**“Holding the Lotus to the Rock:**

**Creating Dance Community(s) in Red-State America”**

In describing the dedication necessary to transplant Buddhism to North America, the **Japanese Zen master Sokei-an Sasaki** [2] (1882-1945) famously said “it will be like holding a lotus to a rock, expecting it to take root.” Since 2001, the Texas Tech University **Vernacular Music Center** [3] has grown a community of dancers and dance musicians in the American Southwest, one that cuts across boundaries of class, age, and ethnicity.

I teach musicology and ethnomusicology at Texas Tech, and organize and lead campus and community participatory arts initiatives for learners of all ages and experience. I do this because—given my skills, biography, aptitudes, inclinations, and training, and the particular socio-cultural historical moment in which I pass my life—it is the most radically constructive thing I can do. There was a time when we in the industrializing west believed in a technological future in which a single global community would end war, poverty, illness, and human suffering. It didn’t work out that way. In the face of pessimism, what is the point of teaching, learning, playing, or loving music? What is the function of participatory art in the face of despair?

My own coping answers have focused around the twin paths of artistic beauty and social community. Discovering participatory music and dance as an adolescent rescued me from the alienation of the 1970s New England suburb in which I was raised. Learning and sharing these idioms—Mississippi Delta blues and traditional Irish dance music among others—shaped my life, both prior to and since my re-entry into the world of academia.

Throughout the history of Homo sapiens, since the **first cave paintings** [4] under Cantabria in Spain 40,000 years ago, humans have used art--particularly participatory and vernacular art--to make sense of the world, of existence, and of death. But participatory art forms, community art forms, cannot exist in a vacuum. Like any other living thing, they depend upon ecosystems conducive to their ability to thrive, reproduce and evolve.

At present, the social ecosystems which support participatory community arts and the sanity which those arts have historically provided are under assault no less than is our biosphere. Mass consumption, global communications, and what the **folklorist Alan Lomax** [5] called "cultural gray out" have yielded a population, at least in the technological West, far more oriented toward passive consumption than active participation.

At the same time, in advocating for both biological and artistic ecosystems, one must, to paraphrase the **Earth Day** [6] slogan, “think globally but act locally.” In North America, such ecosystems have tended to be healthier in locales which are aware of vernacular traditions, often because they have been the sites for diverse experiences: **the immigrant communities of the Northeast, the Pacific Northwest, the San Francisco Bay area, and the upper Midwest** [7], for example; or the small pockets of progressive and engaged arts found in semi-rural college towns scattered across the continent.

On the other hand, outside these Left and Right Coast "Blue States", in the red-state "flyover country", there are millions more Americans whose lives have been or could be enriched by the experience of making art for themselves. Yet many of the advocacy organizations which promote and celebrate these participatory art forms tend to focus both their tactical efforts and their strategic philosophies upon the same “Left and Right Coasts.” Those advocacy organizations sometimes struggle when addressing populations, cultural heritages, or--especially--sociopolitical experiences different from their own. The "Red States" in the “flyover country” have often fallen outside both their awareness and their initiatives.

I, on the other hand, live, teach, and play music in **Lubbock, Texas** [8], which is located approximately five hours drive west of Dallas, approximately six-and-a-half northwest of Austin, and approximately six east of Santa Fe; to paraphrase *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, the place is a bit of a “geographical oddity—five hours from everywhere.” At the time that I moved there, its principal tourist attractions were listed as a **man-made lake** [9], “**More Sky**” [10], and **Prairie Dog Town** [11].

Rooted in a regional economy largely driven by mono-crop farming, the city's local culture is dominated by conservative Anglo-Protestant demographics, politics, and social priorities. Yet there is a long and honorable tradition of live music here: everyone from the 1920s fiddler **Eck Robertson** [12] to the ‘50s singers **Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison** [13] to ‘70s outlaw country stars **Waylon Jennings and the Flatlanders** [14], came from here. In fact, it is part of local musician folklore to wonder aloud "what is it about Lubbock that creates such great music, and drives musicians to leave?"

When I **moved here** [15] in the fall of 2000, it became apparent that in order to practice the vernacular art forms I wanted to share, learn, and teach, it would be necessary to, in the parlance of the region, "grow me some players” [16]. Initially these efforts were separate from my duties as professor of musicology; however, surprisingly quickly and with the welcome support of a farseeing and imaginative Dean, it became possible to incorporate a wide range of research, teaching, ensembles, and creative activity within-- and in addition to--my required duties. Under the heading of the "**Vernacular Music Center**" [17] nearly all of these activities became permissible inclusions to my tenure and promotion dossier, being valued as mutually supportive and synergistic.

However, it is **never easy to build things** [18]. There are few shortcuts. Most of the real and lasting development has to happen face to face, by word of mouth, person-to-person, and takes much longer than I ever anticipate. Now, well into our second decade, the job is a bit easier, because I can look back over the Center’s developmental arc, recognize certain patterns, and begin to build and plan for them. But it still requires constant energy, constant recalibration of expectations, constant shaking of the money trees which grow quite sparsely out here on the short grass prairie. In a way, the VMC has been a 13 year apprenticeship in holding the Lotus to the Rock.

