

John Sikorski – covering letter

15 September 2005

To: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund (LUTSF)

Study visit to Eastern Canada & United States, researching percussive dance styles (Appalachian Clogging and Quebecois stepdance)

I am enclosing my report on my recent research trip to North America, which the Lisa Ullmann Trust very kindly chose to support. The project took place from 29 June – 01 August 2005. The first ten days were spent in Quebec, then two weeks in North Carolina, and finally a week in Cape Breton Island (Nova Scotia).

On reflection, I would say that the trip has surpassed my expectations in unexpected ways. I succeeded in visiting all three regions outlined in my proposal, and in working with dancers from each tradition. In addition however, I spent some time with a Cossack dancer in Montreal, as well as participating in Square dancing and some Old time fiddle lessons in North Carolina, which have all cultivated a deeper understanding of that particular tradition.

In covering such a diversity of styles at the one time, I feel my appreciation of the dancing/music, as well as of myself as a performing artist have been deepened. I must confess that the highlight of the trip was certainly the immersion in the old time traditions of the Appalachians. I feel that I have developed stylistically, as well as realising an intense connection with the music of this area. The other (unexpected) highlight was my encounter with the Ukrainian dancer, which has reinforced my sense of tradition.

I continue to acknowledge the LUTSF's support as I teach these various styles in my workshops and courses.

Once again, I would like to thank Lisa Ullmann Trust for supporting my artistic discovery.

Yours sincerely

John Sikorski

JOHN SIKORSKI – REPORT.

Professional Development Visit to USA, Quebec & Cape Breton Island to study Appalachian Clogging and Canadian stepdance styles. 29 June – 01 August 2005.

My recent research trip to North America has above all given me the inspiration to develop my existing talents as a solo performer, as well as providing a broader insight into what is possible. Geographically, I have managed to accomplish more than originally anticipated, having visited Quebec, North Carolina and also Cape Breton Island (Nova Scotia).

I started in Montreal, where I was joined for the week by Kristen Andreassen from the Footworks Percussive Dance Ensemble. Kristen is also a well-known musician/clogger in the US old time music scene. Over the course of the week, we spent much time exchanging dance steps from each other's repertoires. This gave me a chance to brush up on Appalachian steps, before heading to North Carolina.

One of my key targets for this venture had been percussive dancer Sandy Silva, of 'Bottine Souriante' band. Sandy is distinct from other percussive dancers whom I have met, in that she has fused aspects from different styles together, having taken, more than any other dancer I know, the components and invented a distinct style of her own. I was privileged to have spent an entire afternoon with Sandy Silva, during which we openly discussed her experience and approach as a solo creative artist. I found Sandy enormously inspiring, and this session enabled me to develop a much deeper understanding of creative practice with respect to dance and rhythm.

I had two sessions with a Quebecois percussive contemporary dancer, Marie-Soleil Pilette, who had been highly recommended by Sandy Silva. Marie-Soleil taught me a set of traditional Quebecois steps, and it was interesting to see the close similarity to the Cape Breton style, but with a different emphasis. I spent some time discussing Marie-Soleil's broader work, and looked at some video footage from her own group 'Sans Temps', including an interesting percussive piece she had choreographed in ¾ time.

Prior to arrival, I had established contact with a contemporary dance student in Montreal, Natalie Wilkinson. Natalie has Ukrainian heritage, and belongs to the Montreal-based Ukrainian dance company, Troyanda. Having previously sampled this percussive and highly acrobatic Cossack dance style when in Moscow with the Scottish Stepdance Company, I was keen to take advantage of contact with local Ukrainian dancers. Although this dance form is very distinct, it is of significance to my practice because of its strong traditions. Natalie taught me a number of steps from the Ukrainian Carpathian mountains, including a rather complex turning step. We discussed the different styles of dancing found within the Cossack culture.

I was disappointed to learn that there are no music sessions where local dancers perform, and so it was difficult to find Quebecois stepdancing outside the visits that I had set up.

