



Six String Nation meets CFLSA

Report on the 2014 Fall Tour supported by
The Community Foundation of Lethbridge
and Southwestern Alberta

A Summation of the 9 days of activity built around Six String Nation's presence in the Lethbridge area as organized by the CFLSA between September 23rd and October 3rd, 2014.

by Jowi Taylor

Introduction

First it must be said that this was a standard-setting experience for us (myself and the guitar, *Voyageur*) and the work that we do to engage audiences, students and whole communities with the Six String Nation project. As such, it is perhaps worthwhile first to lay out the different ways that we engage our various audiences and then talk about how this particular tour met many of our objectives, where we might expand or improve aspects of the experience and how it all might be portable to other communities, Community Foundations and similar organizations across Canada.

As a guitar made from pieces of history, *Voyageur* clearly has equal strengths as both an entertainment and an educational device and it has always been my goal to bring a bit of each into the other whatever the presentation might be. So, for example, in a school setting or conference engagement where the storytelling and information aspects of the project are foregrounded, I insist on making sure there is someone to play the guitar as part of the presentation. It brings the musicality of the project into the picture and helps to infuse all the informational content with an emotional quality that comes to the surface when the guitar is brought to life by a musician. This in turn helps to bind together the people in the room in a unique way. They have shared an experience that the performance opportunity in the presentation – however short – helps to articulate. Likewise, when we're in a primarily performance based situation such as a concert or recording session, I make sure I take a little bit of time to point out and describe some of the elements of *Voyageur* and mention something of the philosophy and goals of the project. This helps to add a kind of depth and significance to the occasion so that the audience feels that they've been present for something a bit rare and special.

So, having said that, my activities with *Voyageur* include everything from informal club and concert appearances to elaborately developed presentation programs with the Windsor Symphony Orchestra; from festival participation including on-stage performances, informative workshops and our official photography station to national and international conference keynote presentations (sometimes also including the portrait component); and from school assemblies to classroom workshops, public library and other community presentations. And I also make *Voyageur* available for artist recordings and media events where appropriate. All of these activities happen at different levels and at a variety of fee scales and sometimes in combination.

The Lethbridge and Southwestern Alberta 2014 tour experience included several of these aspects of our activities into a single bundle and could certainly have included more with a bit more preparation. It's through that lens that I will try to summarize my impressions of the experience:

School Presentations

With the exception of one cancellation and the final day in the region, the tour was scheduled around two presentations per day. This is just about right as a pace. Most schools seem to be able to accommodate a 60-70 minute assembly in their day and it makes sense to plan for a morning and an afternoon session with travel, set up and a bit of preparation time in between.

One frustration that I felt on a couple of occasions (and that were also expressed to me later by teachers) was that I sometimes found myself presenting to a small group within a much larger school population and sometimes possibly not presenting to the optimum group *vis a vis* age and curriculum relevance. So, for example, I was expecting to be speaking to the secondary school group at the Piikani First Nation school but ended up speaking to just the grade 5 and 6 classes from the adjacent primary school. While the students seemed to enjoy the presentation, I'm not sure they got out of it what the older students might have had the school had a better idea of what was coming and how it might have met curriculum goals and that kind of thing. At LCI, I spoke to a mix of Fine Arts, Social Studies and Special Ed students instead of the whole school. In fact, that allowed us to take good advantage of the facilities offered by a smaller space within the school but it seemed that perhaps some teachers felt it was a missed opportunity to address a broader range of students. And at G.S. Lakie, we had one teacher in particular who seemed to feel that his grade 8 students would have really benefited from having seen the presentation and he found all sorts of curriculum synergies but was not included in the invitees.

Obviously, much depends on other events on the school schedule but it's worth putting greater emphasis on the resource document so that teachers and principals get a better idea about how the presentation might work for a wider range of students. I will also be working to improve that document (and eventually develop specific lesson plans) to help make things clearer for participating schools.

Non-School Presentations

The Friends of the Foundation dinner was the anchor event for this tour and it was great to be in a room with an appreciative adult audience after so much time spent with the younger school audiences!

