

An Interview with Maybelle Chisholm McQueen An Originator of the Cape Breton Celtic Piano Style

Interviewed by Chris McDonald, September 7, 2014,
in the Studio of CKJM Cooperative Radio, Cheticamp, Nova Scotia



Figure 1: Maybelle Chisholm McQueen.

Introduction

Maybelle Chisholm McQueen is a pivotal figure in the history of Cape Breton's fiddle tradition. Not long after the piano became the most important accompanying instrument for fiddlers, Maybelle emerged as one of the most sought-after and imitated pianists, owing to her rich, flamboyant, and innovative style. Before Maybelle was well known on the island, Cape Breton pianists played in a simple, stride style which kept to the middle range of the instrument. Maybelle introduced an active, syncopated right hand that used the full range of the piano, along with glissandi and

other details that added excitement to piano accompaniments. Maybelle and another popular pianist, Mary Jessie MacDonald of New Waterford, did much to popularize the "walking bass line" in Cape Breton piano. Today, many Cape Breton pianists make the most of the instrument's range and rhythmic possibilities, and that is in good measure due to Maybelle's influence.

Maybelle grew up in Southwest Margaree, a small but important community for Scottish Gaelic culture in Cape Breton. Two of her uncles were particularly well-known culture-bearers, including Archie Neil Chisholm, a storyteller, fiddler, and broadcaster, and

Angus L. Chisholm, who was the first Cape Breton fiddler to perform on commercial recordings for Decca and Celtic Records.

I got a good sense of how active and in-demand Maybelle is as a musician in her late 70s as we tried to schedule this interview. We had to move the date around a few times because she kept getting gigs (both on the island and off) with fiddlers like Ashley MacIsaac. We finally nailed down a date in September 2014, and I had the pleasure of interviewing her in one of the sound rooms at the community radio studio near her current home in Cheticamp, Nova Scotia.

Interview (abridged):

Chris McDonald: Tell me about the music you heard in your home and how you got into playing.

Maybelle Chisholm McQueen: As you know, I am a young lady. I am 77 years old. When I was growing up, I listened to the radio – and I listened to it a lot because I loved music. As far as piano music went, there were some very good players but they played what we used to call three-finger chords. These players – most of them were right on – but they only went to the middle of the piano. As a young girl I started out at 10 years of age, playing with my uncle Angus Chisholm, my uncle Archie Neil Chisholm, and people like Angus Allen Gillis, and Dan J. Campbell. These were the men who went and made the first Cape Breton recordings of Celtic music in Montreal in 1934 or 1936. I seemed to have bridged the gap from that generation into today's generation, and I'm playing with the young ones today. I've been doing a lot of playing with them this summer, and it's funny, a lot of the time they'll call me and ask if I can do it with them. And I enjoy that, and seeing the young ones grow up and come into the music.

CM: Can you tell us about some of the early Cape Breton traditional pianists? Was Bess MacDonald one of these?

MCM: Bess MacDonald was one of the best at that time. She played with my uncle Angus L. She made recordings with him. I only made one recording with him because I was so young. She went to Montreal, but she wasn't expected to be the piano player. It was supposed to be Hugh MacDonald from Antigonish. He played the polka. He was called "the Polka King". But when he came to play the piano with Angus [Chisholm], Angus Allan Gillis, and Dan Campbell, the sound wasn't what they wanted. So they picked Bess MacDonald to do the sessions. She was right on. There was no flash, and boy, she was good backing up the fiddlers. Believe it or not – and I don't know if it is a known fact – but those recordings went all over

the world, in Scotland and Ireland. They sold very well in Scotland, and wherever they liked Celtic music.

CM: Did she influence a lot of the pianists who came after her?

MCM: Some of the ones who were younger than her before I came out, you can put it that way. Yes, before some of us came out, some would have taken her style. I created my own style – I don't know if you're aware of that.

CM: Very much.

MCM: That's what they're all doing now, so I have done something where you can use the whole piano. I did that just when I was an early teenager, 14 or 15 years old. I took it upon myself. There was an old piano here – I saw there were 88 keys and we were only using the middle of the piano. I started [using the other keys] and I found it ironic that people seemed to like my style and what I was doing, because that's what they're doing today. Being the senior of them all, I just love this development. Of course everybody puts their own spin on things. But I was the one who started that. Running the bass from way down to up using the treble part. And it was very, very gratifying to me, because you could do a lot of things, grace notes and little things with that, and it would appeal to people out there.

And then what we casually refer to as "the flip". There's a technical name for it, but I'm not going to pronounce it. Whatever key you're on, and it comes automatically after a while, you hit the high key of that note. If you're playing in "A", you hit the key of "A" up at the top, and you just come right down. Some people do it with their fingers now. I do it with the thumb – that's why my thumb is so ugly looking today. [laughter] Then I took it the other way. When you're playing for dances or something like that, and everybody's so happy, and then you do this, they used to go crazy over that. They loved it, because it added to the [performance].

