

An Interview with John Showman

Thomas Grant Richardson, Indiana University

Good Neighbour Espresso Bar
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John Showman is a professional fiddle player living in Toronto. Although classically trained, John left Western classical music behind in pursuit of various forms of traditional fiddling. Over the years, he has immersed himself in the world of Irish, bluegrass, and Appalachian old-time fiddle playing, earning top honours along the way. He is a prime example of an important consideration for traditional music in the 21st Century, which is the way players *choose* to dedicate their lives to traditional music, especially a tradition that is not inherently theirs. Historically, folklorists and ethnomusicologists have focused on tradition-bearers who have excelled at art forms inherent to the time and place of their birth. But contemporary fieldwork in urban centres like Toronto requires a new perspective that attends to the globalized 21st Century, and we must acknowledge and address these new players, their contributions, and the spectre of authenticity that haunts these transitions.

In the summer of 2011, John won first place in the solo fiddle contest at the Appalachian Stringband Festival (known as “Clifftop”), in West Virginia. John was only the second Canadian to ever win this honor, after Erynn Marshall.

I met with John at The Good Neighbour Espresso Bar in The Junction neighborhood of Toronto in the fall of 2012.

Thomas Grant Richardson: You’re currently playing with New Country Rehab, Lonesome Ace Stringband, and The Foggy Hogtown Boys. What else am I missing?

John Showman: You’re not missing anything. That’s basically what I do. I mean those three projects are fairly distinct. Lonesome Ace Stringband is three-fifths of the Foggy Hogtown Boys, but the repertoire and material is different. We play mostly old-time music. The Foggies play some old-time, but mostly bluegrass.

TGR: And New Country Rehab is ... how would you describe it?

JS: We’re essentially an alt-country band, whose music is based in old-time country music and we add all kinds of stuff, from pop music and whatever else. But what we do is play very much a traditionally based music – at least the approach to the songs is tradition-

ally based – like ballads, songs about spirituality, loss, death, and the occasional love song.

TGR: You’re a professional musician. There’s no day job, right?

JS: No. No, hasn’t been a day job for ... never was, actually.

TGR: Is there a way to rank those projects in what demands the most time or attention?

JS: Oh, absolutely. At this particular point in time, the big majority of my effort and time is put into New Country Rehab. It just has to be, because it’s not an established act. We have plans and intend to tour, hopefully big stages and big festivals. We hope to tour across North America and Europe and maybe beyond. And to get a band to that point takes a tremendous amount of work. And everyone in the band is committed to doing it. I’ve made less money on that band than any of the others, but it’s demanded far more of my time. But at this point I’ve invested enough in it; we’ll see where it takes me. I figure I’ve got a few years to figure it out. I’ve got two children and a wife. So I definitely have to make sure I’m doing things that are at least lucrative.

The Foggy Hogtown Boys are always a great project because we’re appealing as a festival band, and for playing concerts, but also for corporate events, for weddings. It’s kind of a throwback. We always seem to go along and get work. Which is cool.

The Lonesome Ace Stringband is kind of an opportunistic thing. We play square dances. We play the Dakota brunches [a weekly bluegrass-themed brunch at Toronto’s Dakota Tavern]. That’s what we do. The other guys in the band are Chris Coole and Max Heineman. Those guys have been my friends for a while. To be honest, I’ll probably be playing music with them, and by extension the Foggy Hogtown Boys, for longer than anything else. I imagine I’ll be playing with those guys in 25 years, assuming we’re all alive and in reasonably good health. It’s that kind of group. We can not play for a year and then come back and have a great night.

TGR: Are the opportunities different for those three bands?

JS: Absolutely. Oh yeah, for sure. New Country Rehab, we have a pretty big sound. There’s drums, there’s electric guitar. I’m playing fiddle through a high-tech processor, which makes it sound, actually kind of natural, but it won’t feed back. It can get ex-

tremely loud. And it's not about volume, but if you're playing for 2000 people in a large hall and a sound man who isn't that used to acoustic instruments and bluegrass, you're just not going to get the same results as you will with a rock band. Rock bands play bigger rooms and it's a more commercially viable sound, not only on the level of how it's delivered sonically, but just the kind of sound people expect. So for me it's fun to do something that has a bigger, ready audience. I mean, at heart I'll always be a fiddle player, a traditional fiddle player.

