Reviews

Edited by John Leeder

Recordings

Heather Cameron. *Traditionally Sound.* WFM-02. 1843 Munro St., Westville, N.S. B0K 2A0; <u>info@heathercameron.ca</u>; <u>www.heathercameron.ca</u>; <u>www.cdbaby.com/cd/heathercameron</u>

Traditionally Sound is a five-performance EP of Scottish song and fiddle music that comes to us from Nova Scotia-born Heather Cameron, who lived in Calgary for the ten years before returning to Nova Scotia. Cameron is both a musician and a music therapist, and a look at her website shows that she is still actively involved with the music scene around Pictou County, Nova Scotia. Heather provides the fiddle and vocals, and some of the guitar parts as well. She is joined by David Settles on bodhrán and Francis Zeritsch on mandolin, guitar, strings (I assume this refers to the synthesized string parts and possibly the electric bass on certain tracks), and harmony vocals.

On her website, she describes the EP as "contemporary arrangements of traditional music", and this characterization is apt, especially with regards to the accompaniment and arrangements. The music is prominently backed by what I think of as the contemporary Irish guitar style. This highly energetic style was pioneered by groups like the Bothy Band and Planxty in the 1970s and was quickly adopted and adapted into the guitar playing of other fiddle-based "trad" genres across the North Atlantic. It's the jangly, driving guitar style you'll usually hear whether vou are in an Irish session in St. John's, a Québécois jam in Montreal, or even playing "old-tyme" Canadian tunes at a fiddle camp in rural Saskatchewan. It definitely gives the music lots of extra drive and power. In certain regards, Cameron's fiddling is - to my ears - also quite contemporary, with a strong backbeat emphasis on the bow and an almost funky groove, features I've noticed being taken up by many younger trad players. I appreciated Cameron's controlled and tasteful playing and her use of ornamentation which never distracts you from the melody.

The EP starts powerfully. "When First I Came to Caledonia" – a 19th-Century song of courtship which refers to the Caledonia coal mines near Glace Bay, Cape Breton, and not the Roman name for Scotland – begins with the fiddle laying down a beautifully-ornamented instrumental turnaround over energetic guitar and electric bass accompaniment (as no one is listed on bass in the sleeve notes, I assume this was a

sequenced part). Then Cameron's voice enters. And it is this aspect of the album which I was most drawn to. Her voice has the right amount of nasality and she masterfully executes the compelling vocal "break" when switching registers. Cameron's vocal timber is still modern, while also evoking the harsher timbres of old female Scottish ballad singers which you hear on field recordings. For my ears, these tonal qualities convey both an intensity and an immediacy that pull me in and keep me invested in the unfolding story. Here I'll confess to being a curmudgeon when it comes to modern Celtic music aesthetics, especially vocals which are usually delivered by pitch- and tone-"perfect" voices. This gives the music a velvety quality that struggles to convincingly draw out the threads of pathos present in the music, either in concert or in juxtaposition with the lyrical or melodic content (more on this below).

This second track is a medley of four jigs. My favourite was the "Northside Kitchen", which gets very nice lift on the tune's turn (B part). I wished the tempo of this set were a little faster, especially for a longer four-tune medley, but I'm sure I've been conditioned to the faster tempos of Québécois and old-time Canadian jigs. Next up is "Red is the Rose", a veritable classic, and in fact an Irish adaptation of a Scots classic, "Loch Lomond". The song makes a masterful use of dynamics after the fiddle break and during the outro. Again it is Cameron's vocals that especially shine on this track. However, I did find the production and arrangement (with synths and cymbal rolls) a little too dramatic. We then get another set of tunes, this time the "Gentle Maiden Set". The waltz that starts it is again a bit slow for my tastes (many people are playing waltzes much slower lately), but by the time the strathspevs comes in ("Miss Douglas" and "Lady Ann Hope"), the music is lifting nicely at a perfect pace. The tempo and key transition to the reel "The Ale is Dear" was surprising - perhaps even jarring, if you are used to traditional Cape Breton sets but the tune is expertly played and I enjoyed the surprising twist here. I especially enjoyed Cameron's ornamentation and bowing on this tune, which compellingly evoke the highland bagpipes – it is a pipe tune, after all. The EP finishes with another song, "The Ballad of New Scotland", which tells the story of early English-speaking emigration to Nova Scotia and the hope of escape from class oppression in their homeland. Zeritsch's mandolin work provides a nice counterpoint to the melody, while Cameron's vocals

are especially perfect for this song, bringing out the lyrical/melodic juxtaposition I described above, where a song of hope for a better tomorrow is sung over a lonesome melody.

