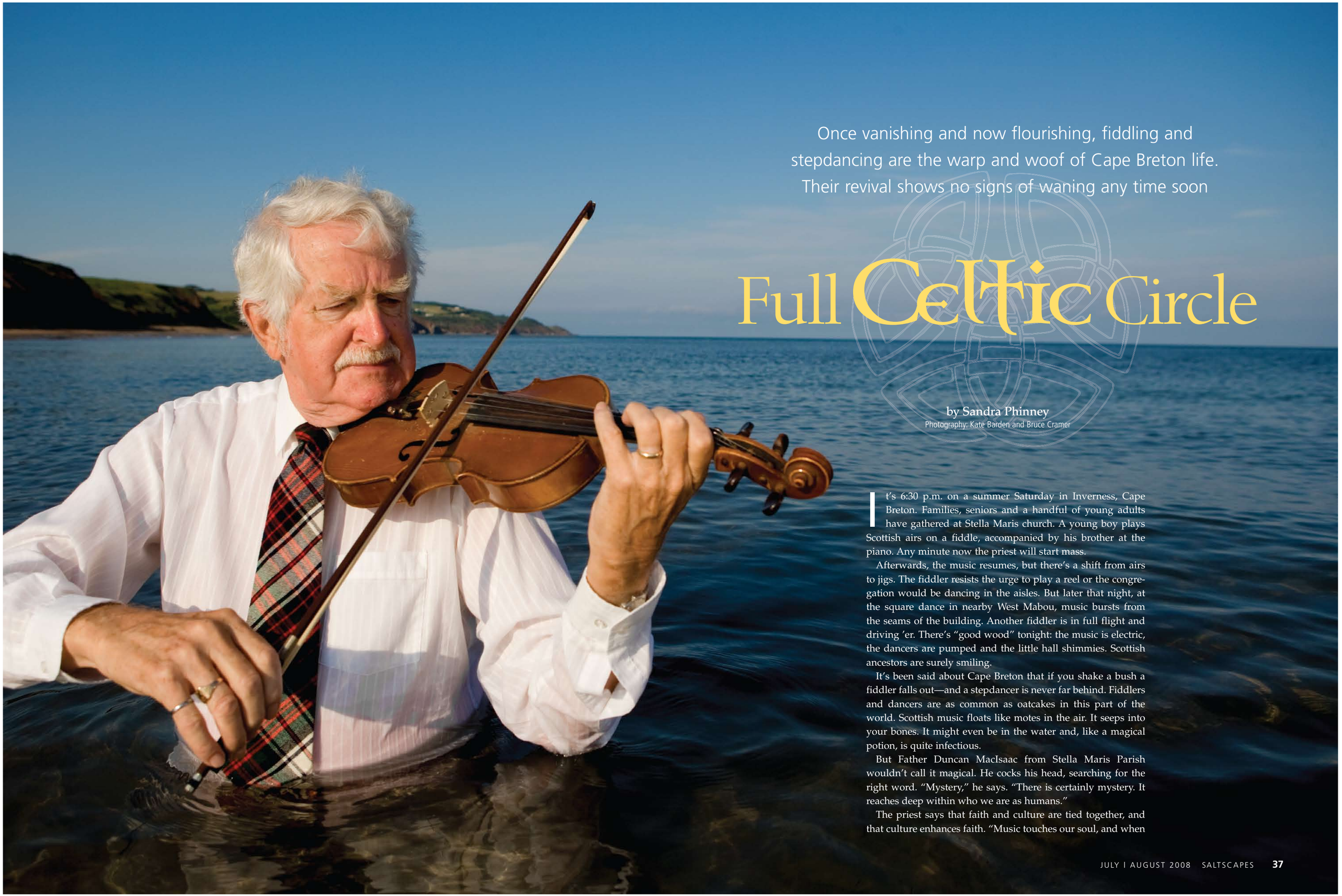

Once vanishing and now flourishing, fiddling and stepdancing are the warp and woof of Cape Breton life. Their revival shows no signs of waning any time soon

Full Celtic Circle

by Sandra Phinney

Photography: Kate Barden and Bruce Cramer

It's 6:30 p.m. on a summer Saturday in Inverness, Cape Breton. Families, seniors and a handful of young adults have gathered at Stella Maris church. A young boy plays Scottish airs on a fiddle, accompanied by his brother at the piano. Any minute now the priest will start mass.

