

Fiddle Music of Louis Beaudoin

by Donna Hébert

TUNES: Blackberry Quadrille, Les guenilles. Transcribed from a 1977 recording. Originally published in Fall 2008 SING OUT! Magazine.



Louis Beaudoin, 1920-1980, was a Franco-American fiddler whose grandfather emigrated in the 1800s from Ste. Émélie de l'Énergie, north of Joliette in Québec. They came first to Lowell, Massachusetts and in Louis' generation, to Burlington VT. Learning first from family members and later from family friend Joe Danis, Louis played fiddle in the Franco community with his brother Willie on guitar. Later both played for local and national audiences in the 1970s through two Philo recordings and performances at the Smithsonian and the Jimmy Carter inaugural. A WWII veteran and a retired policeman, Louis ran his car radiator shop in Burlington and played tunes in the shop whenever he could. Louis died in 1980 at age 59 and his widow, Julie, carried on the family musical tradition with the Julie Beaudoin Family until 2002. Guitarist and fiddler Willie Beaudoin and his son Roger, an accordion player, also performed at national and regional venues as a duo with Willie's wife Lillian on piano.

Julie Beaudoin passed away April 8, 2008, only 9 days after she sang on a live concert CD with the band. Carmen and Nina, Louis and Julie's daughters, continue singing their mother's songs with The Beaudoin Legacy, joined by Carmen's three children, Nicole Charbonneau and Elena Alexander (dancers) and Glenn Bombardier (fiddler, dancer). Long-time fiddling buddy George Wilson and myself organized the group in 2005, since adding younger members Daniel Boucher and Nate Ouellette, who have learned their 'Louis tunes' through us. We now feature Selma Kaplan on piano with Max Cohen playing guitar and Pam Gonyer on "M'sieu Le grand bois" or double-bass. And there are Beaudoin great-grandchildren learning the music who can't wait to play with us! Sometimes we are 12 and more at a concert!

These are two reels from Louis Beaudoin's repertoire. The first one is a two-key tune he called "Blackberry Quadrille," with Willie Beaudoin's jazz guitar chart for the tune. This tune is also called Polka Carnaval in Canada and is credited to the repertoire of Isidore Soucy, who was a strong source of music for Louis. Bowings and accents are transcribed from Louis' 1977 performance with his brother Willie in Winooski VT at the Festival les deux mondes.

Accents fall over notes that get substantially more bow. Notice how the reversible accent pattern provides an elegantly variable way to pop the 3-3-2 syncopation through the phrases of a tune, flipping the thirds into new combinations as the tune changes each time. In many tunes, Louis starts with this simple syncopated bowing pattern that's all on eighth notes, driving the rhythm in both patterns, diagrammed below. [Insert Reversed Bowing Patterns from bottom of Les guenilles transcriptions here)

In Blackberry Quadrille, Louis plays off the polka feel of the tune, finding variations on the 3-3-2 pattern with dotted quarters, quarters and tied eighth notes, turning them every which way to create new rhythms. These are noted within the transcription.

Note that in both tunes, accented notes are often doubled with an open or fingered-string drone. Two strings make a natural dynamic and the accents pop with less push or pull on the bow. The real trick in this style is to learn to control the bounce of the bow by not letting it get too big to handle. By staying near the weighted center of the bow [where you can hold it between your fingers and it hangs parallel to the floor], you can get the bow to do most of your work for you. All movements end at this weighted balance point on the bow, to allow the maximum sound for minimum effort.

Start playing with 3-3-2 rhythmic variations, playing single bows at first to try the reversible 2-4-5-7 and 1-3-6-8 accent patterns. Then try dividing the bar with dotted quarters and more and see what happens. It's all in the way you shake it up each time. Rhythm is the moveable ornament in the style, with driven and slurred bowings creating a new accent on a differENT syllable. While the guitarist plays with just a bit of swing, the fiddler is riffing syncopated variations off the melody. On our recording sampled here, listen for pianist Selma Kaplan on the inner harmony line.

The rhythmic interplay makes your feet want to dance as well, eh? So let's try "podorhythmic" or "l'accord du pieds" as the last part of the lesson. Wear flat or short heeled shoes with smooth plastic or leather soles for noise-making. Find a comfortable chair, one where your knees can easily move up and down and you can lean forward easily. The right height is important for long-term stamina, so try to find the right one. You want to sit forward a bit, with your knees and ankles loose and flexible. One foot is usually dominant - that one will move forward and back, tapping in this pattern: TOE back - HEEL forward, TOE back HEEL forward. Now, between the TOE and the HEEL, you'll drop the FOOT of the other foot, with a rest on the fourth count, like this:

1 & 2 & 1 & 2 &
TOE-FOOT-HEEL-rest, TOE-FOOT-HEEL-rest, etc -

My left foot is stronger, so I tap: L - R - L - rest. L - R - L - rest. You might be right-footed, so yours would look like: R - L - R - rest, R - L - R - rest.

Think "da-da-DUM rest da-da-DUM rest". See the "DUM" accent on the 2-beat? This heartbeat drives French-Canadian music from the feet up! Try clogging with either tune, or start slow to something silly. We teach sit-down clogging in schools with "We will rock you!" It's the right speed for novice cloggers, but anything with a strong 4 beat will do. Louis clogged while sitting down and playing fiddle at the same time. He also step-danced and taught his daughters to step-dance as well, but did not combine the stepping with fiddling as fiddlers do today.

Try the clogging and play through these tunes - they are great fun! If you follow the accent patterns noted in the transcription and listen to the track at the same time, you should be able to get some of Louis Beaudoin's famous "le swing" into your fiddling!

*Lesson, arrangements © 2008 Donna Hébert, www.fiddlingdemystified.com
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A 2008 Massachusetts Artists' Fellow in Folk Arts for Franco-American fiddling, Donna is a concert and dance fiddler who learned Québécois and Acadian fiddling from Louis Beaudoin and Gerry Robichaud in the 1970s. With George Wilson in 2005, Donna founded The Beaudoin Project and the Legacy band to honor Louis and his family for their contributions to Franco-American music. Donna also directs The Great Groove Band of young musicians at both the Old Songs Festival in Altamont NY, and at the Philadelphia Folk Festival. Donna teaches, performs and records with five-member string band Groovemama and with Franco-American heritage quartet Chanterelle. Seven times recognized as a master Franco-American fiddler by New England arts councils, Donna has helped to create and nurture a community of fiddlers, singers and lovers of Franco-American music. She has recorded twice on Smithsonian/ Folkways, with other recordings on Philo/Fretless, Flying Fish and Chanterelle labels. A national fiddling educator and ASTA clinician as well as adjunct fiddle instructor at Amherst College, Donna was appointed a Creative Teaching Partner in Fiddling in 2008 by the Mass. Cultural Council, allowing her to teach fiddling in the state's string education programs. She is also the director of Fiddle & Strings Camps and Fiddling Demystified Camp and the author and publisher of Fiddling Demystified for Strings.