

Graduate Student Profile

Thomas Grant Richardson, Indiana University



Figure 1: Thomas Grant Richardson

Thomas Grant Richardson is a doctoral candidate in the department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University. He is currently researching old-time Appalachian fiddling communities in Toronto, and their connections to the Appalachian South.

After completing a Bachelor's degree in film and writing at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, Thomas spent several years in New York City and Los Angeles working in independent record and book stores. A few chance encounters in L.A. and a fortuitous meeting with Anthony Seeger at U.C.L.A., led Thomas to Indiana University for graduate studies. There he completed a Master's thesis in ethnomusicology on the role of African-Americans in old-time country music, featuring The Carolina Chocolate Drops as his case study. He worked for several years for Indiana's public folklore agency, Traditional Arts Indiana, under the direction of Jon Kay. While he is currently focusing primarily on old-time music, other areas of interest include labour lore and protest

songs, public folklore, digital communities, and heritage policy.

Statement of Research

My primary research interest revolves around how contemporary individuals and communities look to traditional art forms for meaning in their world. I find how people adopt traditions from other cultures, and create, rather than accept, strong connections to the places, people, and histories that gave rise to particular traditional arts equally compelling. This, to me, is one of the essential conditions of the 21st Century, and therefore, along with this counterpart, heritage policy is one of the key issues folklorists and ethnomusicologists must face today.

In the summer of 2011, I read an article in the *Old-Time Herald* about the thriving old-time music scene in Toronto, written by the wonderful novelist and mandolin player, Cary Fagan. In the article, Fa-

gan laid out the landscape of old-time activity in Toronto. I contacted Fagan to find out more about the activity around Toronto. He suggested that I join a Yahoo group but warned that there would be an interruption in activity because most of the old-time community had driven south to West Virginia for the annual Appalachian Stringband Festival (colloquially known as Clifftop). A week later, the Yahoo group exploded with excitement, as two members of the Toronto community had placed in the individual competitions: second place in banjo and first place in fiddle! My interest was piqued. Here was a dedicated community of musicians, coming from a place that has its own fiddle traditions, yet they found something more compelling in another tradition. And more than having a passing interest, they had shown a dedication to, and mastery of, the form to be acknowledged by their Appalachian old-time peers at Clifftop.

The following summer, I began my fieldwork in Toronto, commuting whenever possible from Buffalo, N.Y., where I had recently moved. That summer I also travelled to Clifftop to camp with the Toronto crew in what is coined “Camp Canada”. What began as a study of a regional group morphed into an understanding of a transnational community, one that is based in urban Canada, but has roots in rural America, and forges and maintains strong connections there. While the Toronto scene is vibrant and self-sustaining, nearly everyone takes energy, inspiration, and a complicated sense of authenticity from their connections to people, festivals, and camps in the States. At the same time, the distance from culturally rooted expectations allow a certain freedom for old-time music in Toronto, a freedom that makes the players build and sustain their own community, and by doing so, experience a whole new way to live in the big, modern city.

*Thomas documents his fieldwork experiences in this issue’s “Notes from the Field”.

Recent Presentations

2012. “Transplanted Traditions: Old-time Music in Contemporary Toronto.” American Folklore Society Conference, New Orleans, LA

2012. Panelist: “Perspectives on Appalachian Music and Race.” American Folklore Society Conference, New Orleans, LA.

2011. “ ‘Everything’s Raisin’ But the Wages’: The Poetics of Class Warfare in the work of Two Hoosier Songwriters.” American Folklore Society Conference, Bloomington, IN.

2010. “ ‘It’s So Old It’s Almost New’: The Carolina Chocolate Drops, Ideologies of Tradition, and What it Means to Play ‘Old-Time’ Music.” Society for Ethnomusicology Conference, Los Angeles, CA.

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