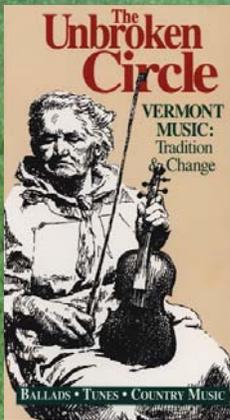


# THE Unbroken Circle

STUDY GUIDE



## Vermont Music: Tradition and Change



# The Unbroken Circle

STUDY GUIDE BY MARK GREENBERG

## Performers and Music

(in order of appearance)

- Cordelia Cerasoli . . . . . *Young Charlotte* (Smith)
- Margaret MacArthur . . . . . *The Lakes of Champlain* (trad.)
- Noman Kennedy . . . . . *Molly Bawn* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Barbara Allen* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Mouth Music: The Kilt Is My Delight*,  
. . . . . *McCleod's Reel* (trad.)
- Ron West . . . . . *Mrs. McCleod's Reel* (trad.)\*  
. . . . . *Honest John* (trad.)
- Ron West & Wilfred Guillette  
. . . . . *St. Anne's Reel* ( trad.)\*  
. . . . . *Prend Un 'tit Coup* (trad.)\*
- Glen Bombardier . . . . . *The Gaspé Reel* (trad.)
- Dorotha Parkhurst & Eleanor Martin (The Hurstins)  
. . . . . *The Harris Piece* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Jesus is My Neighbor* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Darling Nelly Gray* (trad.)
- Lois Carey, Mort "Smokey" Carey, Chuck Donnelly  
(The Pony Boys)  
. . . . . *Frankie and Johnny* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Ragtime Annie* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Alabama Jubilee* (Yellin, Cobb )
- Lee Jollota & Band\*\* . . . . . *Your Cheatin' Heart* (Rose/Williams )
- Al Cadorette & Band\*\* . . *Darling Nelly Gray* (trad.)
- \* with Floyd Brown, guitar  
\*\* with Tony Washbum, fiddle; Vern Hayford, drums;  
"Fat" Gary Lotspeich, bass

## Music Only:

- Margaret MacArthur . . . . . *Fifty Years Ago* (trad.)  
Ed Dragon . . . . . *The St. Albans Tragedy* (trad.)  
Vernon Dalhart . . . . . *The Prisoner's Song* (Massey)  
Don Fields & The Pony Boys  
. . . . . *Pony Boy Theme* (Fields)

## Complete Songs & Additional Material (\*)

- Cordelia Cerasoli . . . . . *Young Charlotte* (Smith)  
. . . . . *French Songs\** (trad.)  
. . . . . *A Horse Named Napoleon\** (trad.)
- Margaret MacArthur . . . . . *The Lakes of Champlain* (trad.)  
. . . . . *50 Years Ago* (trad.)  
. . . . . *St. Anne's Reel\** (trad.)  
. . . . . *The Stratton Mt. Tragedy\**
- Norman Kennedy . . . . . *Molly Bawn* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Mouth Music* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Barbara Allen* (trad.)
- Wilfred Guillette, Ron West, Floyd Brown  
. . . . . *Duane's Tune/Prend un 'tit coup\** (trad.)  
. . . . . *Honest John* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Mrs. McCleod's Reel* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Soldier's Joy\** (trad.)  
. . . . . *Prend un 'tit coup* (trad.)  
. . . . . *St. Anne's Reel* (trad.)
- The Hurstins . . . . . *Jesus is My Neighbor* (trad.)  
. . . . . *The Harris Piece* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Darling Nelly Gray* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (trad.)  
. . . . . *The Beautiful Hills of Vermont\**  
(Parkhurst)
- The Pony Boys . . . . . *Frankie & Johnny* (trad.)  
. . . . . *Alabama Jubilee* (Yellin, Cobb)  
. . . . . *Raggedy Anne* (trad.)

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### Vermont Music: Tradition and Change

**I**n the 21st century, music, for many people, is only the push of a button or flip of a knob away. And so it has been for over a century, ever since people began inventing magical electronic machines and devices that brought an ever-expanding variety of sound and images into the home. From Thomas Edison's shiny black cylinders to home-made crystal radios to remote controlled DVD players to multi-media computers, magical electronic devices have made every home a potential concert hall, night club, or movie palace. Buy it, plug it in, turn it on, and enjoy.