If you are a fan of contemporary Celtic music and looking for something that still retains the edgier aspects of the music's past, then Cameron's EP will be a wonderful addition to your collection.

Available from heathercameron.ca and CD baby: http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/heathercameron

Glenn Patterson, St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador

Ceilidh Friends. *Northern Remembrance.* CF3. Moira Cameron, 4505 School Draw Ave., Yellow-knife, N.W,T, X1A 2K3;

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The most remarkable thing about this CD is the number of extraordinarily fine songs it contains: Jacques Brel's "La Colombe", Richard Farina's "Children of Darkness", Paul Clark's "Valley of the Shadow", John McCutcheon's "Christmas in the Trenches", and two classics by Eric Bogle, "No Man's Land" and "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda", all serious anti-war songs that demand the sincere, uncluttered performances they receive here from Moira Cameron, Steve Goff and Dawn and Steve Lacy. While they maintain the same theme, items like Country Joe MacDonald's "Fixing to Die Rag", Ewan MacColl's "Browned Off" and a sprightly version of the broadside ballad "Bold William Taylor" provide some relief from the intensity.

In part, at least, this is a concept album about the stupidity and tragedy of World War I. The CD takes its title, Northern Remembrance, from an original composition by Moira Cameron about First Nations women lamenting the inexplicable decision of their menfolk to go and fight in a "stranger's war" in Europe. The Eric Bogle songs, of course, are about the unhappy fate of ordinary soldiers in that conflict, and the atmosphere of the time is evoked not only by "Christmas in the Trenches" but by such contemporary items as "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", "Pack Up Your Troubles", "Red, White and Blue", and "When This Bloody War is Over". Listening to these songs, one is reminded of Joan Littlewood's brilliant play Oh What a Lovely War, which was turned into a movie that did not quite retain the impact of the original London stage production. Yet the parallel with later wars, especially those in Korea and Vietnam, is also there, evoked by Ed McCurdy's "Strangest Dream", Peter Yarrow's "Great Mandala", and the three '60s anthems already mentioned by Brel, Farina and Country Joe.

There are, I suppose, two challenges faced by a small group of Canadian folk musicians who decide to attempt an out-of-the-ordinary, reaching-for-the-heights production such as this. Can they design a sequence of songs that balances the intensity of the finest with others of a different kind that still fit the overall purpose? And can they deliver performances that do the songs justice and bring out fully their beauty and messages? In the main, Ceilidh Friends have been successful on both counts. There is no question that this is an exceptional disc.

David Gregory, Nelson, British Columbia

The June Bugs. *Just Here to Sing*. Renay Eng-Fisher, 2424 37th St. SW, Calgary, Alta. T2E 2Z5; fisheng2@gmail.com; www.thejunebugs.weebly.com

The June Bugs are a Calgary, Alberta, area bluegrass band who apparently believe in fun. Their debut CD, Just Here to Sing, officially released early in 2015, seems to fulfill that mandate nicely, and the "fun" part is contagious. The CD is a refreshing mix of country, traditional but primarily bluegrass songs, along with a number of originals, mainly by the group members: Renee Eng-Fisher (vocal & upright bass), Sandy Hirth (vocal & guitar), Sue-Anne Borer (vocal & autoharp) and Tim Babey (vocal & mandolin). They are also capably assisted by a number of very talented and inspiring musical friends, Scott Duncan on fiddle and Fred Mallette on five-string banjo, as well as Steve Fisher and John Thiel, both on lead and rhythm guitar (although at different times). John also produced and engineered this CD. But it's the harmonious blend of voices that brings this project and band together on many levels. And it's also what brings the listener back to repeatedly reaching for the CD for another play.

