

Simon St. Pierre: A Short Biography

Simon St. Pierre was born in St. Benoit, Québec on February 26, 1930. St. Benoit was a logging town north of Montréal which later was combined with several other smaller communities and is now named Mirabel. His family had a farm "on the hill" as he described it. He was the youngest, ninth in a family of five girls and four boys. He grew up with lots of music. His father was a fiddler and really loved the music, although Simon commented that he never put much time into it and wasn't a great fiddler. But one of his older brothers was a very good fiddler. Simon loved listening to them play, and learned a lot from them.

Early years in Québec

Simon couldn't wait to get old enough to play, and started playing music as soon as he could. He played guitar when he was young. Simon started playing for square dances with his brothers around the age of 12, probably playing guitar which was his main instrument for several years.

Simon was a lumberjack for many years, starting in the lumbering camps of northern Québec. There were people there from many parts of Canada, and many of them were fiddlers who brought their varied repertoires with them. Although he started fiddling at the age of 14, that was probably what really got him to start playing more seriously. As he said, fiddling was "all we had for enjoyment" at the logging camps.

When Simon was young he was exposed to a variety of fiddling: French Canadian, Irish and Maritime fiddling were the prevalent styles. Many fiddlers travelled around playing for dances and probably concerts, and he got to hear many of the great fiddlers of Québec in person. That was a good thing because when he was young recordings were rare. One of his uncles had a record player and a good selection of fiddle recordings, and Simon listened to them when he could. Among the influences he mentioned in an interview were Joseph Allard, Isidore Soucy and Jean Carignan, whom he specifically mentioned meeting at a contest in Sherbrooke.

Maine influences: Traditional and bluegrass fiddlers

In 1957 Simon moved to northern Maine. He lived in or near Springfield for about 15 years and then moved to Smyrna Mills. When in Springfield he worked in the woods as a logger. He built a sawmill and worked there for a number of years with his wife Simone until he retired.

In Maine he had a variety of influences. One of the most important influences in his earlier years in Maine was a fiddler named Clair Lake. He was 10 years older than Simon. He played for square dances. Simon used to go to his dances at the Oakfield Grange and sometimes he'd ask Simon to play for a couple squares. Simon also mentioned an older Irish fiddler named Asa (Asael) Logan from Houlton who used to visit him frequently. His repertoire was somewhat different, and Simon said he played a lot of waltzes.

In the 1970s Simon went to festivals now and then. At that time he played a fair amount with his son Danny who backed him up on guitar. Many of these festivals were bluegrass festivals. The festivals were initially of interest at least in part because many French Canadian fiddlers went to them, both from Canada and from Maine.

At the festivals he started to meet other musicians like Fred Pike and the other members of the Kennebec Valley Boys, who were to become important to his musical career. On a couple occasions he was heard by someone from elsewhere and as a result was invited to play for a major event.

Recordings and Festivals

In July 1972 Simon played at the Country Gentlemen Festival in Webster MA. He was heard by Donald Kissil from New Jersey who was very impressed by his fiddling, as were many of the fiddlers playing at the festival. The next summer he played at Smokey Green's Festival in upstate New York, where Don Kissil's friend Paul

Gerry heard him and arranged to record his first record, *The Joys of Quebec* (1973). Paul tried to figure out who should back him up and eventually came up with the Dukes of Bluegrass. This led to Simon recording two more records: *The Woods of Maine* (recorded December 1975, released in 1976) and *Fiddler From Maine* (1977). At Simon's suggestion Fred Pike and the Kennebec Valley Boys played backup on these recordings.

In 1976 someone from Washington DC heard him at a festival and booked him for the Brandywine Festival in 1977. This was much larger than anything Simon had played at before. At that festival he played with Fred Pike who backed him up on guitar. It went very well, and some of the music he played there was released on a CD by the Field Recorders' Collective (*Recordings from the collection of the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music*, 2015) and is still available.