**It wasn't always this way.** Once upon a time, hearing music meant making it yourself and/or being among live people who were doing so, usually in a style particular to a region or even to a local community. In Vermont, as in most of rural America, that meant gathering with friends and relatives in a neighbor's kitchen or at the local school house, church, or grange hall. Only occasionally would there be a chance to see a

professional musician traveling through the countryside with a tent show or renting a space and plastering the area with posters to announce the arrival of "entertainment."

**But by the early 1920s,** thanks to phonograph records and radio, a wide range of musicians and styles could be heard even in rural, isolated places like Vermont. This accelerated the processes of cultural cross-fertilization while also leading to the rise and dominance of mass-market, homogeneous popular culture. In Vermont, as elsewhere, this had an impact on local styles, and soon some Vermont musicians were becoming professional and performing on the radio. Yet connections, both of style and repertoire, to home-made music, remained.

**They remain even today,** though they continue to transform. This transformation - involving both continuity and change—as seen in the lives and music of some remarkable Vermonters, is the subject of THE UNBROKEN CIRCLE.

## I. Introduction

Old photographs and the song "Fifty Years Ago" introduce the theme of change: oxen give way to cars; old-time fiddlers are followed by musicians in tuxedos and cowboy costumes. A hint is given that:

- 1) old and new are relative concepts and
- 2) progress may be a mixed blessing.

## II. The Ballad Tradition

Home-made music was an important aspect of **Cordelia Cerasoli's** childhood. Some of the music was the popular music of the day, but much was also older songs, remembered by both her mother and father. "Young Charlotte" was written in Vermont in the 19th century in the style of traditional ballads that related current, often dramatic events. Cordelia sings unaccompanied as did many traditional ballad singers in the British Isles.

**Margaret MacArthur** grew up in rural Missouri where she developed a lifelong love of country ways and traditional folk songs. She was especially attracted to long story-songs (ballads). In 1948, she moved to Vermont and eventually settled in Marlboro, in an old farm house, where she raised a family. Music remained important, and the family often gathered to sing. In Vermont, Margaret began learning and singing the songs of her adopted state. As a teacher at the two-room Marlboro schoolhouse, she

began introducing the children to songs that she was learning from their parents and grandparents—songs that were in danger of dying out as traditional forms of oral folk transmission gave way to radio, recordings, and television. Margaret soon became aware of the work of Vermont's pioneer folk song collector, Helen Hartness Flanders. She also met Mrs. Flanders, who encouraged Margaret's collecting and singing and gave her access to her files. Margaret has since recorded and reconstructed many of the songs from the Flanders Collection and has helped keep them alive. In 1985, the University of Massachusetts named her a "New England Living Art Treasure," and in 2002 the Vermont Arts Council, presented her with its Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts.

**Norman Kennedy** is one of the world's leading singers of traditional Scottish ballads and songs. He was born and raised among the shipbuilders of Aberdeen and began singing at age three. Most of his songs were learned from "the old folk," who sang in the traditional unaccompanied manner. Norman was working as a tax collector in Aberdeen and singing occasionally in the pubs, when he was invited to perform at the Newport Folk Festival. Norman stayed in the U.S. to demonstrate weaving in Williamsburg, Virginia, and eventually moved to Vermont, where he operated a weaving school for many years. His music represents, both in content and performance style, the Anglo/Celtic roots of much American folk and traditional music. Norman also sings in the style known as "mouth music," which developed from the need for dance music after the clergy banned the playing of instruments. In 2003, Norman was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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### III. Old-Time Fiddling

Norman Kennedy's singing of "Mrs. McCleod's Reel" dissolves to the playing of the same tune on fiddle by Ron West, one of Vermont's most accomplished old-time fiddlers. His repertoire contains tunes from many sources, including his father, Uncle Clarence, neighbors, other Vermont fiddlers, radio, records, and books. A frequent participant in fiddle contests, Ron has taken home trophies from competitions in Hartford, Connecticut and Barre, Vermont. He has also placed fourteenth at the prestigious National Fiddle Championship in Weiser, Idaho.

