

# Festival Fieldwork and the Participant Observer: Celtic Colours, Calendar Custom, and the Carnavalesque

Ian Hayes, Memorial University



**Figure 1: Red Shoe Pub, Mabou, Nova Scotia. Musicians from left to right: Ian Hayes (guitar), Darren McMullen (tenor banjo), Jason Roach (piano), and Colin Grant (violin). (Photo courtesy of Candy Krohmer Cooke)**

Festivals are events that raise issues of identity, community, and cultural commodification. They are a burgeoning area of study, and as such, are often sites for ethnographic fieldwork (Cooley 2006; Ivakhiv 2005; Magliocco 2001; Hale and Thornton 2000; Bauman, Sawin and Carpenter 1992). I found myself addressing the importance of festivals during the course of some of my doctoral fieldwork on Cape Breton fiddling. For local musicians, the Celtic Colours International Festival is one of the most significant events of the year. A nine-day Celtic music festival in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, it attracts thousands of people and injects roughly \$5 million into the local economy each year (Feintuch 2010:255-256). The performers often number in excess of 300, the majority of whom are local tradition-bearers. In addition to the focus on Cape Breton traditional music (both instrumental and vocal), the festival also features traditional performers from countries around the world, most notably Scotland, Ireland, and America. In its sixteenth year, the 2012 festival lineup included 46 concerts, 238 community cultural events, and a total of 112 venues.

This festival, and more specifically, the Celtic Colours Festival Club (an informal after-hours performance series held each night at the Gaelic College

of Arts and Crafts), plays a substantial role in the personal and professional lives of these musicians. It provides an opportunity for them to develop and maintain social bonds with family, friends, and other musicians. Moreover, as an annual event, Celtic Colours ties these interactions to a sense of place and calendar custom<sup>1</sup> within a context of celebration.

As a Cape Bretoner myself, I have been part of the Cape Breton traditional music scene since my late teens and have attended Celtic Colours numerous times. I feel my experiences have been fairly typical, and representative of how the festival is experienced by both local musicians and ethnographers as a whole. As such, I have chosen to embrace my biases, and have included here some narrative and reflexive vignettes which were constructed from my field notes. These allow me to explore my dual roles as musician and ethnographer, participant and observer.

Such a look at fieldwork raises questions about framing. Where is the line between participant observation and participation? When is one an insider and when is one an insider from a distance? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to these questions. These are issues that ethnographers have wrestled with for quite some time. My fieldwork is a far cry from the tales told by Malinowski, the anthropologi-

cal great; there were no hallucinogens or cannibalism, and little that anyone might consider exotic. However, the ideal of an anthropologically influenced, when-in-Rome approach to observation is important to my work.

### Field Notes 1: Celtic Colours and the Trip Home

*I had only been home for an hour but I had somewhere to be. Every time I come to Cape Breton, there seems to be the same flurry of activity. After the flight from St. John's and the three-hour car ride from Halifax, I find myself on the road again, heading to Mabou. It had become an almost automatic reaction to go to the Red Shoe Pub to catch up with friends and get the scoop on whatever parties, gigs, or other noteworthy events that would be happening during my stay. I had been going to the Shoe since I was sixteen. At that time, I had a large beard and desperately tried to hide the fact that I was underage. The staff had generously turned a blind eye, something for which I am grateful to this day. I had been there for the music, after all, and the countless hours I had spent there listening, playing, and discussing music had given me as much of a musical education as the decade I've spent in university.*

*The Shoe is different now; it is under new ownership. None of the tables wobble, they sell hard liquor, and the dozens of red shoes that had been scattered around the pub have been pared down significantly. It is always full and it attracts a different crowd these days, mostly tourists, but the quality of the music hasn't changed.*