CM: How did these ideas come to you, ideas such as running the bass or some of the things you did with your right hand?

MCM: As I said earlier, I realized there was more to the piano than here [the middle range]. The first piano I ever saw, I played around and was able to come up with a sound. I was only about 6 years old. That was when they sent me to the Sisters of St. Martha of Bethany, Antigonish, although the convent was in Margaree Forks. They taught me everything. I studied classical for 10 years. I had some of the greatest teachers in the country. They were wonderful. And that helped me to think of different things – different

ways you could improvise and do your own thing, but do it with grace. They were very, very good to me. They used to love me to come in and play for them. One of my teachers – one of the nuns, Pauline Marie – later became director of music for the province of Nova Scotia, working with all kinds of things such as music festivals.

CM: Were there things on the radio that inspired you?

MCM: No, I thought I was going to do something different, by different I mean that we could do more [with what we were playing] and I did. It's just natural to think like that if you love music so much. And you listen to a lot of people out there. You don't always listen to the radio, because you hear a lot of the same ones over and over again. And I wasn't trying to better anybody, I was just trying to do something that pleased me, and in doing so I invented that full piano. This is on record in the United States and Canada, so it's not me saying this. People coming after me picked up on this.

Here's another thing that may help. [CJFX radio host] Gus MacKinnon was a close friend of mine. He used to phone me once or twice a year to go up and do some solo work for the radio. He had a beautiful baby grand piano in there. I never missed. I always went up and did an hour of music every time I went. So the first couple of times I went up, I had John Allan Cameron with the guitar backing me up. These [radio] shows went to five provinces.

CM: How old were you when you started playing dances?

MCM: I was exactly 10 years old. And I kept on doing it.

CM: So it came really fast.

MCM: It was in me when I was born, because, they used to tell me, I would take a board and play. Now [at that time] I never saw a piano before, so why would I take a board and play on it like that, trying to keep time. And I got my piano when I was 10 [years old] – a great big beautiful Heintzman. It's still in existence and it served me well. Then I gave it to my oldest daughter, who has three children. They're all musical. They're all in university now. My daughter plays a beautiful piano, but she won't go public with it. One of her children is playing with the symphony orchestra in Newfoundland. He was that good they picked him up. He's playing violin. He also plays piano and sings.

CM: And you were always drawn to playing the piano, or did you ever try the fiddle?

MCM: Oh yes, I played the fiddle – that was the first thing I played. And I could have been good, if I kept going. I had an earful from an uncle who should know what he is talking about. My uncle Angus said, "Come on, play a tune with me." So I picked the fiddle up and played a tune with him. He said, "You're darn good, or you could be darn good, because you're just starting out." I was starting out – but I learn fast. I was about 10 [years old]. He said to me: "You're learning piano and you're good at it for a young whippersnapper" – that's how he put it – "but you can't be great at everything. If you want to be great at one thing then do it, but one pick one instrument or the other." He said, "Since you're studying piano, I would suggest that you stick with it."

CM: I was also wondering: when you're playing with fiddlers, is everything improvised or are do you play certain set patterns for certain tunes?

MCM: It's all improvised by me – I don't take from anybody else, because, as I said earlier, I created much of this. Maybe there's a way to do a couple of grace notes or some small things.

CMs: Do you search for different chord patterns to go to a tune?

MCM: That's exactly what I've been doing. When you're improvising, you don't want to be repetitious. You want to vary it. There are various ways to do it. I can't explain it.



Figure 2: Maybelle performing with Ashley MacIsaac.

CM: As a pianist, do you modify what you're doing for the audience, depending on whether you're playing in Cape Breton or away from Cape Breton, or whether you're playing a concert or a dance? Do you adjust your style in any way?

MCM: No, I don't, because it's a style for everybody. I do a bit of everything that I created for myself. I'll use some of it tonight, and maybe tomorrow night,

it'll be a little different. But it depends on the crowd. I can tell that I modify it, maybe, for the Cape Breton crowd. It's like Ashley [MacIsaac] – he knows what he's doing wherever he goes, and he knows how to please a particular crowd. I love playing with that boy – he's brilliant with the music. If he's playing in Ontario, he'll change things around for the people of Ontario. But if he's playing in Cape Breton, it's typically Celtic, and nothing but!



Figure 3: Maybelle and Ashley.

CM: When you think about the piano accompaniment style we have here, do you think it played any role in helping to keep the fiddle alive and relevant?

MCM: Of course. I wrote an article in the '70s for a newspaper strictly on that. What fiddler would walk across the stage without his accompanist, be it a pianist or a guitar player? Have you ever seen a fiddler go alone? It gives it a bass, and the bass is great. You need that balance. And a piano player can make or break a fiddler, and that's the truth.

