

A Fully-Fledged and Finely Functioning Fiddle: Humour and ‘The Uke-Cree Fiddler’

Marcia Ostashewski (University of Regina)



I first met Arnie Strynadka, the “The Uke-Cree Fiddler,” while conducting field research at the Vegreville Ukrainian Pysanka Festival in Alberta in 2002. When I stopped at Arnie’s booth to chat, he told me that he was the child of a marriage between a Cree woman and a man born of Ukrainian immigrants. I had already spent a decade researching and writing about Ukrainian culture and identity, and a lifetime as a Ukrainian cultural, music and dance performer and enthusiast. Yet it was the first I had ever heard of family relations between Aboriginal people and Ukrainian immigrants.

While there is evidence of relations between Aboriginal people and Ukrainians, almost no attention has been paid to this matter in scholarship or public memory. I hope to attend to this gap in the literature, through research I have recently begun on the expressive culture of people who claim both Aboriginal and Ukrainian descent and a broader musical legacy of Aboriginal-Ukrainian encounters in Canada. This essay emerges from what I have been learning in the earliest stages of this new research project, especially concerning humour as it arose in conversations with fiddler Arnie Strynadka. For, as the photograph below

shows, Arnie has made much of a comedic persona.

Humour is often storied as part of Aboriginal culture, as Drew Hayden Taylor (2005a) and other writers have discussed in *Me Funny*. Further, as Philip Deloria has written, humour often arises from the juxtaposition between the expected and the unexpected (2004:3)—as in the encounter I describe below.

Humour and Expectations



I arrived at Arnie’s home to conduct an interview in February 2009. He met me with the seriousness one might expect on the occasion of a formal interview, particularly when it begins with a consent form outlining legal and ethical obligations and responsibilities. After reading the form, on which a brief description of my research project appeared, Arnie looked up at me over the page and fixed his gaze on me. He asked me to remind him again of my last name. “Ostashewski,” I said, after which he respectfully noted, “A good Ukrainian name.” Arnie continued the conversation by calling to mind three common kinds of Ukrainian name endings, “-chuk,” “-adka,” and “-ski,” and proceeded to tell me what he knew about the Eastern European origins of these names.

Quick-thinking researcher that I am, I immediately assessed this as a moment where Arnie

was demonstrating a kind of Ukrainian cultural “competency.” I have heard different explanations for various Ukrainian historical and cultural trivia from many people, including lists of famous people (referencing anyone from artist Andy Warhol and hockey player Wayne Gretzky to composer Tchaikovsky and actor Jack Palance). The notion that there is a definitive explanation for and lineage of Ukrainian names and customs, rooted in a definable point in time and location in a historical Ukrainian land and people, is common among descendants of Ukrainian immigrants in western Canada today. So, when Arnie asked me, “Do you know why so many Ukrainian names end in –ski, like yours does?” I gave him my very focused attention. “Why?” I asked. He answered, “It’s too hard to spell toboggan.”

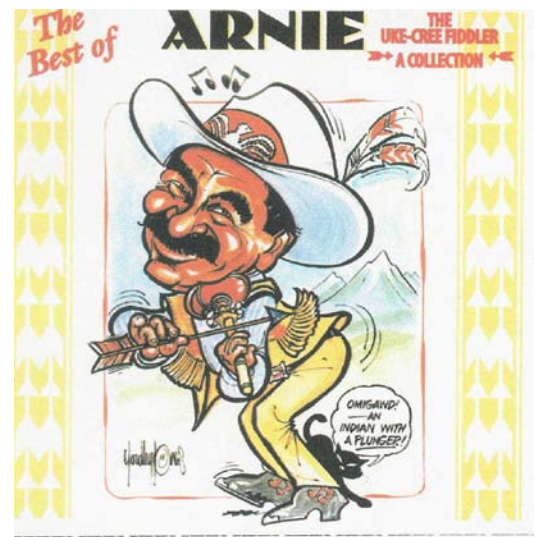
In this situation, Arnie was, no doubt, counting on me expecting to hear a serious explanation of Ukrainian language and history; I am sure he has heard such serious explanations many times. Of course, the joke was on me. I also like to think my readiness to laugh at myself was just what he might have been hoping for, since our conversation quickly became much more relaxed as Arnie began to answer my questions about his life and music.

