

MUSICAL BOUNDARIES

The Making of Traditional Newfoundland Music(ians)

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the boundaries that are constructed around traditional Newfoundland music and musicianship, focusing on the relationships among place, tradition, and history. Drawing primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2009, I explore how some musicians trace historical and place-based connections based on their experiences playing Newfoundland music on the Island and with particular people. In doing so, these musicians draw on concepts of tradition, and ‘emotional’ and ‘historical’ authenticity, to connect certain tunes or settings, and styles of playing to the history and culture of Newfoundland, constructing the “Newfoundlandness” of traditional Newfoundland music. These practices dovetail with the professionalisation of traditional musicianship and provide a means for some to assert their status and authority as traditional Newfoundland musicians. While musicians have varying conceptions about Newfoundland and its music, the connections made among music, place, and history by some musicians work to delimit the boundaries around which music and musicians ‘belong’ to Newfoundland.

KEYWORDS: Newfoundland; music; tradition; authenticity; professionalism.

Introduction

“I don’t really consider myself a musician per say. But, I have always loved music and done something with it, ever since I was little.” This is what Alex told me at the beginning of an interview, although he has been playing traditional music (vocal and instrumental) for many years and has even played the occasional professional gig.¹ In speaking with a variety of musicians who play traditional music in St. John’s, Newfoundland, many would similarly distance themselves from the label of musician. They would ask me why I wanted to speak to them and not the ‘real’ traditional musicians. Individuals’ relationships to the label of traditional *Newfoundland* musician, and to traditional Newfoundland music, was even more complex.

There are three significantly interrelated components involved in defining traditional Newfoundland music and musicianship: (1) traditional; (2) Newfoundland; and (3) music. This article explores how each of these components works to draw boundaries around what ‘belongs,’ leading some musicians, like Alex, to disclaim the status of musician, or

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this article, except where statements are already found on the public record or the individual explicitly gave me permission to use their real names.

traditional Newfoundland musician. The article is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2009 for my Master of Arts thesis (Breslin, 2011). My research and thesis explored the meaning and performance of traditional Irish and Newfoundland music at sessions in St. John's, which are informal gatherings of musicians for the purpose of playing traditional music. I also draw on experiences from my ongoing participation in these sessions.

I focus on traditional instrumental music, colloquially referred to as "jigs and reels", or simply as "tunes", examining this music as simultaneously site for, subject of, and source of negotiations over individual and shared meanings, experiences, and identities. Martin Stokes argues that "music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (Stokes, 1994: 5). Scholarship on Newfoundland folksong, for example, has considered the coalescence of regional and national identity around particular songs, as well as the expression of collective community experiences and values (Colton, 2007; Gregory, 2004; Narváez, 2012a, 2012b; Pocius, 1988; Thorne, 2007).

Performing music also necessarily involves both aesthetics and ethics (Frith, 1996: 124). What "sounds right" in a performance is learned and debated relative to ideas such as what is "traditional", "authentic", "Irish" or "Newfoundland", among other categories and meanings that may be assigned to the music (ibid: 110). The negotiation over Newfoundland kitsch and cannon music, for example, entails negotiation over the identification of Newfoundlanders as "Newfies" (a historically derogatory term), Newfoundland's place within Canada, and the meaning of Newfoundland identity more generally (Everett, 2016; Guigné, 2008; Rosenberg, 1994; Thorne, 2007). Additionally, there has been much discussion about the 'Irishness' of Newfoundland and Newfoundland music; scholars have explored the historic and cultural connections of Irish music to Newfoundland, as well as how Irish music relates to the construction and negotiation over identity and sense of place in Newfoundland (Breslin, 2012; Byrne, 1991; O'Connell, 2007; Ó hAllmhuráin, 2008; Osborne, 2010, 2013, 2015).

Bryant (2005) further considers how a "good" performance by a musician is linked to a judgement that they are "good at" music. Mastery in musical performance is therefore expressed, at least partially, in a discourse of correctness, which includes both performing and judging what 'sounds right', as well as what is a good tune or who is a good player (ibid: 227-230). In this regard, the definition of music as a concept and activity itself is negotiated (Attali, 1985; Kingsbury, 1988). In discussing the performance of classical music in the United States, Henry Kingsbury observes that "musical performance [is] inextricably intertwined with the negotiation and reproduction of social inequality" (Kingsbury, 1988: 105). The performance of music – classical and traditional – therefore involves a politics in negotiating different definitions of good music, as well as who has the authority to assert these definitions, to make assessments of others' musical performances, and to create and enforce hierarchies and boundaries.

My goal with this paper is thus not to ultimately provide a clear definition, or determine the authenticity, of a thing called "traditional Newfoundland music". Rather, I explore musicians' perspectives on how and why they define and bound this music, and assess the status of musicians who play it. I consider the construction of the "Newfoundlandness" of Newfoundland instrumental music by considering some of the connections and distinctions that are made by musicians in terms of tradition, place, and history (personal

and place-based). I also consider some other factors, such as professionalism and talent, which contribute to assessments of musicianship and musical belonging.

