

Notes from the Field: A Weekend in Toronto's Old-Time Music Community

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**Friday
1/28/2013**

I leave Buffalo, N.Y., around 7:00 pm on Friday night, after working a full shift at my retail job. The night is cold, but the sky and roads are clear, and crossing into Ontario on the Peace Bridge is quiet, as I seem to be the sole traveler headed north that night. Around Hamilton, the weather turns and the last 40 km are a brutally slow crawl into Toronto. I'm learning to think in kilometers. I'm learning to watch the weather.

I arrive at the Russian Orthodox Church near The Annex neighborhood of Toronto for the square dance around 10:00 pm, two hours late. Regardless, I feel welcomed and expected. People are taking a break. We talk about the weather and the turnout for the dance – fewer than hoped for, though still sizeable, and plenty for this first test run of the square dance they plan to continue. They have enough for three full squares, which means there are at least 24 people there, plus the band and caller. While it may seem small, I think it is significant, given the fact that it is a frigid Friday night in late January and it has been snowing since the early afternoon.

Hannah is calling, all dressed up in her redingham dress. The band calls itself Whistlehog. Sarah plays fiddle, Sean is on banjo, Heather is on guitar, and Lucas is on bass. They have played once or twice together before, but Sean is about to leave to work on a farm further north. This will likely be their last time playing together.



Figure 1: Whistlehog playing the square dance

I shoot a few pictures before my DSLR camera goes black with an error message. A little fussing with it proves worthless, so I decide to leave it for later, and put my fieldwork equipment away. There won't be much note-taking tonight. I am dancing!



Figure 2: Closing out the dance, with a last waltz

Those in attendance are mostly new faces to me, and I learn that many are there by invitation from those involved. Out of the 30 or so people dancing, only three or four are recurring members of what I'm starting to recognize as the old-time community in Toronto. This, to my mind, is a positive step. The square dance is a new thing, a first for the community. They are expanding their reach. One of the organizers remarks to me, while we are cleaning up, that it wasn't a bad turnout, considering the blizzard and the fact that there are a million other things to do in Toronto on a Friday night. They've decided the hall worked well and are going forth in planning the first official dance of what they're calling The Hogtown Hoedown.



Figure 3: After the dance, the snowy Toronto streets

After the dance, we clean up and pile into our cars. Two of the younger participants, Sean – the guitar player from the band – and a friend of his who was dancing, are headed to a Robert Burns party in Roncesvalles Village. I offer to drive them, as it isn't far from Peter and Debbie's, where I'm staying. Almost immediately upon turning the car on, Sean comments on the CD in the player, what I'd been listening to on the drive up. "I love this record so much. The Dobro is just perfect with Chris's banjo." This both surprises and impresses me. This particular album is by no means a best seller, yet Sean knows it within seconds. We talk about my project as we drive Toronto's snowy streets. I mention the name Cary, the mandolin player who had first introduced me to old-time music in Toronto. Sean replies, "Oh yeah, that guy lives on my block. I bought a mandolin from him at his last yard sale." Toronto is suddenly feeling much smaller.

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I drop Sean and his friend off at the party, a rocking house party that shows no signs of slowing as we move into the morning hours. I drive back to Peter and Debbie's, two of the ringleaders of the old-time community, who put me up when I visit.

When I arrive, Peter and Debbie are just putting away the equipment from the dance. Peter is brewing tea for us all. We stay up another hour or so, talking about the dance, the interesting collection of people there, and plans for future dances. I call my wife to check in, and settle into the guest room that's growing increasingly familiar. Without Peter and Debbie, I tell my wife, this project would be nowhere.

**Saturday
1/29/2013**

In the morning I am given a freshly brewed cappuccino. This has happened each time I've stayed with Peter and Debbie, and I'm slightly embarrassed at how I've grown to love it. I remind myself that I am surely the envy of every fieldworker.

Peter has some work to do in the upstairs office. Debbie is off to her graphic design office, a 5-minute walk away, to have her picture taken for a student's photography thesis (she also teaches design at OCAD, a local art and design university). She decides to have some fun with the shoot, taking her fiddle and a paper cowboy hat she found in a thrift shop.

Peter helps me figure out where to get my failing camera checked out, and I tell them I'll be out all day. They say they are thinking of having some people over to play tunes that evening, and we agree to meet

around dinnertime. I head off to the camera shop and Peter and Debbie go about their day. The camera turns out to be dead, and I need to buy a replacement DSLR body on the spot, due to a shutter failure. The store is in an old stone building, a beautiful artifice on the east side of town. To me, as a resident of Buffalo, N.Y., even these errands have a certain charm to them. The camera proves an unexpected expense, but I'm just happy I am to be able to fix such problems in a matter of hours, rather than days.