*Colin Grant was playing tonight, along with his usual accompanists, Jason Roach on piano and Darren McMullen on guitar. I joined them outside during their break as they joked and traded stories in the parking lot. It was Celtic Colours time. Musicians were run off their feet with gigs all over the island. It was a chance to jam with exciting players from away, as well as to catch up with the locals who you don't see as often as you should. The tunes never seemed to stop and the drinks were abundant. No one slept and everyone loved it. They each goaded me to join them for tunes and drinks after the gig, but I couldn't partake, at least not tonight. Instead, we decided that I would sit in with them on their second set, a compromise of sorts. Darren generously offered me his guitar and grabbed his tenor banjo from his car.*

*I felt at home by the first downbeat. This was my local pub, a venue where I was more than comfortable. What's more, I was playing with Jason, my piano player of choice. Though we had largely gone separate ways since undergrad, he to tour internationally, and I to grad school, it seemed like no time had passed at all. Not even remotely "traditional,"*

*the night was filled with pedal points, chord substitutions, and even funk grooves. At times, his playing went on some cerebral tangents, though it was anything but subdued. A barrel-chested man of six feet, he played loudly. The floor shook. I once heard him described by a fan as a "bear on speed".*

*Colin wasn't shy either. He is an assertive fiddler and doesn't mind an accompanist pushing him because he doesn't mind pushing back. The three of us challenged each other, taking risks. A quirky, unsuspected chord here, an abrupt key change there; it was a performance filled with musical jokes only we heard, understood, or cared about. It was a game; we were playing just as much for ourselves as we were for the audience. It was a familiar experience, one that I only seem to find at home, at times like these.*

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The Celtic Colours International Festival takes place every October, beginning Thanksgiving weekend. The "Colours" in the festival's name references the fact that it is timed to coincide with the autumn foliage. In an effort to further showcase the leaves, the festival is not located in one specific place. Instead, it is spread over the entire island, in dozens of communities. While the logistics of this must be staggering (there can be up to eight events occurring simultaneously across the island), Joella Foulds, a co-founder and current Artistic Director of Celtic Colours, insisted on structuring the festival in this way. She feels that local musical tradition is found throughout Cape Breton, in small communities, and that it is important to support the local community halls that have fostered the island's traditions over the years (Feintuch 2010:249).

The Festival Club is the social centre for Celtic Colours. It is a place where performers and festival-goers alike gather at the end of the day for drinks, conversation, and music. Each night consists of a series of informal, half-hour sets beginning at 11:00, and experimentation is encouraged. The musicians have the option to stay in the Gaelic College residence, much like a hotel, either for a specific night or for the duration of the festival. Backstage, the green room is always filled with musicians. Some are tuning or warming up; others are involved in a perpetual jam. Some stand quietly to the side, watching and listening. It is a space where musicians who would normally never come in contact with each other meet and play, their music a product of mutual admiration.

For many local musicians, Celtic Colours marks the summer's official end. Summer is more than the time between June and September, and it is more than warm weather. It is also when the entire island is bustling with visiting family, tourists, and music. After

Celtic Colours, the last of the tourists head home and all of the seasonal businesses close for the year. For musicians, it spells the end of regular gigs (at least on a local level), and the beginning of a much leaner off-season. Geographer Yi-fu Tuan asserts that time is a key aspect to how space and place are experienced and understood (2001). Be it a distant, mythical past, or an imagined future, all places are bound by time. As such, Celtic Colours is intrinsically linked to time in regard to the autumn leaves and Thanksgiving, a cyclical sense of time connected to landscape and calendar. Adrian Ivakhiv discusses Celtic Colours' relationship to geography, explaining that the festival not only frames the island's landscape to be consumed by visitors, but labels it specifically as "Celtic" (2005).

The fact that the festival is framed as Celtic connects Cape Breton with other similar festivals, as well as discourses surrounding the Celtic movement. Scott Reiss argues that Celticism draws connections between various cultures and ignores the distinctions between these different traditions (2003:145). Celtic music and the festivals that are associated with it create an international circuit of performance opportunities for musicians. These musicians can be seen as belonging to a transnational Celtic music community (Lavengood 2008). In this way, they are part of what Will Straw would refer to as a "scene". He describes a scene as a group that is formed around a cultural activity, and often (but not necessarily) is associated with a location or region (2004:412). Although Straw's conception of a scene is somewhat broad, it is an idea that is extremely malleable; a scene could be highly localized, or exist on an international level. Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett refine Straw's framework to define scenes on the local, translocal, and virtual level (2004). Celtic Colours could be seen as both a cross-section of the international (or trans-local) Celtic music scene, and the local Cape Breton music scene; while both scenes are distinct, they have numerous members in common.