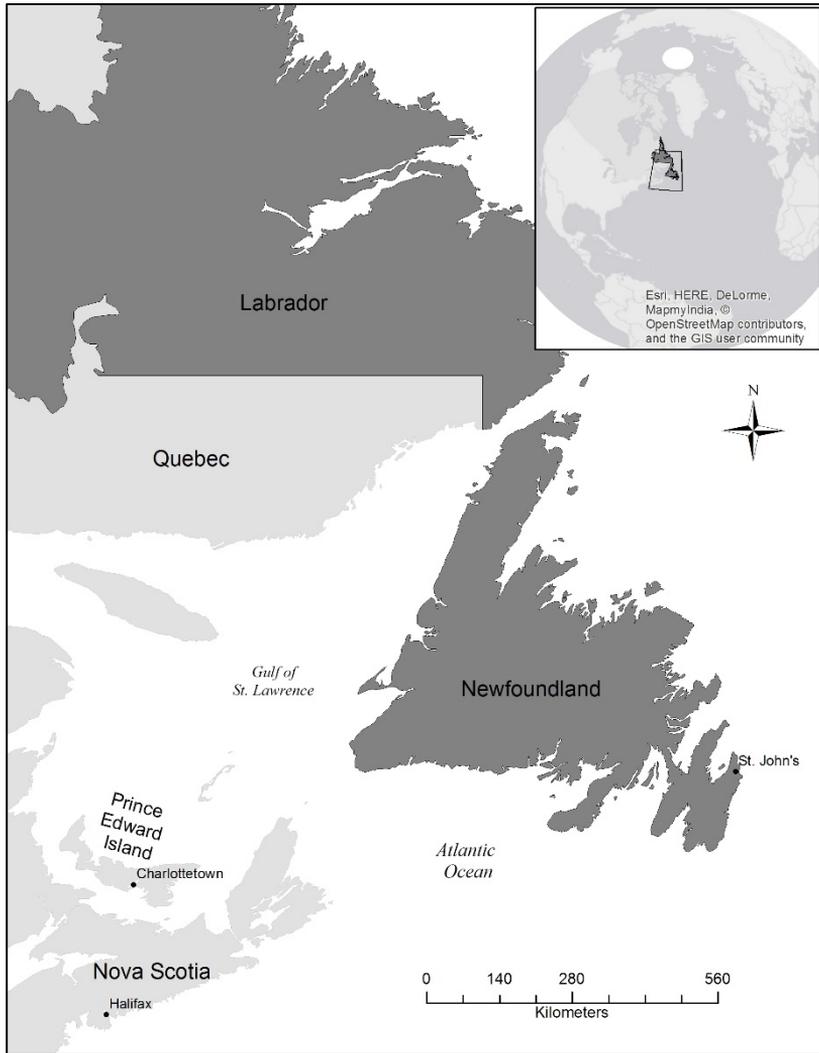


Figure 1 - Newfoundland and Labrador, showing St. John's

Making “Tradition”

In his well-known book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams suggests that, “tradition survives in English as a description of a general process of handing down... But the word tends to move towards *age-old* and towards ceremony, duty and respect” (1983: 319). Ben-Amos (1984) also traces seven definitions of the term that have been used

in the discipline of folkloristics, many of which are similar to those described by Williams. Ben-Amos, however, additionally specifies that tradition can mean any or all of the process of handing down, the material that has been handed down, or the quality of the material that is passed on (ibid: 99–100). These approaches conceptualise tradition as a bounded entity that a person or group possesses and that is transmitted among people. Many musicians use the concept of tradition in similar ways, while also situating traditions in particular places and as part of personal, familial, and place-based histories.

One implication of conceptualising tradition in this way is that it becomes something that can be identified, described, and collected. However, over the past several decades scholars have argued strongly against this “naturalistic” view of tradition, and suggest we explore tradition as a “symbolic construct” where “tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (Handler and Linnekin, 1984: 276). In this regard, I explore how musicians use ideas of ‘tradition’, and the closely related concept of ‘authenticity’, in assigning meaning to traditional Newfoundland music. While there often is such a thing as ‘tradition’ in the hearts and minds of musicians and others, myself included, I treat these terms as “categories of practice” rather than “categories of analysis” (Cooper and Brubaker, 2005).

Although there are many varied ways in which musicians are introduced to traditional music and go about learning it, musicians had fairly consistent opinions about how traditional music was ‘traditionally’ learned. Most insisted that even with the introduction of sheet music and recording technologies, traditional music continues to be rooted in the ‘traditional’ aural process. That is, the music is learned and played by ear. Links with tradition are seen as created and maintained through memories and lineages that are passed on along with the tunes (Breslin, 2012). As Hillary, a musician from Newfoundland, suggested:

It should be taught by people and passed down by people from people. I’m just thinking, yeah, like that’s so important. It’s hard to put in words what I know about certain tunes but it’s about the experience of learning them, like who did you learn them off of or where did you, what was it used for. Like, to learn the Running the Goat set and not know about the dance or not see the dance performed or perhaps to not know how to do it yourself. It’s almost a crime. It’s not doing justice to the tunes themselves.²

As suggested by Hillary, traditional music is seen as transmitted from and to particular people in particular places, which in turn is seen as a key part in transmitting the culture and history of the music and “the experience of learning them” (Breslin, 2012: 162-163).

With the growth of bands, public performances, and recordings, narratives about traditional music making are also increasingly part of liner notes, band and individual biographies, performances, and academic discussions. The online biography for well-known Newfoundland accordion player Graham Wells is illustrative:

² Running the Goat is a set of four tunes consisting of ‘Running the Goat’, ‘Round Old Ruby’s Garden’, ‘She Said She Couldn’t Dance’ and ‘Final Goat Tune’. There is also an associated dance that is common among post-revival musicians and dancers in St. John’s. The set originated from Harbour Deep (Maynard 2001).

Graham Wells is a young multi-instrumentalist and singer from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. He is one of the only musicians of his generation to learn his art in the old way. His music was passed on directly from his family.