This is **Emily** [19], a current member of our **Celtic Ensemble** [20] and Tech Irish Set-Dancers. Emily was born in San Antonio Texas, to an Italian father and Irish mother. As a child, she discovered the world of **competitive step-dancing** [21], a world of high artistry and high stress, in which the stereotyped phenomenon of the stage parent or the overbearing dance coach is very much alive. By the age of 14 she had transformed herself into a champion Irish dancer, and had both the trophies, medals, and complicated emotional perspectives to prove it. But at the age of 16, she made the decision to cease dancing, because as she put it “I realized I was doing it for my dance teacher, not for me.”

Two years later, she walked into an early meeting of the **Texas Tech Irish Set-Dancers** [22], having seen an e-mail announcement of the group, and, in her own words, “danced the Threes across campus to get there.” [23] Though no one knew her when she first arrived, it was immediately apparent to us that she had considerable prior experience. But the circumstances, human interactions, and priorities in the Set-Dance group struck her as quite different: she commented later upon the sense of acceptance and enjoyment, and the absence of critical pressure. In part this is a product of a group who are essentially avocational, many of whom lack prior dance experience. But it is also a product of a quite different set of artistic goals and social tradition in the world of the set-dances, which in Ireland were not competitive, but local, participatory, and communal. Adapted from imported Continental court dances, the sets became emblematic of individual communities' local cohesion.

What was unique, unpredictable, and fortuitous about Emily’s experience in our Red State context was that she found the sets so much more emotionally and artistically satisfying. So when it came time to design a role for her in our annual fundraising **Celtic Christmas** [24], she and I talked about the nature of that role and played with the idea of the **Dance Master** [25], the itinerant teachers who brought Continental dances to Ireland in the 18th century. Emily had previously created a deeply personal dance piece for a class project, combining a narrator’s spoken words and her own danced interludes, relating her autobiographical experience with dance, and catalyzed by the three tropes “I remember,” “I feel,” and “I imagine.” So we talked together, and arrived at the idea that she might try to embody the Dance Masters. Historically, such traveling teachers would sometimes dance with hard shoes on a half barrel, or rain barrel, or kitchen’s half door laid flat on the ground; this was the origin of both the rattling resonant acoustic of the hard shoes and the precision and upright posture demanded in the later step dance.

And so I went out and found the local architectural salvage store, which in Lubbock Texas is run by the Salvation Army. There, drawing on my prior experience as a framing carpenter, I located an old multi-paneled solid wood door, probably from a farmhouse. For $10 I brought it home, and, **constructed a version of a half door** [26], battered and worn. I kept the scars and what an expensive interior designer might call the "distressing"; I **moved but retained the old brass hinges** [27], and the **scarred brass finger plate** [28]. In short, I engineered a piece of practical performance equipment, in whose use a particular economy, adaptation, regional origin, historical resonance, personal skill sets, and autobiographical relevance all coalesce to reflect the specifics of its origin in our community. When Emily **dances on that half door** [29], she is embodying not only the Dance Master of Irish rural artistry, but also the history of our Vernacular Music Center and staff, and the **transformative journey** [30] of her own past and hoped-for future. That wooden surface resonates both acoustically, emotionally, and historically.

This is Lacey [31]. She was born not far from Lubbock, to an Irish immigrant father and Texas mother. She has had a very long battle with a particular disability; born with a congenital talipes equinovarus, or "club foot", she struggled through surgeries, therapies, and other strategies which attempted to correct this congenital deformity and enable her to walk. When I met her, she and her twin sister **Lyndsey** [32] were students at Texas Tech University, avid participants in the annual "Zombies Versus Humans" live-action role-playing game, and interested in becoming involved with our Tech Irish Set-Dancers. **Lacey** [33] has a wonderful snarky Irish sense of humor, very high intellectual capacities (her time as a NASA intern continues to pay a stipend and cover her health costs), and absolute mastery of the electric-powered wheelchairs she used to get around, often at alarming rates of speed. As Lindsay worked on her dancing skills, Lacey found a place for herself as our videographer.

But fairly quickly, the attraction of the dancing proved too great, and Lacey determined that she wanted to participate more actively. Our team of young dancers decided quite matter-of-factly and without much apparent discussion that they wanted to help with this. So they developed a repertoire of swinging, housing, turns, and other dance figures which incorporated Lacey, in her zebra striped wheelchair, charging through the sets.

I should emphasize that literally no part of this inclusivity originated with me. Though I am charged as a university professor with recognizing and accommodating ADA needs, I didn’t have to dictate how the members of this student group chose to accommodate Lacey; they did that on their own. A few months later, a group of them decided to return to an annual English Country Dance event in Austin, at which our youngsters will typically interact with avocational dancers, many of them part of a graying 1970s generation.

