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Smithsonian Folkways CD Released

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings released a CD last month documenting traditional fiddle music from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, that was compiled, produced and annotated by Burt Feintuch, director of the Center for the Humanities at the University of New Hampshire.

"The Heart of Cape Breton: Fiddle Music Recorded Live Along the Ceilidh Trail" is the second documentary recording Feintuch, a professor of folklore and a fiddler himself, has done for Smithsonian Folkways. "Northumberland Rant: Traditional Music From the Edge of England" was released in 1999.

"I'm committed to understanding music as a part of community life," Feintuch says, "and I'm very interested in traditional fiddle music, which was once common in many communities throughout North America and Europe. My work in England on the first CD got me interested in Cape Breton. It is an area that was settled by people driven out of Scotland in the 19th century, and parts of it were Gaelic-speaking until just a generation ago. It is a unique area because the music is getting stronger and stronger, against the conventional wisdom in many places that distinctive local musics are often endangered or slipping away. I think that Cape
Bretoners can teach us something about the integrity of local culture."

Feintuch researched and wrote the 34-page booklet that accompanies the CD. It documents not only the musicians and their music, but the history of the area and the art form. "I really like the idea of my research reaching a wider public," Feintuch says.

"As an academic I'm very interested in cultural revival and what causes it. Music is the most public symbol of Cape Breton. It's used to draw tourists, and for better or worse, it's being seen as a way to make money." Natalie MacMaster, whose uncle Buddy is featured on the CD, is an example of a local person who has had great success with the music outside of Cape Breton.

Folkways Recordings was founded by Moses Asch in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction and sounds from around the world with little regard for commercial success. It became one of the largest independent record labels in the world with nearly 2,200 albums that never went out of print. In 1987, the Smithsonian Institution acquired the collection when Asch died, with the agreement that nothing be allowed to go out of print. It is now run by a curator and releases about 25 recordings a year, with extensive booklets of interpretive notes.

The music on this CD was recorded in context, at dances and concerts along the Ceilidh Trail, on the western side of Cape Breton Island. Feintuch and Grammy-winning sound engineer Pete Reiniger spent a week during the summer of 2000 recording more than 30 hours of the traditional fiddle music. "This is what the music sounds like when it's being played by real people for real people," Feintuch says.
Feintuch has been doing field recordings since the 1970s when he started his academic career, first in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania and then in south central Kentucky, where he started work as an assistant professor. He describes his work as ethnographic research, not unlike what journalists do. His recordings are at Western Kentucky University and the Library of Congress, and he also has a few hundred hours in his personal collection. Digitizing those hours is his current project. A lot of the original tape is deteriorating.

"I consider it part of my legacy," Feintuch says of the recordings. "I've been privileged to meet extraordinary artists and hear remarkable music in many local settings such as dance halls, churches and people's houses, and I want to make sure it is still heard 50 years from now."

Feintuch was recently appointed to a new National Recording Preservation Board by the Library of Congress. The board was established by Congress to create national policy for the preservation of culturally, historically and aesthetically significant sound recordings.

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