Afterwards, the music resumes, but there's a shift from airs to jigs. The fiddler resists the urge to play a reel or the congregation would be dancing in the aisles. But later that night, at the square dance in nearby West Mabou, music bursts from the seams of the building. Another fiddler is in full flight and driving 'er. There's "good wood" tonight: the music is electric, the dancers are pumped and the little hall shimmies. Scottish ancestors are surely smiling.

It's been said about Cape Breton that if you shake a bush a fiddler falls out—and a stepdancer is never far behind. Fiddlers and dancers are as common as oatcakes in this part of the world. Scottish music floats like motes in the air. It seeps into your bones. It might even be in the water and, like a magical potion, is quite infectious.

But Father Duncan MacIsaac from Stella Maris Parish wouldn't call it magical. He cocks his head, searching for the right word. "Mystery," he says. "There is certainly mystery. It reaches deep within who we are as humans."

The priest says that faith and culture are tied together, and that culture enhances faith. "Music touches our soul, and when

When five-year-old Madeleine had a chance to dance for friends at the Inverness County Centre for the Arts, she was on stage quicker than you could say "Johnny Jump Up." Previous page: Alexander Mac Donald at West Mabou beach. Time slips by when he's focused on music—he's even been known to be oblivious to the tides.

we bring our gifts to the altar, we bring our music as well."

In Cape Breton—especially Inverness County—music is the warp and woof of life and as distinct as the smell of newly mown hay. Music accompanied the Scots when they fled the old country in the mid-1700s. No doubt fiddle tunes and step-dancing were the biggest part of the cargo that accompanied those early pioneers.

"It left us with a blessing—although it was hidden for a while," says Father Duncan. "But now there's recognition by the world that this is something special. And when we share our music, then we get blessed as well. That can only raise the self-esteem of any youngster who has learned to play or dance."

Back in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Scottish music was not very sexy. Big band, jazz, then rock 'n roll were not bosom buddies to the fiddle. Stepdancing was anything but cool. Then a peculiar thing happened. In 1972, CBC-TV aired a documentary called *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*. Feisty Cape Bretoners rallied. Fiddles came out of the closet. Male, female, young and old wiped the dust from their bows and parleyed with their fiddles. A year later, the first Festival of Cape Breton Fiddling was held in Glendale, featuring more than 130 players cheered on by 10,000 fans. And the word "vanishing" morphed into the word "flourishing."

Meet Alexander Mac Donald (he spells it the Gaelic way), a retired engineer who grew up in Mabou. His father was a fisherman who loved to play the fiddle; relatives and friends would often drop by with their instruments and join in. "I was fascinated, and tried to figure out how they could get all that sound out of a little box," he says.

Trying to suss out the fiddle in general—and Cape Breton music in particular—has been a lifelong obsession for Alexander. Although he usually practices every day and often plays with other musicians, he doesn't consider himself talented. His main interest—and larger passion—is to understand the music from a technical point of view, and also to dispel a few myths, like the notion in some circles that Gaelic is needed to render an authentic or superior form of Scottish music. His bushy white eyebrows curl up at the thought.

And should anyone call Cape Breton music primitive, he downright bristles. "It's very sophisticated!" he says. "The Scots have a long history of intense interest in music." Then, to prove his point, he quotes a writer who visited Scotland in the mid-1700s:

"You can learn a tune out of a book, but you can't learn style. You've got to live with it. It's like having an accent"

> The degree of attachment which is shown to music in general in this country exceeds belief. It is not only the principal entertainment, but the constant topic of every conversation; and it is necessary not only to be a lover of it, but to be possessed of a knowledge of the science, to make yourself agreeable to society.

