sister MaryEllen, a singer and guitarist. Brigid describes learning the guitar:

Well, we didn't have a guitar. I used to pick up the fiddle sometimes and maybe get a few notes out of it, but Tom Gaul...had a guitar, and he loaned it to us. And I wasn't allowed to take it. It was hangin' up, we had a picture on the wall, and there was two nails, and a little shelf. So the guitar stayed there, and I wasn't allowed to take it from the wall, so I would put my hands on the strings and strum [laughs]... (Drody 2013)

Learning a few chords from her sisters, Brigid was soon accompanying her siblings. Several of their neighbours have described to me their memories of hearing the music of the Drodys drift from the front porch of the Drody homestead after church on Sundays.



Figure 8: Gaspé Tent.

Although the piano has historically been the accompaniment of choice for fiddle music in Quebec, the villages between Gaspé and Percé, like Douglstown, seem to have strongly favoured guitar accompaniment, almost to the exclusion of the piano.¹⁷ Brigid's guitar style seems influenced – whether directly or indirectly – by the early country musicians popular on the radio during the 1940s and '50s. Her style is rooted in the walking bass style popularized by musicians like Maybelle Carter, Jimmie Rogers, and Hank Snow – all of whom were well-loved in Douglstown through commercial radio broadcasts from as far as Wheeling, West Virginia. Punctuating the regularity of the downbeat bass-strum pattern and forceful quarter-note walk-ups are moments of rapid-fire eighth-note down-and-up strokes executed with her soft plastic plectrum. In [Audio Clip 6](#), Brigid's driving bass walks and rapid strumming are miked front and centre while accompanying her brother Joseph at a party on New Year's Day, 1991 (also her birthday). In [Video Clip 1](#), Brigid backs Brian Morris and me up as we play "Tommy Rooney's Jig".¹⁸ Brigid believes that she really developed her guitar

style while playing for fiddlers at the "Fiddle Park" campground at the Pembroke Fiddle and Stepdance Festival, which she and her husband have attended since 1981. This weeklong festival in the Ottawa Valley has been a yearly reunion for a core group of diasporic Anglophone Gaspésians. In the early morning of the Monday before Labour Day this group sets up camp, assembling the legendary "Gaspé Tent" (Figure 8), a dance platform and small stage covered by a tarp structure. Throughout the week, Gaspésians living in Ontario, Quebec, and as far away as New Jersey, Nevada, and British Columbia bring their RVs and campers and park around the tent. Here, they enjoy the fiddle and country music they grew up with, whether as musicians or spectators (Figure 9).



Figure 9: George Dion.

2.4 Stutters Revisited

During our first visit with Brigid in 2010, Brian and I played the tune we had learned from the recording of Cyril DeVouge posted on *The Fiddle Hangout*. She remembered well having played this tune with Cyril over the years, and mentioned that he was still living and would love it if we paid him a visit to play him "his" tune.

On May 22, 2010, Brian and I met Brigid at Cyril's nursing home in Châteauguay. Due to paralysis in one arm and a pinched nerve in the other, Cyril had not been able to play fiddle for several years. Nevertheless, he entertained us as much as we entertained him, sharing his stories, jokes, and wisdom with us; he also treated us to some lilted ([Audio Clip 7](#))¹⁹ and harmonica playing ([Audio Clip 8](#))²⁰ of music he had once played on the fiddle. At around 5 seconds in Audio Clip 7, we clearly hear Cyril lilt a "stutter" by dropping the three consecutive downbeat eighth notes

in a group of six. On a recording I later found of Cyril fiddling this tune, he did not “stutter” his bow in a similar manner. However, during our next visit, having played this tune as I had learned it from his lilt-ing, Cyril remarked to Brigid and Brian that “he plays it *exactly* the same as I did” (DeVouge, Drody, and Morris 2010).

The music we played for Cyril that afternoon connected him with some of his earliest memories:

CD: I’ll tell you boy, I used to love the fiddle. Well, my father used to play it when I was a little boy about this high. Every Sunday. And I’d sit and listen to him and the first thing is tears. I had to go upstairs – I loved the fiddle so much. It used to go right into my heart ...

GP: How old were you when you started playing?

CD: Oh, about 10. I played for a tea-meeting when I was about 10 years old. Up in the loft in the old school house. They had a tea meeting and I played for the first time. I couldn’t get my feet on the floor off a chair.

