

MITIGATING OR MARKETING CULTURE? PROMOTING MOUTH MUSIC IN CAPE BRETON, NOVA SCOTIA¹

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Abstract: The author discusses the sometimes misunderstood Gaelic genre of *puirt-a-beul* in Cape Breton Island. Based on fieldwork in Cape Breton and in Toronto, the article examines *puirt-a-beul* from the perspective of traditional and popular musical expression.

Why is it that a traditional song genre generally overlooked by scholars and accorded minimum value by cultural insiders remains an integral part of concert performances and commercial recordings? This paper considers possible answers to this question in relation to the Gaelic song tradition of *puirt-a-beul* in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where Gaelic-speaking descendants of 19th century Scottish immigrants live.² While conducting fieldwork in Cape Breton, I heard *puirt-a-beul* performed at concerts, in Gaelic classrooms, at workshops, and at festivals. They are also frequent inclusions on albums by Cape Breton artists, including those of Mary Jane Lamond, Ashley MacIsaac, The Barra MacNeils, and The Rankin Family. Despite the apparent popularity of *puirt-a-beul*, they tend to be characterized as a subsidiary part of the Gaelic song culture, by both scholars and Cape Bretoners themselves.

Puirt-a-beul are Gaelic dance songs known as *mouth music* in English. They constitute one genre amongst many in a culture that prizes oral culture.³ Almost invariably, *puirt-a-beul* are defined as vocalized tunes used to accompany dancing when instruments were not available. If a musician were delayed due to inclement weather, for example, a singer might perform *puirt-a-beul* to start the dancing. Alternatively, a group of friends and neighbours might want to dance and, if no musician were present, *puirt-a-beul* might be sung.⁴ *Puirt-a-beul* are characterized by their quick, up-beat tempo, and are most often strathspeys or reels, although jigs and marches also exist within the repertoire. The lyrics are repetitive and generally humorous or satirical in nature, sometimes juxtaposing vocables with words. A good *puirt-a-beul* singer articulates the tongue-twister-like lyrics clearly without sounding breathless or missing a beat.

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² The current population of native Gaelic-speakers in Cape Breton is estimated to be fewer than one thousand.

³ A partial list of additional Gaelic song types includes: milling songs, *òrain mhòra* ("great songs"), laments, lullabies, eulogies and elegies, *canntaireachd*, milking songs, rowing songs, and butter churning songs.

⁴ Despite their definition as dance music, *puirt-a-beul* have been and continue to be used in a variety of contexts and for multiple purposes. For example, there has been some indication that they were once a part of women's domestic song repertoire. Apparently, there is also a substantial bawdy repertoire, calling into question the notion that *puirt-a-beul* lyrics are secondary to the melody. See Sparling 2000.

Despite being considered relatively simple songs, *puirt-a-beul* are complex. Their origins are uncertain, and theories range from the belief that they date from Druidic times to the belief that they substituted for instrumental dance tunes banned by the Presbyterian clergy during the 19th century. One of the most popular assumptions is that *puirt-a-beul* were created after the bagpipes were supposedly banned in 1746 (Sparling 2000: 219-222). Moreover, traditional *puirt-a-beul* performing practices remain in doubt. Although they are generally considered unaccompanied songs sung by a single person, some evidence suggests that they may have been performed in groups or occasionally accompanied instrumentally (Sparling 2000: 238-247). Finally, although *puirt-a-beul* are invariably defined as dance songs, they have been and continue to be used for many different purposes, including the transmission of fiddle tunes, expression of humour, labour songs, children's songs, and as a cultural entry point for non-Gaels (Sparling 2000: 247-282).

