

# News from Canada—Opening the Doors of Cooperation for Traditional Dance, Music and Song in the Northern Wilderness

written by Bev Bernbaum, an interview with Katie Avery

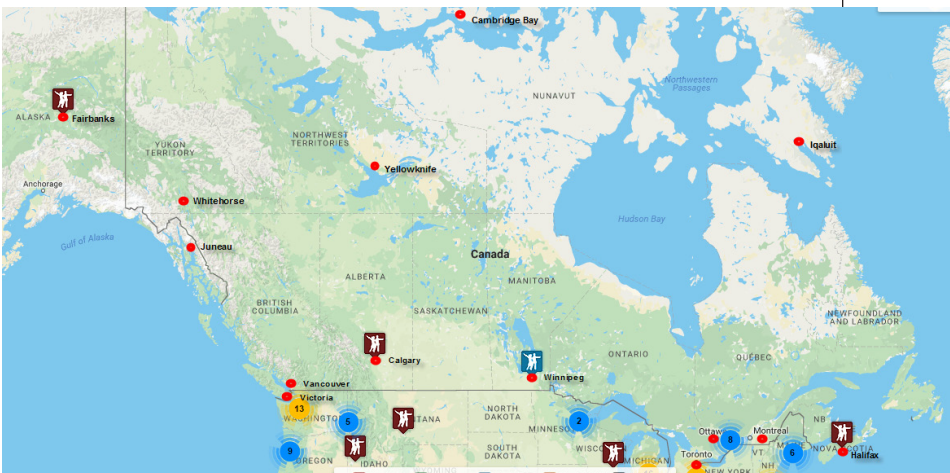
In early 2011, I had an awesome opportunity. I was working on a project in the territory of Nunavut (NU). It was the farthest north I'd ever been in Canada. I spent four weeks in Iqaluit, the capital of NU, and another week in Cambridge Bay, a hamlet in the center of the territory north of the Arctic Circle. If you use Google Maps to find these two places, you'll see that Iqaluit is a three to four and a half hour flight from Toronto, Ottawa or Montreal, and Cambridge Bay is a six hour flight from Calgary, all cities with traditional dance, music and song communities that have been featured in the "News from Canada" column.

Even though I was only going to be in the north for five weeks, I was a bit concerned about not having a dance or music outlet for that long. Some relatively local contra dance friends connected me with a couple of musicians who had spent three years living in Iqaluit. I got in touch with them to gather information about the town, advice and local

to be in Iqaluit!

I wish now that I'd taken some pictures at the session. If memory serves, there were six to eight people there, all "from away" with different stories about what had brought them to Iqaluit. There were fiddlers, whistle players, guitar players, and me with my little banjo. They played mostly Scottish tunes and changed keys often (tricky for a banjo player) but I held my own often just strumming chords. It was such a treat to be in the company of these lovely welcoming folks and to have something in common to do other than work. Traditional music had brought us together.

I asked them about other forms of music, dance and song in Iqaluit. They told me that these kinds of things were typically organized by people from away who found themselves in the north, often just temporarily for various lengths of time. They told me about someone who had organized a community choir that met once a week and that was still going strong. They told me about a fellow who had come up years before and organized a square dance. Apparently some of the local Inuit had gone to it and claimed it as Inuit dancing. That fellow had long since left so the square dance had fallen apart but someone else had come more recently and organized a swing dance to recorded music. The swing dance was still happening sporadically. They mentioned that the tune jam ebbed and flowed with the mix of musicians changing as people came and went, but they'd always managed to maintain a core to keep it going. Interestingly, traditional aboriginal dance, music and song events seemed carefully hidden from this outsider.



contacts. We had a great chat and I found out about a tune jam session that happened monthly, often at the home of a famous polar explorer. I was intrigued!