TGR: You grew up playing fiddle?

JS: I grew up playing classical violin. I started when I was 6. I grew up in Ottawa. I moved around a bit. I was born in Ottawa, but moved to Washington [DC] at five months old. Lived there for two years. When I was 9, I moved to Paris for two years with my parents. And when I was 14, I moved to Germany, West Germany, for two years. Then I went to Indiana University at 18. So I've kind of lived in a lot of places. When I was 21 or 22 I moved to Montreal and spent eight years there. I'm 41 now, and I've been [in Toronto] eleven years.

TGR: But you didn't play fiddle when you were in Indiana, right?

JS: No. I played a year and half of very intensive classical music and then I quit.

TGR: Were you in the Jacobs School?

JS: Is that what it's called? I just remember it being called the School of Music. Maybe it was and I never knew.

I got to the point where my technique was great, but I started to lose my interest in it. It was too much of a factory. I found it to be a very sterile environment. To be fair, I think I always enjoyed playing the instrument more than I liked the classical music ... scene. It actually drove me kind of nuts. None of my friends played classical music. I was kind of the weird kid who happened to be really good at classical violin. But those weren't my friends. I thought most of them were ... nerds. I mean, I was a nerd too, but I wanted to not be a nerd. I realized that hanging out with a bunch of classical musicians tended to make you nerds. I found a few guys who were into classical music who I aspired to be more like because they tended to be cooler.

TGR: So what turned you from classical violin to traditional fiddling?

JS: It's weird. I gave it up for dead; I guess I was 20 when I quit. Or almost 20. And, like I said, I was good, my technique was really good. There wasn't

much I couldn't play ... maybe some of the tougher Paganini caprices.

TGR: If Paganini is the stuff that trips you up, you're already most of the way there.

JS: Yeah, exactly, and I was pretty confident. I had a really good sound. But I just quit, though. I gave it up for dead and I got a degree in business with a minor in German. I stayed in Indiana for two and a half years working on that and I became really studious.

Then I came to Montreal, went to McGill, got my degree there. Took me two and a half years. I ended up being in University, between music and business, for six and a half years.

When I had about a year and a half left on my undergrad, I started picking up fiddle again. I had a good friend who was in the theatre school there and there was this girl in the program I was kind of infatuated with. So he and I jammed together, just improvised stuff. It wasn't even classical, it was just whatever noise we decided to improvise. And so we went and did this impromptu thing at school and it caught the attention of this girl. Then I realized I sound good when I just play violin, and the cool thing was that I wasn't playing classical music any more. I wasn't really playing anything, I was just making sounds. But I think because I'd taken such a long break, I hadn't lost any of the technique, but I'd lost whatever hang-ups or bad associations I had. So I had a tremendous amount of freedom. So I could play whatever I was thinking.

So then I started busking. I was still in school for a year and a half, and I started busking and I found a bluegrass jam and met a banjo player who started showing me all these tunes that had been written out in sheet music. And I could sight-read the music. Now, it didn't sound like bluegrass. But I basically started going to these jams. Everyone was like, *Who's this guy, where'd he come from?* I remember there were these crusty guys who were really good bluegrass soloists, and one night they just laid into me and said, "You suck, you don't even sound like a bluegrass player, you sound like a violinist pretending to be someone you're not." I turned beet red for about a week, but I realized they were right. I was kind of shitting all over this music they were really, really excellent at, and that's when I got serious about it. I got in my hands all the recordings that I could. Guys like Kenny Baker, and Bobby Hicks, and Vassar Clements. Even Vassar Clements, who isn't really a traditional player, but he had a sound that I could identify with, and I started learning Scotty Stoneman. He's another weird player. I started learning all the weird players first, and then I got into guys like Kenny Baker. At first I was just learning by books. I found all these books that had bowing patterns writ-

ten in them. And I thought, this is a cool way to look at it. So I started really analyzing the bowing patterns that these guys were using. But at the same time I was listening to the source recordings. And then over time, I stopped paying as much attention to the written stuff and started going to the source recordings.