By 1980 Simon was clearly quite connected with the bluegrass musicians in Maine and beyond. Although his playing remained solidly French Canadian, he also learned some old-time Southern and bluegrass tunes. He started to make use of what he learned about these styles in his Canadian fiddling as well. It's interesting to note that according to Simon he was playing with Danny when he was discovered by the people who recorded him and brought him to so many places. Yet, he ended up having bluegrass accompaniment on all his recordings. In part this was undoubtedly due in part to the popularity of bluegrass at the time and the relatively small number of active musicians playing traditional Canadian music in the area. Also, at the time there wasn't a clear understanding on the part of those producing his recordings of the differences between the styles. On the cover of *The Joys of Quebec* his music is described prominently as "Canadian Bluegrass Fiddle".

In 1983 Simon was awarded the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship. This was a major honor, and he traveled to Washington DC where he played at the Smithsonian Institute's Festival of American Folklife, and even at the White House. He brought Joe Pomerleau from Somersworth, NH to back him up on guitar. Joe is an outstanding bluegrass guitar player, and the two of them played together for many years. Peter Yarensky notes that he and Joe attended a weekly soiree in Dover, NH regularly, and Joe talked about that trip many times; it was clearly a highlight of his (and likely Simon's) career.

In the years after that Simon didn't travel as much, although he continued playing at home and with friends for many years. Doug Protsik visited him in Smyrna Mills in 2015. Doug interviewed Simon and they played quite a few tunes. Simon's playing was excellent and he was obviously enjoying himself very much. Simon died on July 7, 2016.

Discography & Sources

Here is a discography and listing of information sources for this essay. It's important to note that there was some inconsistency in the information presented in different sources. We have done our best to make this account as accurate as possible, but there may be some minor errors, especially in details like his age when starting to play the fiddle.

Discography

Simon St. Pierre and the Dukes of Bluegrass. *The Joys of Quebec*, Revonah 915, 1973.

Simon St. Pierre and the Kennebec Valley Boys. *The Woods of Maine*, Revonah RS 920, 1975.

Simon St. Pierre and the Kennebec Valley Boys. *Fiddler From Maine*, Revonah RS 926, 1977.

Simon St. Pierre. *Recordings from the collection of the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music*, Field Recorders' Collective, FRC 206, 2015 [recorded 1977]. *Note*: This recording is not included in the transcriptions but will be added in the future.

Sources

- Centrum Welcomes Simon St. Pierre to Fiddle Tunes (March 19, 2014). <http://centrum.org/2014/03/centrum-welcomes-simon-st-pierre-to-fiddle-tunes/>.
- Eugene Chadbourne, *Artist Biography* for Simon St. Pierre page, AllMusic. Retrieved June 12, 2017 from <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/simon-st-pierre-mn0001607708>.
- Protsik, Doug (published February 1, 2011). *Interview & Session with Simon St. Pierre*. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/h03V9VeqLiQ>.
- Protsik, Doug (published April 6, 2017). *Simon St. Pierre — Maine Woodsman / Fiddler, Smyrna Mills, 2015*. <https://youtu.be/sBLs1YVYzI0>.

About the Sources

The 2015 interview by Doug Protsik was used more than any of the others. The liner notes from Simon's recordings were also important sources.

Notes on the Fiddling of Simon St. Pierre

Introduction: Simon's Repertoire and Style

It's probably safe to say that few recorded Maine fiddlers had a more idiosyncratic style than Simon St. Pierre! Although he shared repertoire with many other players of his generation, Simon usually played the tunes very differently. By the 1970s he was a contest fiddler much more than a dance fiddler. Because of this his style is fairly smooth, but the grittiness of his early style still shines through. This contrast, which gives a straightforward honest quality to his playing, is a large part of what makes his recordings so compelling.

Simon's repertoire drew from the Franco-American styles of Maine and New Hampshire as well as from Québec, the Canadian Maritime Provinces, and American Bluegrass fiddling. The influences of the great Canadian fiddlers Graham Townsend (Ontario), Don Messer (Ontario), Andy De Jarlis (Manitoba), and Isidore Soucy (Québec) are evident in his playing, as are the influences of Franco-American fiddlers such as Lucien Mathieu (Maine) and Louis Beaudion (Massachusetts). He is not known to have composed any tunes himself.

