

Dear LUTSF,

I wish to thank you greatly for supporting the travel cost of my Appalachian Flatfooting Research Project from 30/07/13 – 28/08/13 in the Appalachian mountains of W. Virginia and Virginia, USA. I travelled to the heartland of Appalachian Flatfooting in order to bring a greater understanding of the dance and its roots to my practice as a percussive and contemporary dancer, teacher, and choreographer. The purpose of the project was to

1/ Develop my flatfooting skills

2/ Better understand the clogging styles from a roots level, learning from living legends

3/ To gain integrity in my clogging practice

4/ To network and develop possible collaborations

I believe that this project was a huge success and that the aims were achieved even beyond what I had imagined. I experienced the real heart of flatfooting during my time in the USA, got stuck in and was accepted into the style with a second place rosette at Clifftop, respect from past teachers and new, endless jamming and sharing, and a lot of fun!

I found that, because I had planned and researched my trip and pre-warned of my project and arrival, it was very easy to slip right into the middle of the scene, and make the most out of it – and allowed me to delve deeper into the rich scene.

I have developed so many connections and contacts from this trip, and I am already in planning to bring some artists from the USA over to the UK and organise an inspirational clogging weekend. I am also sharing information about my project through the classes I teach and sharing my newfound skills and understanding.

I would never have been able to have this amazing opportunity without the help of LUTSF. It has come at exactly the right time in my development, and I feel justified in my practice, and excited about the flourishing that is happening as a result of this trip.

Many thanks,

Alice Cade

REPORT

Appalachian Flatfooting Research Project 30/07/13 - 28/08/13 Appalachian mountains of W. Virginia and Virginia

This August I travelled to the Appalachian mountains of W. Virginia and Virginia to the homeland of Flatfoot dancing with the help of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. The aims of this project were to simply develop my flatfooting skills, gain a better understanding of clogging styles from a roots level, and thus enhance the integrity of my Flatfooting practice (especially as an 'outsider'!) I visited 2 large gatherings of Old-time musicians and dancers and then travelled along the Blue Ridge of the Appalachians, pursuing recommendations from the many greats of flatfooting whom I had met along the way.

My Appalachian adventure started at Clifftop Appalachian String Band Festival, W. Virginia, a week-long gathering of more than 4,000 of "some of the nation's finest string band musicians and flat-foot dancers", as well as international visitors! Every day there were dance workshops, flatfoot jams, and music sessions late into the evening.

It was in the daytime workshops that I met Charlie Burton, one of the biggest inspirations of the trip. At 82, Charlie is one of the oldest living teachers of this Appalachian art. He learned his first steps from his dad growing up in Kentucky and is seen teaching throughout the eastern United States at many old time music festivals. On the first day, I went to the workshop early in order to introduce myself to him, as we had been in email contact about my trip. He immediately invited me

to do a demonstration at the beginning of the session – a great if slightly daunting way of introducing me to all the flatfooters at Clifftop. In the following days, some of the others doing demos were flatfooting greats Rodney Sutton, an original Greengrass clogger (precursor to flatfooting style and much more 'flashy'); Jay Bland, an amazing exponent of the very percussive intricate style of flatfooting (winner of this year's dance contest 40-60 yrs); and many others of varying styles and ages. (See Videos: Rodney Sutton demo, Jay Bland demo, Charlie Burton Demo)

As well as his kind and playful nature that opens up the dance to all, part of what makes Charlie Burton's teaching special is that he teaches his steps based on 'commonality'. This means that he recognizes that the infinite variety of flat-footing steps all are based on a handful of primary steps. I had never come across this way of breaking down the steps, and although I'm sure this approach would have been useful earlier on in my learning, for it to come now has meant that I am now able to break from the set steps I have already under my belt and freely improvise within the structure of the primary step concepts. And really this is liberating and allows the dancer to properly respond to the music.

The sense of play and 'making up new steps' is another thing that was inspiring about Charlie. Every day, after the workshop, some members of the band would continue playing, and a few dancers would hang about chatting to Charlie and the other tutors. It was during these times I had the opportunity to jam with Charlie, and indeed with other legends like Rodney Sutton and Jay Bland, sharing steps and making up new ones, playing around with existing ones, really discovering how far one could go with the sounds and visuals of the step. There was one particular step that Charlie taught me, that had been made up by his grandfather (and Charlie is 82 now, so...!). The step is based on the illusion of one foot sliding under the other and I took to it well. In fact, I took that step with me to the next festival, Galax, and to the Friday jam in Floyd, and actually all the way up the Blue Ridge, and back here to the UK – and at each place, teaching that step to the dancers I met. This passing on of steps has made me feel really part of the tradition.

The music jams made up a huge part of both Clifftop and Galax gatherings. Musicians would jam together all over the camping area all day and all night. As a dancer, I often joined in stepping on the wooden porch of the club building, or on a step-a-toon (dance board) that Charlie Burton had lent me. In fact, throughout Clifftop, there had been many a discussion about dance surfaces and shoes, traditions, origins, and new fads, taps or no taps. Again, as with most things flatfooting-related, no definitive rules were laid down, Charlie preferring to use cornflour sprinkled on a wooden floor or board to make it easy to slide (an element of flatfooting which I had not been aware of before), and even some folk dancing in trainers! All in all, it seemed to me that the true flatfooting folk were really not as bothered about the conventions of the dance as much as people dancing the style in the UK! Perhaps a real understanding of a fluid and changing tradition such as flatfooting allows for such broad-mindedness, whereas when I felt as if I was just approximating and imitating the style, not really understanding its roots, I had to hang on to any perceived rules that I could perhaps too strongly. Indeed, the range of valid interpretations of flatfooting that I witnessed during this trip was astonishing and refreshing, and brought home to me that this is a tradition that is alive and that I can now say I am a part of.

