

Graduate Student Profile

Daniel Neill, Memorial University of Newfoundland



Figure 1: Daniel Neill.

Daniel Neill received his BA from Humber College in Jazz Performance in 2004. Since graduating from Humber College's Jazz Studies program in 2004, Daniel has performed and toured extensively in Canada and Europe with some of Canada's finest musicians and songwriters, including Dan Griffin (formerly of Arkells), Paul Reddick, K.C. Roberts and the Live Revolution, Devin Cuddy, Flash Lightnin', Patrick Brealey, Whitney Rose, Adaline, Rykka, Dwayne Gretzky, Karnel Sawitsky, Johnny Max, Robyn Dell'Unto, Jimmy Bowskill, Valery Gore, David Gavan Baxter, Greg Cockerill, and Conor Gains.

In 2014, Daniel completed his M.A. at York University, and he will begin his Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology at Memorial University in September 2015.

Below, Daniel describes his research. You can find more of Daniel's work in this issue on page 1 ("From Singing to Cryin': Towards an Understanding of The Steel Guitar in Country Music 1915-1935").

Research

I am a musician and graduate student in Musicology from Toronto, Ontario. Broadly speaking, my academic interests are in popular music, organology, improvisation, and the interaction between folk and popular in commercial country music. Living and working as a musician in Toronto has given me valuable knowledge as a performer; however, it has been my experiences outside of music – as a drum teacher and cabinetmaker's assistant – that have strongly influenced my current research interests.

Shortly after entering York University's M.A. program in the fall of 2012, I began pursuing my long-standing interest in the steel guitar, and made it

the focus of my research. My goal was to establish a more nuanced understanding of the instrument's musical and cultural history, with special attention given to the intertwined development of its tunings and physical design. In 2014, the first phase of this research culminated in a Major Research Paper, titled *Consistency in Variation: Towards an Understanding of the Development of Steel Guitar Tuning Systems 1900-1970*.

In my future research, I hope to explore the musical, material, and social relationships between the pedal steel guitar, its makers, and its players. Through ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation in the pedal steel guitar maker's workshop, I will highlight the often undervalued yet complex cognitive, creative, and improvisatory skills of those who make musical instruments. The steel guitar's historic relationship with country music puts it in close proximity to rural and newly urbanized audiences and performers who often had occupations that required a skill set that was beneficial in approaching the technical developments of the steel guitar. As a result, the pedal instrument's development has depended on DIY ingenuity and on a research and development process that was often carried out in suburban garages and country bars. Key figures in the development of the pedal steel guitar, such as Buddy Emmons, Jimmy Day, Shot Jackson, and Maurice Anderson, have tended to blur the lines between inventor, designer, and performer. Their constant experimentation made the pedal steel a more versatile instrument while also cultivating a high regard for the maker among pedal steel players and enthusiasts. My ethnographic fieldwork in the pedal steel guitar community, and participant observation in the pedal steel guitar maker's workshop, will shed light on the relationship between maker, instrument, and musician.