

The Songs of Their Fathers

Lynn Whidden

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Article abstract

This article is based upon a corpus of thirty-three songs sung by Métis women in the Red River area during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author focuses mainly on the song lyrics to understand the thoughts and concerns of Métis women as they adjusted to life in non-Native society and explores the adoption of, and love for folksong that is part of the French Canadian tradition.

THE SONGS OF THEIR FATHERS

Lynn Whidden

Brandon University

During 1989-1990 I collected Métis songs across the northern plains for the Saskatchewan Music Educators, who then published a songbook (Whidden 1993). This paper offers opportunity to reflect upon the songs sung by the thirty-three Métis women whose songs are in the collection (see Appendix). Some of these songs are unforgettable. For example, two singers, Mme Jean Lafrénière and Mme Alphonse Carrière, both in their seventies when they were recorded, had clear lilting soprano voices. Their songs, passed through the generations, were honed to polished beauty after decades of singing for the pleasure of their families. But the songs offer us much more than beautiful sounds. The songs the Métis women sang in the nineteenth century Red River area until the mid-twentieth century show us the dramatic culture change which they experienced.

The Métis are the descendants of Aboriginal mothers and European fathers and in 1982 were identified as an Aboriginal people under the Canadian constitution. During the nineteenth century they developed a group identity and in the Red River area of Manitoba, declared themselves *une nouvelle nation* [a new nation]. Scholars such as Jennifer Brown (1980) and Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) have begun to write the long neglected history of the Métis. The songs of the Métis leader, Louis Riel, are in print as are the songs of Pierre Falcon, the “bard of the prairie Métis” (Macleod: 1959). Moreover, most of us have heard of the fiddle tunes and voyageur songs of the men, but less well known is the large repertoire of songs sung by the women who were their partners in the Métis settlements. Women sang during the long hours of working

hides to mend and make jackets, moccasins, harnesses and snowshoes. The sources of the tunes were eclectic: many are old French folksongs; a lesser number were popular tunes of the day; and “ditties” of no particular origin but known by everyone, such as the following variant of the tune and words to “Twinkle, twinkle little star”:

*Je voulais vous dire chère maman
Que l' couvent c'est ennuyant
On se couche à l'heure des poules
On se lève à l'heure du coq*

*On se rend à la chapelle
Pour gélér comme des grenouilles
(Appendix, #28)*

Brown and Van Kirk have shown various causes of cultural change among Métis that are due to non-native contact, and they document the visible effects of such acculturation. Less well known are the thoughts, feelings and expectations of individual Métis, particularly women. In this paper I want to explore nineteenth-century Métis women's history through their songs. The lyrics of these songs provide unique insights into their inner lives. Concerning the value of ethnomusicology, Alan Merriam wrote, “... music may be useful as a means of understanding other things (than the music itself) about other cultures. In music, as in other arts, basic attitudes, sanctions, and values are often stripped to their essentials” (1964: 10). Although we cannot be sure the song words and music express the particular feelings of the individual, we do know that folksongs tend to express the thoughts and concerns of the community. Moreover, singing requires a considerable investment of energy, and in an oral tradition, songs will not live if they are not loved: they must resonate with the feelings and the ethos of the singers or they will not be sung.

By the late nineteenth century Métis women were singing the French folksongs of their fathers, in addition to the Native songs of their mothers (Whidden 1993). The Native songs live on in the form of gentle lullabies; the existing non-Native songs in this paper show Métis mastery of European solo singing. The pathos of these songs may have been reinforced by the composed songs of the time. For example, Victorian sheet music includes a group of songs called “Indian Intermezzi” in which the beautiful Indian maiden is most likely to die an untimely death. Métis women may have heard these composed songs in the Red River

community. In addition, Métis song was influenced by church and school music: on September 8, 1897, only four days after their arrival in Saint-Laurent, Manitoba, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary opened their school, and the "first singing lesson was given on September 27" (Mercier 1974: 3). Still, most of the women's songs listed in the Appendix are from a European folk tradition that antedates the Victorian popular songs: the songs of their fathers.

My Girl is an Irish Girl

Mme Alphonse Carrière
Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1971

1. My girl is an I-rish girl. She's all the world to me. Ev-'ry time I come to

town I buy her a pac-kage of tea. Ki - kakwec - im iko - nan les pa -

taques That's all she has for me. In a nice pink dress and rib-bon few,

Refrain

Ha-nima na - ko - siw. It's al-ways the same to girls Wher - e - ver they may be. In

nice pink dress and rib-bon tea All is grand and pret-ty. — Ne hi-yaw-ak all the

same, They're all as good as we. Kah-ki-yaw ki-sa-kih-ik - wak — kwa-yes na - ma ci?