At the same time, I started getting into Irish music. It was when I graduated and I needed a job, and I quickly found I could actually team up with these guys who played in Irish pubs, basically five nights a week, and make a living in Montreal. My rent was something like 300 bucks a month. I immediately started playing five nights in Irish bars, getting paid an average of 40-50 bucks, which at the time was enough. So I started learning all these Irish tunes and these old traditional Irish drinking songs. And again, I didn't sound like an Irish player, but I was figuring it out.

I had a lot of energy. And eventually I started getting into the bluegrass thing. And we're going back, I guess ... 17, 18 years when I started taking that seriously. At that time I'd found this awesome book someone had put together that was three Irish players: Paddy Killoran, [James] Morrison, and Michael Coleman. Somebody had taken these old source tapes and slowed all these tunes down and written down in painstaking detail these Irish tunes with the exact bowing patterns. And I spent about two years just really focusing on these. Playing these at an incredibly slow tempo. Just using the exact bowing and trying to figure out why they would slur two notes and then separate one and then slur five and separate one. I just kept going over it again and again. And about that time, this is about two or three years ago, I saw and started really getting into [Appalachian old-time fiddler] Bruce Molsky. I'd never heard anybody play that way. There was something he had, something really similar to this Irish stuff I was playing, the rhythm, the way he'd use his bow, there were similarities.

You know we're talking about similarities the way I perceived them, because I learned them in a vacuum. I hadn't been to Ireland, I didn't know any Irish people, I'd seen and heard a lot of recordings, so I at least had some kind of frame of reference, but the old-time thing really made sense to me, from what I heard and connected with right away, with the bowing that was used. And that kind of shaped the way I looked at bluegrass. At some point, bluegrass and old-time have a common progenitor, and that progenitor, at least on the fiddle, is Celtic music! It's like Irish and Scottish music from immigrants. They brought the music here. And Acadian players. All that stuff comes from there anyway.

I'm not a traditional player. Only in what I've created. I didn't grow up in a tradition at all. But I've

really kind of ... analyzed it a lot and I've come to appreciate things about it that you can't tell me aren't true, because I'm a player.

TGR: These days these different forms are thought of as very distinct styles. Some people draw firm lines in the sand. Do you feel, musically, there is a tangible connection between these styles?

JS: I can't make it a cause and effect sort of thing. To me the most intimidating of styles, or the only one where I need to turn my brain on, the only one where I'm not that confident, would be Irish music. Because it's such a storied idiom. The Irish players are so into their styles. They're so particular about it. The cool ones are particular, but they're embracing ... and then you get all these [guys] who are just into their style and that's all they can do. So if you can't play their style they like to lord it over you. They can't do anything else, and maybe they don't want to and that's fine.

In old-time music, obviously that exists, and I'm saying this as an outsider, I wish I knew more about it, but my gut tells me in old-time music, there's more embracing of other sounds and other ways of playing the tunes. Because maybe there's less information of where the battle lines are drawn between the styles. I mean, I won Clifftop. I'm not a traditional player. And all the judges were trad players ... I mean, there was a guy from Missouri and I don't know him. Erynn Marshall is one of them, she knows the tradition as well as anybody. I mean, she knows the history and she studied in school. She wrote a thesis on it! Obviously I didn't piss her off too much the way I played the stuff. But I think in Ireland, you can't do quite the same thing. But I think the North American styles are a little more embracing.

One cool thing is that one guy, Pierre Schryer, a French-Canadian guy who won the Canadian Grand Masters (1990), which is quite a distinct style from French-Canadian, but the kind of Canadian style that's more like Texas style, very clean, single notes, a lot of 2/5, 3/6, 2/5 (chord) changes.

TGR: What do you mean by "Canadian style"?

JS: Okay, maybe I'm talking about the Ontario, Don Messer, Pembroke and Shelburne contest styles. Those are the big contests, Pembroke and Shelburne, and this French-Canadian guy who's a wicked fiddle player, I think he's as good as anybody. But he won the first prize. So again, I don't know how it works in Ireland, but I know that a lot of players I've seen from there, like I said, they're very particular about what they want in a tune.