The joking exchange about our last names was loaded with even more significance, though. This rather innocent joke is not only part of a good comedy act, it also contains cues that locate both Arnie and myself within a particular set of expectations resulting from having grown up in northwestern Canada, a region of North America that contains a particular history for Ukrainian immigrants and their descendants. Among the earliest Ukrainian immigrants to Canada was a group of Ukrainians who settled close to one another near what is now Star, Alberta, in east-central Alberta, northeast of what is now the provincial capital of Edmonton. I grew up northeast of Edmonton not far from where Arnie spent his earliest years and near where he lives now. Arnie’s joke was the result of our shared experiences of being descendants of Ukrainians. As my 12-year-old son likes to say, the first word he learned to spell was our surname, since he so often heard me spelling it for other people (on the phone, in the bank, at store counters, and anywhere one might need to state their name). Arnie and I also share experiences of living on the northern prairies, where skis and toboggans are part of snowy cold winters, part of daily life for more than half of every year; somehow I just cannot imagine the surname joke working quite so effectively among Brazilian-born descendants of Ukrainian immi-

grants. In short, the joke about my last name demonstrates his awareness and understanding of a Ukrainianness particular to western Canada from the perspective of someone who has lived that experience.

Arnie Strynadka ‘The Uke-Cree Fiddler’

The plunger-fiddle is another of Arnie’s gags that plays into expectations, particularly upon hearing the instrument: a plunger that is a full-fledged and very finely functioning fiddle. Arnie was inspired to build his plunger-fiddle after working with a country music performer who had turned a toilet seat into a guitar. He says that he was always somewhat “goofy,” so a funny act on stage was a natural extension of his personality. Arnie uses humour in his musical production; for instance, as in the image below, one of his compact disc covers features a caricature of Arnie in cowboy dress and a feather in his hat, bowing his plunger-fiddle with an arrow. A caption reads “OMIGAWD! – AN INDIAN WITH A PLUNGER!”



Arnie’s stage talk and act contribute in other ways to the humour in his performances. For example, he has sometimes substituted a coat hanger or other items for a bow. In one of his videos, recorded live while he performed at the West Edmonton Mall, he substitutes an arrow for his bow. As the song ends, Arnie pokes fun at the audience, saying, “Gee whiz, you white folks are getting brave. You didn’t even flinch when I grabbed an arrow!” (Strynadka, *West Edmonton Mall*). Arnie’s comedian-fiddler act plays readily into an oft-storied aspect of Indigenous North American identity; as Arnie pointed out to me,

more than once during our interview sessions, Indian people are often known as jokesters.

That Aboriginal people are jokesters may be something of a familiar notion we have all heard many times, but Arnie also has actual experience growing up in a First Nation community and among Cree families. Arnie (Arnold) Strynadka was born in 1940 on the Goodfish Lake Reserve near Vilna, Alberta, to a Cree mother, Dora Bull, and a father of Ukrainian immigrant descent, Nick Strynadka. The families of Dora and Nick had come together in the 1920s when Arnie's Cree grandfather—a wealthy farmer, trapper and trading post owner/operator named Sam Bull—hired the destitute Ukrainian immigrant Strynadka family to work on his 1200-acre farm. Nick and Dora, children of these Cree and Ukrainian families, married in 1933. Arnie has three older siblings, but he was the last child to be born to his parents; his father died in a farm accident when Arnie was little more than a month old. Arnie's Cree and Ukrainian grandparents all contributed significantly to helping Arnie's mother raise him and his older siblings. He likes to say that he “grew up with bannock in one hand and kobassa [Ukrainian garlic sausage] in the other” (interview, February 2009)—speaking Cree with one grandmother, Ukrainian with the other (and English at school and with various folks on the reserve and around home).

Arnie's childhood appears to have involved a rather seamless synthesis of aspects of both Cree and Ukrainian-immigrant-pioneer life. He was nonetheless aware of differences between the ancestry of his parents and some implications of these differences. Since his mother had married a non-Native man, Arnie's family lived off the reserve, and he attended the school in the nearby Ukrainian settlement community of Two Lakes, not the school on the reserve. Arnie noted that Indian agents were known among those who lived on the reserve to have a strong hand in ensuring only Treaty Indians lived on the reserve and went to school there. While Arnie's memories of Ukrainian Canadians and Cree people working together in rural Alberta where he grew up are positive; he does not suggest that such good relations were necessarily the norm in other places. In fact, he says it was commonly known among Aboriginal people in his community that “you don't go to ‘so and so's’ farm because they don't hire Indians” (interview, February 2009). Arnie also experienced, first-hand, severe racism when he moved to the city of Edmonton at the age of twelve, which led to him dropping out of school and leaving town to begin working in a lumber

camp by the age of fifteen. Arnie's memories of the Goodfish Lake Reserve community have nonetheless remained strong.