After playing an instrumental version of the Carter Family’s “I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight”, Cyril, Brigid, and Brian speculated as to why they experience such an emotional response to fiddle music:

BM: Well, we grew up with the fiddle, I mean I did too. The fiddle was the first instrument in the house.

CD: Well, at home we were four brothers. And there were four fiddles hanging on the wall, on nails. And they had a little cord around there. And my mother said there was never the four of them there together at the same time.

BD: We had the fiddle hanging up over the stove. Over by the couch there. It was hanging on a nail...

CD: You know, it’s one of the nicest musics in the world.

BD: Oh, it’s beautiful. (DeVouge, Drody, and Morris 2010)

2.5 Hooks

In subsequent visits with Cyril before he passed away in March 2011, he patiently helped me understand other aspects of the “Gaspé sound” and how to interpret his tunes. Although I had now heard several home recordings of Cyril playing the fiddle, my ear was not attuned to subtler aspects of his style. One particularly subtle yet effective technique is what Cyril called “a hook”. Hooks are achieved by replacing a single quarter note with two eighth notes of the same pitch, a rather simple technique. Nonetheless “hooks”, like “stutters”, can also create a *perception* of syncopation. When used on strong down-beats in a tune’s melodic development, the second note of the “hook” can disrupt the expectation of hearing the quarter notes durations which occur ubiquitously at key downbeat moments in much old-time fiddle music.²¹ Cyril made it clear that “hooks” were essential in playing *his* tunes correctly; no longer able to play fiddle himself, Cyril would often stop me as I played his tunes and would sing a given phrase so that I could add “hooks” at key moments. In [Audio Clip 9](#), Cyril DeVouge demonstrates where his friend Neil MacKay can put a “hook” in one of his tunes, “Roland White’s Tune”. In [Video Clip 2](#), Cyril and Brigid play this same tune in 1996 at Pembroke, and we get to see Cyril’s mysterious and lyrical bowing in action, alternating between long slurs and sharp, staccato hooks and string crossings. (James Allen also carefully captured footage of Cyril’s footwork on this tune, which shows his use of the “double time” eighth-note pattern described earlier.) In Figure 10, I have transcribed the first section of “Roland White’s Tune”,²² including Cyril’s bowing and use of “hooks”. After spending time with Cyril, I realized that many of Erskine Morris’ tunes were also laden with hooks ([Audio Clip 10](#))²³ – something I suppose I had missed while being distracted by the more overt syncopation of the “stutters”.

Roland White's Tune - First Turn

Demonstration of the "Hook"

Transcription - Glenn Patterson

Traditional
Cyril Devouge

2.6 Connecting Sounds, Connecting Generations

The aesthetic created by “stutters”, “hooks”, and foot percussion extends beyond the community’s fiddle music; local lilted and harmonica playing featured the same prominence of these techniques. I asked Erskine’s son, Brian Morris, to comment on my description of the Gaspé sound. He writes:

That “Gaspé Sound” was around long before my Dad and Cyril began playing the fiddle. I remember my Grandmother, when she was lilted a tune, she used the same techniques you mentioned in your article, by singing in a highly syncopated manner with a lot of emphasis on the stutter and the hook. Everyone was using this technique, including my aunt, Harriet ... I agree with you about Cyril’s and my Dad’s playing being built around the stutter and the hook, these became the foundation by which they expressed themselves musically. By using these techniques they were able to generate a lot of music from a simple 4 or 5 note tune. And when you add the feet you have the perfect combination. (Morris 2013)

In [Audio Clip 11](#), Erskine’s mother, Beatrice Fortin (or Ms. Edgar Morris, as she was known), lilted a well-known French-Canadian tune “The Four Corners of Saint-Malo” (*Les quatre coins de Saint-Malo*) using the stutter to great effect. In [Audio Clip 12](#), we hear Erskine playing the harmonica (an instrument that he seldom played) on “Joe Drody’s Jig”, a local tune that he also played on the fiddle.