He first learned the accordion from his grandfather, accordion player Edward Walsh. From the tender age of 6 he played for countless parties and dances at both his own and many other cabin kitchens on the Witless Bay Line, on the Southern Shore. An area steeped in the musical traditions of Irish Newfoundland. (Wells, 2017: online)

The image portrayed here is one of inter-personal aural transmission, directly from another person or as part of a community. Similarly, a news article on the St. John's-based traditional music band the Freels suggests of the group and particularly the fiddle player, Maria Peddle:

Though they came from different backgrounds in the St. John's area, it was under the tutelage of Korona Brophy that they met at a young age — Peddle was only five years old when she started. (Belbin, 2014: online)

Another similar autobiography was given by Newfoundland musician Emilia Bartellas in her appearance on TEDx St. John's:

I'm from town. I grew up in the Battery... and while there was a huge love and support for music in the household... there weren't people around me playing Newfoundland tunes or what have you. I grew up playing music formally. I was taught traditional Newfoundland music, and it was the very same teacher Christina Smith who taught me classical as well as traditional music... I started playing when I was four. (Bartellas and Collis, 2014: online)

Emilia's discussion is interesting here because she does point to the fact that she was formally taught traditional music. Nonetheless Emilia's and the other biographical descriptions connect musicians' personal histories to people and places on the Island. They each repeat that these musicians learned from young, where they're from or where they learned, and who they learned from in Newfoundland.

These narratives also draw on conceptions of how the music was 'traditionally' played in the past, namely as part of community dances or 'times' in outport communities. In such contexts, the music is seen as something that was just an inherent part of everyone's lives. Jeremy, a musician who is not from Newfoundland, nevertheless explained the 'traditional' image of aural transmission:

When folk music was evolving, it was in regional styles and it did belong to everyone in the community and since people didn't have other options of entertainment it was the best thing going. Right, so everybody was familiar with it and they became fluent in that musical language.

In this idealised past, recalled nostalgically by many musicians, music was just a natural part of everyone's lives. Everett discusses how some musicians are critical of the constructed imaginary portrayal of traditional music and musicians in tourist campaigns and imaginaries (2016: 117-118). Some musicians pointed out that portrayals in tourist ads of

local kitchen parties happening every day that a tourist could simply join are unrealistic, and that these imaginaries actually capitalise on a history of poverty and underdevelopment in outport communities (ibid: 117-118). Nevertheless, musicians also strategically draw on these images in promoting traditional music as part of the tourist industry (ibid: 118-120). Arguably, musician bios on websites, liner notes, news coverage, and so on could be part of this strategic promotion. Yet, as seen in Hillary and Jeremy's discussions, musicians also share similar imaginaries as tourists, but with a focus on musical transmission instead of based in cultural difference (ibid: 119).

The significance of the kind of unself-reflexive transmission discussed by Jeremy is explored by both Deborah L. Rapuano and Helen O'Shea in relation to the performance of Irish music in Chicago, USA and in counties Clare and East Clare, Ireland. They consider how musicians who were 'born into' the music and grew up hearing and playing it are better able to gain status and acceptance among the community of musicians than those who set about to deliberately learn traditional music cultivate themselves as musicians (O'Shea, 2008: 91-97; Rapuano, 2005: 123-29). In the case of those who grew up in musical environments, exposure to traditional music provided both motivation and means for learning and playing (Feintuch, 1983: 210-12). Many musicians in Newfoundland describe this "traditional" way of learning by saying "tunes were passed on by ear". Such a description implies little effort involved in learning since everyone acquired familiarity or fluency from continued exposure. As a result, they unconsciously and un-self-reflexively "became" traditional musicians (Osborne, 2007: 188).

The idea of tradition then works as an 'ideal' for learning and performing traditional music in two interrelated ways. The first usage refers to the epitome of musicianship – the archetypal image of a traditional musician. The second refers to the judgement of how a traditional musician *should* look, perform, think, and behave relative to the first sense. Evelyn Osborne points out how some musicians in Newfoundland that she interviewed did not consider themselves traditional players because their repertoire contained tunes learned from media sources, along with the 'traditional' dance music that was part of their communities (ibid: 193-94). Additionally, as seen in each of the biographical discussions above, there is limited or no reference to the effort, work, and frustrations that may have been involved in playing. Like musicians discussed by Rapuano and O'Shea, musicians in Newfoundland who present themselves as born into the music – having played from young, learned from particular people, and in particular places – are thus able to gain status among musicians more easily than those who set about deliberately learning the music later in life or without the connections developed over a lifetime to places and people.

Distinguishing "Newfoundlandness"

Connections made between tradition and place are also significant for the construction of the "Newfoundlandness" of Newfoundland music. Musicians have varying opinions as to how to define the music of Newfoundland. Scholars have also worked to understand what constitutes the Island's music, investigating its history and technical details, how these compare to music from other places, and how these differ among different regions within the province (Breslin, 2011, 2012; O'Connell, 2007; Ó hAllmhuráin, 2008; Osborne, 2002, 2010, 2013, 2015; Quigley, 1995). Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins argues that "cultures are generally foreign in origin and local in pattern" (1999: xi). The different standpoints among musicians focus differentially on "foreign origins" or "local patterns". In one sense, any music that is played by a local musician could be considered Newfoundland music, and I

have previously explored the ways musicians make connections to Newfoundland and places on the Island through playing music with foreign (primarily Irish) origins (Breslin, 2012). Some musicians, however, emphasise the *historical* developments of Newfoundland music on the Island, focusing on the local patterns created over time. Here, I focus on these musicians who draw connections and boundaries around place and music, while also considering how these boundaries are drawn in contraposition to other musics and places.

As discussed previously, through the associations of traditional music with place and culture, many musicians distinguished Newfoundland music by emphasising the ways in which the music has changed over generations since it was introduced to the Island, to reflect the character of the place and its people (Breslin, 2012). Andrew, a professional musician who focuses on playing this music similarly, explained:

The unique Newfoundland music is stuff that actually is ours and belongs to us and has been changed by Newfoundland. That's what I consider to be Newfoundland music. The other stuff is Newfoundland too. And of course, as I said before, it all depends on where you draw your boundary, and everybody's going to draw it a different place. I can't tell you where to draw it. You've got to draw it yourself.