Although it is easy to be critical of how folk festivals attempt to represent culture, I feel that Celtic Colours does not attempt to label itself as "authentically" Celtic. The festival, on the other hand, uses this idea as a basis for programming its artists, but this is fairly flexible. From my experience, this is something that is quite common among music festivals: rather than debate the appropriateness or authenticity of an act too critically, it seems that quality often takes precedence. For instance, the Celtic Connections Festival of Glasgow, Scotland, focuses on Celtic music, yet has included acts that may have more tenuous connections to Celticism, such as the traditional Québécois band La Bottine Souriante (Jenkins 2004:320). As a result, one might accurately

describe Celtic Colours as a folk music festival which has leanings toward the musics of the British Isles, particularly instrumental music. Furthermore, it is worth noting that while Celticism may be critiqued for its romanticization of the past and invented traditions, identity is actively constructed and these ideas may have profound meaning for some individuals (Curtis 2000).

When Cape Breton musicians become active on the international festival scene, their relationship to "home" can change substantially. The overwhelming majority of local performance opportunities are found in the summer months, during the tourist season. Counterintuitively, it is precisely these performance opportunities that these professional musicians may not have the chance to play. Jason Roach explains,

This summer, I've barely had any Cape Breton gigs, for the first year ever. There's no time for these Cape Breton gigs, 'cause you're [always] gone. And it makes no sense to live here in the winter and not get the summer [gigs]. So I should be somewhere else for the winter, but then, I'd never be here... There's enough gigs to keep you living... for the summer. But you have to go away and do other things to set yourself up for the rest of the year... You have to get these friends and these connections that are outside as well (2010).

Celtic Colours, then, gives musicians a chance to return home, see their family, and play to a local audience that may not otherwise have the chance to hear them; this is of particular importance to Cape Breton musicians.

## **Field Notes 2: The Colliding Worlds of the Personal and Professional**

*It was close to midnight when I got to the Festival Club. It had been a long drive from the concert in Judique.*

*"Do you want to play some tunes?" Kenneth asked in his quiet, understated manner.*

*"Sure!"*

*He led me past the security guard to the green room where his two brothers, Angus and Calum sat with fiddler Shelly Campbell. Kenneth and Shelly tuned their fiddles, Angus took out his pipes, and Calum waited at the piano. It was a common place for impromptu sessions and I was eager to play with the MacKenzie brothers before the room got crowded. As I tuned my guitar, they discussed what tunes they would play, and how we would approach the overall arrangement. I thought it was a little uptight for a jam, but I shrugged it off. There's certainly nothing wrong with a little planning, and I'm always up for trying new things.*

*Several sets later, we were informed that we were due on stage in ten minutes. I choked. Having been out of touch with Kenneth lately, it completely slipped my mind that they had recently recorded an album. I felt foolish and slightly panicked as I realized that I had unwittingly agreed to play their CD release with them. I was happy to do it, but I felt wildly unprepared. Damn. Why hadn't I paid closer attention to the order of those last four key changes?*

*Soon, we were taking the stage. Fortunately, everyone else was well-rehearsed and I was able to hide behind them during moments when I was uncertain about the arrangements. It was a different experience from playing at the Shoe the other night. It was unfamiliar, yet exciting, and most of all, I had the best seat in the house. It isn't often that I get the chance to hear good traditional piping these days. This specific case was even more special: Kenneth and Angus are often separated by an ocean, with Kenneth in Cape Breton and Angus in Scotland.*