While he did not live directly on the Goodfish Lake Reserve in his early years, Arnie often spent time there, playing with other children, working on his grandfather's farm, meeting with local folks at his grandfather's home in the evenings and on weekends, to listen to the radio, make music, dance and sing. This included playing in a dance band (mostly polkas and waltzes, as well as square dances) with his brothers as a teenager, both on the reserve and in the nearby Ukrainian settlement at weddings and social dances. Yet it was not until the 1980s, after a number of career changes, that Arnie would self-identify as “The Uke-Cree Fiddler” and begin to perform more widely and regularly.

Challenging Expectations

The subtitle “Challenging Expectations” is intended in two ways. First, it is to represent the fact that Arnie Strynadka, his identity, and his music production challenge a number of paradigms, or sets of expectations. Second, it acknowledges that Arnie's circumstances and choices have been very difficult for him to live with in various ways. In this part of the essay I draw the reader's attention to some ways in which Arnie Strynadka has presented and engaged certain challenges in relation to his mixed Aboriginal-Ukrainian ancestry. The sometimes unexpected nature of Arnie's identity and personal experiences have led him to employ humour as a means of representation and engagement in powerful, and even poignant, ways.

I noted earlier that Arnie attended a public school in the “Ukrainian settlement” (interview, February 2009). However, in 1952, when Arnie was twelve years old, his mother moved the family to Edmonton so that the older children could attend high school in the city. While he lived in Edmonton he worked part of the time for an uncle with a construction company. Often he would go for lunches to a little Ukrainian restaurant downtown—frequently enough that the servers were friendly with him and knew that he could speak Ukrainian.

Arnie recalls going into that restaurant one typical afternoon, on break from the construction site, dressed in overalls and muddied with smudges of concrete and dust. He went to the counter, ordered his plate of *pyrohy* (perogies), and sat down at a nearby table to wait for his meal. A few moments later, a small group of old-

er women came in, all dressed up for a restaurant meal. When they came in the door, they noticed Arnie and began making comments—speaking in Ukrainian—about the “dirty Indian” and “what a shame” it was. It seemed obvious that they thought that Arnie could not understand what they were saying. The women sat down at a table not far from Arnie (the restaurant was a small one) continuing this conversation amongst themselves. A few minutes later, Arnie’s meal was brought to his table. He noticed he had no salt or pepper at his table, turned around to the women sitting nearby and asked them—in Ukrainian—if they might please pass the salt and pepper. The surprised looks on the women’s faces told Arnie they were quite shocked and embarrassed to realise that he had, indeed, understood what they had been saying. They had certainly not expected him to understand, much less speak, Ukrainian. Very shortly afterward, Arnie told me with a chuckle, the women stood up and left the restaurant without having eaten their meal.

As Arnie has said (and author Mirjam Hirsch has written, 2005:99), Native humour has long gone unnoticed by settlers and Euro-North Americans—an austere and serious stereotype has been the most common image of Aboriginal people. Given the circumstances of Arnie’s restaurant story, it is certainly likely that the elder Ukrainian women in Arnie’s story would not have perceived the humour in this particular incident, which raises the issue of their expectations. Deloria (2004:4) writes about chuckles that are often elicited when he shows a photo of a Native American woman in beaded buckskin traditional clothing sitting under a salon hair dryer while she’s having a manicure—a woman in traditional dress stereotypically associated with a “primitive” lifestyle in the “hinterlands” set in the environment of a modern, urban hair salon. He argues that humour often originates with juxtapositions of the expected and unexpected.

Deloria continues, noting that, while such humour may not be “overtly racist in nature, it nonetheless suggests that broad cultural expectations are both the products and tools of domination and that they are an inheritance that haunts each and every one of us” (2004: 4). Plenty of scholarship exists to date on the ways in which “Aboriginal writers use humour to subvert white society and counter colonization and stereotypes” (Fagan 2005:24, c.f. Taylor 2005b:71). The unpleasant nature of Arnie’s restaurant story also reflects the struggles Arnie faces as a result of his mixed ancestry.

Arnie’s mixed Aboriginal-Ukrainian ancestry has resulted in difficulties as regards fitting in with either group. Arnie has told me that he has recorded “neither Indian nor Ukrainian music” for, he says, people won’t buy them. “Indians don’t want to buy that stuff from me,” he says (and signaled a sense that his music and other accomplishments do not tend to be appreciated on the reserve community of his early years) and, “If somebody wants to buy ‘Ukrainian music’ they go out to the Vegreville [festival] or the Ukrainian [book]store in Edmonton and buy recordings by Radomsky or bands like the Ukrainian Old-Timers” (interview, February 2009). Arnie experiences his place in relation to both Aboriginal and Ukrainian Canadian communities and identities as quite altogether an “Other” one.