Figure 4: Author reviewing images of camera with failing shutter

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That afternoon, I head over to Chris's house to interview him. Chris lives quite near Peter and Debbie in the Roncesvalles Village, on the west side of the city. Chris is one of the best-known and most-respected old-time players in Toronto. A professional musician for over 20 years, he is responsible for the thriving old-time scene today in many ways. While he doesn't get to jams too often because of professional obligations, he remains fully engaged with the community socially.

I arrive at Chris's house around 4:00. As I'd only been there once before for a party, I'm not entirely sure of the location. In addition to not being sure which house is his, I also have to enter off the laneway through the backyard, so even though I have the address, I'm going mostly on memory and a map Peter had drawn me. Chris arrives at the back door fresh from the shower, with warm cheer. We sit in his kitchen drinking beer while he dices an onion, chops garlic, and sautées tomatoes. I am beginning to worry that I needed to get the interview done as quickly as possible, since clearly he has plans for later in the evening. As it turns out, Chris is making dinner for us. Homemade pizza with fresh dough and homemade sauce. It is amazing. Not just the pizza, but this man, who I had only met twice before, welcoming

me into his home, giving me beer to drink, and making me pizza. I comment about the Canadian hospitality I've been experiencing, and to my surprise, Chris doesn't think it's a Canadian trait at all. In fact, he thinks Americans are more hospitable. We discuss further. Maybe the hospitality we've both experienced isn't based on nationality at all, but on the fact that we'd both hung out with old-time musicians. The desire for community, for participation, for give and take, is so integral to old-time music-making, it seeps into other aspects of people's lives. Or vice versa; those who live a life based on mutual care and concern for others are drawn to old-time music.

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For two and a half hours Chris and I talk about his history with old-time music and the aesthetics of his banjo playing. The greatness of Bill Monroe. The equal greatness and utter strangeness of John Hartford. We talk about the seminal records in his life, as he gets up to change what is on the turntable from time to time, choosing from dozens of records stacked in the kitchen. He talks about how so many records get made that don't really need to be made. He tells me if you're going to make a record, you should always be attempting a masterpiece. Django Reinhardt comes on next. We talk about instruments. We talk about Toronto. We talk about fishing.

I leave Chris's house and walk down to the nearest coffee shop, where I pore over my notebook for another hour trying to get my thoughts together, importing new songs in my iTunes library, and downloading my interview files. During that time, Debbie sends me a text message: Heather and Hannah are over and they are starting to jam soon. I'm off to more music-making!

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Back at Peter and Debbie's, they have just finished their own dinner. Heather and Hannah are there and the Knob Creek bourbon is out, though no one has touched it yet. They are running through some tunes Hannah had been working on recently, "Hog Eyed Man" being one she wants to practice. Other tunes they play that night include:

Willow on the Lake
 Abe's Retreat
 Tipping Back the Corn
 Sally Will You Marry Me (Melvin Wine)
 Sugar in the Gourd
 Cluck Old Hen (Ed Weaver)
 Old Beech Leaves
 Chattanooga

Yellow Gal
 Speed the Plow
 Boys Them Buzzards Are Flying (Gary Harrison)
 Cookhouse Joe
 Old Bob (Gary Harrison)
 Hunting the Buffalo



Figure 5: Jam at Peter and Debbie's

Peter is playing guitar, Hannah and Debbie play fiddle, and Heather is on banjo, although it isn't long before Heather pulls out her own fiddle, and passes me her banjo. Heather is beginning to learn the fiddle and says this would be a good time to break it out, among friends. She jokes that she doesn't see my audio recorder, so it is safe.

Later that evening we are joined by Peg, a good friend and community stalwart, who plays some guitar while talking to us all about local politics. She is fuming over changes at a local school. The jam is a safe place, where frustrations can be expressed, support is given. This is a very real and evident example of the social aspect of the music community. Often the music provides access for likeminded people to find one another, and the friendships take on dimensions beyond the music and become primary social support networks.



Figure 6: Peg joins the jam on guitar

The music continues into the late hours, and the cold morning becomes a reality. Heather, recovering from a recent concussion, is feeling exhausted, with a headache coming on. Peter and Debbie suggest she sleep on the couch. Peter even moves her car from a side street to their driveway, where it won't be ticketed.

Hannah and Peg march out into the cold night, while Heather falls asleep on the couch. I retire to the guest room.

Sunday 1/30/2013

Mornings at Peter and Debbie's are fieldwork treasure troves. We have often sat at the kitchen bar, recounting the past night's events, both Peter and Debbie giving and getting instant reflections or opinions on the old-time activities, Toronto, and Canadian-ness in general. This morning is no different. While Peter makes cappuccinos for everyone, Heather helps make breakfast. We all sit around the table, talking travel, favorite books, and the concept of public intellectuals.