**Wilfred Guillette** joins Ron and guitarist Floyd Brown for some fiddling in Ron's kitchen. Wilfred, who died in 2004, was one of the most colorful and popular fiddlers in Vermont and a familiar face at fiddlers' contests throughout New England. He played in the French-Canadian style and clogged along with his playing. A third-generation fiddler he, like Ron West, fondly recalled the old "kitchen junkets" (or "tunks"), when neighbors would gather in a farmhouse kitchen for a full night of fiddle music and dancing. Wilfred received the 1986 Vermont MIDSUMMER Award for his contributions to the state's traditional culture. "St. Anne's Reel," played by Wilfred, Ron, and Floyd is one of the most popular Franco-American fiddle tunes.

**Glen Bombardier** is the grandson of the late Louis Beaudoin, Vermont's best-known traditional Franco-American-style fiddler. He began learning to play from his grandfather and has often performed with The Julie Beaudoin Family, a group consisting of Glen's grandmother, his mother, aunts, and several cousins.

### IV. Country Music

**Eleanor Martin** and **Dorothy Parkhurst**, collectively known as **The Hurstins**, began sharing their love of old country hymns, songs, and dance tunes in 1962. Both traced their love of music to their families and also to the influence of radio and 78 RPM phonograph records, which they continued to collect. The Hurstins were exceptional, both for their dedication to simple, homemade music and for the scope of their talents. Eleanor, who died in 1994, sang, played guitar and spoons, and was an extraordinary whistler. Dot played guitar, mandolin, harmonica, and fiddle and sang. She died in 2004. The Hurstins music is truly folk music, whatever the sources of some of their repertoire—music

played by ear and adapted to the skills and tastes of the players, presented in a direct manner without any of the affectations of show business. The Hurstins received the 1988 MIDSUMMER Award for their contributions to Vermont's traditional culture.

**Mort "Smokey" Carey, Chuck Donnelly, and Lois Carey** were members of one of Vermont's best-known "cowboy bands." **Don Fields and His Pony Boys**. As radios and phonographs became more common in Vermont in the 1930s, local bands began to adopt and adapt the repertoires and styles of commercial "cowboy" and "hillbilly" performers. Don Fields had aspired to being a classical violinist, but hard times forced him to abandon those dreams. He turned his abundant talents instead to playing traditional and popular music. The Pony Boys began playing barn dances and radio broadcasts in the 1930s. Their music consisted of older traditional fiddle tunes, newer commercial cowboy songs, and even pop and big band tunes. In the late '40s and early '50s, Lois, Smokey, and Chuck joined The Pony Boys. Each had played with other musicians and had acquired considerable technical skills, despite their lack of formal training (though Lois had had singing lessons). These skills were further honed during their association with Fields. Together they represent the continuing evolution of country music as it cross-breeds with other musical forms. Both Chuck and the Careys have also passed their love of country music on to their sons, who have played in various country-rock bands. Smokey and Lois died in the 1990s.

**Al Cadorette** learned to call square dances at kitchen junkets and box socials. He calls in the singing style, using the tunes of popular country songs. An unusual feature of his calling is his use of scat singing, or "diddling," during the instrumental breaks. He attributes this practice to calling with players who didn't know the tunes. By providing the melody for the dancers, Al's "diddling" is akin to Norman Kennedy's mouth music. Al has called throughout Central Vermont and for foreign diplomats at the United Nations. The band backing Al up consists of Lee Jollota (rhythm guitar), Tony Washburn (fiddle), "Fat" Gary Lotspeich (bass), and Vern Hayford (drums). All have played in various Vermont county and country-rock bands. Their instrumentation and style represents the more modern, Nashville-based type of county music that gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, largely in the wake of the huge success of singer/songwriter Hank Williams ("Your Cheatin' Heart") The music and dancing seen here are typical of the Saturday night dances held every week at the Moose and other social clubs in Vermont.