Andrew additionally commented that he sees older Irish music as more connected to Newfoundland than the “latest Sharon Shannon CD” as a result of the older music’s longstanding performance and local development on the Island.³

Musicians focus primarily on two aspects in distinguishing ‘traditional Newfoundland music’: the tunes themselves or their settings, and performance style. While an increasing number of tunes in Newfoundland are written down, when performed in an aural context alone there is limited separation between the structure of tunes and their performance (Breslin, 2012: 173). Bridget O’Connell, for example, includes tune structure in her description of style (2007: 91). These distinctions, however, are used by musicians and researchers to highlight different musical features and facets of performance. Hazel Fairbairn additionally points out that performance style, which can include settings of tunes, refers to three interrelated scopes of musical performance: “As a generic term it refers to a national idiom, within which there are regional distinctions. Individual style refers to a musician’s unique relationship with one or both of these” (Fairbairn, 1994: 569). I consider here primarily ideas of a “national idiom” that Fairbairn refers to. Yet, musicians and scholars also have varying conceptions of regional styles within Newfoundland. Christina Smith suggests there are four styles across the Island, whereas Osborne considers there to be six or more (Osborne, 2007: 189; Smith, 2007). O’Connell (2007) follows Smith in analysing four regional styles plus an “old-time” fiddle style that is not seen as regionally rooted.

Tunes composed by Newfoundlanders are widely considered to be Newfoundland tunes. The most widely cited composers of traditional Newfoundland music are Rufus Guinard and Émile Benoit.⁴ Musicians also talk about the settings (or variants) of tunes in Newfoundland music, which are different when compared to Ireland or elsewhere. Hillary commented, for example:

³ Sharon Shannon is a professional and very well recognised accordion player from Ireland.

⁴ See Quigley (1995) for a discussion of the composition practices of Émile Benoit.

The setting has this really heavy lineage. It's entrenched into a place and also specific players, you know this particular setting was passed down, played by certain players but passed down to the next generation.

Hillary sees the variants of tunes as deeply tied to specific places through their production and transmission by players in these places over generations. Some musicians also commented that tune settings could differ from one community to the next in Newfoundland. Musical elements, specific note variations, specific types of sounds produced by instruments, or specific ways of playing a tune are therefore embedded with meaning that are associated with and produced by the places where they are commonly and historically played. Tunes are therefore localised through their variation or composition by local players, contemporarily or historically.

More specifically, Newfoundland has a high quantity of “crooked” tunes (Smith, 2007). A crooked tune is one that does not fit within a symmetrical set of eight bars, seen as ‘normal’ for most dance tunes (ibid: 142). The tunes have extra or fewer beats added at the beginning or the end of a section. Wayne, a musician from Newfoundland who focuses on playing Newfoundland music, explained:

But Newfoundland tunes... there's lots of little twists and turns in them, you know, like extra bars and extra beats... like off the surface you'd just say they're fucked up Irish tunes and if you can't get past that you may never appreciate them. But luckily now there's enough people who are actually playing them with enthusiasm and respecting them for what they are.

Smith argues that the crookedness of these tunes is tied to local dancing practices that constituted the context and purpose for this type of music throughout much of Newfoundland's history (ibid: 151). Since dances were generally accompanied by a solo performer there was no need for musicians to keep in time with one another as in ensemble playing, allowing musicians to extend or shorten the length of sections based on the needs of the dancers (ibid: 153–54). Crooked tunes are therefore seen as tied to the character and history of Newfoundland through their performance by musicians and dancers (Breslin 2012: 161). Musicians also repeat this explanation when discussing Newfoundland music publicly (eg Bartellas and Collis, 2014).

Musicians additionally suggested to me that there is perhaps a Newfoundland style of playing. One musician commented that the Newfoundland style is “very fast, very driving”. Smith also explains that traditional Newfoundland tunes “are played with few ornaments and with a strong pulse which is equally divided; eighth notes and sixteenth notes are played with no ‘lilt’ or ‘swing’” (Smith, 2007: 142). These qualities are seen in the performance of polkas as singles in Newfoundland, which could also be constituted as different *types* of tunes as much as a different style. With singles, beats are emphasised differently to produce a straighter sound. Newfoundland music also has doubles and triples as additional tune types or styles. Just as tunes and settings are seen as “entrenched into a place”, these styles are also connected to specific locales and histories, and particularly to the history of music for dancing across the province. Smith, for example, suggests that since most dancers on the island were not formally trained, the simplest way to keep them all in time with the music is to emphasise each beat equally (ibid: 158). Accordionist and singer Jim Payne similarly ties the quick speed at which singles and other Newfoundland tunes are played to the small spaces used for dancing, primarily in kitchens

(Seward, 2017). Thus, a Newfoundland style of playing is similarly connected to the history of the Island and its people (Breslin, 2012, 161).

Music that “belongs to us”

The associations among place, history, and music (tunes and styles) and the delimitation of ‘Newfoundland music’ allows musicians to identify with Newfoundland and create a sense of place on the Island. Frank, a self-proclaimed amateur musician from St. John’s, explained his preference for learning “Newfoundland tunes”:

I try to learn all the Newfoundland tunes that are out there... I think maybe it's just a sentimental attachment. See if they're Newfoundland tunes, then maybe that's when I feel like I have to try a bit harder to know them all, because of that.

Several musicians in St. John’s and across the Island focus specifically on playing ‘Newfoundland music’ and others like Frank feel a “sentimental attachment” to this particular music. This “attachment” is created as musicians draw on ideas of ‘historical authenticity’ and ‘emotional authenticity’ to establish a sense of continuity with previous generations and assert their love of the music and the places it is associated with.

