

Rufus Guinchard, Newfoundland Fiddler, (Portugal Cove, Nfld.: Breakwater Productions (Breakwater 1002), 197-. One 12" 33 1/2 rpm disc).

I. Sheldon Posen

Volume 1, Number 1-2, 1979

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081024ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081024ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Posen, I. (1979). *Rufus Guinchard, Newfoundland Fiddler, (Portugal Cove, Nfld.: Breakwater Productions (Breakwater 1002), 197-. One 12" 33 1/2 rpm disc)*. *Ethnologies*, 1(1-2), 94–96. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081024ar>

popular numbers from the turn of the century and later. Perhaps they are in Ashlaw's repertoire but were passed over for this recording.

The selection of songs was made by Bethke in consultation with Ashlaw, and is based on the collector's recorded sample of some sixty songs, approximately a quarter of what Ashlaw says he knew back in his youth when he "could sing all night and never sing the same song twice." A list of the songs Bethke recorded but did not include would have enhanced the reference value of the notes. How does his repertoire compare with those of others from the region (like Lawrence Older and Sara Cleveland) and with those from neighbouring regions (like the Ontario informants of Fowke and Puckett)? It would also have been useful to have song texts to follow while listening to the record. Neither texts nor the list would fit onto the liner, however; a brochure would be needed.

The liner notes do contain much useful information: a biographical sketch, a discussion of Ashlaw's attitudes about and experiences with his own and related musical traditions, a description of circumstances in which the songs were recorded and edited for the record, brief annotative notes for each song, and a photo of the singer. We look forward to further information in Bethke's book. Texts an extended discussion of repertoire (or at least a list), and a more detailed analysis of the role of music in Ashlaw's life would be welcomed. An accident ended "his days of informal group entertaining;" one wonders what kind of impact his discovery and recording by Bethke caused.

Considering that these are field recordings, the quality is good. On a few songs some background noises can be heard, but these are well in the background and reflect the high quality of the recording equipment and microphones used. In summary, this is a useful addition to the growing body of recordings of traditional singers from Eastern North America. I plan to use it in the classroom, contrasting Ash-

law's version of "Mantle So Green" (Laws N38) with that of Marie Hare of New Brunswick (Folk-Legacy FSC-9). I hope that in future productions of this sort Philo will be able to provide space for song texts and additional documentation, for that is the only aspect of this album which fell below expectations.

Neil V. Rosenberg
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Rufus Guinchard, Newfoundland Fiddler
(Portugal Cove, Nfld.: Breakwater Productions (Breakwater 1002), 197-. One 12" 33 1/2 rpm disc).

Dedicated to publications and recordings from out of Atlantic Canada, Breakwater Productions has released as its second lp, this album of Newfoundland fiddle music. Mr. Guinchard is 77 years old, from the northwest coast of the island, and his playing is first rate. Untrammelled on this recording by an accompaniment other than his own beating feet, Mr. Guinchard soars and gallops through reels, jigs and breakdowns, pausing once or twice for a slow waltz or song tune, then racing off again. His phrasing is as natural as air, his playing clean and his intonation sure; his rhythms are crisp and his energy unbounded. One hears more Scottish than Irish or French influence in Mr. Guinchard's playing. He ornaments less with turns or triplets than with canny double stopping, punctuating the melody lines with swipes down to the lower strings, letting them sound sometimes in chordal accompaniment, sometimes as melodic drone. It is a technique also heard among Scandinavian fiddlers, especially when they play in pairs. Mr. Guinchard's judicious use of it adds depth and variety to his solo playing without sounding heavy-handed or clichéd. Altogether, Mr. Guinchard is a joy to listen to.

The production of this album, however, and by that I mean everything about it except Mr. Guinchard's playing, seems to have been a somewhat scattered affair. To give Breakwater the benefit of the doubt, I am going to surmise that this was so because its people knew what they wanted, but not how to do it or for whom. Their goal seems to have been a document of some kind, of Mr. Guinchard both as an individual musician and as a member of a folk tradition; hence the title "Newfoundland Fiddler", and the album's totally unaccompanied tracks. I also think that in some vague way, Breakwater saw the album as selling not only within Newfoundland but also on the mainland. To this end they have made some attempt to print more than the usual few lines of notes one sees on many Newfoundland albums, and have demonstrated Mr. Guinchard's status as something of a nationally recognized figure by providing a photograph of him playing on a CBC-TV program hosted by Peter Gzowski.

All these features break new ground in the format usually employed by Newfoundland producers in recording local music, and it is a welcome change. Unfortunately, the Breakwater people have not yet learned how to make local information about traditional performers accessible to the general public. For example, the aforementioned photograph on the album jacket is captionless, and the three figures in it unidentified. The viewer knows who Mr. Guinchard is because he is the one with the fiddle. But only Canadians, and Canadians who watch TV, recognize Peter Gzowski's face and know who he is, and can therefore appreciate the significance of a photo showing Mr. Guinchard together with him. The third figure, who is playing the spoons, will be known to only a small circle of Newfoundlanders, mostly from St. John's: he is Clyde Rose, the director of Breakwater Productions. Presumably, people who know Mr. Rose and Mr. Guinchard will get some satisfaction seeing both of them. For all others, the photograph's significance, and

very meaning will be lost: Americans have asked me who those people are and why they are on the cover.

The same puzzlement arises for any outsider listening to the album. While to an extent music carries some "meaning" of its own within itself (though this may be disputed by, say, any westerner who listens to oriental music for the first time), its significance is enhanced if it is given some kind of contextual framework within which to hear it. Breakwater has not yet found the way it seems — through notes, photographs, and description — to give the album context for any whose personal knowledge does not extend to the small Newfoundland outport community or to the circle of traditional Newfoundland musicians. The notes provided on the jacket are overly general in their information (Newfoundlanders usually give their homes as the names of bays or coasts from which they come, but a document should be more specific) and leave whole areas untouched: there is, for instance, no account of the tunes themselves, or about fiddle styles on the island or in Mr. Guinchard's locality, or about the relation of the feature artist to those styles. In fact, in talking about Mr. Guinchard, the notes romanticize him as some kind of charming rural eccentric, practically rebuilding his first fiddle of fishing twine and birchbark, and doing his early playing in "furtive" secrecy, this last explaining Mr. Guinchard's unusual fiddle position (instrument on the right or bowing shoulder). No mention is made of the fact that making do with local materials, and learning in isolation until an activity is mastered, are both traditional patterns in Newfoundland outport life. In all but his virtuosity, Mr. Guinchard is an example of the typical, not the unusual. One has to wonder for whom he is being made to look quaint (Newfoundlanders? mainland Canadians?), and why.

The notes also proudly proclaim that the album was made from tapes recorded in a single session that lasted "five straight hours." I find it hard to believe that even an old hand like Mr. Guinchard could play

his best all in one shot, on any one day, or towards the end of that fourth or fifth hour. It does not seem fair to the musician to have had the results of only one session made into his first record. I suspect that the inclusion of all those short cuts, especially those under sixty seconds, was necessitated by this unfortunate recording practice. One hopes it does not become Breakwater policy.

Nonetheless, Breakwater Productions is to be congratulated on the new direction

it is taking with Newfoundland recording. It has access to extremely rich cultural, technical, and personal resources. If it can maintain some sense of wider vision and seriousness of purpose, Breakwater Productions has brilliant prospects for the useful recording of many aspects of Newfoundland's musical heritage.

I. Sheldon Posen
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pa.