Métis women sang in Cree, Saulteaux, French, Michif, English and sometimes combined several languages in one song. For example, Mme Carrière sang *My girl is an Irish girl* in English and Plains Cree, with the French words “à la main”, commonly used in the square dance. In 1872, this song “travelled” with Mme Carrière’s family from the Red River colony to North Dakota and then back to Manitoba. So far, the tune, which sounds like a dance hall tune of the Victorian era, remains unnamed (see Whidden 1993). Here are the words to verse two:

*First time I met that girl
It was at an Appleski dance
The way she threw her feet around
Her arms, and around she danced
À la main left and elbow swing
Ayi wesh day hi now
Ni-sâkih-ik, ni-sâkih-aw [She loves me, I love her]
Kwayês nama cî? [Isn’t that right?]
(Appendix, #2)*

The Métis women performed the long legato lines of the haunting European tunes with clear voiced ease. Many tunes are in minor or sometimes modal keys that enhance the pathos and the yearning quality of the songs. The songs are strophic, that is, the tune repeats as many times as necessary to allow a singer to fully express a thought or tell a story and they often have a refrain, a frequent attribute of oral narrative, for it helps the memory. Following is *Tout le long du rivage* (Appendix, #17) to illustrate some of the music elements of old European song living on in the new world: the Aeolian mode (like a major music scale with flattened third, sixth and seventh degrees) and phrases which arch up and descend and which are slightly changed upon repetition. Note also that the words focus on the suffering of married women.

There is little evidence that Métis tried to combine Native with European song to create a new sound.¹ This absence of syncretism in musical traditions is in keeping with the findings of my own research

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1. Although descriptions are rare, it seems that dancing may exhibit syncretism as described by O’Meara: “The women enjoyed the balls as much as the men, but curiously, they often did not follow the same dance steps as their male partners. Perhaps mixed-blood women who adopted a grave countenance and slower step were influenced by the solemn ritual of the dances performed by the Indian women” (1968:128). Also, the fiddle tunes show considerable Native influence, particularly in rhythmic elements, as Lederman (1987) has shown.

into traditional Cree hunting songs (Whidden 1986), and may be attributed to profound cultural differences in music use and structure. As a rule, after exposure to European music, much of traditional Cree music vanished. Indeed, there is written evidence that secular French folk songs were not as readily accepted by Aboriginals as were sacred hymns. A Récollet priest, Gabriel Sagard, writing about the Natives he encountered in New France in the seventeenth century, noted that they enjoyed the ritual music of the church. On the other hand, these Natives "expressed repugnance at the profane and dissolute songs of the French". Sagard regarded the affinity of Natives for church music as the result of the similarity between traditional Native and religious music, believing that "the sensuous melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structure of the French chanson was too different from traditional Native song" (cited in Amtmann 1975: 63).

Tout le long du rivage

Mme Alphonse Carrière
St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1971

Slowly E- C A- F#° E- C A- E-

Tout le long du—ri—va—ge, Tout le long du—ruis—seau,

E- C A- D C A- C D

Là—haut j'en—tends la—voix d'un oi—seau, Di—sant dans son lan—ga—ge,

E- C A- E- C A- B- 1.E- 2.E+

"Que Dieu bé-nisse ces—jeunes—gens,— Qui veulent se met-tre en mé-na—ge. ge.

2. Pour se mettre en ménage,
Il faut avoir du souci.
Le lendemain des noces,
Quel habit mettrons-nous?
Nous mettrons bel habit blanc,
L'habit de réjouissance,
Aussi le chapeau du souci,
Le collier de souffrance.

3. Le lendemain des noces,
A fallu faire le paquet,
En regardant la porte,
Avec un grand regret.
Oh, oui, je regretterai longtemps,
L'endroit de ma naissance.
Là-haut j'avais tant de plaisir,
Ah, que de misère!

4. Adieu père, adieu mère,
Adieux tous mes parents.
Je m'en vais en ménage.
Ce n'est point pour un an,
C'est pour le reste de mes jours.
Je m'en vais en ménage,
C'est pour le reste de ma vie,
Quitter le badinage.

5. Un jour sa mère lui dit:
"Qui est-ce que vous a poussé?
Qui est-ce que vous l'a fait prendre?
C'est votre volonté.
Je te l'avais toujours bien dit,
Que dans le mariage,
Il fallait quitter les plaisirs,
Aller dans la misère."

The reluctance to combine Native and European song styles may be related to differences in function as much as to formal differences in the sound and lyrics of the songs. For example, in traditional Cree hunting culture, male love songs tended to be for, and about the animals; such songs were rarely about or addressed to women. We know also that Cree women also sang traditional songs for carrying water, chopping wood, and songs to their children (Whidden 1986). To Crees, song was a spiritual force and an essential part of their survival “toolkit”. To the French, folksong was for entertainment, although it must be noted that “le bon Dieu” is a stock phrase, and that many of the songs were infused with the supernatural. The mystical words sung across Canada by the Europeans who explored and traded must certainly have appealed to the Métis singers for they are retained in many of the songs. For example, the following verses of *Si tu reviens Dimanche* sung in 1971 by Mme Carrière of Saint-Boniface contain images of bodily transformation:

Verse 7

*Si tu mets prêtre pour me prêcher,
Je me mettrai soleil au firmament,
De même tu n'auras pas aucun agrément.*

Verse 8

*Si tu mets soleil au firmament,
Je me mettrai nuage pour te cacher,
De même tu n'auras pas aucun agrément.
(Appendix, #3)*

Still there is a substantial difference in the use of the supernatural. The French folksongs contain passive descriptions of wonderments: the Native hunting songs are forces in themselves and believed to have power to change winds or to bring animals (Whidden 1986).