We were very lucky at Clifftop to have the presence of Ira Bernstein. Ira was in fact my first teacher, travelling to the UK once a year to run Flatfooting workshops at Reading Cloggies Festival. A recognised master in the dance (and indeed in percussive dance in general), and in its study, Ira unfortunately now suffers from Parkinson's disease. His presence at Clifftop was unexpected and a great honour. He has found certain ways to deal with his illness and continue flatfooting, albeit not to his former standard, by starting slowly and simply, and by explaining what he is doing as he is focussing on it. His teachings in Charlie's classes were inspirational, and returning to his ideas and thoughts on Flatfooting was for me very special and threw new light on what I had learnt from him so many years ago. You can see the passion and interest in the roots, history, present and future of the dance in his demo (see Video). It was a great pleasure for me to re-introduce myself to him, his remembrance of me as a student, our talks about all things flatfooting, his seeing me dance, the mutual respect.

Clifftop culminates in a dance contest on the Sunday. Like many other solo folk dances, flatfooting has developed and grown around contests (e.g. Irish step dance fleadh). This fact only dawned on me on my trip, that there are so many parallels with Irish dancing in that flatfooting is a solo dance that originated from the flash 'showing off' bits that people used to throw in when dancing set dances, or in the case of flatfooting, square dances (with 8 people in formation). Anyway, of course I entered the competition. I felt so proud to even be up there, dancing my 2 minutes of improvised flatfooting, having borrowed Charlie Burtons step-a-toon (made from ultra light but clean/loud sounding aircraft board), and with both Charlie and Ira Bernstein and many of the other masters supporting me at the side of the stage, cheering me on and giving me tips on how to calm nerves etc! With the culmination of the week's flatfooting frenzy in my feet and my soul, I was on fire with musicality, humour and style in my dancing, and won 2nd place in the 16-40yrs age group! More than just a sense of achievement, this added to my growing feeling that I was being accepted into the development of flatfooting, into its history, that I had the right to call myself a flatfooter despite my lack of Appalachian roots.

An excellent dancer called Josephine Stewart won in my category and, later that evening during the jams, she let me use her board alternately with her, sharing rhythms, and doing probably what you would call a 'dance-off'. Ira was there too, and it was a special proud moment for me. Receiving 2nd place!



There were not so many classes or things like that at the second gathering, Galax, so it was more of a personal journey to find the little pockets where the dancing was happening. I took my board (that I had found on the campsite!) around the various music jam sessions, and joined in with my feet. Often I was the only dancer, and the music was more varied than at Clifftop so my style had to adapt! I became well known in the jam camps.

Towards the end of the week the dance contest was approaching, so more flatfooters came out of the woodwork, and there were often 10 or more dancers dancing to the bands or sessions on big communal boards. The variation in styles and ages was incredible, united by the fact they were having a great time!

A photo of me sharing moves with an old flatooter, TK.

There is a video of me dancing at a late night jam at Galax:
http://youtu.be/EFHXptRC_T0



Towards the end of the week, I came across a young dancer called Samantha Wilhemi, who was jamming to some lovely Old-time music. She was an incredible dancer, with very complex, fast, flashy and modern moves, what she calls contemporary clogging. It was very exciting to watch, and soon we were jamming together – I taught her Charlie's grandad's step, and she taught me a few of hers, and we talked about her style and the controversy around it in traditional flatfooting contests. I really enjoyed being introduced to this way in which flatfooting has developed – a branch I suppose – and now recognise contemporary clogging's influence on dancers that I admire, for example Nic Gareiss and his use of percussive dance as a concert dance; and for where I would like to take the style within my own practice. See in Videos for her amazing dancing.

After Galax, I made my way along a route recommended by many of the people I had met. I attended flatfooting workshops (mainly basic level), and travelled to the Blue Ridge Music Centre and learnt about the history of the music and dance in that area renowned for its vibrancy. At the music centre, Maggie Anderson (Old time dobro player) invited me to dance in her mini concert, and everywhere people were intrigued by my flatfooting story.



I spent some time in Floyd, famous for its Friday nights at the Country Store. People come from near and far every Friday for concerts, a huge flatfooting jam, then numerous jams all along the main street into the night. It was incredible to see so many people dancing all together, the floor was bouncing! There I met Todd Fulmer, a great dancer from North Carolina, with whom I jammed for hours, copying moves and outdoing one another. I found that the best way to learn was to assimilate another dancer's moves, learning and developing my own style – it was very hard not to! The weekend in Floyd continued with a music session on the Sunday, all in a circle in the back room of the Country store, with me and a few other dancers stepping away in the centre. I felt so proud to be part of this wonderful tradition.



Throughout this inspirational trip I have learnt more than I can write here about flatfooting, about my practice, about the nature of traditional dance and where it is going or can go, about Appalachian mountain folk, about belonging, musicality, jamming, and rhythm. I have felt immense pride about a culture of dance that I can truly feel I am part of now, and it has given me the confidence, inspiration and rooting that I needed in order to take it and develop it in my own way, within my own practice. I have the tools to teach it without feeling like I'm an impostor, with true knowledge and understanding, and the ability and framework to develop it in my own way as an exciting percussive performance style.

With many thanks to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for supporting my travel to make this life-changing trip happen. Thank you.

Alice Cade