

Singing Storytellers: The Lives, Music and Verbal Artistry of Bards in our World

An International Interdisciplinary Symposium hosted by [Cape Breton University](#), in partnership with [Celtic Colours International Festival](#) and [CBC Cape Breton](#)

October 9 – 12th, 2014

For nine days in October, Cape Breton Island is home to a unique celebration of music and culture as the [Celtic Colours International Festival](#) presents dozens of concerts all over the island and an extensive line-up of community and educational events. Artists are invited from countries including Scotland, Ireland, Wales, England, Denmark, Spain, Brittany, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Germany as well as from across the United States and Canada to join the finest of Cape Breton's musicians, singers, dancers, storytellers and tradition-bearers.

Singing storytellers - *griots, kobzars, troubadours, ashiks, gusle players, sean-nós and seann-nòs singers, bards and epic singers*, men and women from countless narrative traditions around the world - have played a variety of complex roles in their communities and cultures. The long-time focus of study for ethnomusicologists and other scholars of culture, history and memory, they are multifaceted social agents - genealogists, historians, spokespersons and activists, diplomats, musicians, praise singers, healers, and advisors. Wordsmiths and performers, their verbal and musical art have been the subject of studies across disciplines - religious studies, history, music, folklore, anthropology, gender studies, linguistics and literature, to name a few. But recent studies of these bards and their practices in our contemporary world are relatively few.

The study of today's singing storytellers resonates with theoretical interest in ethnomusicology, humanities and social sciences. It offers opportunities to consider the importance of the individual in society, as well as the politics of representation. Whereas ethnomusicology has, more conventionally, invoked music as a symbol of national pride, cultural and national unity, or presented musical phenomena as typical products of a larger social organicism, this symposium also looks to the ways in which music is historically constructed, socially maintained, individually created and experienced. We will look to examples through which numerous interlocutors, processes, practices, statements and performances continually operate and fluidly reshape one another. We will consider the ways in which cultural performance and production are contingent on intersecting and mutually affecting aspects of experience entwined with identities. Contributing to a burgeoning literature on musicians' life stories, this topic brings to light the ways in which individuals function within cultural webs along the many avenues they travel — revealing shared practices and ideologies within specific locations and beyond. Aspects of identity and experience are shaped in the context of wider, changing historical, social and cultural pressures – which many singing storytellers deftly negotiate. Singing storytellers provide an opportunity for scholarly investigation that profoundly makes evident the complexity with which experiences and identities are created and performed through the lives, music and verbal artistry of individuals.

Call for Participation

[We](#) invite contributions from a rich array of scholars/practitioners/artists alike - to encourage investigations of and engagement with performers and their practices in our world today, through a variety of ways of knowing, and creating and sharing knowledge.

[We](#) invite proposals for various forms of presentation, including papers (either individual 20- minute papers with additional 10 minutes for discussion, or panels), keynotes, workshops, performances, roundtables, films and exhibitions (including of photographs and other visual materials, and interactive and multimedia installations).

- Workshops will run either 60 or 90 minutes
- Roundtables will run concurrently throughout the conference
- Theatre and studio space is available in addition to standard conference facilities

*****Symposium works will be considered for publication in a peer-reviewed, edited collection.*****

Submissions for papers or creative presentations MUST include:

- Title(s) – for panel (if applicable) and each individual presentation
- Presentation format/type
- Technical requirements
- 300 word abstract (of each individual presentation)
- 100-150 word abstract (of each individual presentation)
- Panel proposals also require a panel description of 100-200 words
- Each presenter(s) one-page C.V.
- Each presenter(s) institutional affiliation (or indication if you are an independent scholar/artist), including department or division
- Each presenter(s) complete contact information, including postal and email address, and telephone number

ALL SUBMISSIONS MUST INCLUDE ALL OF THIS DETAILED INFORMATION FOR EACH PRESENTER, or your abstract will NOT be eligible for consideration. The detailed information and materials requested are necessary in order for the conference organizers to apply for travel/event funding.

PLEASE SEND YOUR SUBMISSIONS to singingstorytellers@gmail.com by **March 15, 2014**. The subject line of the email is *Singing Storytellers proposal – [name]*. PLEASE ATTACH THE INFORMATION and MATERIALS IN .DOC FORMAT.

Please write to us at singingstorytellers@gmail.com if you have any questions! For information and updates, check the conference [WEBSITE](http://www.singingstorytellers.ca) (www.singingstorytellers.ca).

We look forward to receiving your proposal – and to welcoming you to Cape Breton!

MORE ABOUT SINGING STORYTELLERS...

As ethnomusicologist Phil Bohlman writes of *epic*, the historical core of bardic material, it:

provided the framework for the classical, the foundation of human creativity and history that was true to the past. The author (Bharata) or authors of the *Natya Shastra* constructed the Brahmanic past out of the narrative imagining of the Rama; the author (Homer) or authors of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were no less obsessed in writing multiple pasts in the classical voice of singular authority. Epic diverted the ethnographers' gaze to the past, Johan Gottfried Herder in the eighteenth-century

Central Europe, no less than Ibn Khaldun in fourteenth-century North Africa, turned to the epics of al-Andalus from even earlier centuries to search for the meanings of Europe at its historical beginnings. (Bohlman 2012: ix)

The epic singers and bards and new kinds of singing storytellers of today continue to engage memory and history in powerful ways. Rather than merely echoing the past, though, contemporary singing storytellers “sing in active voice of a modern and changing ethnomusicology” (Bohlman 2012:ix). They sing and tell stories of a modern and changing world, in ways that engage historical practices and new media, too.

Who are the important singing storytellers of today – and what stories are they telling? What are they singing about? To what ends? What roles do they play in relation to culture and the arts, history and memory, belief, health and wellbeing, politics, economics and other realms? How do they craft their words and musics? How do they sound – how do their performances appear? How are historical traditions and practices a part of to contemporary performances? Where and in what contexts do today’s singing storytellers create and perform, and for whom? How does their creative work shape – and how is it shaped by – the worlds around them? What are their lives like day to day – and how do issues and circumstances of our contemporary lives shape their broader experiences, production and performance? For example, how do mobility, migrancy and hybridity - creative and hybrid worlds in motion - either enable or constrain production and performance, and subjectivities? These are just some of the questions we invite you to consider.

***The Singing Storytellers [organizers](#) and [Cape Breton University](#) are also very pleased to be working with CBC Cape Breton - [Island Echoes](#) and [Mainstreet – Cape Breton](#) host Wendy Bergfeldt! Watch the symposium [WEBSITE](#) to learn more about how the symposium, its participants and performers, will be featured on CBC Radio in the coming months leading up to, and during, the symposium and the Celtic Colours International Festival. ***