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This interplay between the vernacular and professional is part of the life of a Cape Breton traditional musician. In a “pure” vernacular context, Cape Breton fiddling is most closely associated with social events – house parties, weddings, and square dances. However, professional musicians encounter a music industry that is explicitly commercial, where recordings, marketing, and musical experimentation are a necessity. Although there is certainly a distinction between commercial and vernacular contexts, most musicians can effectively navigate both musical situations, which are rarely entirely separate. Scott Reiss argues that while Irish traditional music and Celtic music are interrelated, “Celtic” music is a commercial construction, and Irish traditional music is vernacular music bound by personal relationships (2003). In essence, the Celtic movement has become a globalized version of the grass roots traditions that it celebrates (Chap-man 1994). Robert Deveaux offers,

I still really enjoy sitting in someone's house. Laid back and relaxed. That's where I enjoy it the most. But I have learned to enjoy the big productions. Apples and oranges. [...] If you want to make a living at it, you have to be versatile. But I think that there's something about the whole idea of being true to your roots, because that's probably what brought you there in the first place. And once you're there, you dance. But I think it takes a balance of both. You at least have to respect the traditions in order to be able to take it further, because otherwise it's like a house of cards (2011).

A significant part of the Festival Club is what occurs backstage, in the greenroom. Although a backstage jam may seem inevitable with so many musicians in a small space, this music-making serves an important function in regard to transmission. In a vernacular context, house parties and community concerts play a role in socializing young musicians. As a tradition that is highly regional in nature, these events are also an opportunity for musicians from all over the island to interact and play. Celtic Colours fills a similar role in this way, but in a professional context – it allows musicians, in a relaxed environment, to interact with others from around the island and abroad, exchanging musical ideas. In this sense, it occupies a space somewhere between a house party and the networking associated with a professional conference.

The end results are a professional performance and networking opportunities. The mix of partying and networking creates a sense of community among musicians. In this way, there are relationships that exist exclusively on the Celtic music circuit. Jason Roach explains,

Some of them you get to jam with. Some of them you don't, but you still get to hang with [them]. And it's funny because you see these people over and over again. You think that every time is the last time. You think that it's total coincidence that you met and you hung out this time and you may never see this person again. And then it's a week later, and [there they are again] (2010).

### **Field Notes 3: One Last Round for the Road**

*Tonight was the last night of the festival. When things shut down at the Festival Club tonight, the off-season began. It was a night of socializing and music. The drinks flowed freely, and there was plenty of catching up with friends, both new and old.*

*I sat for a moment and frantically scribbled ideas in my notebook:*

- Space and place? - What about Goffman?
- Social network theory? - Calendar custom?

*“Bahktin might have called this Carnavalesque,” I thought. “But to hell with critical theory, that's for me to deal with while I hack away at my dissertation during the long, cold winter months. This is fieldwork, and I'm grabbing a drink.”*

*At 2:00, the Festival Club closed down. The last drinks had been served, and the patrons slowly filtered out. The performers, however, discretely made their way back to the greenroom to start the after-hours jam, which continued until 4:00.*

*“I can't believe they closed the session down,” someone complained to me, wishing he could play tunes until sunup. The remaining musicians gathered*

*on the back deck, saying their goodbyes; many of them were clearly reluctant to call it a night. There were plenty of “This-was-a-lot-of-fun”s and See-you-next-year”s mixed with hearty hugs. Though some felt that there was still some more fun to be had before they retired, I headed to my room, determined to get to bed before 5:00.*

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Carnavalesque is an excellent term to describe Celtic Colours. There is a wild intensity that accompanies the festival, particularly for musicians. Of course, it is not much of a stretch to use the term carnivalesque to refer to a festival. That is what Bakhtin was referencing to begin with: medieval carnivals, particularly the feast of fools (Bakhtin 1984:5). These carnivals were a time when one could step outside one’s daily roles; they were an inversion of normalcy. They were a time of laughter, merriment, and hyperbole. In addition, Bakhtin maintains that medieval carnivals were closely related to cyclical time because they corresponded with religious feast days (1984:9). Celtic Colours also shares this quality, as it begins with the feast of Thanksgiving. Although the idea of carnival may seem far removed from a contemporary context, it is integral to events like Halloween, Mardi Gras, or even New Year’s Eve. For many of these musicians, this is the common experience of being on the road, but Celtic Colours is a time when the tour comes home.