With the day moving on, Heather heads home, and Peter and Debbie move to their upstairs office to put in a few hours work organizing their respective teaching duties. I spend some time organizing photos and writing notes, then head out to spend some of the sunny Sunday afternoon walking the Toronto streets, cold, but bustling with life. I walk along Queen Street West, a hipster paradise with cafes, restaurants, and small shops. I see a group of young men playing a pick-up game of hockey in a schoolyard. Canada sometimes plays to type. This weekend is Design Week in Toronto, with many events scattered all over town. Fashion-savvy Canadians seem to be everywhere, headed to gallery openings, furniture showcases, lectures, and parties. Peter and Debbie mentioned they were going to stop in to a friend's book signing before they go to the afternoon jam at the Gladstone Hotel.

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Usually the Sunday jams at the Gladstone occur in the Art Bar, a room as far away from everything else as possible. Because of Design Week and events at the Hotel, the Art Bar is in use for a showcase exhibit. The nice staff quickly puts away the breakfast buffet to make room at the back of the restaurant for the circle of fiddle and banjo players. While initially the transition seems slightly awkward, the replacement of the jam to a more central location (near the washrooms) proves to be a fascinating collision of those playing and those who are a) curious; b) en-

tranced; and c) totally confused as to what is happening. I don't play in the jam. I take pictures from the periphery and am privy to conversations about what people are witnessing. I am also able to field quite a few questions. At one point someone asks me, simply enough, what is happening? I say it is a bi-weekly jam of American music from Appalachia called "old-time". I think to myself, *you have no idea how much more I could say!*



Figure 7: Bi-monthly jam at the Gladstone Hotel

As the jam gets going, it begins to attract the attention of folks walking through the Gladstone restaurant. Several stop to listen, and take pictures on their phones. Some stay for several tunes, applauding after each ends. It is enjoyable to hear people's comments and to talk to onlookers about what is happening. Peter asks me if I'm "spreading the gospel" of Toronto old-time. I reply it's hard for me to rein it in when people ask me, "So, what's this all about?"

There is a good turnout for the jam, and Heather has rallied. She is in fine form, enjoying a Caesar, a cocktail consisting of Clamato juice, vodka, spices, celery; essentially a Bloody Mary with clam juice. We had been discussing it earlier at breakfast, Debbie remarking that it was "very Canadian". I said I'd never had anything with Clamato juice in it, and didn't feel like it was something I needed to try. Heather professed that it was something I needed to try. So I did. I maintain that I did *not* need to try that.

The jam is a mix of friends and people I've never met. A young couple, Dan and Megan, were among the new members. I learn they have recently relocated to Toronto from Waterloo, Ont., and have played a few gigs opening for the Foggy Hogtown Boys (local bluegrass legends). They perform as the duo Blackwood Two. I also get to talk to Joan, a woman I'd met briefly before, who travels from Courtice, Ont., about a 90-minute train ride into the city. Some of the tunes they play during this session are:

Sarah Armstrong
Texas
Kate's Got a Wooden Leg
Grub Springs
John Brown's Dream
Horny Ewe

Around 5:00 we pack up and several of us head back to Roncesvalles for Chris's weekly show at The Local. I sit in the corner booth with Peter and Debbie, Peg, Kim (Chris's girlfriend), and some of her friends. Chris's show ranges far beyond standard old-time fiddle tunes, though he can play them all on the banjo. Songs and tunes from his set include old-time and bluegrass classics, like "Tennessee Waltz", and "Hang Me", but he also brings in songs more familiar to the general audience, like Johnny Cash's "Big River", Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm", and Mississippi John Hurt's "Louis Collins". He is a superb musician at the top of his game. After a big, loud, sometimes messy jam session, it is a pleasure to hear such practiced talent. It is also fun to hear Chris enact all the theories he was espousing the day before. Singing the great songs, playing a style that is true to the performer, and one that respects the timelessness of the tunes.

It's encouraging to be to see Dan and Meg, from the Gladstone jam, also having dinner at the Local.

Our table is overflowing by the time Rachel shows up, and so she sits with the pair. This is how friends are made.

It is a great night at The Local, but I must leave earlier than I'd like to, since I need to drive back to Buffalo. On the ride back, I listen to Chris's recordings with new enthusiasm and insight. Music on records holds such pleasure when you've been in the artist's home, and talked about their craft. It was an incredibly productive weekend in Toronto. I witnessed a community in three stages of development: the seasoned professional, the dedicated amateurs polishing their craft, and the seeds of something completely new.

I saw great thought, heart, introspection, and dedication at all three levels. I saw the flow of tradition, not going past people, but through them, where they are able to embody its power, and make that power personal by adding their own touch, their own contribution. These people know there are many benefits to traditional art communities, both aesthetic and social, and that the core of a thriving community is its sustainability. This sustainability comes from holding to what works, what has survived, but not being afraid to adapt in the face of an ever changing world. Each time I drive the long lonely QEW home to Buffalo, I think about what I might experience next time.



Figure 8: Chris playing his weekly gig at The Local