Following my time in Quebec, I spent two weeks in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. This area is renowned for its vibrant traditions of old time fiddle music and Appalachian clogging. I believe it is essential to visit an area in order to experience its culture, and this section of the trip was definitely the highlight in terms of inspiration and joy.

Another key contact had been Ira Bernstein, and I spent time in Ira's studio in Asheville, where we focused on crucial points of style within the Appalachian flatfooting tradition. I was also forced to consider the stylistic differences between my 'first' (Cape Breton) style and its looser Appalachian cousin, and I feel this has led to a deeper understanding of stepdance styles in general, and their relationships to each others' music traditions.

My visit coincided with the 'Swannanoa Gathering' festival, one of the most important old time festivals in the Appalachians. There were a number of ex Green Grass Cloggers present at this time. The Green Grass Cloggers formed in the '70s and were key in the revival of Appalachian clog dancing. One of the most valuable outcomes from this visit was from a session spent analysing video footage of older flatfooters from western North Carolina. It was most educational to observe the diversity of dancers' own styles within the scope of the tradition.

I participated in a square dance calling course, which enabled me to dance traditional square dances to live music, and gain an authentic experience of the native dance culture, as well as attending farmers' dances in the Asheville area. I found the square dance figures very interesting, and will be able to use some of this material in my own teaching work, in contrast to our Scottish set dances.

I spent some time learning from Grace Haaland, a clogger with the Applehill Cloggers in Chapel Hill. As a young dancer, Grace's style was more representative of the more contemporary clogging style, in contrast to the older flatfooting style. We exchanged steps from each other's repertoires, and the sessions were very rewarding, giving me a number of new clogging steps to augment my repertoire.

I studied with another former Green Grass Clogger, Andy Edmunstone during my stay. Andy's style is fairly traditional, and as an old time musician herself, we spent much of our time discussing the musical qualities of the Appalachian tradition. I also took some old time fiddle classes with the highly respected Rayna Gellert, which was tremendously beneficial in developing an appreciation of the phrasing and emphasis within the dance music.

During my visit to the Asheville area I established a strong understanding of the Appalachian dance and music traditions, which owe so much of their existence to their Scots and Irish heritage.

The final week of my trip was spent in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Here I attended four local dances in different communities across Cape Breton, and met Harvey Beaton, whom I originally learned from. In addition, I performed a concert in Inverness County with Andrea Beaton (piano) & Glen Graham (fiddle); both are highly respected musicians from the Cape Breton tradition. Andrea arranged for me to spend the morning in the archives of the Celtic Music Interpretive Centre in Judique, where I looked through a number of videos of dancers from the past two decades. It was interesting that all the dancers keep to a very traditional style, with freedom of expression much less evident than in the Appalachian style.

In terms of creative opportunity, the trip to Cape Breton was the least fulfilling, as traditions here are fairly conservative, and I have found the people to be on the whole very protective of their culture. However, I did meet with Lisa Gallant, a young stepdancer and percussionist with the band 'Slainte-mhath'. Lisa and I spent two mornings working with less familiar Cape Breton steps, and comparing the style with the Appalachian clogging style. I also met stepdancer Tracy Dares who taught me a figure from the Cape North Set as well as a couple of steps she had invented.

In conclusion, I would say that trip in its entirety has been very worthwhile. The LUTSF's decision to support my research trip has allowed me to examine a diverse cross section of percussive stepdance styles of North America. It has led to a deeper understanding not only of the dance and music context, but has also enabled a realisation of my own creative potential and purpose as a dancer/musician.

I have already incorporated new material into performances including the recent Edinburgh Festival (Spiegel tent), as well as introducing these steps into workshops throughout Scotland, including primary schools in Islay and a festival in NW Sutherland. I continue to acknowledge LUTSF's support orally through my teaching and performing work.

The only recommendation that I would make is to provide artists with attractive LUTSF T-shirts, as this could have wider publicised the Trust's support, both during the trip and at subsequent events & workshops.