Lindholm (2008) discusses two interrelated ways that individuals employ the concept of authenticity: based on origins, in other words based on accuracy to an original or past source or a traceable genealogical lineage; and based on content, such as emotional expression. Other scholars have made similar categorisations of the ways in which ‘authenticity’ is applied (Edensor, 2002; Ray, 2005). Edensor (2002), for example discusses the idea of “emotional authenticity” in relation to Scottishness and the popular Hollywood movie *Braveheart*. He suggests that, regardless of the historical accuracy of particular traditions, the ability of a product to satisfy the emotional needs of the audience allows them to claim an “emotional authenticity” for that product (ibid: 156). Similarly, Ray (2005) refers to Edensor and comments that “heritage” is not necessarily the same as “history.” Yet, she also points out that identifying with some form of “ancient origins” is nonetheless emotionally appealing for many people (ibid: 9). I use these “historical” and “emotional” qualifiers to distinguish the different ways in which the concept of authenticity is constructed and used by musicians.

Most musicians consider traditions and musical styles that have been passed from generation to generation on the Island to be historically authentic in their ties to the development of Newfoundland. The music thereby has a “story attached to it here,” as Wayne suggested to me. Using this idea of historical authenticity, many musicians attempt to remain faithful to ‘old’ music and ways of playing. As Smith concludes, “those of us involved in developing the Newfoundland and Labrador ‘listening tradition’ have the responsibility to learn, play, and teach these tunes as we discover them” (2007: 160). Forsyth identifies a similar practice and pressure by some musicians, along with tourist marketers, in the Shetland Islands to “maintain ‘pure’ forms of Shetland’s traditional music”, through which musicians construct and perform a distinct Shetland identity (ibid: 55). In Newfoundland, musicians maintain this ‘purity’ by maintaining the crookedness of tunes, for example, rather than viewing them as “fucked up Irish tunes,” and play in a style that they connect to the music’s performance for community dances in the past. Lindholm points out that strict adherence to notions of historical authenticity is impossible as music

technologies, instruments, and performance contexts change through time (2008: 28). Nevertheless, musicians create a sense of connection simultaneously to the music and to place by adhering to links between the tunes and performance style relative to previous generations.

Musicians who focus on this music generally identify as Newfoundlanders who play music that “belongs” to them. Andrew discusses above, for example, how he focuses on playing music that “belongs to us and has been changed by Newfoundland.” The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* lists a particular usage of belonging in relation to ideas of place in Newfoundland as “to be a native of; to come from” (Story, et al. 1999) As Frank further suggested of Newfoundland tunes:

A lot of them probably have Irish ancestry... They're not direct imports, but they're imports that have aged and fitted into the surroundings here, musical surroundings, and probably taken on a local accent or colour that makes them sound like they came from here.

Newfoundland music is distinguished from Irish and other music, and from its origins in other places, in how it has become different and irrevocably changed by its history on the Island and therefore ‘comes from’ Newfoundland (Breslin, 2012).

Popular music scholar Simon Frith additionally explores the relation between musical performance and collective identities. He suggests that music “stands for, symbolises *and* offers the immediate experience of collective identity” (1996: 121). Frith further elaborates that “music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (ibid: 124). Wayne, for example, discussed how significant and exciting it is to him to play music that is connected to the people and place of Newfoundland:

It's kind of something that is a personal mission of mine... to further embrace what it is that actually I enjoy about the way music is performed by the people that I've met here and the kind of place that [the music] has. I think that there's something exciting that's there to sort of be done... I think that it is very exciting to think about, to approach the music as not just being Irish music but to try to look for what was there in it that kind of drove it and [why] you maybe personally find it enjoyable and exciting.

Through the active performance of this music and associations of ‘traditional’ music with the past, musicians like Wayne both embody and conceptualise continuity between the music they are playing and the performance of that music by Newfoundlanders in previous generations. Musicians then also use ideas of emotional authenticity in constructing these “imaginative cultural narratives.”

Musicians like Andrew and Wayne thus also draw on a sense of Newfoundland as *shima*, a Japanese/Ryukyuan conception of islands and islandness where geography, cultural practices, and personhood are intertwined (Suwa, 2007). As Suwa explains, “islands are, in this regard, ‘cultural landscapes’ where imagination takes forms of reality” (ibid: 6). Musicians combine historically ‘authentic’ musical forms (crooked tunes and particular musical styles, for example) with nostalgic ideas of how it was played in community dance contexts – what “drove it” – and the idea that this music is a part of this place and its

people. Musicians are thereby able to place themselves within lives of continuity connecting them to the Island, its people, and their past.

Drawing Boundaries

By distinguishing and performing “traditional Newfoundland music” musicians also focus on its uniqueness and value. Over the past century, through the influence of radio, visiting musicians, and other factors, musicians and the people of Newfoundland have adopted a variety of musical styles. In their report on the “Newfoundland Popular Music Project” Posen and Taft, for example, write that “from 1900 into the thirties... St. John’s... was probably as sophisticated, musically speaking, as any mainland city of the same size” and featured many performances by bands from the mainland (Posen and Taft, 1973: online). The American military presence in Newfoundland during World War II also brought new performers to the Island and new dance contexts on the Army bases, as well as a new radio station (ibid). Osborne (2007) additionally suggests there were four major influences on traditional Newfoundland fiddlers: (1) radio from Nova Scotia featuring fiddlers from Cape Breton; (2) *The Don Messer Show*; (3) country and western music during the 1950s; and (4) Irish music recordings throughout the 20th to 21st centuries. ‘Traditional’ music from beyond the Island, along with other genres, thus had considerable popularity in Newfoundland (Osborne, 2007; Smith, 2007: 140).

Musicians also talked about how confederation with Canada in 1949 led to a decline in adherence to “Newfoundland traditions”. One musician commented to me:

After confederation there was a looking down on Newfoundland culture in general and Newfoundlanders didn’t want to be at it, you know. Oh, you wouldn’t want to be caught dancing that way, that was old fashioned. Those old songs, you wouldn’t want to be listening to those old songs.

