

# **Language, Music, and "Franco-américanité": Investigating the Identity of Maine's Franco-Americans**

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Franco-Americans in Maine have often defined themselves in linguistic terms. The French language was traditionally one of the three pillars of Franco-American life, along with religion and culture, and though the use of French has declined in recent decades, a significant minority of Maine's Franco-Americans still consider it an important part of their cultural identity (Albert et al). However, language can be more than a means of verbal or written communication. Franco-American traditional music (FATM) — historically passed on by ear and played at kitchen parties, community dances, and holiday celebrations — is in many ways a language of its own, with a distinct vocabulary, grammar, and expression that has brought Franco-American musicians and listeners together for generations. Like the French spoken in Maine, it recalls the Canadian origins of the Franco-American population, and also reflects the cultural influences and assimilationist pressures of its New England environment. But while scholars have studied the significance of the French language to Franco-Americans in Maine, the role of FATM has often been overlooked in academic literature.

With this in mind, my research focused on the social and communicative functions which FATM fulfills in contemporary Franco-American communities in Maine and the ways in which Franco-American and non-Franco-American players of FATM experience the music they play. I was especially interested how questions of cultural identity and language are tied to musical practices, including both music and dance. Over the course of the summer, I interviewed several local musicians and dancers, attended an informal "jam session" with musicians, and consulted academic articles and books on Franco-American, French-Canadian, and New England folk music, along with other cultural analogues. My interviews, tailored to each interviewee, sought to understand how the subjects became part of Maine's traditional music community, what influences shaped their personal styles of music and dance, how their cultural identity, language, and/or heritage are connected to the music, and what importance they assign to the music.

My sources revealed that FATM is complex and changing, not necessarily conforming to the boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, or geography. While the music is still played in Franco-American communities like Lewiston and Biddeford, especially during festivals and public celebrations of Franco-American culture, it is no longer widespread in the community or transmitted through family ties. Instead, it is something that is discovered, accessible through recordings, sheet music, and a collection of masters who have kept the tradition alive. Practiced by Franco-Americans and non-Franco-Americans alike, FATM has different meanings for everyone, whether as part of a New England contra dance set, a fiddle contest, or a women's group singing popular songs in French. It is not an exclusively ethnic or cultural activity — but, crucially, one which may carry these meanings for the Franco-Americans who engage with it. I hope to continue to investigate this topic during the academic year as an honors project or independent study, and I am grateful for the support of the Surdna Fellowship, which has allowed me to explore this area of Maine's musical heritage.

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