It might be that a similar tour organized by another CF wouldn't have the same kind of occasion to use as an anchor but I think it's an important part of the mix and would gladly welcome other adult audience opportunities. Especially if the tour gets the kind of media coverage that this one did, it presents the opportunity to build a ticketed event even if there wasn't one already planned. We heard a lot from adults saying their kids had talked about the presentation at dinner time and that could also help drive traffic to a ticketed event, such as the concert we did in Strathcona with the Edmonton Community Foundation that included catering and wine tasting. At that event, my presentation formed the first half of the show and the second half was a concert of three short sets by prominent local musicians. This might require some impresarial skills outside the CF office but could be a great way to reach out to other organizations in the community, especially ones that might have benefited from CF grants in the past. So, for example, we might easily have added evening programs for a mixed audience at the theatre in Cardston (recipient of CFLSA assistance) or at the Opera House in Waterton. Again, I realize this might be outside the bailiwick of in-house staff at most CFs but it gives the chance to meet some other players in the community and have them take on the work they already know how to do while at the same time increasing visibility for the CF with different constituencies and different media.

The Vulcan Greenhouse Concert was a good example of where we might have been able to do a bit more and have had a bigger impact if we had a more solid communication with them in advance. They were very appreciative of us being there and I had a lot of people coming up to talk and ask questions afterwards but they weren't equipped to accommodate the full presentation in terms of tech or schedule. Connecting with someone more familiar with the local touring and event circuit might have helped us build that out into a higher value play. I ended up connecting to some people in the Lethbridge music community through my visits to the Owl Acoustic Lounge and the Lucky Star Guitar shop. Reaching out to those folks early could help expand our range of venues. Again, it wouldn't require more organization by the CFs and could serve to build relationships.

Technical Support

Having the suite of support gear rented (and borrowed) on my behalf was an absolute godsend and will likely be a condition of future such tours. The projector came in handy twice and the wireless headset mic was brilliant. I request these at every event and sometimes a school will say they have it but it turns out to be an inferior product connected to an inadequate sound system so this really helped me concentrate on the audience and the presentation and not so much on the tech (although, as everywhere, different schools have a wide range of in-house expertise with their own systems and you're never sure what you're walking into. The top quality gear we found in total disarray in Claresholm made for an almost comical situation but at least we didn't have to worry about the stuff we'd brought on our own).

Media

Two features in the Lethbridge Herald – including a front page – and prominent coverage on GlobalTV and CTV news shows PLUS interviews with Quirk and the Pincher Creek Echo – not bad at all! I hope that the media exposure helped to sell tickets to the Dinner. The one kind of media that we lacked on this trip was the music-based kind. I was a bit surprised we didn't get more attention from the University station as, traditionally, those have been great resources when travelling with the project. Of course, we're more likely to get that kind of coverage if there are more public events built around the visit. If, for example, someone from the Twin Butte General Store or the Owl Acoustic or the Geomatic Attic had been hosting an evening presentation with a local or visiting artist playing *Voyageur* then we might have been more likely to get buy-in from campus media or even commercial stations. Our visit to Sarnia ON got us interviews with three local commercial stations (including an in-studio appearance on the morning show on our way into town) and helped drive a massive turnout to a portrait session at a local bookstore. Our last visit to Calgary got us in-studio sessions at both CKUA and CJSW and our evening presentation at the National Music Centre with a variety of Calgary musicians was a packed-to-the-gills sell-out thanks, in part, to the increased exposure to that audience.

Again, these need not be something the CFs specifically go after but a relationship with local promoters might lead to increased media and greater visibility for the CF as a by-product of that kind of exposure.

Portraits

We didn't do the official portraits in Lethbridge as part of this tour.

I admit that it is (or at least appears to be) a fairly costly and complicated addition to the program. Indeed, apart from the additional fees required and the additional transportation and accommodation costs for the photographer, there are considerations for equipment rental (depending on the location), volunteer support, available space to install the portrait studio, and time – you need to have enough of it before and after the event to accommodate the demand for the portraits. And we've had line-ups go on for a long time to make sure everyone gets their chance to get good results in their photos. But I have included this section in the report in order to advocate for the feature and encourage other organizations to consider including it as part of the package. I'll just briefly describe the value of it and how it can be made more affordable:

I endeavour with the presentation to leave the audience feeling that they are part of a community that is wider, deeper and more connected than they might have thought. The fact that people will line up to pose with local photographers or snap each other with cameras and smartphones is testament to the fact that they feel inspired to take away some evidence of that connection. Offering them the official portrait feature truly makes them part of the project that goes out across the country. They share in common with thousands of other Canadians that they've had their portraits taken in this particular way by this particular photographer while they hold this piece of history in their hands. From the Six String Nation point of view, this adds to the extraordinary gallery that already exists. For our hosts – who receive a full set of the portraits electronically – it becomes a communications asset and links them both to the project and to their funders and constituents in an ongoing way. And for the subjects, it becomes a memento of the event and a direct connection to the project and all the others who have come before.