Puirt-a-beul are particularly intriguing because of the range of divergent opinions articulated about them. I found more than 450 examples of *puirt-a-beul* (see Sparling 2000: Appendix A), and even though the highly respected Cape Breton tradition bearer, Joe Neil MacNeil (1908-1996) recorded more than one hundred examples for the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project in the late 1970s, *puirt-a-beul* are regularly characterized as a subsidiary part of Gaelic song culture. In 1931, K.N. MacDonald wrote of *puirt-a-beul*:

Many Highlanders of the advanced school may consider that the ... "Puirt a Beul"⁵ mouth tunes, or articulate music, were not worth preserving. Certainly as far as the poetry is concerned there may be some truth in the statement, but we do not claim the rhymes as poetry. It would be a great mistake to do so, as no effort has ever been made to rank them alongside the more serious efforts of the muse. They were, as a rule, entirely spontaneous, or strung together with little effort, and reflect rather the humorous side of the Highlander in his gayest mood (1931:50).

Thirty years later, James Ross, a Gaelic song scholar, explained that the *raison d'être* of *puirt-a-beul*

is melody and not a textual development of theme. They are characterized by a verbal repetitiveness which is not normally found in other songs and in a number of cases their vocal content is meaningless. Many of them simply present a visual image of a ludicrous kind with no element of narrative (1961:20).

Francis Collinson, a Scottish music historian, characterized the lyrics of *puirt-a-beul* as "nonsensical, ludicrous, humorous or satirical" (1966:95). These brief sketches of *puirt-a-beul* almost apologize for the repetitive, humorous lyrics and set the genre aside as one of the less "serious efforts of the muse." These descriptions of *puirt-a-beul*, combined with the virtual absence of *puirt-a-beul* in most other Gaelic song and dance research and texts, suggest that *puirt-a-beul* are either dismissed or considered as an afterthought to a discussion of more "substantial" Gaelic song types.

⁵ Gaelic orthography is still in the process of being standardised and therefore spelling variations of a single word are frequent.

In Cape Breton, many native or fluent Gaelic-speaking consultants had comparable attitudes towards *puirt-a-beul*. Early in my fieldwork, a senior singer, upon hearing the focus of my research, admonished me to “get some real songs!” Another singer asserted, “I’m really not that fussy on [*puirt-a-beul*].”⁶ In my Master’s thesis, I attributed the fluent speakers’ dismissal of *puirt-a-beul* to the fact that their lyrics are quite simple and therefore of less interest to the fluent speaker than more poetic song genres (see Sparling 2000:288-298). This has led me to the exploration resulting in this paper: why do *puirt-a-beul* continue to be performed and recorded despite being considered a minor and even negligible part of Cape Breton Gaelic song culture? My belief is that *puirt-a-beul* are an effective marketing tool for both Cape Breton artists aiming at an audience beyond Cape Breton borders and for Gaelic culture at large, which is currently undergoing a revival.

Mary Jane Lamond expressed similar sentiments to those articulated to me by other Cape Bretoners. She explained that *puirt-a-beul* “are not serious forms of music the way other poetry is or the way other songs are, even the way the tunes themselves are.”⁷ Yet the first single released from her album, *Suas e!* was “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean,” a *port-a-beul*.⁸ An additional two of the eleven songs on *Suas e!* are *puirt-a-beul*: “Dòmhnall mac ‘ic Iain” and “Bòg a’Lochain.” She also sings a set of three on her first album, *Bho Thir nan Craobh*, and another two appear on her most recent album, *Làn Dùil*. It might seem curious that Mary Jane Lamond says that *puirt-a-beul* are “such a small little part of the whole big picture” and yet continues to include multiple examples of *puirt-a-beul* on her albums, but her reasons are complex and varied. Musicians and singers do not always like everything they perform. Mary Jane Lamond⁹ confirmed my feeling that *puirt-a-beul* are performed for several reasons, including the fact that (non-Gaelic-speaking) audiences react positively to them, they vary the texture of an album, they allow for more creative flexibility, and they are ideal for introducing Gaelic culture to audiences unfamiliar with it.¹⁰