I have had the good fortune of having played extensively with Brian Morris in Montreal and around Douglstown. In [Audio Clip 13](#), Brian plays “La ronfleuse Gobeil” with Brigid’s backing at the 2013 Pembroke Fiddle and Stepdance week. He learned this tune in the 1980s from a Jean Carrigan recording. His lead playing has a compelling swing and it took me a while to realize perhaps why. Just as his father and Cyril DeVouge brought aspects of the “Gaspé Sound” to the music they learned from commercial records and radio, Brian too has incorporated the unique syncopated rhythms of “stutters” and “hooks” that he heard from his father, grandmother, and relatives in Douglstown into his own bluegrass-influenced lead guitar playing. When I ask Brian about his use of these techniques, he again contrasts my own experience learning this music; for him it is a decidedly non-technical matter and is as simple as just having “the feel” of the music (DeVouge, Drody, and Morris 2010).

Conclusions: The “Gaspé Sound” in the Contemporary Gaspesian Cultural Landscape

Despite decades of outmigration, Douglstown continues to make great efforts to maintain links with its cultural past. The local Douglas Community Centre²⁴ has played a pivotal role in the Douglstown area’s recent and present day cultural landscape. The community centre runs social and cultural events throughout the year, including concerts, breakfasts, presentations, and the yearly St. Patrick’s Day festivities, which always include fiddling and square dancing as well as singing of popular 20th Century Irish sentimental songs. Since 2009, a committee has worked to save and renovate the Holy Name Hall,²⁵ the local parish cinema built in 1938, and the historic site of the town’s yearly St. Patrick’s Day concerts. The height of the town’s cultural calendar is the annual Douglstown Irish Week held during the first week of August. Strategically occurring during the height of the homecoming season for diasporic Gaspesians, the festival brings together local and outside talent to provide concerts, workshops, and historical presentations. Yearly highlights are the Saturday evening, which starts with a “fish supper” (with salt cod cakes, boiled potatoes, and potluck dessert) followed by a concert under the tent. The festival’s concert programming shows a marked shift towards showcasing local talent; in 2012, the Drody family gave an hour-long concert to a full crowd on the Saturday evening, and a concert earlier in the week featured Norma McDonald (an active community member and guitar player and singer) in concert with a nun/fiddle player who taught at the school in the late 1960s. Since 2010, I have participated in the festival as a musician-academic by giving concerts, fiddle workshops, and presentations on Erskine Morris and Joe Drody as a way of fostering dialogue and reciprocity with the community.

There is a special buzz in the community around the Irish Week, and informal visits with old friends often turn into house parties when a musician or two shows up with a guitar or fiddle. Outside of the festival’s official programme, I have been welcomed into many kitchens and parlours to play music with Brian Morris and Brigid Drody; I’ve also been the fiddler for the spontaneous late-night square dances that take place under the festival tent after the evening’s official entertainment ends.

Since 2012, fiddler-musicologist Laura Risk (McGill) and I have been part of a collaboration led by the Community Centre to research and produce a CD of local music drawn from home recordings made in Douglstown and the diaspora since the late 1950s. Listening to over five dozen hours of home recordings for this project has been enlightening as

both a musician and an academic. It has greatly expanded my understanding and appreciation of the range of performance contexts and the massive breadth of music filtered through the Douglstown experience.²⁶ We expect to release this CD at this year's Irish Week (July 28 – August 3).²⁷

My valuable experiences with this Anglo-Gaspesian community, whether at the Irish Week or at the Pembroke Old-Time Fiddle and Stepdance week, informally jamming out with Brian Morris and Brigid Drody, or spending hours researching a blog post, can all be traced back to the captivating syncopations I heard coming from my computer speakers in 2009. These same sounds have encouraged rooms full of people to join hands for a square dance during the Irish Week, or pack into a warm and overcrowded room with over 70 others to participate in a presentation on the life and music of Erskine Morris. With this in mind, I find myself returning to my own early engagement with the "Gaspé sound" – initially mediated through computer speakers, mp3 technology, and slow-down software – and am forced to reflect on its socially and personally transformative potential which, when tapped into, might engender seemingly "extreme" responses. These responses might include inspiring a community member to drive across the continent in their RV for a few days of music in Pembroke with friends from back home or encouraging an amateur musician and community outsider to forsake their unimpassioned but nonetheless comfortable engineering career for the greener pastures of ethnomusicological scholarship.

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Notes

¹ This French-Canadian tune was recorded on a 78 rpm disk by the fiddler Joseph Allard in the 1930s. We learned this tune from Brian Morris' father.