It seems appropriate that the CD starts with a Carter Family classic, "My Dixie Darling", and then finishes with the old-timey bluegrass "Black Eyed Suzie"; these classics seem to be the bookends, and provide context and reference points from which their music is rooted. The second cut, Bill Munroe's "Sitting Alone in the Moonlight", with beautiful vocal harmonies, reinforces this bookend reference point. This is followed by Renee's "Little White Lies", that is firmly rooted in the bluegrass groove. "Just Here to Sing" by Sandy Hirth (and Norma Hayes) slows things down a bit in a cowboy country love song that seems to have Alberta written all over it. It wouldn't quite seem like bluegrass if there wasn't at least one

gospel/spiritual kind of song, and Tim's "Ain't Done Walking" fits the spot well, especially with the a cappella harmonies. "Blue Love" by Jamie O'Hara (of the '80s duo The O'Kanes) is a modern era country song that departs from the bluegrass genre, but it does have an Everly Brothers harmony quality to it that does keep it somewhat in context; it's a good dance tune too. Sue Anne's "Thoughts of Home", a bit more on the folky side, is a thoughtful and reflective sentimental song that is easy to identify with. Renee and Sandy's "Enough is Enough" is a peppy "you done me wrong" song, bitter but sweet; actually a bit salty too

The overall sound of this CD is full and balanced in acoustic instrumentation and harmonious vocals, and none of it in inappropriate ways. And as mentioned above, I found it to be a fun CD that easily bears repeated listening. The CD liner notes, although somewhat informative, I found lacking and a bit hard to decipher some facts. I also found it bit hard to actually "read" the notes due to the graphical layout (small white lettering on pink background in anything but bright lighting doesn't work well for me). My final point is that if they intended to leave me wanting more, they succeeded; I would have wished for two or three more songs. Perhaps there will be another CD soon.

Norm Walker, Regina, Saskatchewan

Anne Lederman with Ian Bell. *Old Man's Table: Tunes fron Grandy Fagnan*. FP515. Anne Lederman, 153 Glendale Ave., Toronto, ON M6R 2T4; anne.lederman@stmpatico.ca; www.annelederman.com

In 1984, Anne Lederman was given a tape-recording of tunes played by Métis fiddler Grandy Fagnan. Intrigued by what she calls the "wild unpredictability" of the tunes, she applied for a grant to study fiddling in and around Dauphin, Manitoba, a small city south of Fagnan's home community, Camperville. By spring of the following year, Lederman was sitting at Fagnan's table in his dilapidated trailer, listening to his stories and tunes. Although Lederman has since ventured on to a wide range of musical endeavours, the Indigenous fiddle music that she studied and recorded in the mid-1980s has stayed with her, shaping her career and even her sense of identity as a scholar and musician. Old Man's Table is her latest effort to preserve and share the Indigenous fiddle tradition, featuring tunes that Lederman learned from field recordings of Fagnan. These field recordings are available on a companion website, www.grandyproject.ca.

Old Man's Table presents a mix of reels, jigs, and marches, in addition to a song (an adaptation of "The Lakes of Pontchartrain" with lyrics by Lederman) and a waltz (unattributed, but presumably written by Lederman in honour of Fagnan). The instrumentation varies between tunes, from a track that features fiddle with traditional foot accompaniment ("Grandy's Modal Reel #1") to a more timbrally complex track blending fiddle, mandolin, guitar, feet, jaw harp, and bones ("D March Set"). Lederman's competence as a fiddler is apparent, given her generally good tuning, warm tone, and clean articulation. The tunes "So-Do", "Devil's Dream", and "D March Set" are especially well done, performed with exuberance and confidence, and the first tune of the final track, "Double Gigue" (known elsewhere as "Fisher's Hornpipe"), is striking in its presentation of an unusual but compelling version of a popular tune.

Despite these examples of proficient playing, Lederman does not convincingly capture Fagnan's style, and only occasionally achieves his sense of drive. This is especially apparent in the reels, which often feel heavy and have insufficiently emphasized offbeats (especially notable in "Growling Old Man", "F/Bb Set", and "Arkansas's Brother"). Lederman's foot accompaniment is, furthermore, not always in tight time with the other instruments, undermining the sense of forward motion and propulsive rhythmic feel that is so striking in the field recordings. Although the recording presents a more professional-sounding version of Fagnan's tunes, Old Man's Table ultimately fails to capture some of the more nuanced elements of Fagnan's style, at least beyond the use of clogging and the adoption of his unique formal structures (i.e., crooked phrases).