Puirt-a-beul are appealing to non-Gaelic audiences because they are generally short, quick, and simple. They sound technically impressive; in fact, many consultants characterized *puirt-a-beul* as “tongue twisters.” Sung quickly, they sound quite extraordinary. One does not have to speak Gaelic to recognize a *puirt-a-beul* singer’s vocal capabilities. They rarely consist of more than two or three verses and a chorus, which means that an audience’s attention can be maintained for the entire duration of the brief song, whereas an audience’s attention might wander during a longer, more involved Gaelic song, which often consist of upwards of fifteen or twenty verses. One Gaelic learner and professional singer, noted,

People like things that are fast and loud and high. ... Sometimes [*puirt-a-beul*] sounds harder than it is and sometimes it sounds as hard as it is and people think, “Wow! How can you get all those words out?” And then maybe because

⁶ Interview with author, June 29, 1998.

⁷ Interview with author, August 3, 1998.

⁸ Singular spelling.

⁹ Personal communication, March 26, 2000.

¹⁰ Mary Jane Lamond emphasized the fact that her commercial albums and concerts are aimed at audiences outside of Cape Breton. In Cape Breton itself, she sings in a more traditional manner, participating at *ceilidhs* (neighbourly get-togethers) and milling frolics. She made the point that she would normally perform more poetic songs in lieu of *puirt-a-beul* in such contexts (personal communication, March 26, 2000).

it's in a foreign tongue, people who aren't Gaelic speakers are even more wowed by the mystery of it.¹¹

The lyrics are generally repetitive and many *puirt-a-beul* singers choose to repeat verses and choruses. The occasional use of vocables makes it easy for an audience to pick up at least a few words or vocables, should they wish to sing along. Finally, the words are often silly or even nonsensical. The literal translation of *puirt-a-beul* is "tunes from the mouth;" the very name of this song genre indicates that the music is the prime consideration rather than the lyrics. The voice plays an instrumental, rather than a vocal, role. Therefore one does not need to know Gaelic to appreciate them.

Appeal to Audiences

While in Cape Breton, I heard *puirt-a-beul* performed at various concerts, festivals, and workshops. At one concert, a native Gaelic speaker in his eighties accompanied his own step dancing with *puirt-a-beul*, to the whoops and hollers of the delighted audience. Although there were plenty of fiddlers and pipers in attendance who could have accompanied him, this elderly gentleman deliberately performed *puirt-a-beul* rather than dance to instrumental music. While he may have accompanied himself simply because he is used to practising his step-dancing in his own kitchen to his own accompaniment, I think that he is aware of and enjoys the reaction he gets from his audiences: people are impressed.

At another Cape Breton concert featuring "music and dancing," a fluent Gaelic speaker sang *puirt-a-beul* to accompany a young woman's step dancing. Again, it was not out of necessity nor done spontaneously. Instead, it was carefully orchestrated. Part of the purpose of this particular concert was to educate community members about their cultural heritage while introducing tourists to Cape Breton Gaelic traditions. In this instance, *puirt-a-beul* not only promoted the singer and dancer, but also served to promote the wider culture as well.

The flashiness and drama of *puirt-a-beul* are generally programmed quite deliberately. *Puirt-a-beul* are frequently found at the end of a concert program or at the end of a CD, as a "grand finale." For example, a program for a Cape Breton Gaelic choir concert in 1990 indicated that two of three sections of the evening concluded with *puirt-a-beul*, while the penultimate piece of the third section was also a set of *puirt-a-beul*, followed only by a traditional parting song.¹² *Puirt-a-beul* were also used to conclude Margo Carruthers's Cape Breton CD release party¹³ and Mary Jane Lamond's Grand Narrows concert,¹⁴ both in Cape Breton.

Similarly, a number of recordings also conclude with the flourish of *puirt-a-beul*. The Barra MacNeils conclude both *Until Now* and *Closer to Paradise* with the song, "Am Pige Ruadh." In fact, *Until Now* includes two versions of the song, with the second being

¹¹ Interview with author, March 24, 1998.

