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Monthly Newsletter
2024 Fulbright Project

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An October sunset at West Mabou beach, Mabou, NS

An Dàmhair [October]

Monthly Recap

What an incredible year it has been! Now that I've made it back to the states, this week I'm reflecting on the past ten months spent on Cape Breton Island and around Nova Scotia. As I scroll through hundreds of photos and videos I've taken – and update my Google photo storage plan so I don't have to delete a thing – I'm overflowing with gratitude and am thankful to have had the opportunity to be totally immersed in Cape Breton's music and culture. Cape Breton has a beautifully rich and connected musical community and I've felt so at home during my time there. Between the countless late night square dances in dance halls across the island, eye opening conversations and interviews with musicians and tradition-bearers, to the meaningful friendships cultivated, I'm truly inspired by the vibrant musical community and hold deep respect for its rich cultural heritage. Just some of the year's highlights include: learning to step dance, taking Gaelic language learning classes (I can exchange brief pleasantries!), seeing the total solar eclipse, taking in 3-4 square dances per week throughout the entire summer, learning jigs on the tin whistle, Tuesday morning "toast and tea" community breakfasts, hiking in the Cape Breton Highlands national park, visiting Newfoundland, lobster fishing, learning the traditional craft of weaving, and generally feeling re-energized!



Celebrating Thanksgiving in Canada, a tradition that falls annually the second Monday in October



Sun setting along a highway in Cape Breton

I found out about the Fulbright program back in 2014 as I finished my undergraduate degree. I applied to the program four times, and with each submission built upon the project idea, which initially began by tracing the roots of the music in Appalachia, specifically that of bluegrass, folk and old-time genres. I originally set out to explore how traditional music is connected to and shaped by place and first looked at who came to the Appalachian region during immigration and settlement. Investigating these threads led me to connect with Scottish and Irish music, which eventually led to learning about the Cape Breton style. It is still a surreal experience to be able to say that I spent the majority of 2024 abroad in Cape Breton, after nearly a decade having the program and project on my radar. The experience has been rewarding, motivating and transformative, and I'm excited to return home and play a more active role in regional musical communities in the Appalachian region. I'm also thrilled to be able to share this project when it's completed with a wider audience, and hope that you might be encouraged to uplift and participate in your own cultural traditions, be it through music or other creative outlets.





Fall fun around Nova Scotia!



Square dance at Brook Village Hall during Celtic Colors, October 2024.

The annual Celtic Colors International Festival took place across Cape Breton island October 11th - 19th and was the last big hoorah before the tourism and music scene shifted gears into the off season. Over nine days the festival hosted over 50 concerts in 36 communities at various venues. The festival is a unique celebration of Cape Breton island's living traditional culture, and through concerts and various activities, international musicians share stages with Cape Breton artists, singers, dancers and storytellers showcasing Gaelic singing, fiddling, dance, piping and more. Each day you'll find cultural events and concerts, but the nights don't end there. Every night from 11-3am attendees and musicians gather for the nightly Festival Club concerts that feature more music and dancing into the wee morning hours and special guests. This year I was able to volunteer at several concerts, one of my favorites (it's near impossible to choose!) being the "Close to the Floor" concert showcasing the Cape Breton step dance style along with the Métis dance tradition of the Red River Jig reimagined with a hip hop twist, and dance steps from Prince Edward Island. With Celtic Colors being an international festival, the concerts and events showcase other genres of music alongside the Cape Breton traditional style, establishing cross cultural connections through music.

Fulbright Project Updates

During my time in Cape Breton, I spoke and recorded interviews with 33 individuals for my project. I also collected field recordings of various events and activities, including square dances, community events, milling frolics, language learning, and more primarily during the summer months when the majority of events and cultural activities took place. Between the in-depth interviews which averaged 1-2 hours per interviewee, and the additional field recordings, I collected over 45 hours of audio and media footage. After collecting the interview recordings, I transcribed all of the interviews, developed and implemented a thematic analysis method for analyzing the qualitative data I collected. Currently I am continuing the analysis step which is planned to go until the end of 2024 before moving on to post production editing of the audio podcast episodes. The release of the first phase of the project (the audio podcast series) is planned for May 2025, along with the development of a companion project website. The second phase of the project includes a short companion documentary which will act as a reflection of the audio podcast and is planned to release in October 2025.

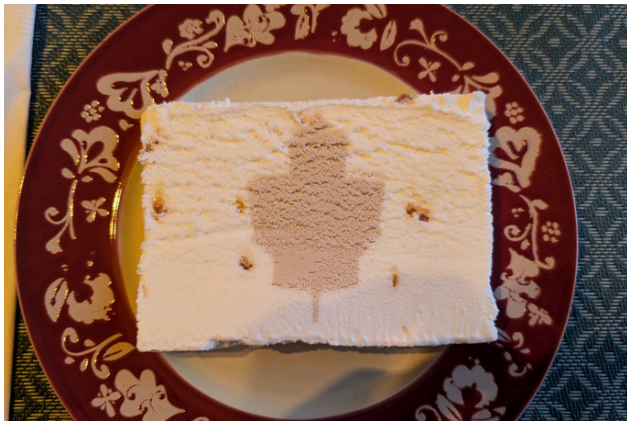


Check out the video below - or click here to access

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









(Left) Sunset over West Mabou beach (top right) Maple leaf ice cream (bottom right) post Brook Village square dance selfie during last dance of the season

Looking Ahead

As I settle back into a routine at home in Virginia, I'll be continuing work on the project this winter. This will be the last project e-newsletter I'll be sending out, but I'll be in touch and will send project updates via email in the coming months. Finally, I want to acknowledge and extend my gratitude to everyone who welcomed me so warmly in Cape Breton. I'm deeply thankful for the many acts of kindness and friendship—from those who invited me to countless music events and offered me rides all over the island to everyone who took the time to share their perspective for the project I'm working on, be it from a recorded interview, or through conversation. Your generosity made my time there unforgettable, and I feel incredibly lucky to have shared so many amazing moments with you all. Thanks for making me feel so welcome in your wonderful community. Cape Breton's official slogan is "your heart will never leave" and I can attest to its accuracy.



Until we meet again CB!

Is obair làtha toiseachadh
[A beginning is a good day's work]

- Toni

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