The details of execution aside, this album is a thought-provoking model for researcher-performers, because it is accompanied by a website that gives listeners access to the original field recordings - a total of 93 very unique tunes that were heretofore largely inaccessible. (Some of the field recordings were previously released on LP and then CD.) Easy access to these tunes will undoubtedly be invaluable to fiddlers interested in reviving the old style of Métis/Indigenous fiddling from this particular area, and the album – as a "cleaned up" version of some of the tunes heard on the field recordings - may be a more accessible entry into the repertoire for some listeners. The album and website are a particularly compelling combination because, together, they make the process of translation from field recording to studio album transparent, and this transparency may enable discussion of the subtle elements of Fagnan's style.

> Monique Giroux, Kingston, Ontario

Cassie & Maggie MacDonald. Fresh Heirs. C&MMAC2011.

Cassie & Maggie MacDonald. Sterling Road. CMA 002. Mac Sis Music, 2757 Robert Murphy Dr., Halifax, N.S. B3L 3T3; cassieandmaggie@gmail.com; www.cassieandmaggie.com

Cassie and Maggie MacDonald are two sisters from Antigonish, Nova Scotia, who play Celtic Roots music, largely influenced by Cape Breton traditional music. With Cassie on fiddle and Maggie on piano and guitar, they perform a mix of traditional instrumental music and contemporary arrangements of folk songs. Their efforts have been acknowledged by such organizations as the Canadian Folk Music Awards, East Coast Music Awards, Live Ireland Radio, and Galaxy Radio, and they tour internationally.

Their first release, Fresh Heirs (2011), demonstrated their potential as artists, with both traditional and newly-composed instrumental compositions. A lively album, it is generally representative of the live fiddle-piano duo performances found in the Nova Scotian traditional music scene. It is exciting, energetic, and traditional but not without some twists and turns. The opening track, "Everything but the Kitchen Sink", for instance, made excellent use of the multitrack recording studio, layering mountain dulcimer, guitar, piano, and rhythmic fiddle grooves to create dense and interesting accompaniment for the otherwise very traditional tune "Jenny Dang the Weaver". Another standout track is the "IB 'Real' " set; carefully arranged with dark and colourful harmonies, the track features the "IB Reel", composed by Cassie. This is an album that shows how powerful a duo can be. Not shy of experimentation, Cassie and Maggie can be quiet, with delicate, stripped-down arrangements, while at other times they have a big sound, like that of a full band.

Their recent sophomore album, *Sterling Road* (2014), shows a great deal of musical growth and maturity. Overall, it is a more polished product, and is considerably more adventurous, featuring a variety of talented guest musicians and including four songs. First of all, I have to say that this album sounds fantastic. It is well-recorded and -mixed, sounding huge and lush. This is a CD that has a stubborn tendency of remaining in my car stereo for days on end – I blame Cassie and Maggie entirely for this. It's infectious! While *Fresh Heirs* certainly has its strengths, *Sterling Road* is clearly their arrival on the international stage. Sleek, modern, and polished, every track is an event, with arrangements often reminiscent of trad groups like Vishtèn, Còig, or even Natalie MacMaster.

Although the musicianship is strong on both recordings, what is most striking is the choice of repertoire, particularly Cassie and Maggie's own compositions. Time and time again, I found myself clamoring for the liner notes to find out more about a hip, unfamiliar tune coming from my speakers. Half expecting to find it to be an obscure composition by a trad music giant like Gordon Duncan or Liz Carroll, I invariably found it to be one of their own original tunes. "Stop Drop and Reel", "Hurricane Jane", and "IB Reel" all quickly wound up on my list of new tunes to learn. "Sweet Melodies" is a bluesy, hook-laden original song with a distinct Nashville sound to it, and I can't get it out of my head.