Hence, while both Métis and Native shared in the compartmentalization of Native and European songs, the Métis love and acceptance of the new European music, its language, sound and context, contrasts sharply to the Native disinterest, and shows them to be “la nouvelle nation”, a truly new people. The Métis not only adopted secular song but, indeed, became well known for their love of song, story, and visiting. Joe Venne, whom I interviewed in Birtle, Manitoba, sang in French, English, Cree and Saulteaux. He recalled the women visiting in one room and the men in the next. The men took turns singing for each other. Joe said that he did not compose songs, they

were songs he heard; songs for passing the time. Sometimes the furniture would be pushed against the walls and the men and women would dance. Joe could play the fiddle, mouth organ, accordion, spoons, comb, and jaw's harp, and was a caller for the square dance (Whidden 1993: 4).

The Métis pronunciation of the words often varies considerably from French pronunciation. Thus, while the music transcriptions were readily achieved, translation of the words was more difficult. One of the translators described the words as "Indian French". Following is an example of Joe Venne's rendition of *The Young Girl Who Wanted to Get Married* (Whidden 1993: 46), to show the sounds of a Métis-French version contrasted to a French version:

MÉTIS

*Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se mareiller
Elle demandait son père
Aussi sa tendré mère
Bonjour mon cher père
J'voudrais me mareiller
Quand j'ai pensé aux amants
Ça m'empêche dé dormir*

FRENCH

*Il y avait une belle fille
Qui voulait se marier
Elle demandait à son père
Aussi sa tendre mère
Bonjour mon cher père
Je voudrais me marier
Quand je pense aux amants
Ça m'empêche de dormir*

Although we do not know the learning process involved, song and language interacted to create this radical musico-cultural change. Certainly, for the Métis (the first generation of whom were typically the children of French fathers and Cree mothers), mastery of the French language was probably a concomitant of the meaningful adoption of French lyrics and melodies. The significant structural and cultural differences between Cree and French language and music would likely have been easier to negotiate for Métis than for their Cree cousins, accounting for the emergence of both Michif and Métis music. Presumably, this is also why so much traditional Cree music has until now not been strongly influenced by European genres. For example, in 1984, when I asked an Algonquian speaker from Chisasibi, Quebec, if he liked country music, popular among the younger generation of Cree, he replied, "If I understood the songs of the white man I would probably like them. But since I don't understand them I get nothing from them" (Whidden 1986: 26).

Clearly, the French songs in my collection had great appeal to the Métis women. They are sung with such intensity that one feels they were treasured, perhaps in a way that imported articles of European dress were valued because of their rarity. Let us first examine the general qualities of the songs to explain their survival both in European and Métis oral tradition and then specific lyrics that must have resonated with the Métis singers who heard them.

As in most old folksongs the Métis song words tend to dwell on a single situation and show us, rather than explicitly tell us, what is happening; they create suspense through repetition and with references to exotic, far distant sights such as “le roi d’Espagne” and “mon château”. They have a stream of concrete, yet beautiful language: colours are primary, as in “un lit blanc” and “bel habit blanc”; synecdoche abounds: for example, women are frequently referred to as “la belle” or “une brune”. Some of the phrases are formulaic, such as “Adieu père, adieu mère”. Stock phrases are commonplace: “gagner ma fortune”; “un sabre à mon côté;” “le doux parfum du gai printemps;” “un beau dimanche matin;” “beau comme un ange;” and “un doux baiser.” Such phrases often occur in parallel, as in

C’est comme toi, belle tendresse
C’est comme toi, que tu vis d’amour
 and
Un doux baiser sur ta bouche
Un doux baiser confiance
 (Appendix, #18)

At other times parallelisms display oppositions such as:

C’est n’est point pour un an
C’est pour le reste de mes jours
 (Appendix, #17)

Ses beaux yeux bleus
Ses beaux bas blancs
 (Appendix, #25)

Also noteworthy is the frequent reference to birds in the old songs, such as “des pinsons,” “l’hirondelle,” “le rossignol sauvage,” “le rossignol des bois,” “un oiseau sauvage,” translated respectively as chaffinches, the swallow, the wild nightingale, the nightingale of the woods and a wild bird. Perhaps the apparent freedom of the birds appealed to Métis, whose lives, as they adopted European lifeways, may have seemed to

become more and more restricted in comparison to their Cree cousins. Métis elders have described to me the great number of birds (and flowers) in the early twentieth century. This sense of amazement is also clearly conveyed in Charette's evocative description of the prairies:

...who wouldn't stand amazed and overwhelmed at the sight of immense flights of ducks, geese, swans, cranes and pelicans, not to mention other winged creatures? The country was swarming with life all year long... In April the crows, thrushes, grosbeaks, sparrows, meadowlarks and a host of others would arrive as harbingers of the return of the sun, which had just opened the first buds (1980: 32).