Fieldwork is integral to how we, as ethnographers, conduct research. Qualitative research can lack breadth at times, but offers deep, nuanced understanding of specific inquiries. Ethnography cannot be thought of as objective; no matter how much we may wish to ignore our own biases, all researchers have them. Our fieldwork is shaped by our preconceptions, our likes and dislikes, even our own interpersonal skills. Moreover, our experiences, or data, must be interpreted, making many of our conclusions entirely dependent on our own personal knowledge and skills as a researcher. We all approach fieldwork differently. We have our own strengths and methods of navigating various social contexts and accessing the information we need to conduct our study. Playing music is integral to my fieldwork. It provides insight to issues surrounding performance practice and musical interaction. It also helps break the ice, fosters new friendships, and is a good way to meet people.

Timothy Rice asserts that the distinction between insider and outsider is not necessarily useful because it is overly simplistic and lacks finesse (2008:53). Deborah Wong, on the other hand, offers that the ethnographer is always an outsider and must therefore cultivate new relationships even when relation-

ships currently exist (2008:82). Simultaneously an insider and outsider, I frequently found myself trying to balance between my roles as local musician and researcher. I was having fun catching up with old friends, but I also had to take a step back and analyze details that had previously seemed mundane or irrelevant.

To some, socializing and playing music may not seem like research, but I was always accompanied by my field notebook. For me, it is exactly my notebook that makes the distinction between being a participant and participant observer. These are activities I would be engaging in anyway, but in this case, I was engaging with forethought, with each interaction and experience considered critically and then relived afterwards, under the microscope of scholarly analysis. I had been to the Festival Club many times before, but framing a familiar experience such as this as research is an interesting one, with reflection and introspection becoming new parts of my otherwise “normal” experience. In this way, context can be as important to the construction of meaning as the text itself. Just as the “field” may lie merely outside our door, fieldwork may be constituted of experiences that are equally familiar. In a sense, it is fieldwork if we choose to frame it as such.

Celtic Colours exists at an intersection. It is part of a scene, in both a local and a transnational sense. On a transnational level, musicians are part of a Celtic community and festival circuit that is part of the life of a touring musician. On a local, vernacular level, musicians have the opportunity to return home and spend time with family and friends. Celtic Colours is a series of overlapping categories and communities which are separate, yet connected. As a festival, it also delineates time and landscape through its connection with Thanksgiving and the autumn leaves. For myself, the festival (and more specifically, the Festival Club), is a fieldwork site. Adding an extra frame to everything I see, hear, and experience means that I must shift fluidly from researcher to “local” and back again.

Underpinning all of this is the carnivalesque quality of the event, a time when everyday responsibilities, routines, and expectations are temporarily suspended. It is a time when work, play, music, friends, and family are combined in a celebration of Cape Breton identity, punctuating the end of the tourist season. It is this experience that reinforces who one is as a professional musician and Cape Bretoner. Ultimately, everyone wakes up the morning after with new memories, stories, acquaintances, and continues on with some well-deserved downtime. As we all return to our daily lives, we enter a new season. Although it may be the off-season, it is a time that is equally important. It is this period that makes the

festival possible. It is a time for composing, recording, and preparing for the upcoming year. Musicians will plan new projects and book new gigs. As the next series of festivals and tours begin, they will meet again, and their Celtic Colours experiences will become jokes and anecdotes. I, however, will return home, transcribe, reflect, and write. Eventually, as the summer ends, it will be time for another Celtic Colours, and the whole process will begin again.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Calendar custom is a term used by folklorists to describe traditions and customs associated with a specific date or season, such as Halloween or Christmas.