Irish and Irish American music, along with various music obtained from media sources, thus became privileged by musicians over local dance music or local versions of tunes (Byrne, 1991: 66-67; Osborne, 2007: 198-199). Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, several musicians from Ireland moved to Newfoundland and started bands that became very popular throughout the Island. As Newfoundland fiddler Gary recalled:

A whole bunch of Irishmen, probably about six or eight of them who had been in Toronto and who had either met people from Newfoundland or who had they’d visited here, decided to come here and go to university or decided to move here and play music... Ralph O’Brien, Chris Hennessey, Fergus O’Byrne... Dermot O’Reilly, Dennis Ryan, a whole bunch of these guys. They were in groups like the Sons of Erin, Sullivan’s Gypsies, Ryan’s Fancy, groups like that.

The Sons of Erin played their first show in 1969 and Ryan’s Fancy in 1971. Ryan’s Fancy also began their own television series, airing on CBC not long afterwards, that some musicians remembered watching.

These bands performed primarily vocal music, doing tours throughout the Island and performing regularly in St. John’s. Pat Byrne suggests this was a second revival of Irish music in Newfoundland, with the influences of the McNulty family in the 1950s being the first (Byrne, 1991: 68). Osborne (2013, 2015) provides a detailed overview of the historical

influences of Irish music in Newfoundland. The Irish and Newfoundland music played by Ryan's Fancy and other groups came to be viewed by many people in Newfoundland as Newfoundland music. These musicians from Ireland also collaborated and performed with local musicians; for example, Fergus O'Byrne and Newfoundland musician Jim Payne have performed and released several albums together. This music also influenced popular bands in the 1990s and 2000s such as Great Big Sea and the Irish Descendants, who continued to perform and record a repertoire of Irish and Newfoundland music (Osborne, 2013: 265). Bands such as Tickle Harbour also began recording primarily instrumental music that they learned from recordings of Irish groups such as Planxty, De Dannan, the Bothy Band, and the Chieftains. Tickle Harbour formed as a band out of sessions at various festivals and included musicians from Ireland and Newfoundland. The popularity of Irish music continues through to the time of writing with the growth of sessions and Irish music in St. John's and around the world.

Throughout these periods, however, while many musicians were adopting new music and sounds into their repertoires, others were concerned with preserving, and promoting Newfoundland traditions. This focus on promoting local traditions culminated in a folk revival in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁵ The establishment of the St. John's Folk Arts Council (SJFAC) in 1966, later to become the Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Arts Society (NLFAS), marks a formal realisation of this awareness, and helped promote the growth of bands that performed Newfoundland 'traditional' and 'folk' music. One group that featured prominently in the revival in Newfoundland was Figgy Duff, which actively sought to make Newfoundland music more mainstream by adapting traditional music to rock music, following bands from England such as Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention (Saugeres, 1991). Figgy Duff thereby sought to make the music relevant to an urban and contemporary setting, performing in a variety of contexts including radio, television, festivals, and recordings (ibid). Musicians such as fiddlers Émile Benoit and Rufus Guincharde and accordionist Minnie White, were also "discovered" from outport communities, and they and their music were promoted throughout the Island as they played at festivals and concerts as part of this 'revival' of Newfoundland traditions.

This promotion of Newfoundland and Newfoundland music as unique and valued, for some musicians, was significant in opposing other musics and revivals in Newfoundland, particularly to 'traditional Irish music'. Newfoundland singer Anita Best, for example, has argued against what she sees as "Irish cultural imperialism" (ibid: 103). She asserts that Newfoundland's cultural traditions, including its music, should be understood as distinct from their Irish heritage (Breslin, 2012: 162). This representation of Newfoundland music during the folk revival affected how later generations of musicians experienced the place and its music. The influence is clearly seen in the case of Andrew who was learning traditional Newfoundland music in the 1980s and was influenced by the revival movement's interest in preserving and promoting the music of Newfoundland. He comments, "Well yeah, I am a Newfoundlander and I feel that unless we play the repertoire, nobody else is going to play it". Andrew further explained his approach to Irish music:

⁵ Saugeres suggests that the folk-song revival in Newfoundland was a continuous process that began with the publication of *The St. John's Advertiser and Fishermen's Guide: A Racy Little Song Book* by John Burke in 1894 (Saugeres 1991, 92). Several more folk-song collections were published in the 1920s to 1950s. See Narváez (2012c) for an overview of some of these collections and publications.

Andrew: *So my attitude towards that [Newfoundland] music is it's music that I love and music that belongs to me, you know. The Irish music is great, I love it, but it doesn't belong me.*

Sam: *It belongs to them?*

Andrew: *Yeah, it belongs to Irish people. And that's fine, we're kind of like cousins, you know. So if my cousin has a jacket that I like, I can compliment them on that jacket and say 'gee, I really like that jacket,' but it doesn't mean I'm going to go out and get one exactly the same.*

To Andrew, playing 'traditional Newfoundland music' music is an important part of his identification with Newfoundland as a Newfoundlander. Irish and other music that has been in Newfoundland for the past thirty years, introduced by local bands such as Tickle Harbour, and more recent groups, is not seen as irrelevant to Newfoundland and its people. Andrew says "that's Newfoundland music too". Yet, for Andrew and some other musicians, it does not have the same connection to the place as music that has been evolving here since its early European settlers.⁶ "It all depends on where you draw your boundary", as Andrew says.

In his introduction to the edited collection *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Hall suggests that "identities are constructed through, not outside, of difference" (1996: 4). Distinguishing Newfoundland music from 'other' styles is important for Andrew and many musicians in constructing and expressing a certain representation of Newfoundland and Newfoundland identity (Stokes, 1994). While many of these musicians have experience playing Irish music, it is precisely these experiences that have crystallised their commitment to distinguishing and promoting Newfoundland music. Newfoundland musician Daniel Payne, for example, explained that he gained a greater appreciation for Newfoundland music while playing music in Ireland for a time (Osborne, 2013: 317 – 318). Pocius (1988) explores in relation to mummering in Newfoundland how, while nativist revival movements – of which Newfoundland music is a part – draw on narratives of historical authenticity, revived "traditions" do not necessarily reflect historical practices. However, asserting musical distinctions provides many musicians with a means of creating a distinct representation of the Island, its music, and its people. In other words, Newfoundland music is defined, for some, by its *difference* from Irish music. The additional implication in delimiting boundaries in opposition to Irish and other music, however, is that those who often play Irish music from the latest Sharon Shannon CD are not entirely "traditional Newfoundland musicians".