¹² The concert was performed at the Needham Presbyterian Church Hall in Needham, Massachusetts for the Cape Breton Island Gaelic Foundation, Boston Branch (Beaton Institute Pamphlet 2865). During the first half of this century, many Cape Bretoners moved to the "Boston States" to find work.

¹³ July 29, 1998.

¹⁴ August 7, 1998.

a “bonus extended version.” The Rankin Family also finish their self-titled debut album with the “Jigging Medley,” which concludes with the port-a-beul, “Bodachan a’Mhirein.”

Christine Primrose, a native Gaelic speaker from Scotland and internationally recognized singer, explained why she sings *puirt-a-beul* despite her personal preference for other types of songs:

I find the more satisfying type of song to sing for me is a very emotional, highly charged song. That’s what I get the most satisfaction from singing. People would just be *so* depressed if they were to listen to me all the time with my choice of song. People don’t want to hear that all the time. When you start recording, you’ve got to have a slightly different approach. You can’t be totally selfish and self-centred about it. You’ve got to remember that people are out there. And to be honest, I think it’s good, when you are into recording a CD, to intersperse it with *puirt-a-beul* or something completely different rhythmic-wise. Because then people [think], “Oh, that’s nice and that’s got a great rhythm,” and you’re sort of clapping to it and whatever. And then you take them back into the “real” stuff, the real heavy music, the big music of the Gaelic song tradition.¹⁵

Puirt-a-beul break the tension of more involved, serious songs. Their upbeat melodies and humorous lyrics provide the audience with an emotional release. *Puirt-a-beul* invite the audience to laugh, to clap, and to respond to the music. Not only do *puirt-a-beul* break any tension built up through preceding songs, but they also cleanse the palate, as it were, for songs to follow. As an alternative to using *puirt-a-beul* as a “grand finale,” some recordings insert *puirt-a-beul* in the midst of other selections, varying the pace of the songs. Examples include Mary Jane Lamond’s *Làn Dùil*, Margo Carruthers’s *Tàlant nam Bàrd*, and The Barra MacNeils’ *The Question*.

Creative Flexibility

Puirt-a-beul may be employed as a marketing tool not only due to their inherent musical qualities, which are attractive to a non-Gaelic audience, but also because they provide more artistic flexibility than other Gaelic song types. It may be that *puirt-a-beul* can be arranged and altered with less fear of recrimination from others within the culture. Because *puirt-a-beul* lyrics do not deal with serious topics and because the entire genre is not considered as important as other song types, such as “Great Songs” or milling songs, it is possible that they can be manipulated with impunity.¹⁶ Considerable alteration of other song types is more likely to provoke controversy. For example, on *Suas e!* the only songs with substantial instrumental preludes are the *puirt-a-beul*.¹⁷ The voice immediately begins almost every other song and when the voice does not immediately start, the prelude is minimal, merely establishing an atmosphere or providing a drone for the voice. In addition, Mary Jane Lamond takes liberties with the form of the *puirt-a-beul* in “Dòmhnall mac ‘ic Iain” and in “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean,” by breaking the lyrics up, overdubbing two sets of different lyrics, and altering tempos. All of the other songs are sung straight through. The *puirt-a-beul* tracks also incorporate the

¹⁵ Interview with author, July 13, 1998.

¹⁶ Mary Jane Lamond agreed that she feels free to “play around” with *puirt-a-beul* whereas she would feel disrespectful if she were to alter other types of Gaelic songs, which she explained need to maintain their own “voice” (personal communication, March 26, 2000).

¹⁷ All Gaelic songs are traditionally sung without instrumental accompaniment.

most “pop” elements, employing electric guitars, drums, synthesizers, and electronic manipulation of the voice. Thus, it is possible that Mary Jane Lamond has more freedom to meld *puirt-a-beul* with pop elements, making her Gaelic song recordings appealing to a wide audience.