TGR: So all of this was happening in Montreal, you getting into bluegrass, which led into old-time. Are

you interested in, or do you feel competent playing, French-Canadian or Ottawa Valley styles?

JS: Totally interested. Competent? No. I have a feeling that the Acadian and the French-Canadian stuff would be the stuff I'd find most interesting to learn. Because it's a little bit different. There's a different lilt to it. The French-Canadian stuff is more friendly to what I do. Given the time, someday I'd love to learn the elements of it.

TGR: Are there any cultural politics of playing styles that you're not a part of? Like French-Canadian or Métis?

JS: It doesn't factor into it for me, because culturally I'm so far from all the styles I play well that I'm like a chameleon with that stuff. I'm sure culturally a lot of people would take exception, or not take you that seriously. There's a French guy I know who plays a certain regional Irish fiddle style and he's superb at it, but the stalwarts of that style don't really take him too seriously. Because he doesn't speak English with an accent, or whatever it is. I mean, that's the way it is. I have such mixed feelings about it. The regional isolation that created all these styles is dead. It's totally gone. Especially in the States. Don't even get me started on the politics, but basically the ability of cultures, or of little regions, to develop their own culture, in a healthy isolation if you will, is gone. It's just gone. The kids don't give a shit about it. Nobody's putting the money into the education. The American government has effectively gutted the country from the ability to sustain itself. The same thing is happening in Canada, although not so extremely. It hasn't happened quite as badly in Europe, but it'll get here. It's an interesting time. So the thing is, you have all these styles, you have this rich wealth of styles because those conditions exist where people could go two valleys away and you'd have a different sound, and you'd have a guy that's really great and who'd started to influence people. Then two valleys back, there's another guy who's doing something a little different. That doesn't exist to the same degree. Now it's not a regional thing. It's kind of, fairly amorphous, because of the internet. Because I can go online and see a video of some brilliant young fiddle player playing her awesome version of some tune that was recorded at some festival in North Carolina, and I can learn that note for note, without even coming close to a thousand miles of it. So once you have that condition in place, the regional boundaries have to go out the window at some point. Because otherwise, what are you defending? The government hasn't given you anything to defend. There's nothing to fight for. You just have to give in and embrace the history of it.

The thing for me is that it's not just style. The music has to sound real. To me, the problem is that most the time people approach the styles from outside. Or the way I've heard them approach it is to just treat it like a museum. They just simulate something. And I was doing that at first. Until those two guys told me to get my shit together and actually learn the style. And actually invest something into it. If you're going to play music, you've got to invest the right kind of emotion into it. I think it's more about intent and emotion than playing certain notes or certain bowing pattern or whatever it might be. I think people miss that. But I think people can hear it when people miss that. Because it just sounds boring. It's just lame. There's a lot of lame, shitty playing that has arisen as a result of all the people having this, almost too easy, access to these tunes. They think they've got it because they can play a tune note for note the way someone else is playing it but it doesn't sound right. It sounds bad.

It's kind of like ... I can't really stand Bela Fleck's linear banjo playing. His Bill Keith stuff. But Bill Keith sounds awesome. Bela Fleck can play a circle around him, but I'd much rather listen to Bill Keith. Again, it's not to pick on Bela Fleck, because he's technically brilliant and he's done a lot of cool stuff. But these guys ... they got to a technical level where it just loses any kind of meaning. So it's hard to walk a line between those two things. I mean, I'm trying.

TGR: Tell me about Clifftop and how long you've been going.

JS: Last year was the third year I'd been.

TGR: Tell me about last year, when you won. I believe you're just the second Canadian to take first stop after Erynn [Marshall], is that right?

JS: Right.

TGR: So tell me about last year. Do you remember what you played?

JS: Yeah, I played a semblance of a version of "Abe's Retreat" that I heard off Scott Prouty's album for the preliminary round. And for the final round I played a tune that I heard a recording of, Art Stamper playing "Devil on a Stump", and then I played a tune ... I'd heard a couple of versions of, but my favorite was this guy Rhys Jones' version, called "Blackberry Blossom".

TGR: Tell me a bit about the experience last year. You won and [Toronto player] Frank Evans came in second [in banjo], so I imagine it was a lot of excitement around Camp Canada.