Many musicians who have been playing traditional music in Newfoundland following the revival movement have continued to promote Newfoundland music, and emphasise its distinctiveness. For example, Christina Smith has been offering fiddle classes through the Suzuki Talent Education Program (STEP) since 1982, as well as publishing several tune collections focusing on Newfoundland music (Osborne, 2013: 119; Smith, 2006; 2008a; 2008b). Kelly Russell has similarly published several tune collections (Russell, nd; 2000; 2003), and Daniel Payne has created instructional DVDs for Newfoundland button accordion and tin-whistle (Payne 2007; 2010; 2011). These musicians and others have also

⁶ Newfoundland was previously inhabited by native groups, including Maritime Archaic (5000-3200 years ago), Dorset Paleo-Eskimo (2000-1100 years ago), and the Recent Indians/Beothuk (2000 – 400 years ago) (Rankin, 2008). Discussions of the historical roots of traditional Newfoundland music among the musicians I spoke with, however, centre on European contact with and settlement on the Island beginning in the 1500s (Nemec, 1991; Pope, 2008).

produced numerous albums focusing on Newfoundland music, either individually or as part of local bands (eg Collis and Bartellas, 2013; Payne, 2008; Smith, 1994; Wells, 2008).

Yet, for musicians who started playing tunes in the 1990s and 2000s, although they promote Newfoundland and Newfoundland music, many are also more encompassing in the boundaries they draw. Accordionist Graham Wells exemplifies this approach. While Wells produced the solo album *Traditional Music from Newfoundland* (2008), he has also been involved in the *Island to Island* (2003) album that was a collaboration of musicians from Newfoundland and Ireland; the four-piece accordion band Cordeen (2017) that includes Wells and Billy Sutton from Newfoundland and two musicians from Ireland; and co-organising the *Féile Séamus Creagh* in Newfoundland since 2010 in honour of Irish fiddler Séamus Creagh who lived in Newfoundland from 1987 to 1992 and had a significant influence on the local music scene (Féile Séamus Creagh, 2017).⁷ In this regard, Hillary related to me an experience of playing tunes at a session in St. John's. She explained:

I played some tunes the other day. It was a stratum of Newfoundland tunes and Irish tunes in the set. And I was like 'is that ok, is that cool?' and they're [the other musicians] like 'of course, mix and match and it's all a part of our culture, right?'"

This response demonstrates how music that is seen as originating from Ireland becomes associated with a different context in Newfoundland (see also Breslin, 2012). These younger musicians have limited concern for "Irish cultural imperialism" and many of these musicians play and record traditional Newfoundland music along with Irish music and other styles and genres.⁸ Forsyth explored similar tensions between maintaining 'tradition' and pursuing innovations in Shetland traditional music (2007: 54-55), and musicians' varying perspectives of the boundaries of Newfoundland music exemplify the tensions of inclusion and exclusion, boundedness and connection, and clear versus fuzzy "edges" of island music and islandness more generally (Dawe, 2004; Hay, 2006; Hayward, 2016).

In sum, the performance of Newfoundland music provides musicians with a sense of connection to Newfoundland through ties constructed in relation to Newfoundland's past and to the people of Newfoundland. Correspondingly, Newfoundland as *shima* connects the island, its people, and its music, and so the music is seen to "belong" to the place and to the people who perform it (Suwa, 2007). In contrast, Irish music is seen to belong to someone and somewhere else. Such a sense of belonging is therefore not wholly inclusive. In delimiting the boundaries of what belongs, some music and some musicians are placed outside. Yet, the promotion of their music as "just as good" also allows musicians to represent Newfoundland and its people as unique and valued.

Performing and Judging Musicality

Notions of acquired ability and inborn talent also influence musicians' ideas of how to achieve status as traditional musicians. As discussed above, the ideal of 'traditional' music emphasises effortless learning from a musical social environment. Nevertheless, there was

⁷ See Osborne 2010 for a detailed examination of the production of the *Island to Island* album.

⁸ It is worth noting, however, while Irish music is often played alongside Newfoundland music, other traditional musical origins such as English, Scottish and French have less frequently or enthusiastically been given the same recognition and engagement, particularly in the context of sessions (see also McDonald, 1999).

a sense that musical ability could be deliberately acquired. Kevin, a well-known musician from Newfoundland, explained:

Kevin: *Once you learn one tune, well you'll get another one. Once I learned to play a tune all it was a little bit of patience...*

Sam: *And a lot of practice.*

Kevin: *And a little bit of talent... and a bit of age. You've got to age with it too you see. It's no good learning to play for two hours and drop dead, that's no good. You got to play it and live for a while so it'll, so you can get into it.*

The self-reflexive project of learning is then a viable, if not ideal, path to achieving status as a traditional musician. Yet, there is no question that it is also a long road, regardless of when someone started on it. As Kevin says “you’ve got to age with it too.”

But Kevin also says that you need “a little bit of talent” and there was a sense among many musicians that some people just do not have it. The emphasis on talent and ability is also compounded by a focus on musicality and virtuosity through the influence of the music and recording industries. Radio, recordings, and broadsides became widespread in Newfoundland in the 1940s and, as discussed above, influenced music and musicians on the Island (Osborne, 2007). Musicians from Newfoundland additionally began themselves recording traditional and folk music; well-known musician Harry Hibbs, for example, recorded his first album in 1968. A small number of musicians also recorded and performed some of the Newfoundland dance repertoire. Accordionist Wilf Doyle, for example, released his record *Jigs and Reels of Newfoundland* in 1956.