Pedagogical Use

While it seems clear that *puirt-a-beul* are an effective marketing tool, are Gaels “selling out” if they promote their culture using a song genre they regard as having little or no cultural value? Why does Mary Jane Lamond, who is committed to supporting and promoting Gaelic culture, include *puirt-a-beul* on her albums when she herself called them light, little, and not particularly serious? Why not spend all her time promoting the “real stuff,” as Christine Primrose had put it? The answer may be that *puirt-a-beul* are the best means of attracting outsiders to the Gaelic culture. *Puirt-a-beul* could be considered a cultural entry point.

Obviously, non-Gaels are attracted to *puirt-a-beul* and find them accessible. *Puirt-a-beul* therefore offer an ideal means of enticing non-Gaels to explore Gaelic culture further. Perhaps non-Gaels intrigued with the music will visit the area, financially support Gaelic culture (i.e. buy a subscription to a Cape Breton Gaelic newspaper such as *Am Bràighe*, purchase a Gaelic song CD, etc.), or even learn the language. The greater the interest in Gaelic culture, the greater the political clout wielded by the Cape Breton Gaels when asking for government funding for Gaelic education, or for the production of Gaelic resources. I am a perfect example of the theory in practice. My interest in *puirt-a-beul* has not only resulted in my M.A. thesis, but has also meant that I have continued learning Gaelic and even started teaching Gaelic in Toronto this year.

Puirt-a-beul are an ideal introduction to Gaelic culture because, in addition to being distinctly and identifiably Gaelic, they bridge the instrumental and singing traditions. The long time and widespread popularity of Cape Breton fiddling¹⁸ has only been strengthened by Ashley MacIsaac’s 1995 hit, “Sleepy Maggie.” And since *puirt-a-beul* are essentially fiddle tunes with words, an audience already well acquainted with instrumental music may find *puirt-a-beul* at least somewhat familiar. Once non-Gaels are drawn to one type of Gaelic song, they could be tempted to listen to (or even participate in) more.

For the same reasons that *puirt-a-beul* are marketable to a general audience, they are appealing to Gaelic learners and therefore are frequently used in the language classroom to teach basic vocabulary and grammar. Their simple, repetitive lyrics and short duration make *puirt-a-beul* an ideal pedagogical tool. My own Toronto Gaelic teacher used *puirt-a-beul* in his Saturday morning Gaelic interest classes because “they’re simple and easy to learn. You can also pick apart some simple grammar from them.”¹⁹ Mary Jane Lamond pointed out that it is very satisfying for beginners to be able to learn an entire Gaelic song, such as a *port-a-beul*, within twenty minutes. Moreover, *puirt-a-beul* bridge the gap between entertainment and language study. A Nova Scotian Gaelic teacher agreed:

¹⁸ Cf. McKinnon’s thesis, *Fiddling to Fortune: The Role of Commercial Recordings Made by Cape Breton Fiddlers in the Fiddle Music Tradition of Cape Breton Island*, 1989.

¹⁹ Interview with author, March 10, 1998.

Puirt are excellent learning tools not only because of repetitive vowels, consonants, words or phrases but also for breaking down barriers between students in a classroom setting. Mistakes are inevitable.... These mistakes lead to laughter which relaxes the class so that they are free from self-consciousness very quickly.²⁰

For this teacher, *puirt-a-beul* not only teach valuable language lessons, but also create an enjoyable learning atmosphere, where students will want to continue learning Gaelic culture. Because *puirt-a-beul* lyrics are humorous or nonsensical anyway, mistakes only add to the hilarity. On the other hand, mistakes would be considered graver in Gaelic song types involving more sober lyrics. Christine Primrose similarly noted the accessibility of *puirt-a-beul*:

[*Puirt-a-beul*] comes across as this throwaway type song. So people don't feel so self-conscious when they're singing it. I feel that people who wouldn't consider themselves normally as, quote, "singers," they feel they can get off with singing this wee rhyme, sort of a ditty. A wee *port*, you know. A verse.

While other Gaelic song types appear to demand a competent singer and/or Gaelic speaker, Christine argues that *puirt-a-beul*, as a minor song genre, are less intimidating.

