



Take a Bow to the Maritimes

Fiddle Phenom Zoë Darrow

By Rob Weir

Most people spend their whole lives awaiting an epiphany; 17-year-old fiddle phenom Zoë Darrow had hers when she was just six. No trumpeting angels or robed gurus were involved; Darrow's revelation lay in the sizzling bowing of Prince Edward Island's J. J. Chaisson, who just happened to be playing a gig with extended clan members near Darrow's western Massachusetts hometown of Blandford.

DARROW IS A home-schooled lass whose parents Phil and Pam enrolled her in classical Suzuki fiddle classes when she was four. Pam recalls that Zoë was sitting on her lap at the start of the Chaisson family concert in 1995. "She got up and sat in the aisle, mesmerized. At the end of the concert she said, 'That's it. That's what I want to do.'" And so she has. Darrow notes that Suzuki style gave her a solid base, but that the music of Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton, Ireland and Scotland "seemed more accessible and made me happy." Suzuki lessons ended and Darrow began studying with Van Kaynor, a western Massachusetts musician who drilled her in pan-Celtic and Appalachian fiddle. Before she was eight, she and her father — who is the guitarist in her band, Zoë Darrow and the Fiddleheads — were

busking on the streets of Northampton, Massachusetts. By the time Darrow released her first CD at age twelve, her precocious talent and frenetic performance style drew comparisons to Natalie MacMaster when she was a young whelp barking at the heels of public prominence.

Now that Darrow has added step-dancing and a host of Cape Breton tunes to her repertoire, comparisons to MacMaster flow like grace notes. It's a heck of a burden to saddle someone with and Darrow is having none of it. "That's flattering," says she, "But I'm nowhere near her level or quality of performance. She grew up in the tradition, lives it, and breathes it. I just play some tunes I learned from her and I bounce around a little bit, but she's Natalie MacMaster for heaven's sake." What excites Darrow

more than the comparisons was meeting MacMaster at a concert, where she signed a CD *Always Fiddle*. When she saw MacMaster again at Leahy concert, Natalie made Darrow's day when she exclaimed, "Hey, you're Zoë the fiddler!"

Darrow may not have been raised in the tradition like so many Maritime fiddlers, but she's doing her best to make up for that by spending time there. Darrow has taken advice, classes, and workshops from some of the best Celtic musicians on the planet — Kevin Burke, Liz Carroll, Phil Cunningham, Alasdair Fraser, Dougie MacLean — and she'll turn eighteen at the Willy Clancy Summer School in Ireland in 2007, but Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton draw her like a moth to the flame of inspiration. "The first time I heard the Cape Breton/P.E.I. style and I just loved it," notes Darrow. "I listened to the Rankin Family, Natalie MacMaster, and heard the Chaissons when many of them were still kids. Cape Breton music has a really cool sound. Its turn of phrases and embellishments give it a gritty sound; it's hoppy, has a lot of vitality, and there's a little jump Cape Breton fiddlers put at the end of the note that adds character to

the music. Of course, Cape Breton still has strong Scottish influences and a lot of the fiddle tunes have drone qualities and embellishments more typical of bagpipes. I also find that P.E.I. has an amazingly wide repertoire of tunes. At first I didn't notice the same influences as on Cape Breton, but then I took up the bagpipes and it's now apparent to me of how much influence the pipes have had on P.E.I. fiddle music as well."

As Darrow's remarks indicate, she's a student of the music, not just a tourist. It's easy to get lost in the flash of Darrow's performances and undersell the substance. She's like a caffeinated gyroscope when she plays — always in motion, head bobbing, feet sliding across the stage, and bursting with a feeling she describes, simply, as "Let's go!" But as one who has seen Darrow since she was a street busker, the thing that strikes me is that she's always had something that's hard to teach: a feel for the music, that ineffable quality that takes a listener inside the lore and customs that gave birth to the tunes she's playing.

But Darrow knows there's just so much one can learn from busking, recordings, and books; to that end, the Darrow family has made regular trips to P.E.I. and Cape Breton. Darrow has attended the Rollo Bay Fiddle Festival on P.E.I., the Celidh Trail School of Celtic Music and the Gaelic College of Arts and Crafts on Cape Breton. She's especially enamoured of J. J. Chaisson. "He's a fisherman, a fun person, and an amazing fiddler," says Darrow. "As far as I'm concerned, he's Mr. Perfect." She also credits the Chaisson clan for helping her "get" the music. "I went to the Chaisson family festivals and spent some time in the tuning shed. There were these great sessions where people played all night and I didn't last too long the first time," she laughs. "Everything was so amazingly driving and beat-oriented. Everyone was stomping their feet, the piano was keeping rock solid time, and the fiddlers just closed their egos and played for hours. I saw evidence of this huge spirit behind the music that I didn't



A young Zoë Darrow (aged 15), taken by Rob Weir.

feel when I was playing classical and I just got completely caught up into it." Darrow also speaks highly of all the local instructors she's encountered in her trips: Sandy McIntrye, J. P. Cormier, Richard Wood, Judy McKenzie...

Maybe Darrow took to the Maritimes because it felt so much like home. Her mother jokes that the first time the family hit the famed Cabot Trail, Zoë kept saying, "Looks just like Blandford," except with an ocean. Phil recalls, though, a hairy attempt to find a shortcut across the Mabou Highlands that ended at a CNN transmitter and an admission of defeat! But the entire family speaks of how welcoming and comfortable they find Cape Breton. They stayed in Chéticamp when attending last year's Celtic Colours, and Zoë revelled in its French influences, as well as the graces of famed bed and breakfast hostess Germain Doucet. "I'm a big meat and potatoes gal," says Zoë, and "Germain kept making me all these special French dishes. I loved her and the food." ("Okay, it did all taste pretty much the same, but that's fine by me," she jokes.) The Darrow's also felt right at home in the Rankin Family's old

stomping grounds of Mabou and West Mabou, which really do look a lot like Zoë's hometown of Blandford. There the Darrow's revelled in the sheer number of fiddle, dance, and guitar workshops available to them.

Variety is all to the good for the eclectic Ms. Darrow. As noted earlier, she's studying the bagpipes and step-dancing; she's also taken up the bodhran and the low-D whistle and has gotten pointers on the latter from no less than Phil Cunningham. If that's not enough, she's also developed a fascination with the *erhu*, a bowed, two-stringed, Chinese instrument. She finishes her home schooling this year and is contemplating ethnomusicology as a college major, about the only thing that could satisfy her musical passion, her desire to travel, and her insatiable curiosity about people around the globe. If she pulls it off, she can thank the Maritimes for that as well. "Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton were my first experiences of anything outside my own culture," says she. "They showed me the flavors of the world." My guess is that Zoë Darrow is destined to add savoury spice to the global mix.