Over the course of that trip, which we undertook in a university van, and during which we were housed on couches, floors, and sleeping verandas belonging to family members, Lacey “rode shotgun”, in the front passenger seat which was most accessible and comfortable while wearing leg braces. She and I developed a bit of bantering repartee, because I, as the tallest male, had the task of picking up Lacey out of her chair and boosting her into the van. I would always groan loudly and she would always laugh. On the closing night of the weekend, at the formal costume ball which always climaxes such dance events, Lacey wore a beautiful silk ball gown, whose shade harmonized with the blue tiger striping on her chair.

Now, English country dancing employs a slightly different spatial organization and slightly different social connotations than does the Irish set dancing. The sets, danced in figures of four couples apiece, require precise teaching, learning, and practicing. In contrast, the Country Dances are much simpler, and what country dancers call "**progressive**" [34]; that is, couples will line up opposite one another in long shoulder-to-shoulder lines: thus, down the hall, a line of men shoulder to shoulder faces a line of women, with partners directly opposite one another. Over the course of a dance, whose simple shapes and sedate stepping make the style accessible to beginners, each couple will "progress" down the line, such that each man will in the end dance with each woman in the room. Such dances were a means of introducing persons of the opposite sex to one another in a slightly-formalized, aesthetically-pleasing, participatory and socially defined fashion; a function they served well.

That social geometry also meant that every attendee at this Austin event had to learn, on-the-fly and in a socially apropos fashion, how to dance with a wheelchair. Our own dancers provided a model of sorts, **not least in the degree to which they demonstrated their unflappability** [35], but it was still possible to observe every other dancer panic as she or he realized the imminent necessity of dancing with Lacey's wheelchair, **followed by a self-conscious concern to avoid any inappropriate reactions** [36], followed by gradual but real-time learning of new skills which empowered both Lacey and those other dancers. Without a word being said, without any prose or verbal description, instruction, or negotiation, the very act of dancing together provided unspoken yet effective vernacular socialization into inclusive conduct around physical disabilities.

But the reality is that Lacey's condition was never going to be cured. She had already undergone years of unsuccessful surgeries and bone grafts. She bore the emotional frustration and physical discomfort with remarkable aplomb, and by this past summer, she was up out of her wheelchair leg in a brace, **dancing her way through the Irish eight-somes** [37]. At the time, I felt concerned she might be trying to do something that her body wouldn’t permit, and more concerned that she might be exacerbating her disability or discomfort.

What I did not know was that over the course of this past winter Lacey also concluded, in consultation with her medical experts, that the surgeries and grafts were never going to yield truly satisfactory results, and made the decision to have her troublesome right foot amputated. This decision, difficult for someone who so wanted to dance, was made even more difficult by a certain degree of family resistance. But in the end, she made an informed and legal decision to go forward. **Three of our dancers picked her up at 6am on the morning of the surgery** [38], accompanied her to the clinic, and waited with her through that long day. The surgery was successful, and two nights after her transfer to a rehabilitation center, the group held their regular Tuesday evening practice at the center, with Lacey as the guest of honor. Before the night was over, she had swung her way, chair and all, stump and all, through a figure of the Lancers set, and was telling me “I’ll be back on the floor when I’ve me prosthetic!”

No one gave these young dancers an explicit directive that they “ought” to help Lacey through her journey of disability, surgery, and recovery in these particular fashions. No one said “well, it would be good if you guys would do this or that for Lacey.” Instead, and precisely as a result of what the tradition itself has taught them, these young artists simply knew, through a kind of learned intuition, what to do for their friend; they simply *knew* what she was feeling, and what responses would be both comforting and encouraging. Few words were spoken; none about what “ought” to happen. They just did it.

The great Irish button accordion player Joe Cooley once said, “it's music that brings people to their senses, I think.” If the last 35 years of working in vernacular traditions—the traditions that made possible my own escape from the alienation of my childhood, that made it possible to recover some sense of what it means to be connected to the land, the weather, the cycle of the seasons and the year, and to each other—have taught me anything, it is that human communities need to create beauty together in order to "come to their senses."

In this way, participation in creative arts, particularly those oral/aural arts that are learned and taught and passed on by demonstration and imitation and in the memory, and most particularly those which require members of the community to reconnect socially with one another in the field of creativity, is as fundamental to humans' and communities' psychological and physical health and well-being as clean air, clean water, education, security, and freedom from fear or want.

To withhold participation in creativity, as in the withholding of these other human necessities, is, then, to violate fundamental human rights. Conversely, to celebrate, enhance, enable, recover, and do battle in favor of such participation is, at the twilight stage of a post-colonial industrial empire, a revolutionary, life-or-death act of conscience. It can, in the words of the great poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder, “tilt the universe one or two degrees toward justice.”

This is what ***"thinking globally but acting locally" looks like*** [38-45]. This is what true communal and participatory art forms, true “outreach scholarship,” can accomplish. This is what the interplay of the shared and the personal, of history and autobiography, of artistry and function, of campus and community, of specificity and universality, can create. Such art is temporary, personal, timeless, communal, specific, and universal. It is also one of the only weapons we have left with which to help communities, both local and global, to rebuild, re-create, revitalize, and “come to their senses.”

Thank you very much.