

# An Interview with Simone Blais

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**Figure 1: Simone Blais with Alicia Blore and Joanna Burt.**

I first saw 19-year-old Simone Blais dance when I attended the Oshawa and Durham Region Metis Council's annual Metis Heritage Celebration in June 2015. Although she was new to Metis dance (which is broadly referred to as "jigging"), the combination of her previous training as a dancer (see below) and her obvious dedication to learning to dance in the Metis way meant that she was already a very skilled jigger. In our brief conversation during Metis Nation Ontario's Annual General Assembly (Midland, Ontario) two months later (transcribed below), Blais speaks about her experience as a new learner, highlighting the importance of peer-support and knowledge-sharing, the vitality of Metis youth, and the important role of culture in the process of decolonization. Many of my questions address issues of authenticity, innovation, and tradition, and reflect my own interest in learning about cultural change and continuity, as well as the role of music and dance in Metis cultural revival and resurgence.

This interview was very informal – ultimately just a preliminary conversation, or an opportunity to begin a relationship both with Blais as a consultant and more broadly with Metis culture bearers in Ontario. Because of its informal nature, some of the more mundane banter has been edited out (i.e., comments such as "ah, yes, I saw you do that in Oshawa"), although the casual exchange can still be noted in several instances. Ultimately, it is my hope that this interview will elicit many questions, but also call attention to the important work being done by Metis youth in Ontario.

MG: Could you tell me a bit about how you got started as a dancer, how old you were, who taught you, and why you wanted to learn?

SB: Yeah, when I was about 7 or 8 I started doing Irish dance, and that was my first introduction to dance, and, no particular reason I did Irish dance ... it was at our community centre, and so I started and

then I really got into it. I competed for maybe six or seven years, and we went to Oireachtas, the big national championships. And then I stopped and then, just this year I learned how to jig, and that kind of came along with the Metis culture and then I was like, “Oh, this is the exact same thing, just slightly different,” right? Because it has that European influence, and a lot of the dance moves are the same and so now I consider myself a jigger.

MG: Did you start [jigging], then, because you were interested in learning about Metis culture, or were you interested in learning the Red River Jig, which led you to interest in Metis culture?

SB: It was my interest in the culture that brought me into the MNO [Metis Nation Ontario], and then during our training for my job [with the Summer Youth Cultural Program<sup>1</sup>], we had to learn a bunch of different aspects of the culture. We had to learn the music, we had to learn the dance, we had to learn the beading, the finger weaving, all of that, and so I learned it that way.

MG: You’re a really good dancer. I saw you in Oshawa. It must be partly the Irish dancing that helped you learn [to jig].

SB: Yeah, for sure, and I struggle with trying to keep it authentic. I don’t want any of the Elders to be, like, [laughing] “What is that? That’s just Irish.” So, I try to ... keep it as much a Metis jig as possible. But that being said, all these dances, they evolve.

MG: I actually wanted to ask you a little bit more about that, because out west there are groups that are concerned, of course, about maintaining traditions, but are also interesting in doing things like using taps on their shoes, and those kinds of things. How important is it to you to maintain [the jig] the way that it was taught to you, and how interested are you in innovation or change?

SB: Yeah, I think to keep any culture current, you have to make, not adaptations, but you have to keep it relevant. That doesn’t necessarily mean always changing the dance, but just something about it, even like, with A Tribe Called Red, they’re taking powwow music and they’re spinning it in a very current way, and people are obsessed with it, and it’s kind of the same. But I don’t want to, I’m hesitant to modify it because it’s a part of a culture that I feel like I don’t really have permission to tamper with, and I just wouldn’t want to disrespect anybody by saying that it’s a Metis jig, and really doing something totally different.

MG: Have you seen people in Ontario making these changes? Or do you find that it’s generally kept traditional?

SB: Well the, the Metis jiggers that I know in Ontario, I don’t know a ton of them, and most of the ones that I know are new learners. And so I can’t really speak too much to that, but definitely the ones I know from out in Alberta, it’s kept very traditional ... When I’m doing workshops and I’m teaching different groups about jigging, usually what I do is, first I show them, well, I explain the evolution of how jigging came to be and how it’s the blend of two cultures of dancing ... and I demonstrate an Irish dance jig and then I show them a Metis jig. So I try to separate it in that way, but I’m still a new jigger, so I’m figuring it out, and I’m trying to learn how to do it in a good way.

MG: Would it be accurate to say then that you feel like you really need to be more grounded in the tradition and know it even better before you start thinking about maybe making changes to it?

SB: Exactly, and having the guidance of more Elders and their input into what they think about making modifications before I actually modify it.

MG: Okay, so it’s not just something that you should do on your own. It’s something that should be supported by the community.

SB: Exactly, yeah, I really like the way you put that.

MG: Can you tell me who taught you how to jig? You mentioned the youth group that you joined for work, but who was teaching jigging?

SB: Yeah, the woman teaching jigging, her name was Anne ... out of the Midland [MNO] office. She taught me how to jig [the basic steps] ... but Alicia Blore, I have to credit her a lot, and Joanna Burt, two people that I’ve been working with. Both Alicia and I, our Metis lineage is Red River, from Manitoba. My family is all, well, my Metis family, they’re members of the Metis Nation of Manitoba, but because me and my mom live in Toronto, we’re part of the Metis Nation of Ontario, but really our family’s out there. [Alicia] has family who are jiggers, and her uncle’s a really good jigger, and so she kind of taught me, and showed me the steps and watches me as I’m dancing, and lets me know how I did, so I credit it a lot to my two co-workers.

MG: Does that happen a lot with the youth group?

SB: Yeah, this group is a really, really strong group ... This youth group has been an incredible honour to be part of it, because this experience is just so unique. There are so few opportunities in Ontario for this many Metis youth to come together and share knowl-

edge ... I honestly don't think that there's anything else like it going on in Ontario, like this Summer Youth Cultural Program. And [it's] so intense because we're working full time, and we do two weeks of training at the beginning where we're together every single day and this is what we're doing.

MG: How did you find out about this program?

SB: Through word of mouth in the community. I went to the March break camp two years ago, and a bunch of different people recommended that I do it. But I wasn't in university yet; I was still in high school. But going back to learning from each other, I think, yeah, you can only, there's two weeks of training, but we're not really learning from Elders. It's, we're all together, but there's not the kind of knowledge passing on from Elders, and so we end up learning from each other, because we all have knowledge but we just don't have the opportunity to share it and so we end up learning throughout the summer.

MG: Tell me about ... some of the first dances that you learned, some of the first Metis dances.

SB: The Red River Jig was the first one, and that's like the Metis national anthem. Everybody knows it. Alicia probably has played the Red River Jig a billion times in her life [laughing] ... and then I learned the heel-toe polka, which is a nice one, and then I learned the seven step, and then this summer we learned from the Jiglets, it's called [Jamie] & the Jiglets. They're a family – oh, they're amazing, you have to look them up – they're a family dance troupe from Lac la Biche, in Alberta. They go around and they dance, they jig. And so they taught us the Butterfly Dance.

MG: Were they brought in by the MNO?

SB: Ah, no, they came to the Aboriginal Pavilion for the Pan Am Games. We were at the Metis encampment, and so we went and we were involved in a few of the other stuff going on, not just at our encampment, but we tried to make good connections and create good relations with the different nations there, so we went and supported them and we jiggled with them.

MG: Who did you learn the other dances from? From your peers?

SB: Ah, we learned [them] at training, so, yeah, I guess we learned [them] from Anne ... There were a bunch of people there and they were all just kind of showing the stuff that they knew. It was like a big knowledge sharing, I guess.

MG: What do you think is the most, to you, the most important element of the Red River Jig? What makes

it really different from any other dances, like Irish dancing?

SB: Yeah, I think just, just knowing that that's a dance that your ancestors did. There's a connection in that way, because I don't have any Irish heritage in me that I know of, and so you're dancing and it's significant, because dancing in itself is, it's spiritual, you know ... I'm a writer, so I like words, but you need to have a balance, and expressing yourself physically is really important to me, and just knowing that probably I have some great-great-great-uncle somewhere who was the best jigger in the settlement, or something [laughing], you know, it's pretty special, I guess, for that reason.

MG: Is there anything else that you want to add, that you feel like you really need to say about the Red River Jig or about your experience with this cultural program?

SB: Just that it's such an honour. I don't take my job lightly at all. I would be doing it if I didn't get paid, seriously, because it's such important work, for reconciliation, for just everything. It's so important, and I'm just so honoured to have the opportunity. Sometimes nobody even heard the word Metis before you do a workshop with them, and then you walk away, and they understand colonialism. It's like, oh my gosh, that's amazing. So, I'm just grateful.

MG: So you feel that your work can, I don't want to say "despite being cultural", but coming from this idea that you're just teaching culture, you feel like you're actually teaching a much broader subject.

SB: Oh yeah, for sure! I mean, I always say that we're educating people about Indigenous issues through culture. We're not just teaching culture. We're actually getting to a bigger cause, but through culture. Because I think that's the best way to learn. When you can actually physically do it, I mean, you can dance and you can finger weave, people understand it because they're doing it. You know, you're not just telling them words.

MG: Well, I think that's a fantastic way to end!

SB: Sweet!

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Summer Youth Cultural Program was developed by MNO as a way to give Metis youth the knowledge and tools to speak about Metis history and culture. As part of the program, post-secondary students share Metis culture and history with Ontarians at a variety of venues (schools, daycares, senior's homes, etc.) throughout the summer (field notes 08/22/2015). As noted on the MNO website,

“The training and orientation activities encourage the gathering, sharing, learning, and celebrating of Métis traditions, with specific emphasis on ... Ontario Métis history and

culture” (<http://www.metisnation.org/programs/education--training/summer-youth-cultural-program>).



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