There is no evidence of imitation of bird calls in these Métis songs, although the phenomenon is described in ethnomusicological literature such as that of Steven Feld's study of the Kaluli in New Guinea (1982). It's interesting to note also that the classical counterparts of the Métis in Europe were consciously adopting bird calls. Mozart used starling sounds and Beethoven, Schubert and Haydn echoed a quail species that has now disappeared in Europe. These Métis songs do show how nature is interpreted by means of culture. In the French folksongs, bird songs were sometimes understood as meaningful utterances:

*Là-haut, j'entends la voix d'un oiseau,
Disant dans son langage,
Que Dieu bénisse ces jeunes gens
Qui veulent se mettre en ménage.*
(Appendix, #17)

It is likely that bird song is shaped into human song that then becomes a sound metaphor for longing and sorrow. In the songs of this collection birds are implored to carry messages of love; to waken sleeping loved ones with their songs so that they will hear their lover's words; to teach their love songs to the lover; to bring news of a beloved. Indeed, all creatures can point to love, and pastoral European scenes such as the following are sung about with conviction by the Métis women, perhaps while they were working on hides!

*Les moutons vivent à l'herbe
Les papillons aux fleurs
C'est comme toi, belle tendresse*
(Appendix #18)

Romantic love, in all its aspects, is the most common theme to be found in the thirty three songs, further evidence for Richard Slobodin's

observation that "... what is distinctive for Red River Métis is an ideology of sexual passion, a sense that each person's life is likely to include an irresistible, stormy love affair" (1981: 363). Slobodin continues: "Several observers have noted that the Red River Métis love affair, like the courtly love of the late Middle Ages in Europe, is not regarded as a basis for marriage" (363). The songs show the extent to which Métis women adopted the concept of western romantic love, further strengthened by the Roman Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary. Falling in love became a near-ecstatic experience and, to my mind, replaced the mystical experiences of Cree hunters living with nature (Preston 2002). Even Riel's execution of Thomas Scott is unofficially attributed to a love triangle. "Riel finally shot Scott... over the love of a girl not the love of country" (Desjarlais 1984: 6).

Two main types of love are revealed in the songs: the first is unofficial love and the second is married love. Married love is imposed from without, and solemnised by church sacrament. Both songs tell about suffering: in the songs about love without marriage, individuals suffer in the lover's absence, while marriage songs emphasise the importance of leaving youthful pleasure behind and accepting the duties of marriage. In songs extolling carefree love youth is celebrated as a time of great promise for love that is yet to be found:

*Vingt ans, vingt ans, c'est la belle âge.
On trouve l'amour, dans chaque mot dit.
V'là le moment
T'as le courage
Les yeux fixés sur l'avenir.*
(Appendix, #6)

And from the perspective of old age, the singer recalls the "burning moment" when "I love you" was said:

*Verse 2
Tè souviens-tu de même
De ce moment brûlant
Que tu me dis: "Je t'aime"
J'avais alors vingt ans.
Moi, jeunet, Toi, coquette,
C'était là les beaux jours
Le temps que je regrette
C'est le temps des amours.*
(Appendix, #4)

There are many songs of disappointed loved, *Là-bas dans ces montagnes* for example:

Verse 2

*Car il faut donc que la belle
Qu'elle vive ou tant pleurer
Oh, si je pleure c'est la tendresse
C'est le défaut d'avoir trop aimé*

Verse 3

*De vous aimer, la belle
Ne nous défends point
Il faudrait avoir le cœur bien dur
Pour ne pas vous aimer, la belle!
Là-bas dans ces montagnes.
(Appendix, #18)*

Unrequited love is a constant theme:

*Un soir en allant voir la belle
J'avais le cœur tout réjoui
J'avais le cœur tout réjoui
Mais cependant j'étais en peine
J'ai rencontré son cavalier
Qui revenait de la demander*

*Je lui ai dit charmante brune
Tu n'as plus d'aimitié pour moi
Tu n'as plus d'aimitié pour moi
(Appendix, #19)*

Métis women did not hesitate to sing songs presented from a male point of view. They sang about male disappointment, for sometimes the girl left behind would have another child upon her lover's return or his beloved would greet him thus,

*Son nez fier, son air sévère,
Elle lui dit: Je suis mariée
(Appendix, #11)*

With results as follows:

*Je suis l'amant malheureux dans ce monde
J'aime une brune, je n'ose lui parler
Je m'en irai dans un bois solitaire
Finir mes jours à l'ombre d'un rocher*

Finir mes jours à l'ombre d'un rocher.
(Appendix, #20)

Note also the common motif of a young man proving his worth in battle to win the girl back home in the following two songs sung by Léa Regnier. Her family history is typical of the Métis who moved from the Red River in the 1880's to the Saskatchewan River area. The musical style and words of the tunes of *Francœur* and the previous *La chanson du Capitaine Huet* which Léa sang indicate a recent arrival in Canada from French speaking immigrants in the past 100 years or so, and may not be known in the East². The two songs are similar in music style with their march rhythms and simple harmonies. *Francœur* is clearly about the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 while the last verse of *La chanson du Capitaine Huet* tells us he was a commander in the Northwest regiment. Was the last verse added to appeal to those Métis who participated in the 1885 resistance?

Verse 2
Mes bons parents étaient malcontents
Quand ils m'ont vu au régiment
Mon tendre père
Ne fait que soupier, ma chère mère
Elle ne fait que pleurer

Verse 3
Quelle est la cause de cet ennui?
C'est une fille de mon pays du mariage,
Dont il n'y a pas question
Je pris pour gagner, un sabre à mon côté

Verse 4
Il y avait un temps que j'étais brigadier
Mais à présent, je suis officier maître
Capitaine commandant,
Dans le nord-ouest maître du régiment.
(Appendix, # 7)

In *Francœur* the women of the northern plains used images from European history to sing about the bravery of their young men. In the following excerpt the hero is identified as a lance-corporal in the Zouaves (an infantry regiment in the French Army):

2. Personal Communication, Ronald Labelle, March 1992, Centre d'études acadiennes, Moncton.

Francœur caporal des zouaves
À la guerre était un démon
Il raconta ainsi l'histoire
D'un jeune Prussien qu'il tua
Oh mes amis de celui là
J'en garderais longtemps mémoire
Je suis zouave
Je le sais bien
Que tout n'est pas rose à la guerre
J'attends hélas c'est mon tour demain
Ma foi, trempez encore un verre
Oh souvenir d'un Prussien
Oh souvenir d'un Prussien.
 (Appendix #10)

Overall, lovers are portrayed as unhappy, for loving leaves one vulnerable to loss as in *Les Vallons et les plaines*:

Verse 2
Pleurez pauvres yeux, mon sort funeste
J'ai perdu, j'ai perdu mon amant!
Funeste sort, vois-tu ce qu'il me reste!
Oh! rendez moi l'amant que j'aimais tant,
Oh! rendez-moi, oh, rendez-moi,
L'amant que j'aimais tant!

Refrain
J'ai parcouru les vallons et les plaines
J'ai entendu le rossignol chanter,
Et il disait dans son joli ramage,
Les amoureux sont souvent malheureux.
Les amoureux, les amoureux sont souvent malheureux.
 (Appendix, #9)

Mme Alphonse Carrière of Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, sings another tune of lost love:

Verse 1
Mais il n'y a point longtemps
Mais par ma maîtresse
J'ai perdu ma maîtresse
L'autre jour c'est pour toujours
L'autre jour c'est pour toujours

À qui j'irai me plaindre
Moi qui suis délaissé

*J'irai trouver bocage
Pour me cacher
En entendant le rossignol chanter*

*Rossignol sauvage
Rossignol des bois
Apprends-moi ton langage
Mais apprend-moi
Et dites-moi des nouvelles
De Marilou
(Appendix, #16)*

Là bas dans ces montagnes, known throughout French Canada and France, is a pastourelle, a song describing a rural love scene. In the following song, nature reflects the lover's emotions and also hints at an illicit love:

Verse 3
*De vous aimer, la belle
Ne nous défend point
Il faudrait avoir le coeur bien dur
Pour ne pas vous aimer, la belle*

Verse 4
*Les moutons vivent à l'herbe
Les papillons aux fleurs
C'est comme toi, belle tendresse
C'est comme toi, que tu vis d'amour
(See Appendix, #18)*

The second type of love, married love, is imposed from without by parents and church. Those who do become engaged, are viewed as special, on the edge of a new life. Although the songs are sad, there is no mention of longing, desire or passion. The following song speaks of the bride's great regret at leaving her birthplace and her family forever. The change is symbolized by the wearing of a white dress, hat and necklace:

Verse 1
*Tout le long du rivage
Tout le long du ruisseau
Là-haut j'entends la voix d'un oiseau
Disant dans son langage
Que Dieu bénisse ces jeunes gens
Qui veulent se mettre en ménage*

Verse 2

*Pour se mettre en ménage
Il faut avoir du souci
Le lendemain des noces
Quel habit mettrons-nous
Nous mettrons bel habit blanc
L'habit de réjouissance
Aussi le chapeau du souci
Le collier de souffrance
(Appendix, #4)*