When it came time to go, I packed up my 3/4 size "pony" banjo since it would fit in the airplane overhead compartment and literally headed to the great white north. It was January 2011. I got in touch with the jam session folks and as it happened, the timing was perfect and there was one planned while I was going

I had no such luck in trying to find a jam session or any other activities related to dance or song in Cambridge Bay but that didn't really surprise me. In 2011 Iqaluit was a relatively busy town with a population of 7000 people<sup>1</sup>. Cambridge Bay only had 1200 people<sup>2</sup> and by the time I arrived there in February, it was the bleakest winter. The farthest I was willing to walk was from the clinic to the

1 <http://nunavuttourism.com/regions-communities/iqaluit>

2 <http://nunavuttourism.com/regions-communities/cambridge-bay>

apartment I was staying in due to the dark and cold, only three blocks. I was relieved that I was only in Cambridge Bay for one week. But I actually loved being in Iqaluit because it had an energy that I really enjoyed, and I'd love to go back.

Since then, I've often wondered about the other northern territories to the west, Northwest Territories (NWT) and the Yukon Territory (YT), and whether any traditional dance, music and song activities were happening there. I was delighted when I found out that Katie Avery, a soon to be thirty-something fiddler and Suzuki violin teacher from Guelph, ON had moved to Whitehorse, the capital of YT.

Just to give you a sense of how far north and west that is, Whitehorse is a two to four hour flight from the traditional dance, music and song communities in Vancouver, Victoria and Calgary. Across the border in Alaska, Juneau is a 2-1/2 hour drive and 6-1/2 hour ferry ride away, and Anchorage or Fairbanks typically involve nine hour flights due to the multiple stops required. Compared to Iqaluit and Cambridge Bay, Whitehorse is a *huge* metropolis with a population of approx. 26,000<sup>3</sup>. I chatted with Katie via Skype recently to find out how she happened to be in the westernmost territory of the Canadian north.

Katie just celebrated the fourth anniversary of her arrival in Whitehorse in September. Back in 2012, she had dinner with her violin teacher who suggested that because Katie was young and single, she might be interested in a grand adventure teaching for the nonprofit Suzuki Strings Association of the Yukon (SSAY). The program had started 21 years ago but had not had a live-in teacher for the last five years. The organization would apply for grants and fly teachers to Whitehorse every six to eight weeks for a weekend or a couple of weeks at a time. Katie emailed to say she was probably interested in the live-in position and to find out more but didn't hear anything back. Serendipity prevailed and while she was visiting some Canadian friends in Egypt, met some friends of a neighbor who just happened to be from the Yukon and knew about the SSAY program and the quest for a live-in teacher. Very small world. The next day while Katie was in Cairo, she'd received an enthusiastic email from Whitehorse saying they had not received her first inquiry, definitely wanting to talk to her.

"When I came and took over, it felt like this program was really on the verge of collapse. It really felt like if I hadn't have shown up when I did, that there just wouldn't have been enough students left to make it worth someone's while to move here," Katie said, though she admitted that she could be wrong about

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hikebiketravel.com/25539/25-fun-interesting-facts-whitehorse-yukon/>

that. She began teaching group and private violin classes for the SSAY upon arrival in Whitehorse. She explained that Suzuki training is a classically-based method traditionally used to teach violin to young children<sup>4</sup>. Katie took over a group of public school students in her second year from another teacher. Since all of the groups and private students were learning the same curriculum, after a while she suggested combining the groups together to achieve some economies of scale but that was met with strong resistance from the association. After 2-1/2 years of trying to work within the politics, Katie decided she'd had enough.

Katie has been teaching Suzuki method on her own in Whitehorse for the last year and a half. She has 20-25 private students and continues to teach the public school program that has another 20 kids. Now the only person she officially works with is a teacher at the school who does the kid wrangling, grant writing and organizational management. All she has to do is show up and teach. It's a great synergistic relationship. "Now that I'm teaching by myself, I can have group classes that mix my private students with the public school students and everybody wins," Katie said. Her beginner group class has 3 year olds and 12 year olds in it learning the same curriculum and it's just not a big deal. Her more advanced group has ages 6 through to adults in it. "Everybody benefits from a multi-generational class."

Katie gave me a very basic primer in Suzuki method, describing it as having elements of folk upbringing. Everyone learns the same songs in the same order so everyone can play violin together, and by and large progress to the next levels together, assuming similar amounts of dedication and practice time. She said that in cities with a larger population base, Book 1 students in a group class will all be within three years of age of each other. But Whitehorse is too small to support having classes separated by age, and even by ability level, so she's had to be creative about creating classes and developing repertoire that will engage her mix of students.

