

Métis Music and Dance

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Though the Métis are famous for their fiddle music, traditional musical instruments of the Métis also included the concertina, harmonica, hand drum, spoons, bones, comb, and mouth or jaw harp. The Métis style of fiddle music was an oral tradition handed down for centuries. Fiddle tunes were often hummed or sung for learning and remembering. In the early days, fiddles were often hard to obtain and expensive, making it a common practice to make their instruments from woods like maple and birch. If a fiddle was not available for a dance, the tune would be sung.

Fiddle music was introduced to the Aboriginal population across Canada by the Scots-Irish and French Canadian fur traders. This music was heavily influenced by native song, just like the hymns and country songs were adopted and adapted by the Aboriginal population.

Métis fiddling is unique, each fiddler having his/her own style and version of tunes, which could change with every performance. The fiddle plays the melody, tells a story, and many legends are recorded in fiddle tunes. Rhythm is supplied by toe tapping or spoons and the uneven and irregular beats of the fiddle create a bounce in Métis jigging that is as unique as the fiddling itself.

Some of the unique characteristics of the Métis music are the inclusion of the bagpipe beat, evident in tunes such as Big John McNeil or Sir John Tupper's March. Other characteristics are the vigorous foot tapping, which some believe comes from the beat of the drum, Aboriginal or from the Celtic (Gaelic) hand drum. They also tend to use a variety of bowing techniques, using short bow strokes, giving the music a percussive, rhythmic sound.

Métis music is a social music as well as dance music. Like the music, Métis dance is a combination of Scottish, Irish, French and Indian. While keeping the foot work close to the floor and continuous throughout the dance having only three main steps, the third being the step with the "scuff" which gives the unique sound to the Métis Dance. A few traditional dances of the Métis are The Quadrille, danced in a circle, a reflection of Native dance, the Square Dance, Drops of Brandy, the Duck Dance and the Red River Jig, which is widely known and central to the Métis identity. This dance is done in two main parts, the dancer starts off with the "scuff", when the music changes to the high pitched section, and the dancer does the "fancy" step. There are up to fifty different fancy steps, and many jiggers can perform all of them.

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