

Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music. 2014.

Heather Sparling. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press. 357 pp.

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The Cape Breton tradition of *puirt-a-beul* (“mouth music”) is familiar to many listeners of Scottish and Irish music (both in the homelands and the diaspora). Characterized by the use of both lyrics and vocables to support vocal versions of dance music, *puirt-a-beul* is an important but frequently unheralded aspect of Cape Breton musical culture. With the publication of this exciting new work, Cape Breton University Press brings mouth music into the clear light of day through the eloquent and effective writing of Heather Sparling. Because she circulated drafts of these chapters to various members of the local community, Sparling has (and we have) good reason to feel confident about her own understanding of the genre, and of the community’s approval of her “voice” here.

As part of her work in developing this book, Heather Sparling conducted extensive interviews, examined collections of tunes, looked up historical documents, learned to perform, and was present at multiple events at which *puirt-a-beul* occurred. She explored the ways in which the songs are not quite considered “songs” because of their general lack of narrative content, and not quite considered “tunes” because of the fact that they are performed vocally. With her initial visit to Cape Breton taking place in 1998, she has come to describe and analyze this genre after many years of experience and deep study.

The Introduction presents two

conflicting ideas about *puirt-a-beul*, as represented by two performers: one in which performing the genre is surely a welcome aspect of any situation, and one in which the people who perform it would probably rather be singing something more narrative. By unpacking these ideas and situating *puirt-a-beul* in a context in which a broad spectrum of Gaelic speakers (from zero to fluent) coexist, the genre takes on complexity immediately. Offering multiple reasons why it has not been a prior focus of study, Sparling situates *puirt-a-beul* in the center of a lacuna of attention and reveals its importance. This chapter is essential reading to understand the foundation, terminology, and parameters of study.

Chapter 1 focuses on the importance of *puirt-a-beul* within worldwide mouth music traditions. Beginning with a clarification of the term “vocables,” the chapter points out the many ways practitioners use them in Indian, East Asian, jazz, and other musical traditions. Closer to home, *puirt-a-beul* appears as just one manner of using the voice. Sparling differentiates between “jigging” (the use of vocables in a relatively culture-bound manner) and *canntaireachd* (the use of highly coded and formalized vocables in a pedagogical situation). Ultimately, however, most of these songs use lyrics rather than vocables.

By using the song title “Chuirinn air a’ Phìob e” (“I’d Play it on the Pipes”) as the title of Chapter 2, Sparling notes the connection of instrumental music to the genre in the early development of *puirt-a-beul*. Beginning with the controversy as to whether the highland pipes were actually banned as a “weapon of war” (thereby justifying the development of *puirt-a-beul* as an act of tune preservation), the

chapter continues with a discussion of religious prohibitions against fiddles, speculations about various origin theories, and concludes with a most-likely set of explanations.

The musical features of *puirt-a-beul*, particularly the reels and strathspeys characteristic of Cape Breton music, are the focus of Chapter 3. Such musical features include the overall structure of the tunes, aspects of repetition, tune forms, how sets are put together, and methods of performance practice. It was a pleasure to find the transcriptions of the songs featured as a part of exploring the tunes used; I missed seeing them elsewhere in the book, simply because it would be helpful to know how the tunes sound. Without an accompanying CD, readers are left to seek these out in video clips online.

Chapter 4 brings the lyrics of *puirt-a-beul* to the forefront of discussion. Sparling includes accurate and informative translations of the songs throughout the book (not just in this chapter), which makes perusing them a great joy as some of the genre's mysteries are revealed. Even more interesting is the use of subtle humour and innuendo in the lyrics, none of which would be missed by the Gaelic speakers in the culture-within-a-culture of Cape Breton. Recognizing the power of a shared sense of humour in communities of scholars as well as in communities of musicians and audience members, the author sensitively (and hilariously) lets the readers in on the jokes.