² My early engagement with this sound relied upon home sound recordings made by local and diasporic Gaspésians of musicians in the community. Home recordings on reel-to-reel and audiocassette have been made in this community since the late 1950s.

³ The "Douglstown area" includes neighbouring villages of l'Anse-à-Brillant, Seal Cove, Bougainville, and Haldimand. Although somewhat arbitrary, this designation speaks to Douglstown's historic role as a cultural hub in this area, especially for the local Catholic population.

⁴ The *Ordonnance de la marine* (1681), declared by the French King Louis XIV, forbade the establishment of seigneuries along the coast to maintain the region as an uncontested resource for continental French fishing fleets (Mimeault and Sinnett 2009, 43-44).

⁵ The second settlement was Cox Township, which saw the creation of the town of New Carlisle on the Baie-des-Chaleurs in 1784 (White 1999).

⁶ English speakers often represented 95 percent of the town's demographic before the mid-20th Century. Their majority status lasted until about the 1990s.

⁷ I have been told that there was likely some nominal understanding of French among the village's Jersey population, who spoke both English and French and possibly *Jèrriais*, the Norman-French dialect of Jersey. (Girard-Snowman, 2014).

⁸ In this article, I do not explicitly deal with or speculate about the music's ethnocultural "origins" per se, a research topic that has generally proven intractable (see Nettle 1984, 260-262).

⁹ <http://gaspefiddle.blogspot.com>.

¹⁰ Harmonicist Louis Blanchette recorded a similar tune in 1938 under the title "Le reel de Windsor Mills", named after a village in Quebec's Eastern Townships. Erskine would have learned this tune ca. 1926, and it was in the repertoires of Douglstown fiddlers born as early as the 1880s.

¹¹ Liltling, or *tuluttage* in French, refers to singing vocables to instrumental dance music. In Douglstown, people generally refer to this as "singing the tunes".

¹² www.fiddlehangout.org.

¹³ E.g., "The Murphy Reel", "The Shannon Reel", "The Blue Shannon", and "The Rocky Road to Dublin".

¹⁴ See footnote 8, on the general intractability of musical origins.

¹⁵ This was run by the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network for their StoryNet project. <http://storynet.ca>.

¹⁶ Unlike Douglstown, these communities had significant Protestant populations as well Catholic populations.

¹⁷ The piano and pump organ were, however, used extensively in the area to accompany 19th and early 20th Century "popular" songs and country music favourites. In my experiences with the community, many have expressed their belief that the piano tends to overpower the fiddle.

¹⁸ We heard this tune previously from the 1984 Morris Family Reunion. It is in fact a *brandy*, not a 6/8 jig. "Jig" here refers simply to the step-dancing that accompanied this tune. Tommy Rooney was a well-loved step-dancer who used to visit Brigid's home to dance to her father's fiddling.

¹⁹ Cyril said he learned this tune as a boy from his father, Leslie DeVouge.

²⁰ Cyril said he learned this tune from his best friend growing up, Roland White of the neighbouring hamlet of Bois-Brulé.

²¹ This is, at least, *my own* perception of the rhythmic effect.

²² This melody was recorded in the late 1920s by both Joseph Allard and Isidore Soucy under the separate, and rather unspecific, titles of "Quadrille acadien" (1928) and "Gigue indienne" (1929) respectively (these can both be heard on

<https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/gramophone>).

Although Cyril DeVouge learned this tune from Roland White, I do not know if the latter learned it from these (or other) commercial recordings or from a local source.

²³ This is Erskine's radical recasting of a rather straight-ahead Don Messer tune, "The Veteran's Reel". Erskine uses hooks continuously throughout the tune and varies the metre and phrasing of Messer's setting considerably.

²⁴ The community centre was established by a group of residents in 1998 in the old St. Patrick's School, which closed in 1993 due to declining student enrollment. <http://douglstown.net/en/>.

²⁵ <http://holynamethall.weebly.com/index.html>.

²⁶ On one cassette we listened to, there is music from a local fiddler, early country songs, 19th Century ballads, sentimental and vaudeville Irish songs, and a song by ABBA, all played and sung by local musicians, mostly with pump organ accompaniment.

²⁷ <http://www.semaineirlandaiseirishweek.com/accueilang.html>.