We have transcribed a total of 39 tunes: 28 reels/hornpipes, 4 waltzes, 4 two-steps, 2 polkas, and 1 jig. Why so few jigs? Until older Irish repertoire arrived in Quebec ca. 1900, most Québec players didn't play jigs, or played them in a quasi-polka timing. Notable exceptions included Gabriel Labbé and the Verret and Corrigan families. Another source of 6/8 timing in the early 20th century were 6/8 quadrille tunes. Minor tunes were almost never played - you'll notice there's none at all transcribed here. Simon converted many minor tunes to major, and included many modal tunes in his repertoire. For him, these may have fulfilled the role of minor tunes. Many tunes transcribed here include specific performance notes and observations; some tunes were so complex we added an un-ornamented core version to help with learning. But as always, the best way to learn is to listen to Simon himself!

Timing and Tempo:

Simon frequently played tunes 'crooked', that is, not 32 bars long with a repeat after each 8 bars. Tunes like Simon's *Woodchopper's Reel* and *Antiquite No. 2* are particularly noticeable as crooked. His tempos are generally around quarter note = 120 beats per minute. On waltzes the internal beat of each measure is often varied. This means that while the whole group of musicians will always be together on the downbeat, the fiddle may play beats 2 and 3 earlier or later than the accompaniment.

Pitch:

To modern players, Simon's playing often sounds "out of tune". In reality, his use of pitch is far more nuanced than that of most modern players and certainly more complex than conventional notation is able to show. This is why you will find arrows over many notes indicating to play them higher or lower than what's written on the page. (Listening to his recordings will help you hear these pitches instead of guessing.) Two examples are especially striking: the raised G naturals in *Running Water* and the raised C naturals in *Kiss Me Waltz*. When the banjo takes the lead, you can hear the difference between Simon's raised pitches in the background and the fretted banjo's standard pitches in the foreground.

Bowing:

Simon's bowing style is smooth with clear articulation contrasts used for effect (check out the A part of *Lighthouse Keeper* for an example). In fact, his bowing is so smooth that not all the slurs were audible enough to be transcribed! Simon's playing also includes very complex slurring patterns which often go across beats and bar lines in unexpected places.

Tone:

Related to his bowing is his tone: his fast bow speeds create a full and rich sound. His playing includes careful tapering of the bow speed and pressure to clearly delineate musical phrases.

Chords:

Simon wasn't particularly a bluegrass fiddler, although all three records have bluegrass-style backup. There were few if any non-bluegrass fiddle-backup bands in Maine during the 1960s-1970s before the revival led by the Maine Country Dance Orchestra. There was also money to be made playing contests and selling records in a bluegrass style. The chords on these recordings are fairly simple and generally major. Occasionally additional alternate chords are added above them in the transcriptions, to illustrate a more typical Franco-American or French Canadian accompaniment style from that time period.

Ornamentation:

The ornamentation is probably the most complex part of Simon's style. Nearly without exception the beginning introduction and ending tags have been transcribed below each tune. These often occur after 8 or 16 bars of an A part, rather than after the end of 32 bars as for a contra dance. Sometimes Simon plays not only first and second endings, but also first and second beginnings for each part! These have been written out with the variations below the tune.

Double-stops and open-string drones are common in his playing. Like many players of his time he used little or no vibrato, preferring instead slides up into a note, syncopations, and (in his case) extraordinarily complex trills. These trills have been fully written out in many places. For sake of convenience, notes marked with a "tr" above them are invariably played as 5-note trills ending on the notated pitch (that is, a C with "tr" above it would be played CDCDC).

You will often notice inconsistencies in ornamentation when comparing similar phrases in a tune. This is not a result of sloppy transcription, but rather an attempt to illustrate the endless subtle differences in Simon's playing.