Dance and *puirt-a-beul* are a welcome pairing, and form the heart of Chapter 5 as Sparling covers particular dances associated with the genre. In clarifying that dance associated with the genre is not exclusively from Scotland, nor is all Scot-

tish dance associated with *puirt-a-beul*, this chapter covers laws, local beliefs, dance masters, and various types of dance including sword and dirk dances. Suggested sources for viewing these dances online would have been helpful at this point, because one can only imagine them, in spite of the descriptive material.

Moving away from dance and into issues of transmission and pedagogy in Chapter 6, Sparling engages the possibility that perhaps *puirt-a-beul* has historically been less concerned with dance (its more public face) and more concerned with passing the tradition of instrumental music on to other instrumentalists. Musicians around the world often use their voices when teaching others the intricacies of an instrumental melody, and *canntaireachd* (vocalization of tunes) has a strong role here as well. Using *puirt-a-beul* as an aspect of language learning makes good sense because of the repetitive nature of the songs and their helpfulness in developing good pronunciation, among other reasons.

The concluding chapter of *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks*—"Keeping Things in Line: The Role of *Puirt-a-Beul* in Gaelic Society"—leans on the discussions that take place over whether knowing the language is essential in performing well. This debate is alive and well in Ireland and in the Irish diaspora, so its appearance in Cape Breton is no surprise. In fact, wherever there is a liminal point between languages, anxieties on both sides regarding proper linguistic and musical practices in songs tend to appear. Sparling wields a deft touch in exploring these anxieties, giving multiple sides a chance to be heard. The "low social value" of these songs, and their juxtapos-

ition with the “real songs” (meaning the long narrative songs) form an important part of this chapter as well, and it is in that section that some bigger issues are revealed about how music and musicians are valued and judged.

Heather Sparling has a warm and welcoming style of writing, with which she invites us into her (and her informants’) world. Readers will come to know and appreciate the complications of a well known but not-always-celebrated genre in a society in which many people know each other, and opinions run strong. People in the fields of ethnomusicology, folklore, history, musicology, Celtic studies, and education will all benefit from reading this work, and this is why: so much of this material rings true not only in its own context, but also in the broadly applicable theoretical underpinning that serves as its foundation. In exploring this work, for example, I found connections to the work I have done with both the politics and pedagogies of “lesser traditions” in West Java.

As a work about a genre that many know *of* but few actually know *about*, this book will take its place among the key works on Scottish and Irish music at home and abroad. *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks* is more than that, though; those other works are about the songs and/or the instrumental dance music. By focusing on a genre that is simultaneously vocal and instrumental music, Sparling brings to light some crucial elements of music making that do not take centre stage. Instead, mouth music appears in the parlours, kitchens, and places away from the spotlight where people and their musical practices and preferences are both complicated and fascinating. 🍀

Roy Cape: A Life On the Calypso and Soca Bandstand. 2014. Jocelyne Guilbault and Roy Cape. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. 286 pp.

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You may be forgiven for not recognizing the name Roy Cape, even if you listen to a lot of Caribbean popular music. A musician’s musician and influential bandleader, Cape has backed up a litany of calypso and soca notables in the calypso tent, on tours and in recordings: The Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener, The Mighty Chalkdust, Denyse Plummer, Black Stalin, and many others, but only rarely has a hit borne his name in the top credits. But in one of those delicious ironies of academic publishing, Roy Cape is the subject of an academic (auto) biography, before many of the stars that he backed over his long career (I use the parentheses in “[auto]biography” to highlight that this is a jointly authored work, the product of Roy Cape himself along with scholar Jocelyne Guilbault). *Roy Cape* is thus not only an important work of experimental biography, but also a potent end run around the star system that so often constrains what is considered a worthy biographic subject even in scholarly research.

For my tastes, biography has long been underdeveloped as a methodology in ethnomusicology, whereas it has been a staple for musicologists studying western classical music, jazz, or western popular music and rock. Ethnomusicologists have typically shunned this most particularist approach in favour of stud-