As discussed above, during the folk revival in the 1970s, bands such as Figgy Duff actively sought to make ‘Newfoundland music’ more mainstream and relevant to an urban and contemporary setting (Saugeres, 1991). While musicians had recorded albums in the previous decades, the number of recordings made by artists in Newfoundland continued to grow. Émile Benoit recorded his first CD in 1979, Rufus Guinard in 1978, and Tickle Harbour in 1979. The music thereby became increasingly professionalised and commercialised as it became a (primarily urban) industry. Newfoundland-based recording labels were founded beginning in the late 1970s. Pigeon Inlet Productions by musician Kelly Russell was founded in 1979, Singsong Inc. was started by Jim Payne in 1989, and Amber Music formed by Pamela Morgan, Anita Best, both members of Figgy Duff, and Andre Wall in 1991. Home recording studios also became popular in the 1990s in Newfoundland.

The performance context of Newfoundland dance music thus increasingly shifted to playing for a listening audience rather than as an accompaniment for community dances. At one time in Newfoundland, the measure of a good musician was how danceable their playing was (Smith, 2007, 150). The shift in music to a listening context and the spread of recordings led musicians to compare and validate their own playing in relation to that on recordings, which emphasised the music itself rather than the social relations it helped create (Rex Clark, 2009, public discussion; O’Shea, 2008, 27; Osborne, 2007, 198). Standard tuning, clear intonation, detailed ornamentation, and improvisation have all become important to the aesthetics of playing traditional music in Newfoundland. Additionally, there are a number of musicians in St. John’s who are full-time professional musicians, embodying these changes and reproducing them in their own performances and recordings. What it means precisely to be good at playing traditional music has then changed dramatically in the past hundred years through the production and consumption

of recordings, professional concerts, and participation in sessions by professional musicians.

In practice, it is difficult to separate the categories of ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ (Osborne, 2007: 192). The question is not just whether a musician gets paid but includes their musical ability and social networks, among other criteria. Nevertheless, self-proclaimed amateur musicians almost always assign greater status to those they judge to be professionals. This status is assigned in part because professional musicians are usually believed to have greater musical ability, although one professional musician pointed out to me that this is not always the case. All of the participants in my research who are generally recognised traditional musicians in St. John’s are also professionals in some capacity.⁹ As a result, a musician’s status derived from their connection to ideals of tradition dovetails with their status as professionals, ensuring their high position in musical hierarchies. Rapuano (2005) observed a similar confluence of hierarchal positions held by musicians playing in Chicago. In addition, those who rely exclusively on music for a living are accorded special status as ‘full-timers’ for the ‘guts’ it takes to play music for a living. One musician who has occasionally been paid for playing said, “they’ve got nerve” and “I’ve got a lot of respect for people who can do that”.

In contrast, musicians who do not feel they have put in the same effort, or do not want to, deny their status as musicians. Alex, whose comments opened this article, explained “If I’m not a musician it’s simple, I’m just doing it for fun and if it’s not perfect then that’s too bad because I’m not a musician.” There are also tensions between the status and authority accorded to professional musicians and ideals of community learning associated with traditional music and with sessions, which emphasise egalitarianism and communalism. Musicians are therefore judged not only on their professionalism and ability, but also on their sociability. Others will comment that so-and-so is a ‘lovely player’, but they will also point out whether they are a ‘lovely person’. Such a person is welcoming of others and easy and fun to play and get along with. Alternatively, musicians might discuss how another musician is unwelcoming, arrogant, and imposing.

Conclusion

Sandra, a musician who does not describe herself as such and who is “from away”, insightfully told me:

If you want to get into the politics of it, everybody should be a musician. Everybody is a musician... So there’s that whole idea of who is a musician anyway? Who has the right to pick up an instrument? Well, everybody should in the ideal world. But that said... I want to play way fast, you know what I mean. It’s all relative. I can’t play as fast as those guys.

As Sandra suggests, there are politics involved in defining what ‘traditional Newfoundland music’ is and who is a ‘traditional Newfoundland musician’. As musicians contend in various ways with these politics, they assign status to themselves and to others based on

⁹ The confluence between professional and traditional musicians may be exaggerated among my participants, many of whom I met at professional sessions in an urban centre. There are recognised traditional musicians who are not professionals, though they are rarely seen at the sessions in town. They are also usually older musicians who are accorded respect for their age, as well as for their experience performing in traditional music in community dance contexts.

their performance of ideas and ideals of “tradition”, “Newfoundlandness” and “music(ianship)”. Through ideas of place- and community-based learning and performance situated in Newfoundland, musicians construct the “islandness” of Newfoundland through connections between the Island, traditional music, and personal and place-based histories (Suwa, 2007).

Yet, these connections also delimit boundaries constituting who and what “belongs”. In particular, the ‘Newfoundlandness’ of ‘Newfoundland music’ is defined, for some, in opposition to ‘Irish music’. In this regard, musicians who can establish connections between their personal experiences and learning in particular places and with particular people in Newfoundland, as well as demonstrating talent or being professional musicians, are granted a higher status as opposed to those who are not judged to have been born in the right environments or with the right skills (O’Shea, 2008; Rapuano, 2005). As a result, many musicians, like Alex and Sandra, then disclaim their status as musicians. Yet, in doing so, the work that they nevertheless do put into playing music and the connections they feel between their lives, the music they play, and the people they play with, go unacknowledged. At the same time, anthropologist Rodman (1992) has argued for scholars to consider the multiple ways in which physical space can be imbued with meaning, or the “multi-locality” of place. In constructing various boundaries and meanings associated with traditional Newfoundland music and musicianship, musicians in Newfoundland create different meanings and experiences of the Island, as well as of the music and of their lives living in this place.

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