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The Rhythms of Alex Currie's Feet PREPARED BY PAUL M. MACDONALD Throughout his career as a piper Alex Currie often played for stepdancers or square dances. For this he played the pipes sitting down and would complement his piping with his own improvised rhythmic accompaniment, using his feet. He preferred hard wooden or tile floors and often wore leather-soled shoes when he played. Alex's mother and father were both stepdancers and he was quite the stepdancer himself! Alex especially enjoyed playing for dancers Johnny Stamper, Alex O'Handley, and old Alex Basker. His feet were such an important element of his sound that even when he was only playing the practice chanter in the kitchen, he still padded his sock feet in the most wonderful rhythms. All old-time fiddlers and pipers used their feet in different ways, and Alex's way of accompanying himself was very distinctive. The only other musician I heard that sounded close to him was Northside fiddler Joe Confiant, whose strathspey feet rhythms were as wild and energetic as Alex's.

Alex's Feet Rhythm for the Strathspey "Calum Crubach" 'XXXXXXXXiiK
 ptp{p'j?p;'?}p{p{ip{p{p{p:p:j?p;'p{p'p{p:ptp:jg' LRLRLRLR LRLRL LR
 LRLRLRL L R L R L R L The symbol > denotes the use of the heel. The
 symbol • means the use of the toe. Above is an example of the basic rhythm that
 Alex would use to accompany a strathspey. As in his melodic playing, he would
 never repeat the same rhythmic accents exactly. Instead, he would accent the
 rhythm to complement the natural phrasing of the tune he would play. Also he
 would often adjust his sitting position and his posture, resulting in variations such as
 the main accents shifting from one foot to the other. For added volume and
 dynamics Alex would often use the full flats of both feet on the strathspeys. To
 accentuate and complement certain phrases in the melody he would use the toe of
 the right foot, as in the above example of his feet rhythm for the pipe tune "Calum
 Crubach" ("Crippled Malcolm"), one of Alex's signature strathspeys. To the right is
 an example of his basic rhythm for a reel. For a reel, Alex would rock his left foot
 back and forth, heel and toe Alex's Feet Rhythm for the Reel "Muileann Dubh" 'f U
 [j liXI-JLLj'r U U LR LRLRLRLR L L R L L R LRLRL L R The symbol >
 denotes the use of the heel. The symbol • means the use of the toe. on the main
 beats of the tune. He would accentuate the off-beats and the phrasing of the
 melody with either the heel or the toe of his right foot, as in this example of
 "Muileann Dubh" ("Black Mill"). One of the first tunes he learned from his mother,
 the "Muileann Dubh" remained one of his favourite pipe reels throughout his almost
 eighty years as a piper. Alex's rhythmic accompaniments were also very dynamic.
 He would start softly at the beginning of a tune but by the end of the second repeat
 would build his feet rhythm into a frenzy. He would always end a set of tunes with a
 loud flourish of rhythm followed by a single slap on the floor with both feet and a big
 hearty laugh. your feet--beats 'lith the tune, eh? So they play today--there's no
 idea how to keep the time with their feet. They just hit it on SERVING INDUSTRIAL
 CAPE BRETON FOR OVER 39 YEARS ' Senior Citizen Discounts ' Furnace Leasing 1'
 Discount for Casli CALL TODAY 564-8213 ALAN SULLIVAN the floor, eh? You'll see



them doing it all the time. That's not the proper time. That's hurting a tune more than good it's doing it, eh? You've just got to work with your feet like the old people did. (Would you say that you're actually dancing when you're sitting there? Are your feet dancing, right to the tune?) Yeah. Right to the tune. And then when you turn on the strathspey, on the reel, you've got another style with your feet, you're going.... (Alex taps out a distinct rhythm with his feet.) (Oh, this is wonderful. Let me hear it with the strath? spey. With a strathspey, how are your feet going?) This way. (A steady tap? ping.) Heel and heel. On the reel, you go.... (A different rhythm, a three-part tapping.)

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