CM: What are the kinds of the things you think make a good piano accompanist?

MCM: Consistency in certain things. Above all things: expression. Some people can be very mechanical and still be good players. Expression, expression, expression. And the ear – always be in tune with the violinist. Never go astray on chords. I mean, it happens accidentally, but it's the overall picture.

CM: Have you accompanied pipers?

MCM: I love accompanying pipers! I love the key of B-flat. I lived in B-flat with those old time fiddlers. We played many tunes in B-flat. I know one fiddler who was prone to go to F-sharp minor. That was Dan Hughie MacEachern. He played in different keys. He had that – although he wasn't as well-known as a lot of them – by gosh, could he do it. If people only listened more to people like him. It was a natural thing. You didn't know where he was going half the time. That's where you have to be three steps ahead. They will be honoring me this year at Celtic Colours. In fact, they have three pipers from Scotland. They are the MacDonald boys – all world class. We're great friends: Dr. Angus and Ian, and Allan . . . We had a man who was given a set of pipes by the Queen – this was the Queen Mother back then. All silver – oh my gosh, they were beautiful. He lived at my father's place. We were brought up with the pipes too. The fiddles, the pipes – I was brought up with all that. He was brought up in Scotland. He landed in Cape Breton and had no place to stay. My father loved the pipes so much, he took him in as a boarder. He was looking for a place to stay, and my father took him home. He would play upstairs in his room, and when Daddy wanted him to come down, he would come and play. These were the full Highland pipes. He was one of the world's best at that time. He went all across Canada, teaching bands, putting bands together. He was the best teacher any city had for their bands. He went to New Brunswick and then to Toronto, all through and then to Cape Breton.



Figure 4: Maybelle with Sturgill Simpson.

CM: Is there any difference in the approach to accompanying pipers?

MCM: You're mainly on B-flat. There is no difference, if you know your piano. Some of the fiddlers today don't play B-flat, and I find that strange. A few people who I play with such as Howie [MacDonald] play B-flat well. And Kimberley [Fraser] is a beauti-

ful player. I find it strange, players who don't play in B-flat. I told plenty of them, try B-flat, once you get used to it, it's not bad. But B-flat is a rich key. Then you have your E-flat. There's "The Banks" [a horn-pipe], and a whole whack of tunes to go with it. I played that many times with fiddlers. I used to play "The Banks" in E-flat, myself. It's a rich key.

CM: Do you have perfect pitch?

MCM: Yes. Nobody has to tell me what note is being played. That's what I mean about a good ear. If you have a good ear, it takes all that in. We never had a pitchfork years ago – but you'd be right on.

CM: Perfect pitch is certainly very special.

MCM: It's strange about that – because that's another special gift.



Figure 5: Maybelle onstage.

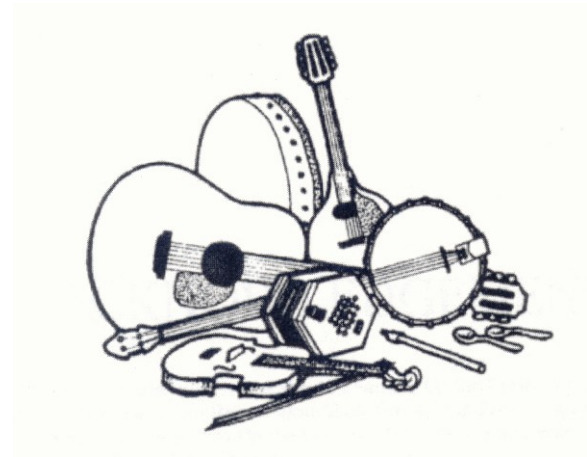
CM: It has been a thrill to speak with you, because you know so many people.

One other question: You have grown up in a family that has been very esteemed for being Scottish traditional bearers. How did you end up living right here in Cheticamp, in the middle of the Acadian culture?

MCM: I used to play down here in Cheticamp a lot. They'd get Buddy [MacMaster], Jerry Holland – I played with them all – Angus Chisholm and Scotty [Fitzgerald] – I'd played with them all down here. I loved Cheticamp and they loved music and enjoyed it so much. And there was so much going on. I'm by the ocean here, and I love being close to the ocean. We always get a breeze in Cheticamp no matter how hot it is. People are very nice, and I've known a lot of them for a long time.

CM: At one time, people talked about Scottish music and Acadian music, now it seems as if it's all come together under "Cape Breton music", where anybody can play with anybody.

MCM: It seems like that. Yes, you'll find the Acadian music has much the same tempo as the Scottish music. And the dancing doesn't change – it's all the same tempo. The old Acadian dancing may have different steps but the tempo is the same . . . I love Cheticamp and, at the same time, my heart and soul are in the Margaree area. I could be in Mabou too. I practically lived there when I was younger.



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