In any fiddle-piano duo, the fiddle tends to be the main focus, and Cassie and Maggie's recordings are no exception to that. Cassie's playing is energetic and engaging, with the classic articulation of a Cape Breton fiddler and a warm, full tone that allows her to fit seamlessly into many different musical contexts. What immediately stands out to me is how wellrounded she is on her instrument. She truly shines on instrumental numbers, but it is obvious that she is equally at home in a supporting role as Maggie provides strong leadwork throughout the songs on Sterling Road. Her ability to improvise is clearly evident, and she brings a lighthearted, flexible approach to fiddle tunes, not merely playing them, but interpreting them. Finally, Cassie is responsible for the bulk of the original compositions on their recordings, and as I have already mentioned, they are ear worms. Writing trad tunes is actually much more difficult than many people realize; jigs and reels are highly fixed musical forms that rely on a relatively limited melodic vocabulary. Composing a tune that is idiomatically appropriate is easy, but creating one that is unique, memorable, and catchy is no small feat. Anyone who can accomplish this consistently is truly skilled at their

As an accompanist myself, I must admit that I am always drawn to the work of talented accompanists. That's not to say that I don't appreciate melody players (without a melody, there is no performance, after all...), but there is always something truly fascinating about how an accompanist chooses to contextualize a performance. There is enormous freedom with what can be done, but also great responsibility. Maggie understands this as well as any accompanist I've heard. Her playing is sensitive and interactive, yet bold and authoritative. She improvises stunning, complex arrangements with inventive harmonies and groove to spare. Moreover, she is a fine guitarist with a lovely voice, and sings lead on all their songs. In many ways she shapes the overall sound of the duo. and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Cassie and Maggie MacDonald are a refreshing new voice in trad music. If you like new, exciting music played by stellar musicians, you owe it to yourself to find out more about them. Buy their records. Learn their tunes. Go to their shows. But of course, if stale, mediocre music is more to your taste, perhaps these two are not for you...

> Ian Hayes, Gaineau, Quebec

Beverlie Robertson. With Knowing Eyes: Canadian Women in Song. Brandy Creek Music,

www.facebook.com/BrandyCreekMusicPublications

This is an important recording.

Readers will no doubt remember the 2006 publication by Brandy Creek Music and Publications of the songbook *With Knowing Eyes: Canadian Women in Song* [reviewed in *CFM*, 40.3, p. 34], the result of a 30-year-old process involving Beverlie Robertson and Edith Fowke. Edith died before the book was published, but her influence is keenly felt throughout.

The book contained 80 Canadian folk songs, many traditional, many from such songwriters as Heather Bishop, Marie-Lynn Hammond, Wade Hemsworth, Vera Johnson, Anne Lederman, Gordon Lightfoot, Rita MacNeil, The Raging Grannies, Sylvia Tyson, and Nancy White, a kind of who's who of Canadian songwriters.

This recording of songs from the book has been eagerly awaited. The recording consists of 15 songs, all sung by Beverlie Robertson herself. Beverlie, as is well known, is an "old folkie" with 40 years of experience performing, producing, and organizing. She brings a veteran's authenticity to the recording, and is more than ably backed up by some of Canada's greatest folk musicians: Ian Bell (pipes), Anne Lederman (fiddle), Paul Mills (guitar), Arnie Naiman (banjo), Denis Pendrith (bass) and Ken Whitely (various instruments). Beverlie plays guitar and dulcimer as well.

The recording is not in a jewel case, but is in an eco-friendlier package.

The title comes from a quote by Sylvia Tyson: "Woman's world: cooking and babies/Little girls with knowing eyes". The cover has a picture of Beverlie Robertson gazing at us with, dare I say it, knowing eyes.

Everyone will want to know what songs from the book made it to the recording. In a way, it doesn't seem useful to me to comment on the selection: finding two people who agree that the selection is perfect is like guessing that an infinite number of monkeys will eventually type out the works of Shakespeare. I will mention that there is a blend of traditional and composed songs, some French and some English, and

that eight of the book's ten sections have at least one song represented. Interestingly, there are two songs on the record that are not in the book: One is "Born to Take the Highway", which Joni Mitchell shared with Beverlie when both were very young, and which influenced Beverlie very much. The second song is Jack Cooper's "Gypsy Lady"; Beverlie tells me she wishes she had a gypsy lady to confide in and to advise her.