Métis women were faced with strong pressure from the Roman Catholic priests to be married in church. When Louis Riel met Marguerite Bellehumeur in Montana, there was no priest so they lived together until a proper marriage was possible. Riel wrote a poem in which he tried to assuage Marguerite's discomfiture with their unofficial relationship:

Verse 4

*C'est la longue absence du Prêtre
Ma fille, qui nous a contraints
De nous marier ainsi.
Ma fille, vous n'aurez pas honte
(Louis Riel dans Lussier 1979: 106)*

As Riel experienced, often no priest was available. But even where there was a marriage with Christian rites, the groom usually obtained permission from the bride's parents, paid a bride price, and smoked a pipe. The bride would be lectured publicly on her future behaviour, perhaps inspiring the cautionary songs to the bride such as the "table song" below.

When there was a priest available, European style marriage ceremonies were commonly practised. Following the religious vows a supper and dance would be held, which lasted most of the night. People danced jigs to fiddle music and "... no one but the happy swain was allowed to go sober to bed" (O'Meara 1968: 115). Jules Desjarlais (1984) of Saint-Laurent recalled going around the whole village with friends in a cutter, sleigh, and caboose following his marriage after the Second World War. At one point, two of the sleighs had a race with the best man holding the reins for the groom. The horses were covered with ribbons and bells. Jule's wedding consisted of two days of eating, drinking and dancing.

Métis wedding celebrations were traditionally festive and involved days of dancing and singing drinking songs, perhaps like the one below. Note the reference to taking credit that had to be paid back on Saturday!

*Les gens de Saint-Ambroise ont tous les bonheurs
 Les petits comme les gros aiment tout le whiskey
 Verse "back" ce que tu auras crédit
 T'es tellement s'les nerfs
 Tu te payeras samedi
 (Appendix, #32)*

After the marriage ceremony the entire family would gather at the wedding feast and sing together the often hymn-like "chansons de table" [table songs]. The following song explains the sacred duties of marriage (i.e., the young bride will no longer go to dances or gatherings but stay home and look after the family).

*Nous sommes ici à soir
 Assises à votre table
 Salut la compagnie
 Aussi la mariée*

*Avez-vous bien compris la belle mariée
 Avez-vous bien entendu que le curé vous a dit?
 Fidèle à votre amant envers et contre tout
 Fidèle à votre tour amant comme vous*

*Tu n'iras au bal, Madame la mariée
 Tu n'iras plus au bal ou aussi d'assemblée
 Vous gardez tout ce logis avec votre mari
 (Appendix, #14)*

Surely these lyrics reflect a change from Native life where marriages took place with little formality, with a women typically moving from her family's to her husband's tent. Cree husbands traditionally did not tolerate wifely infidelity, but, on their own terms, they permitted wife exchange or loan and sometimes practiced polygamy (O'Meara 1968: 60). It is likely that births were well spaced because of nursing and, indeed, we are told that Talon "was concerned that the fertility of Indian women was reduced by their custom of nursing their children longer than necessary..." (Brown 1980: 4). In contrast, married Métis women (who were typically Roman Catholic and encouraged by priests to have large families) were usually pregnant for most of their childbearing years. It's therefore not surprising that Métis brides viewed the finality of a

church marriage as a bittersweet occasion. Women were under no illusion about the hardships of married life in western Canada.

*Un jour sa mère lui dit:
 Qui est-ce que vous a poussé?
 Qui est-ce qui vous l'a fait prendre?
 C'est votre volonté
 Je te l'avais toujours bien dit
 Que dans le mariage
 Il fallait quitter les plaisirs
 Aller dans la misère
 (Appendix, # 17)*

After marriage the Métis brides struggled to fit into a hierarchical social structure quite unlike that of their Cree cousins. And in early contact times their marriage relationship, whether formalized or not with the mobile non-native fur traders, was insecure despite the fact that such liaisons brought social and economic benefits to both. "Abandonment appears to have been a very real fear for a mixed-blood wife because the alternatives open to an Indian wife were no longer feasible for her" (O'Meara 1968: 120). When their European husbands went on furlough, Métis wives were often anxious for they could never be sure they would be back. Indeed, several infanticides were reported as a result of the fear of being left alone (O'Meara: 120). Métis wives, particularly those of the second and third generation, no longer had immediate family in an Aboriginal group who would willingly help raise children, especially those of another race.

Despite the risks Métis women incurred in marrying Europeans, an unhappy marriage was usually better than no marriage. Unmarried women had no place in fur trade society. They needed a male protector to head their household. Due to the constant movement of men employed in the fur trade, it was not uncommon for Métis women to have two or three husbands. "The mixed blood woman was increasingly deprived of the autonomy that the Indian woman had enjoyed with regard to marriage and divorce" (O'Meara 1968: 121). Indeed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Métis women were losing their important role as active players in the fur trade.