With all the students taking Suzuki violin, I asked Katie if there was any traditional music, dance or song scene in Whitehorse. She mentioned that there was a bit of a traditional music scene. She tried to facilitate a folk jam without categorizing it into a specific type of music (e.g. Irish, old time, etc.) but that involved teaching people how to participate in that kind of a forum and proved onerous so she stopped hosting them. However, that led to meeting musicians who already knew how to play folk music and she has a small group of people who like to get together to play fiddle tunes. Katie mentioned that there's a small Bluegrass community that has a camp

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suzuki\\_method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suzuki_method)

every year that brings some excellent musicians up to Whitehorse. There's a folk club that has a concert once a month in a church basement with an open stage and a featured performer, not always traditionally based. Katie played her favorite solo concert there last year and really appreciated the nice listening audience. She mentioned that there is lots of live music in town but it's happening in bars and is more of an outlet for rock and roll and jazz.

When I asked about dance, Katie told me that a group called the Fiddleheads hosts two to three family-style barn dances a year. They usually have a fiddler and a piano player and a caller that Katie thought had come from away with some square or contra dance history. "People really love it."

Katie coached the Fiddleheads for the first three years she was in Whitehorse. Her understanding is that the Fiddleheads started as an extracurricular Suzuki activity. "The kids that were in the Suzuki program also wanted to do some fiddling so that was an extra class." Over the years, it had become its own organization but was also lacking in teaching leadership at the time Katie arrived so she took it on too. However, as the Suzuki program became more popular she focused her time and efforts on that since there were very few people there with her skill set. Katie handed off the Fiddleheads to another fiddle teacher in town.

Uniting all of the musicians in Whitehorse as much as possible is important to Katie and has been her goal. She encourages crossover for the students. She has several private Suzuki students who are also part of Fiddleheads. Katie, the two part-time Suzuki teachers and the Fiddleheads teacher are well connected and stay involved in the greater community to get the kids participating as much as possible. And she really could not be happier about the work she's doing right now. "It's pretty great." She's settled nicely into her role as teacher and likes that she's been able to bring so many different sorts of people together to play music and seeing how they inspire and motivate each other. "It's a great bunch of kids and adults."

In the YT, Katie occasionally mentions that she misses contra dancing and people tell her to just start a dance! But it's not quite that simple. She said "if someone really into contra moved to Whitehorse and knew how to call, it would be totally possible to get a dance started. People are really into that kind of activity, something active that's also social is really good for the winter time." But it would take serious commitment to advertise and market in order to bring people out. She suggested having a contra dance class to teach some people how to do it first and then have social dances.

We talked about potential funding for school programs to teach contra dancing classes. Katie mentioned that there is a "vast amount of arts funding" available in YT but in order to be eligible as an individual, you have to have lived there for a year. She told me that the school Suzuki program she's teaching offers violins and free lessons during the school day to kids that are interested, but she doesn't know how the school funding works.

Katie's comment about someone moving to the area to start an activity reminded me of the comments I'd heard when I was in Iqaluit. It often took people to come from away with the commitment to start something and make it happen. I'd mentioned to the jam session musicians in Iqaluit that I was a contra dance caller and that I thought that they'd make a fine band. They were interested but four weeks just wasn't enough time to make a dance happen, and then I was gone. In January of this year, I thought I might end up working on a long term project in Whitehorse. I think that was when I first found out Katie had moved there. As it happened, that project never came to fruition but if it had, I would have contacted her to see if we could put something together. In my mind, there's opportunity for more traditional dance, music and song in the Canadian great white north. The tricky part is getting there and staying there long enough for the doors to open.

*Katie Avery was born in Guelph, ON and raised on folk and classical music. After graduating from U of T with a music degree, her life led her to the Yukon where she teaches full-time to a wonderful bunch of students in the art of fiddle and violin playing. She is in high demand there as a versatile musician and enjoys playing and recording with many other local musicians*



*By day, Bev Bernbaum is a healthcare information system consultant and often travels to faraway places for work. By night, she has been calling contra dances since 1998 at home in Toronto, across North America, in New Zealand and Denmark. Bev recently completed her second term on the CDSS Governing Board but continues her quest for great stories for the CDSS News from Canada column she co-manages with Rosemary Lach.*