Promoting the Culture or Selling Out?

Although I have argued that *puirt-a-beul* promote Gaelic culture, whether they are performed on stage, on a recording, or in a classroom, there are those who argue that *puirt-a-beul*, particularly when adapted to a pop music format, do not help Cape Breton Gaelic culture and possibly even hurt it. One person actively involved in promoting traditional Gaelic culture in Cape Breton was concerned that pop versions of *puirt-a-beul*

go way over that line and become something quite radically different from the tradition that they originated in. I mean, this [commercial *puirt-a-beul*] thing with all the overdubbing of this sort of whispery stuff and the timing changes and that sort of thing. To me, they have very little connection with Gaelic tradition. And to say that people are learning and coming into Gaelic tradition from hearing that kind of thing, I really doubt very much if they are. Or if they're coming at anything terribly real in the culture from that sort of pop facsimile of mouth music.²¹

This particular person does not believe that *puirt-a-beul* will, in fact, draw non-Gaels to the culture but even if they did, my consultant worried that non-Gaels would be uninterested in moving beyond the surface of the culture. In other words, for the very reasons that *puirt-a-beul* can be made appealing to outsiders -- their ability to be "popified" without causing controversy within the culture -- *puirt-a-beul*'s appeal is problematic. Cape Breton Gaels are understandably proud of their culture. As Mary Jane Lamond herself acknowledged, "you get a little bit jaded when people want to take that [*puirt-a-beul*] approach to Gaelic when you know that there's so much more and that it's almost like an insult to the Gaelic tradition if that's the only thing you're [interested in]." It can be insulting if non-Gaels conclude that *puirt-a-beul* epitomize the culture. However, one Gaelic learner and singer defended *puirt-a-beul* pop:

²⁰ Personal communication with author, May 1999.

²¹ Interview with author, June 1998.

Modern ears are unaccustomed to the simple beauty of unaccompanied traditional singing; therefore, any business enterprise involved with recording and promoting Gaelic music must address the harsh reality that if Gaelic music is to reach a modern audience, that music must be accessible to modern ears or they won't listen. They won't buy it. They won't learn any Gaelic song. If the business fails to make this music accessible, the business not only fails itself but the culture as well.²²

She believes that songs such as Mary Jane Lamond's "Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean" entice people to buy albums on which they hear a broader, more traditional representation of the culture. Ideally, these audiences eventually learn to appreciate unaccompanied Gaelic song.

Conclusion

This is the strange contradiction inherent in Cape Breton *puirt-a-beul*. Over and over again in my interviews, native or fluent Gaelic speakers expressed ambivalent or even explicitly negative attitudes towards *puirt-a-beul*. One worried that *puirt-a-beul*'s rising popularity will have adverse affects on other aspects of the living Gaelic song repertoire. One worried that *puirt-a-beul* are not representative of Gaelic culture. A number of Gaelic speakers indicated that while they have no particular problem with *puirt-a-beul*, they prefer to sing other, more serious and valuable Gaelic songs. Meanwhile, *puirt-a-beul* have become a regular feature of public performances and commercial recordings. Despite being accorded only minimal cultural value, *puirt-a-beul* have become increasingly popular. Strangely, the very part of Gaelic song culture that is considered the least valuable *within* Cape Breton Gaelic culture has proven to be the most valuable tool for reaching outside of Gaelic culture to non-Gaels and Gaelic learners.

Whether one considers commercial recordings and concert performances of *puirt-a-beul* as a marketing nightmare or a marketing masterpiece depends on one's perspective. However, *puirt-a-beul* will no doubt continue to constitute an important part of the musical culture of Gaelic Cape Breton, regardless of one's feelings. And perhaps the contradictory reactions to *puirt-a-beul* are the most valuable means of promoting the culture since they engage participants in a discussion about the definition and future of Gaelic culture.

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²² Personal communication to author, May 1999.

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