Many of the singers in the Appendix are listed by their husband's name only, suggesting the adopting of European naming practices. Other European customs were also adopted by Métis. For example, in the song *Tout le long du rivage*, a young bride regrets that she must leave her birthplace and says goodbye to her parents forever:

*Le lendemain des nocés
 A fallu faire le paquet
 En regardant la porte
 Avec un grand regret
 Oh, oui, je regretterai longtemps
 L'endroit de ma naissance
 Là-haut j'avais tant de plaisir
 Ah, que de misère*

*Adieu père, adieu mère
 Adieu tous mes parents
 Je m'en vais en ménage
 Ce n'est point pour un an
 C'est pour le reste de mes jours
 Je m'en vais en ménage
 C'est pour le reste de ma vie
 Quitter le badinage
 (Appendix, #17)*

The songs of melancholy, regret, even despair, reflected events in the lives of the Métis women. Most had many children, and infant deaths were frequent. It was the women who attended the sick and dying, usually in their own homes³. It seems to me that they could readily identify with many of the song themes and it is not surprising that country music, with its message of broken homes and hearts, has recently usurped the role of many of these traditional Métis folksongs!

*Pour se mettre en ménage
 Il a fallu de faire soucis
 A fallu quitter père et mère
 Avec toutes ses bacs de linge
 Il ne reste plus qu'un mouchoir blanc
 Pour essuyer nos larmes
 (Appendix, #22)*

I have emphasized the song words here for they are intrinsically poetic. Moreover, I believe that they not only confirm much of what we know about Métis life, but also lead us to a deeper realization of the women's thoughts about their place in Métis society. Like many early folksongs they do not protest social structures and situations; they are an appeal rather than an assertion. They reveal acceptance of life as it is. Future research on the song melodies, their origins, styles and uses, may reveal much about the influences on Métis women from the church,

3. Personal communication, Joe Venne, 1989.

school and other groups. Perhaps the songs functioned as communicative vehicles to bring about agreement on the emerging values of the new Métis society.

Métis songs were definitely also performed for entertainment, as a way of passing time, as Joe Venne said. But surely they were more, as music ethnographies have shown for other cultures. For example, in a large and early (1968) study entitled *Folk Song Style and Culture*, Alan Lomax used the huge repertoire of recorded song in archives and an analysis technique called cantometrics. Lomax was able to substantiate that song style symbolizes and reinforces important aspects of social structure in cultures around the world. If so, then Métis performance of old European folksong points to acceptance of European, as well as Indian, lifeways in North America. It is also especially relevant to this article that Lomax lamented and predicted a cultural “grey-out”:

The loss in communicative potential for the whole human race is very grave, for these threatened communication systems represent much of what the human race has created in its thousands of years of wandering across the earth. In them lies a treasure, a human resource, whose worth is incalculable, and which can never be replaced when it has been wasted and lost (1968: 5).

Although arguments about the reality of loss of human cultural diversity continue apace, as an ethnomusicologist I share Lomax’s concern: I have witnessed the total disappearance of the Cree hunting songs during the decade of the 1990’s. If culture allows us to adjust to changing environments without awaiting the corresponding slower genetic change (with a flexibility that animals do not have), then cultural diversity is an important aspect of human survival. Certainly culture change can be too rapid for human populations to be healthy, and even to survive. For example, the Cree hunting songs that “grew out” of their ecological niche, have been replaced by popular music, both sacred and secular. One must question the value of “imported” music, for in its present form it is of little use to the hunters. Yet to those northerners who live essentially urban lives, it is appealing. My collection suggests that, with the exception of lullabies, Métis women stopped singing Native song. In addition to the pleasure of singing these haunting melodies, the old European songs may have helped them to adjust to, and to take their place in a non-Native society.

Sound archives are treasure troves of human history and ethnography. The songs in this article were selected from singers living

and deceased, but special note must be made of M. Henri Létourneau's collection of oral traditions, now housed in the Saint-Boniface Archives of Manitoba. M. Létourneau worked to discover what it is that creates a culture and filled over 100 tapes with the songs, stories, sayings, beliefs, recipes and cures of the first Franco-Manitobans, many of whom were Métis. Many of the elderly singers whom he recorded, primarily in the 1970's, must certainly have had grandparents who were at the heart of the daily life in the fledgling Red River colony. Their songs are an invaluable record of the roots and disposition of a people. Through their songs, we see the quite different lives of the historic Métis women, many of whom had Native mothers and French fathers. And, hearkening back to my view of music as an essential, even inborn mode of communication, we can offer valid insights into the lives of Métis women, although I would caution that this is an initial study: more songs are needed to arrive at a consensus concerning interpretation and to refine different song preferences during many generations of Métis in the Red River area.