While living in Edmonton, Arnie and his family encountered racism as they had not experienced it before. He says they were the only Aboriginal family living in the area and would often be blamed by the public and police for mischief and thefts. Arnie and his siblings faced severe discrimination in the schools and his mother was often visited by police at her home. This was difficult for all of them. After a few years of living with this situation, Arnie quit school at the age of 15 and left town with a cousin. They went to work in logging camps in British Columbia. Arnie earned money as a logger through most of the year, and as a rodeo rider and ball player in the summers.

In 1966, after several years working in the logging industry and gaining experience in forestry resources development, the Alberta government hired Arnie to work with northern communities and development projects. While working as a public servant he completed his high school diploma by correspondence. He also moved back to Edmonton and became involved with various public organizations. One notable group with whom Arnie became active during the late 1960s and through the 1970s was the Métis Association of Alberta. Through connections he established with Aboriginal organizations and government, Arnie was invited to be a guest lecturer at the University of Alberta. He engaged with students primarily to help them prepare for work in northern Native communities. Arnie notes that he worked for a time during the early 1970s at Grant MacEwan College, where he was involved in establishing the first Native North American history courses. He also worked with the University of Calgary to establish Native student programs. Highlights of this period of Arnie’s life include meeting with Vine Deloria at

conferences on several occasions and working with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO) in Ottawa to establish protocol for working with Native communities.

Arnie feels his accomplishments as a public servant and volunteer were important as regards Native history, culture, and rights in Canada. Yet, in spite of facing racism and doing well for himself and, he thought, for his community, he is disappointed that his work was not validated in wider Aboriginal communities. In light of the discrimination he faced, and the lack of acceptance he felt, the humour Arnie has created and engaged with in his life might well be understood as a “salve or a tonic to take the pain away” (Taylor 2005b:69), to live well despite the hardship, to endure the disappointments in his life.

A Balancing Act

Fagan takes up the notion of humour as a factor in maintaining balance in Aboriginal culture and relations (2005). She builds on an argument by Clare Brant that, given the harsh natural environment Aboriginal people have lived in for millen-

nia, they had to learn to work together, to get along and be friendly. Humour, they say, facilitated congenial relations (Brant in Fagan; Fagan 2005:27) (though of course humour may also be used and experienced as a means of humiliation and coercion). Métis educator Fyre Jeane Graveline has also argued that humour has been used to help maintain a balance in life, community and environment (in Fagan 2005:26)—an interesting notion, given the “half and half” mixture of cultures in the ancestry of someone like Arnie Strynadka.

I suggest that Arnie’s congenial and friendly manner, his ready jocularly, may speak particularly well to this aspect of humour. The need to find a common ground and friendly relations between different peoples is clearly an essential part of his life in sometimes very poignant ways. Finally, humour has often been used by Native elders as a complex teaching tool (Fagan 2005:32). It therefore seems wholly appropriate to engage with the humour presented by Arnie Strynadka, “The Uke-Cree Fiddler,” as a means by which to learn about the complexities of Aboriginal-Ukrainian culture and identity in twenty-first century Canada.

References

- Deloria, P. J. 2006. *Indians in unexpected places*. Lawrence, KA: University Press Kansas.
- Fagan, Kristina. 2005. “Teasing, tolerating, teaching: Laughter and community in native literature.” In *Me funny: A far-reaching exploration of the humour dominant among the First Nations people of North America*, 23-46. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.
- Hirsch, Mirjam. 2005. “Subversive humour: Canadian native playwrights’ winning weapon of resistance.” In *Me funny: A far-reaching exploration of the humour dominant among the First Nations people of North America*, 99-119. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.
- Lawrence, Bonita. 2004. “Real” *Indians and others: Mixed-blood urban native peoples and indigenous nationhood*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.
- Strynadka, Arnie. [n.d. ca. 1990]. *Recorded live at the West Edmonton Mall*. AGS DVD – 001.
- . [n.d. ca. 1995]. *The Best of Arnie The Uke-Cree Fiddler Collection*. AGS CD – 001.
- Taylor, Drew Haydn (ed.). 2005a. *Me funny: A far-reaching exploration of the humour dominant among the First Nations people of North America*. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.
- . 2005b. “Whacking the indigenous funny bone: Political correctness vs. native humour, round one.” In *Me funny: A far-reaching exploration of the humour dominant among the First Nations people of North America*, 67-80. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.