A minor quibble: I wish there were at least one song sung a cappella, in the old ballad tradition. I think of Edith Fowke, who would stop listening when the wondrous Margaret Christl used a bodhrán to accompany herself. But when you have the likes of Whitely, Lederman and Naiman all ready to accompany you, well, you can understand.

Looking back at what I have written, I find myself worried about the first sentence. Important recordings can often be important but also kind of boring. This is a very listenable album – Beverlie's voice rings clear, with perfect enunciation – and the accompaniment is always tasteful and appropriate. I particularly liked Ken Whitely's slide guitar on "Give Us Back the Night". In fact, that might be my favourite track.

Whoever listens to this "important" recording is sure to find some new/old material to add to their repertoire. And it certainly is a celebration of Canadian women in song.

By the way, if you wonder why there is no representation of indigenous music, you need only read Beverlie's clear and respectful comments in the book, p. 10.

Lorne Brown, North York, Ontario

April Verch. *The Newpart.* STR15-01. 1406 Lemke Rd., RR #3, Pembroke, Ont. K8A 6W4;

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April Verch is an Ottawa Valley fiddler, step dancer, singer and songwriter who has been making music for over 20 years, and who has embarked on a homecoming of sorts in this, her tenth recording. Verch describes the songs on this album as "timeless", and "alive and relevant". Joined by Cody Walters on clawhammer banjo and upright bass, and Hayes Griffin on guitar and mandolin, Verch draws heavily on an era before the popular mid-century flowering of bluegrass and folk, but includes elements within each track that indicate a unique musical personality with diverse experience that serves to inform and innovate – in a subtle fashion – the music she references. The title of the album, *The Newpart*, refers to the Verch

family room, and this connection to family and history permeates the musical journey that she embarks on. Some tracks harken back to the old-time and vaudeville songs that trace her singing and musical affinities to their artistic source. With this album, she creates a keen balance between community-based musicmaking and an engagement with contemporary tastes.

The retro feel of this starts with the track "If You Hadn't Gone Away", a languid track that features Verch's voice with the spare accompaniment of guitar and bass. Others draw on her experiences as a Canadian fiddler (such as the tunes in the track "Midnight Wheeler", taken from the playing of Métis fiddler Andy DeJarlis) or her step-dancing heritage (she makes her first solo step-dancing track "Gilchrist", where endless variations in tempo and rhythm keep the listener guessing while still maintaining a great cohesion throughout). She makes significant use of her step-dancing as a percussive element in many of the faster-paced songs, such as in "Belle Election", where Verch's effortlessly rhythmic fiddle playing alternates with each other instrument as they take their turns with solos, finishing with a step dance solo and then all elements coming together into a multilayered whole. A particular standout within this already diverse undertaking is the track "Polska from Kumla", which Verch ascribes to the playing of Olof Larsson, which jumps the whole album from a contemplation of North American musical traditions and propels us into Scandinavian territory, with Verch seamlessly blending her fiddle melody with that played with an acoustic guitar counterpoint, accompanied by a spare bass line. Indeed, the arrangements in this album are uniformly sparse, a conscious choice made by Verch, who wished to create an "intimate conversation" between the instruments and her lyrical voice. Indeed, this idea of intimacy permeates the tracks of this album, bringing the listener in close and wrapping them with the spare vet encompassing arrangements, while Verch's voice relates the stories of the songs she sings with a clarity that refreshes the song being covered, all the while preserving its connection with the past that it represents. It is this balancing act that is remarkable; Verch manages to harken back to the past without placing herself entirely within it, bringing the song or tune back with her to the present and altering it in subtle ways so that it can fit with how we listen to music now.

The sheer diversity of music and musicality in this CD is astounding, as Verch takes in all the varied aspects of her musical life and experience thus far, and presents these facets for us, the listeners, to contemplate the complexities of musical experience. It is also a stimulating and fun CD to listen to, where movement is ever-present, as we either lazily sway

our feet to the slower songs, or tap our fingers to the dance tunes. I would recommend this CD to a range of listeners, from those who enjoy a diversity of traditional music, to those who enjoy acoustic or new folk music, and those who enjoy the classic bluegrass tunes of yesteryear.

Toshio Oki, St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador





