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Monthly Newsletter
2024 Fulbright Project

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Costumed runners at the Mi-Carême Interpretive Centre in Grand Étang, NS on March 9th, 2024

Am Màrt [March]

Monthly Recap

Earlier this month I made a visit to Grand Étang, Nova Scotia to The Mi-Carême Centre to catch the Mi-Carême (meaning Mid-Lent) celebration. The center is known as a hub for Acadian culture in Cape Breton, priding themselves in bridging the community together through a diverse range of events that encapsulates the spirit of Acadian traditions. Here you can learn about Acadian history, culture, folklore and traditions, which have been alive on Cape Breton island since the Acadians settled in the area beginning around 400 years ago. Historians cite that early Mi-Carême celebrations were brought with settlers to Nova Scotia around the 17th century. The celebration, while today is no longer a religious one, is now looked forward to all year long by many local residents who take part in the events.

Mi-Carême always falls on the third Thursday of Lent each year and is celebrated through whimsical activities during a week long event. During the multi-day activities, you'll see people dress up in elaborate and fun costumes while playing guessing games of who is who. The "runners" are those that are masked and disguised in costumes that they create, usually with materials that they have on hand, while the "watchers" are those in the audience who have to try to guess who the runner actually is. Music fills the room as the runners walk and dance through the crowd. Runners are encouraged to make it difficult to guess who they are not only by their costume and masks, but by changing their walk, talk or demeanor. You can check out this video and site to learn how to dress for Mi-Carême (you may need to brush up on your French, but even if you can't understand a word you'll still get the idea!). On this day, a giant caterpillar won the crowd's vote for best costume and performance.



A mask sits on a piano bench in the Mi-Carême Interpretive Centre

On March 19th I gave a presentation as part of a speaker series talk at the Center for Cape Breton Studies at Cape Breton University titled Appalachia to Cape Breton with information about my ongoing Fulbright project along with an overview and introduction of Appalachian musical styles. The talk was recorded and will be available online on the Center for Cape Breton Studies YouTube page later this year. Later this June, I will be visiting a neighboring province in Canada to give a presentation about my current Fulbright project at Memorial University of Newfoundland.



A weaving shuttle sits atop a weaving loom with a piece of work in process

This month I've been auditing another course, Literature of the Gael, with instructor and author Oisin Curran as part of the Gaelic Foundations: Living Cultures at Beinn Mhàbu program. The course is wrapping up and has been an insightful look at Scottish-Gaelic history through the lens of poetry of the Gales throughout history. March has also been packed with too many musical gatherings to count. I've been attending house ceilidhs, jam sessions, and more hearing the Cape Breton style of traditional fiddle music and I'm starting to recognize and become familiar with the many different tunes. Most musicians easily have tune repertoires into the hundreds, if not more!

After attending a community event recognizing the former Mabou weavers guild, I was inspired to take an introduction to weaving class which recently wrapped up. Weaving is a craft and tradition going back centuries, and in Cape Breton there is a rich history of weaving patterns that have been passed down overtime through Scottish settlers. Finally, this month I also wrapped up the last of a community Gaelic learning language class in Mabou. In May, I'll be attending Toiseach-Tòiseachaidh: a two week long beginner language learning immersion course.

Fulbright Project Updates

Now that I've been in Cape Breton for a few months and have met so many wonderful individuals, I've moved into the interview collecting phase of my project! To recap, for this project I'm collecting multiple interviews of Cape Breton musicians and those working in and around the musical community along with field recordings and soundscapes to create a series of audio podcasts and a short companion documentary. This project is largely focused on capturing how musicians in the traditional music community at this moment in time are using technologies. This includes how they learn and share music and seeks to uncover how the use of contemporary technologies, like the internet's ability to gives access to other musical influences outside of regional community, could be playing an impacting on the traditions set for this musical community. The project is also focused on documenting the current traditional music scene in Cape Breton and will document how these individuals engage with technology in this moment in time.

Here's who I've spoken with so far:



Màiri Rankin

Màiri Rankin is part of the influential Rankin Family, legends on the Canadian music scene. She is a fiddle player and step-dancer from Mabou, NS and has developed her own unique style by being immersed in such a rich musical culture. She has toured nationally and internationally as a solo artist, a sideman with several groups.



Shelly Campbell

Shelly Campbell is a traditional Cape Breton style fiddle player from Inverness County. For close to 20 years she has been playing local concerts, pubs and festivals and is a popular player for dances. She has taught Cape Breton style fiddling in workshops and in private lessons throughout Cape Breton and in Scotland. Shelly also has an avid interest in the Gaelic language and its preservation in Cape Breton and is currently a Gaelic language teacher.



Allan Dewar

Allan Dewar grew up in Halifax and Antigonish, Nova Scotia and picked up the music at home. Allan learned by ear and attended every concert, dance and house party he could. For many years he toured with several well-known Cape Breton artists and these days, Allan mostly accompanies local fiddlers at dances, concerts and ceilidhs.



A March sunset on West Mabou Beach, Mabou, NS



Musicians Eric Angus Whyte, Rose Morrison, and Brendan Bagley



Square dancers at the Celtic Music Interpretive Centre Judique, NS



West Mabou Beach, Mabou, NS

Check out the video below - or click here to access

too see what I've been up too during the month of March!



Looking Ahead

In April I will be wrapping up the Literature of the Gael course and moving full on into the field work phase of my project. I plan to collect the majority of my interviews April - May, and will spend most of my time visiting with musicians and individuals for the project.

Gum meal sibh ant-Earrach [May you enjoy the Spring]

- Toni

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