JS: Yeah, I guess so. My son had been born ten or eleven weeks before that, so to be honest I was so preoccupied with that and being a dad and figuring that out and just trying to cook food for them. I was just making sure they had enough to eat, and everything was cool. I was sort of overwhelmed by being a dad. So that night ... the whole thing was a bit of a blur. I didn't actually play that much. And I stuck pretty closely to the camp. And by the time 1:00 a.m. rolled around I was dead to the world. So everything felt really incidental. During the competition, I remember scrambling to make dinner and someone said, "Oh, you just made the finals," so I said, "Oh, okay." It was funny, because months before I thought about what I was going to play in the preliminary round and what I was going to play in the final round if I made it. And I sat down with Chris Coole, and he asked if I wanted to run the tune you're gonna play. I said, "Yeah, I want to run this one and then when I make the finals I'm going to run the other two." And I started playing them and everyone looked at me and said, "That's kind of presumptuous." And I looked at them and laughed ... but sure enough.

TGR: What was the reaction? I'm also curious if there was any sideways glances ... like, "Who is this Canadian?"

JS: I don't really know. I honestly don't have a perspective on it. Maybe a little bit, maybe. The people in Camp Canada congratulated me because they knew me. But I was glowing, thinking, *I just won this whole thing*. So it's just kind of weird. It felt kind of awkward. I also had my son Arthur basically swaddled in my chest the whole time. He was sleeping in his swaddle and I was playing fiddle. It was very surreal. It was fun.

TGR: And how long have you been playing with Chris Coole?

JS: About 11 years.

TGR: And how did you meet?

JS: At the Silver Dollar [a Toronto club that offers weekly bluegrass shows on Wednesday nights]. I went down on a Wednesday night. He was on the gig.

TGR: This was before The Foggy Hogtown Boys were a thing?

JS: It was about a year before.

TGR: You didn't walk into a pre-existing band?

JS: No, I knew Chris Coole from sitting in with him sometimes at the [Silver] Dollar and after he met me he wanted to make a bluegrass band that was separate from the Dollar that played a specific repertoire. And with a few different members. Basically me on fiddle,

a different bass player who could really do the high tenor well. It was John McNaughton, who has been replaced by Max [Heineman] since. That was about six years ago. He just wanted to have a classic bluegrass, five-piece set up. Which is [Chris] Quinn, [Andrew] Collins on mandolin, himself on guitar, me on fiddle, and John on bass. And the goal was to be able to play a kind of classic bluegrass repertoire: Stanley Brothers, Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, which are all basically five-piece bands. So that started in 2001, and it's been going ever since.

I feel like Canadians get an opportunity to play this music well, because at this point we have access to almost all the same information. Almost. There's still obviously value in being down there around the players who grew up playing it, and we don't have that. We can go down and visit. But the advantage we have is that we can see the forest for the trees. To me, bluegrass in America got lost in this weird, poppy, saccharine, overly sanitized sensuality where it just sucks. And the best Canadian bands don't sound anything like that. I mean the best American bands don't either. But they still pander to that stuff.

That's where Canadians have an advantage, because we can see through that stuff. I think for a lot of American players, it's evolved too slowly. It's like the frog: if you throw him in a pot of boiling water, he jumps out, if you put him into a pot of cold water and slowly bring it to a boil, he'll cook, right.

TGR: Are there contemporary bluegrass bands and players that you do like?

JS: Definitely. They're a lot of great young players. I like Michael Cleveland's approach. He's such a wicked fiddle player. He's great. I like Ron Stewart's approach. I love Jesse Brock's playing, I think he's an awesome player. Again, sometimes they join these modern bands that are terrible. But yeah, there are good modern bands. They're outnumbered by the bad ones. The bad ones still have great players in them.

So Canadians don't do that because they're really interested in the history and the roots of the style and they don't treat it like a museum where they're just trying to play the notes, like it's lifeless. They can see through the bad, saccharine nonsense. That's why Toronto has a good scene, because everyone kind of plays it with a lot of feeling or meaning. They can listen to all the old stuff that informed all the really good players.

Find out more about John Showman on [his website](#), or listen to some of his fiddling [here](#).