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### Suggested Questions and Discussion Topics:

#### 1. How are folk music, traditional music, popular music, country music similar/different?

Consider:

- Variation as an essential element of folk or traditional music.
  - Differences and similarities of content, style, performance style.
  - Oral/aural tradition versus formal and written ways of preserving/learning songs. How do different ways of learning and/or transmitting music affect the music?
  - How have changes in technology affected regional music and culture?
  - Who are the “folk”?
  - Economic factors; professionalism.
2. **What is the value or function of music for each of the participants in *The Unbroken Circle*?** Consider social functions, personal functions, music as a source of entertainment, as news, as accompaniment to work.
3. **Discuss the role of music in the family.** How did it change in the 20th century? Why has it changed? Is it still changing? Consider the effect of improved mass communication and travel and of commercial entertainment. Have other aspects of family life been similarly affected?
4. **Compare the old “kitchen junkets” with grange hall, barn, or social club (e.g., the Moose Club) dances and with music/dancing in clubs and bars.** How has that affected the music?
5. **What is meant by the “unbroken circle”?**

6. **What aspects of tradition are found in *The Unbroken Circle*?** How do families and communities preserve traditions? Why is tradition honored by some and rejected by others?
7. **Consider the work of Helen Hartness Flanders.** Why are collecting, recording, and publishing folk songs valuable? How might such collections and books affect (a) the preservation of these songs, (b) the continuing process of change and adaptation?
8. **Consider Dot Parkhurst’s statement that it was unusual for a woman to play music, especially so many instruments.** Yet Dot (and Eleanor Martin and Margaret MacArthur) seem to uphold traditional values. Is there a contradiction?
9. **Discuss the impact of progress and change on other aspects of life and culture.** Is progress a blessing (greater, faster communications, access to more music), or a curse (cultural standardization and homogenization), or some of both? Is there a place for old-time ways of doing and learning things in the modern world? What might the value of such things be to the individual, to a particular group, to a society? Is the attachment to the traditional or old-time simply sentimentality or nostalgia?
10. **Discuss tradition and change as absolute or relative terms.** When does something become “old-time?” How and when do new tunes become “old-time?”
11. **Compare and contrast these story-songs (ballads): “Young Charlotte,” “Molly Bawn,” “The Lakes of Champlain,” “Frankie and Johnny.”** How do they reflect the cultures from which they come?
12. **Both Margaret MacArthur and Norman Kennedy are very knowledgeable about their music and aware of its value as part of a cultural tradition.** How do their styles of performance reflect their concerns and attitudes? How do The Pony Boys’ and Al Cadorette’s performances reflect their roles as entertainers?
13. **What types of music continue to preserve and/or build on older musical traditions?**

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### Other Resources:

#### THE FLANDERS BALLAD COLLECTION:

Quinn, Jennifer Post: *An Index to the Field Recordings in the Flanders Ballad Collection at Middlebury College*. Middlebury College, 1983.

#### BOOKS BY HELEN HARTNESS FLANDERS INCLUDE:

*Ancient Ballads Traditionally Sung in New England, Vols. 1-4*.

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965.

*Vermont Folksongs and Ballads*. Stephen Daye Press, 1931, 1932.

#### RECORDINGS BY PARTICIPANTS INCLUDE:

##### Margaret MacArthur:

*Vermont Ballads and Broadides*. Whetstone Records (Box 15, MacArthur Rd, Marlboro, VT 05344).

*Folk Songs of Vermont*. Folkways FH 5314.

*Ballads Thrice Twisted*. Whetstone Records 05.

*Them Stars*. Whetstone Records 04.

##### Wilfred Guillette:

*Old Time Fiddling*. Green Mountain Records.

##### Norman Kennedy:

*Live in Scotland*. The Tradition Bearers LTCD 2002.

*Ballads and Songs of Scotland*. Folk Legacy CD 34.

*Songs & Stories of the Old People*. Golden Fleece (P.O. Box 1525 Sioux Falls, SD 57101).

##### Ron West:

*Vermont Fiddler*. Fretless Records.

##### From Multicultural Media:

West, Guillette, Kennedy, Hurstins, and others:

*Vermont: Kitchen Tunks and Parlor Songs*. MCM 3025.

Don Fields (with Smokey & Lois Carey):

*Don Fields & His Pony Boys: Historic WDEV Broadcasts & Last Sessions*. Rootstock Recordings, MCM 4004.

##### Various Artists:

*New England Dances* (video). MCM 1002.

*New England Fiddles* (video). MCM 1003.

*The JVC Smithsonian Folkways Video Anthology of Music and Dance of the Americas* (video).

*This Study Guide may be photocopied for classroom use only.*

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