"This is an accurate description of Cape Breton today," Alexander says, then steps back from the book with a smile.

Ask him what makes the music in Mabou distinct from other places in Cape Breton, and he'll give you many reasons. One has to do with certain types of tunes that are emphasized in the repertoire. It gets a little complicated, involving accidentals, modal and gapped scale tunes, double tonics and names that sound more like a whisky mix than music. For the musically inclined, a brief explanation: of the seven modal scales that were prominent in the Renaissance/Baroque eras, four are still used in this music. In gapped scales, one or two of the notes in an octave are missing. Double tonic tunes focus on two adjacent keys, rather than a single key.

Family and friends dance during a boat parade in Port Hood. Left: Alexander Mac Donald plays the fiddle most days. Joey Beaton accompanies on piano.

Part of the difference is style. The same tune played in different parts of Cape Breton will not sound the same. "That's style," Alexander says. "You can learn a tune out of a book, but you can't learn style. You've got to live with it. It's like having an accent."

But the most unique difference, he says, is in the bowing. In the classical world, it's called spiccato, or the "up-driven bow" in Scottish music. Pronounced spih-KAH-toe, it's a technique that was mastered by Niel Gow (1727-1807), a famous Scottish fiddler and composer.

"Reels are written in groups of four-note clusters, each note having equal value. However, when using the up-driven bow," Alexander explains, "the first and fourth notes are shortened and the second and third notes are lengthened; the first note is taken with a down stroke and the last three notes played with a bounce bow in one up-bow stroke." Done properly, the bow touches lightly, kissing the strings, and the result is the syncopated beat associated with driving rhythm.

Lunchtime has come and gone but Alexander hasn't noticed. When he's focused on music time slips by, much like it did when he was a child listening to a good fiddler. "You looked and you listened. Intently. I remember my sisters being annoyed. They'd talk to me but I wouldn't hear them." No doubt he has missed more than one meal. He has even been known to be oblivious to the tides.

Douglas Cameron knows what it's like to listen to a good fiddler. His hero? "Buddy MacMaster. No questions asked," says the 14-year-old, "and so humble about it too. That's what I like." Douglas has visited the legendary fiddler a few times, picking up pointers, but mostly he just likes to watch his hero. "I try to hold the bow like he does, hold the fiddle like he does, and play the tunes he does."

Douglas's summer is almost booked solid: he's scheduled

to play at concerts, ceilidhs and dances. He first put fingers to strings when his parents gave him a half-size fiddle. He was seven. He practiced *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, but didn't get the hang of things until he was nine. A year later, he got a full-size fiddle, and has learned more tunes than he can count. It's no surprise that his e-mail address begins with "fiddledude."

The teenager is trying to master a tune called *Mockingbird*. "It's very hard. The third and fourth part go into second and third position. These are high notes and hard to reach, but I love it. And it feels good if I can hit them!" Douglas especially likes to play for tourists. "If I make a mistake they won't point it out."

Katie MacLeod wears a fiddle like a natural appendage. Recalling one of the first tunes she learned to play, she hums *Morag of Dunvegan*, a gentle air. At the time, she raced along as if it were a reel. "I thought faster was better! It must have been very annoying, but I still got lots of encouragement," she says.

The 20-year-old is also an accomplished stepdancer. In fact, she learned to dance before she learned to play the fiddle. "Good dancers can dance on the stump of a tree. Your feet fly but your body doesn't move, unlike Irish dancing where they cover a lot of ground." Cape Breton dancers can move their feet faster than a spider but the best ones are "neat"—meaning their footwork is close to the floor.

Angus Beaton (1823-1899) was a famous stepdancer from Mabou Coal Mines, giving hundreds of lessons to kids in the community. Some couldn't afford to pay, so after a lesson or two they'd scamper out to the woods and chop wood for him. More often than not, when Beaton went out to check on his protégés, he found them dancing on top of the tree stumps.