Lest the songs lead you to think Métis women were a sad, spiritless lot, there are songs of great vivacity. In 1989, I recorded two songs from Susan Ducharme of Saint-Ambroise, Manitoba. She stated that she had learned them from her father and that they had never been written down. Their age remains unknown to me. Both are delightfully rhythmical and were used for dancing. The first, Marie Rouvin, tells of a flirtation. The second, *C'est pas l'affaire des filles*, speaks well (albeit in patois) to women of today:

Verse 1

C'est pas l'affaire des filles de balayer la maison

De balayer la maison, da ree dum allons aux bois

De balayer la maison

(Appendix #24)

Appendix

Following is a list of the 33 songs, numbered consecutively, upon which this paper is based, mentioning the origin and singer of each song, the collector and date of recording and other historical notes. All the transcriptions are by Lynn Whidden. Each song is referred to in the text by number.

Number/ Title	Singer/Place/Date	Collector	Notes
1. <i>Chant Cri</i>	Adeline Petit Duck Lake, Sask, 1972		The words have to be translated
2. <i>My Girl Is an Irish Girl</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière Winnipeg, 1971	H. Létourneau	Translation by Peter Bakker
3. <i>Si tu reviens Dimanche</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière, Winnipeg, 1971	H. Létourneau	Chords suggested by D. Dahlgren
4. <i>Le temps passé</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière Saint-Francois Xavier, 1969	H. Létourneau	
5. <i>Le bonhomme</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière Saint-Francois Xavier, 1969	H. Létourneau	
6. <i>Vingt ans</i>	Mme Elzire Vermette Saint-Boniface, 1973	H. Létourneau	
7. <i>La chanson du Capitaine Huet</i>	Léa Regnier Saint-Louis Sask, 1989	L. Whidden	
8. <i>Napoléon dans sa prison</i>	Léa Regnier Saint-Louis Sask, 1989	L. Whidden	
9. <i>Les vallons et les plaines</i>	Léa Regnier Saint-Louis Sask, 1989	L. Whidden	
10. <i>Francoeur</i>	Léa Regnier Saint-Louis Sask, 1989	L. Whidden	
11. <i>Le voyageur</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière Saint-Boniface, 1971	H. Létourneau	Chords suggested by D. Dahlgren
12. <i>Les tribulations d'un roi</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière Saint-Francois Xavier 1969	H. Létourneau	Composed by Pierre Falcon
13. <i>La Métisse</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière Saint-Francois Xavier 1969	H. Létourneau	Words by Louis Riel; composer unknown
14. <i>Nous sommes ici</i>	Mme Alfred Lafrénière Portage la Prairie 1972	H. Létourneau	A table song for newly weds
15. <i>Le petit rossignol sauvage</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière Saint-Francois Xavier 1969	H. Létourneau	In French collections dating to the 1880's. Variant in Barbeau 1979.
16. <i>J'ai fait une maîtresse</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière Saint-Boniface, 1971	H. Létourneau	Published in Deschênes 1982.
17. <i>Tout le long du rivage</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière Saint-Boniface, 1971	H. Létourneau	Well known song from Québec, Maritimes, France

18. <i>Là-bas dans ces montagnes</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière Saint-Boniface, 1971	H. Létourneau	Well known “pastourelle”. Published in Barbeau 1979.
19. <i>Un soir</i>	Léa Regnier Saint-Louis Sask, 1989	L. Whidden	
20. <i>Vous êtes brune</i>	Léa Regnier Saint-Louis Sask, 1989	L. Whidden	
21. <i>Je m’en vais partir Dimanche</i>	Mme Alphonse Carrière Saint-Boniface, 1971	H. Létourneau	Chords by D. Dahlgren
22. <i>Là-bas dessus ces côtes</i>	Rose Azure Belcourt N. Dakota, 1990	P. Bakker	
23. <i>Le jour que j’ai pris femme</i>	Rose Azure Belcourt N. Dakota, 1990	P. Bakker	
24. <i>C’est pas l’affaire</i>	Susan Ducharme Saint-Ambroise, 1989	L. Whidden	Saskatchewan Archives CBC Collection
25. <i>Marie Rouvin</i>	Susan Ducharme Saint-Ambroise, 1989	L. Whidden	
26. <i>Quand le bonhomme</i>	Alvina Ducharme Brandon, MB, 1990	L. Whidden	
27. <i>Jean qui rit, Jean qui pleure</i>	Elizabeth Bouvier Isle-à-la-Crosse, 1988	P. Bakker	
28. <i>Je voulais vous dire</i>	Elizabeth Bouvier Isle-à-la-Crosse, 1988	P. Bakker	
29. <i>Laisse-moi aller</i>	Victoria Maillot		
30. <i>Il faisait un soleil superbe</i>	Mme Olivia Vandal Woodridge, MB, 1971	H. Létourneau	
31. <i>Ma vache</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière Saint-Francois Xavier	H. Létourneau	
32. <i>Les gens de Saint-Ambroise</i>	Mme Jean Lafrénière	H. Létourneau	
33. <i>Par un lundi au matin</i>	Mme Alfred Lafrénière	H. Létourneau	

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