The official photographer need only be brought in for a single event and we can do as many as two sessions over the course of a day and a half presence. It can help drive ticket sales if kids who've seen the project at school compel their families to attend the ticketed public event in order to have the portrait opportunity. And recognition of sponsors can be built into the design of the photos that are distributed following the event so costs can be defrayed in that way. I realize this won't be an option for all CFs just as it isn't an option for all events we do, but we've had both NSB conference clients and some public schools choose the option and I believe it can add value in a number of ways all down the chain.

Fees and Occasions

I was very satisfied with the fee arrangement agreed upon for this tour and would be pleased to use a similar model for other CF or CF-type multi-presentation tours in the future. While the daily fee is a small fraction of my NSB conference engagement fee and equal to slightly less than a single school presentation fee, the string of occasions in the tour added up to a perfectly acceptable total and the work was so much in keeping with the ideals of the project that it felt like fair payment for work I'm very glad to be doing in sharing the project with the wider Canadian community.

While I am content with the remuneration for this tour, I feel it's important to re-iterate the relative value of the various occasions included just so other CFs who might consider mounting such a tour have a sense of the discount involved. The daily rate might change, for example, if a CF opted to organize fewer occasions or a shorter tour. Depending on the range of proposed tour configurations, it might be appropriate to establish a minimum.

NSB fees for a single occasion conference presentation are \$7500 plus taxes, travel, accommodation and expenses. NSB does also offer a slightly lower rate for some not-for-profit groups. Independent of NSB, I offer lower rates for organizations that don't typically have the budget for events that might make use of the services of a Speakers Bureau. These rates typically run between \$1800 and \$3400 plus taxes, travel and expenses.

The festival rate typically covers a weekend and necessarily includes the portrait feature. That runs between \$2500 and \$4200 plus taxes, travel, etc. depending on the shape of the festival and may include photo equipment rentals depending on the location.

I have a community rate that typically applies to an event such as a presentation at a ticketed community concert, which is \$1200-\$1500 plus taxes, travel, etc.

School visits typically run \$850 plus taxes and a travel allowance, though I will discount to as low as \$550 per school if multiple schools collaborate on a series of appearances within a board or district. This formula was the basis for what we agreed upon for this tour.

Costs to include the portrait feature are more fixed, typically running about \$1800 per day plus travel, accommodation, etc., depending on the location and event. Often, we'll do two photo sessions including a longer public one and a shorter one for VIPs.

Conclusion

Again, I can't begin to express my gratitude for the hard work of George, Erin, Joey and Deb and the support of the CFLSA board in pulling together the school districts and other parts of the community and making this tour possible. The hospitality was lovely and the duration of the tour gave me a chance to feel like I really got to know part of the city, the community and the region and to make some fine new friends.

I was thrilled with the reception by students, attendees at the Friends of the Foundation dinner and members of the public and the media who responded to the presentation and to *Voyageur* with such respect, curiosity and enthusiasm. It is experiences like this one that convince me that it was not a mistake to take on this project that has been at times so burdensome and yet filled with once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Getting to share those experiences in this way makes it all worthwhile.

From a project standpoint, the tour also put me in range of several Six String Nation "homecomings" – the opportunity to bring *Voyageur* to places from whence its constituent materials have originated. While there are still quite a few places to go (most of them quite far-flung), this trip permitted me to cross three important sources off the list and I was glad to be able to make the connections in those communities so people know that their story continues to be told through the Six String Nation.

I do believe that this tour provided a lot of value to the project, to the CFLSA and to the students and communities we managed to reach together. I also believe it established a great working model for subsequent tours and I do hope that what we accomplished together will inspire others to follow the lead of the Community Foundation of Lethbridge and Southwestern Alberta in embracing the Six String Nation.

Thank you once again for providing me with such an excellent opportunity to do the work I love doing and to further explore this beautiful country of ours.