Today, 12-year-old Neil MacQuarrie likes the challenge of dancing on a stump, although most of his dancing is done at community halls or ceilidhs. He has also danced in concerts and even appears in a television commercial promoting Cape Breton tourism. A bit of a speed freak, he's especially fond of the reels.

Neil comes from a long line of stepdancers. When his mother, Cheryl, was pregnant, she danced the entire time. "When Neil was born we had to bounce him around to fiddle music until he fell asleep," she says.

Cheryl's mother taught her family that talent was a gift. "We shouldn't be selfish or brag about it, but it's important to share. So when other kids were studying or playing sports, we'd be entertaining folks at the local seniors' home." She also recalls how her parents used to bring the kids to a dance. If it was an "adult" dance, her parents parked the car as close to the hall as possible and rolled the windows down. "I was too scared to get out but I'm so glad my parents did that!" Cheryl says.

Cape Breton square dances usually start at 10 p.m. and go to 1 a.m. They consist of several sets, each having two jigs and

"Good dancers can dance on the stump of a tree. Your feet fly but your body doesn't move"

Douglas Cameron is known as a young musician to keep your eye on. Facing page: upper right, stepdancer Neil MacQuarrie, who is featured in a television commercial; bottom left, Katie MacLeod, who is also an accomplished stepdancer.

Musical kitchens

Kimberly Gillis (in the middle) is a lucky gal. Her grandfather, Bill MacDonald, made her a fiddle—and it's never far from her side. This year she is completing a work term as part of a marketing program in Halifax, but when she wants to be transported "back home," she reaches for her fiddle.

"It's all about family and friends, the music, and having fun," she says. In high school Kimberly was part of a band called Celtic Crew. She recalls the night her band was signed up to open for Natalie MacMaster at a concert in Whycocomagh, and the plane was delayed. "We were told that if Natalie didn't make it, we were going to be the show."

Natalie did arrive in time to do the show, although her step shoes went missing in transit. No problem. Kimberly whipped off her shoes, passed them over and the headliner stepped on stage as if nothing had happened.

Kimberly's sister Katelin sings and dances. She loves to see young people getting turned on to the culture. "I went to Scotland in 2007 and learned the history of my ancestors. They had to go through so much to get to where we are today. It's important to keep the traditions alive," Katelin says.

And, of course, her most cherished moments are when her grandad comes over and they jam and dance in her mother's kitchen. The only problem is that when the phone rings, Katelin is the one relegated to answer it. She's still trying to figure out how to talk on the phone and dance at the same time. – SP

Ryan MacNeil plays the whistle for son Ewan while his wife, Jennifer, does some "neat" footwork. Music and stepdance stretch from cradle to grave in this part of the world.

a reel, and the jigs and reel feature three parts, called "figures." Figures can be upwards of 10 jigs (twice over) and a dozen reels (twice over), depending on how many people are in the set. Lost count? Doesn't matter. Just keep dancing.

"The crowd really affects how you play," says Katie MacLeod. "They help you play better than your best. It's pretty crazy. Think of fiddlers who play every night of the week—hours and hours of sets. You have to have something to drive you or your arm would fall off!"

Trip to Windsor, one of Katie's favourite tunes, features a lot of frenetic wrist action between high and low notes. "It makes your fingers go in ways they don't normally go," she says. "I can't look at my fingers when I'm doing that part or I might mess it up."

Katie is left-handed, but like most Cape Breton fiddlers, she didn't bother to re-string her fiddle. "It's like playing it upside down," she says. But that doesn't affect her one iota, or stop her right foot from tapping when she plays. "It's impossible not to tap my foot. If someone were to grab my foot and hold it down, I'd have to stop playing!" Either the beat is infectious or it's bred in the bones—or both.

By the way, ask anyone in Cape Breton if they expect to find a fiddle when they get to heaven, and the answer will be, "More than one!"