

Maple Morris Explosion

by Justin Morrison and Stefan Read

Maple Morris has had an exciting year and three-quarters since our last report in these pages! [January/February 2009] A network of younger dancers dedicated to developing new leaders in the North American morris dance community, we've grown significantly in size, the number and scope of our events, and our interaction with the larger morris dance community. In short, we've grown up a little!

The most evident development has been a dramatic expansion of Maple events, projects and activities, all driven by different Maple members. From our original August weekend in Canada, some of our members in Boston have launched an annual spring weekend in Boston, and a January weekend hosted by our Mapleteers in Washington, DC began in 2010. Our numbers have steadily grown at each event, and our email discussion list continues to connect almost a hundred young dancers from southern Ontario and the northeastern US (plus a few participants from western Canada and the UK).

To support our activities, we've launched an improved website (<http://maplemorris.com>), produced a short documentary film about our last Canadian event, and published an online newsletter dealing with a range of topics of interest to morris dancers. This spring, we attended the Marlboro Ale as an official team, for the first time showcasing in a significant way what it is we've been collaborating on for five years.

Last summer, we started planning our most exciting adventure yet—a series of “cultural exchanges” with England's renowned dance innovators, Morris Offspring. By the time this article is published, we will have seen the first chapter of the exchange: a visit by Offspring's irrepressible founder, Laurel Swift, to participate in our spring Maple weekend and dance with us at Marlboro.

Next summer will see a more ambitious installment of the exchange, taking Maple across the ocean for the first time for a two-week tour

with Offspring. The first week will be crammed full of workshops and rehearsals, culminating in a stage performance combining the repertoires of the two teams with the music of two seminal English folk bands (soon to be confirmed!) and a few new surprises. The second week will be a bit more relaxed, touring around and enjoying England's folk scene. A return trip in 2012 will see Offspring come to North America to collaborate with Maple on a second show featuring some exciting Canadian bands, hopefully including a tour to several Canadian and US locations.

An exciting aspect about this project is the opportunity to learn each other's original dances and participate in bringing them to an theatre audience. Both Maple and Offspring have a reputation for original choreography, but in quite different ways; Offspring bring a very theatrical sensibility to their performances, staging long pieces with fluctuating interactions of music and movement. Maple's composition process tends to be a little rowdy (in a good way!), mainly taking place in workshop-style collaborations that leverage the participation and imagination of the group to invent new dances intended for street performance which, while certainly employing departures from traditional dances, hew more closely to the morris forms we grew up with. It will be an exciting and instructive process for Maple and Offspring to work in each others' spheres.

As we started thinking about all of these new events, growing participation, and more ambitious projects, it became clear we needed to revisit some of the original goals we set for Maple in its original incarnation as a weekend event for younger dancers.

The idea for Maple was sparked at the Marlboro Ale in 2005 (part of the reason we were excited to bring it back there five years later!), when we looked around at all the second-generation morris dancers that had come with great teams such as Ring o' Bells, Rock Creek, Great Meadows, and our own Toronto Morris Men. Some of them we knew, some we



Maple Morris at By Chadsey's Cairns, Ontario, 2009; photo by M. Richard Johnson.

didn't, and at that early stage we just thought it would be great to have a weekend for this geographically diverse generation to dance with their peers, as our parents had done before us.

We soon realized, as we began talking to people about the idea, that we had an opportunity to build a network of younger dancers by creating a channel through which they could meet each other, dance, and play music together. In this regard, Maple was somewhat self-fulfilling; merely talking about the event became an easy way to introduce dancers to each other. Morris, by the nature of its being a team activity rather than a social dance, can sometimes be insular, and as we set about inviting everyone we met who we thought would be interested, we found it to be a natural way to break that ice. The festive nature of the Maple weekends themselves quickly created and strengthened bonds of friendship and community. Our membership continues to grow merely by Maplers being excited by what it is we do and telling others about it, and we're always thrilled when someone approaches us to find out more.

The completely participant-driven nature of Maple events themselves naturally gave rise to two additional goals—to share morris knowledge and experience among the dancers who attend Maple, and to provide an opportunity for each participant to take a leadership role. In the first few years, these leadership roles generally meant that everyone who came could bring dances or tunes to teach to the group. In doing so, they'd have the opportunity to think more deeply about the details of the dance and gain experience teaching in front of a group. The potential for this grew more as we began workshopping original dances, providing a space for everyone to contribute to shaping new choreography.

As we're realizing now, however, the growth of both Maple's numbers and our participants' experience allows for increased opportunities for participants to take on more longterm leadership positions, having both a voice in the direction Maple takes and the opportunity to take charge of the parts of Maple that they feel they'd like to contribute to, and to take experience and confidence from that to morris in their hometowns. For instance, we've had Maple members, both new and veteran, take the lead on new event organization and the facilitation of group discussions. More experienced dancers, who used to teach dances, have now moved on to teaching newer dancers how to teach dances. Knowing that many of our members will need financial support to participate in the UK trip, Maplers Erika Roderick and Hannah Lindner-Finlay took it upon themselves to head up a fundraising drive, including researching grants and systems for accepting donations. One of the suggestions they received was that donors might like a regular email

newsletter for news on what we're doing and how their donations are being used, so Natty Smith took charge of compiling and editing one (which you can subscribe to by visiting the website previously mentioned). We quickly realized this would be another opportunity for active participation, by providing a platform for our Mapleteers to share morris-relevant experiences with the broader morris community. Anyone is free to pursue the initiatives they're interested in—the good ideas stick, and the not-so-good ones often teach us some valuable lessons. In the years to come, we hope this somewhat anarchic, entrepreneurial attitude will continue to stoke our members' passion for morris dancing, while simultaneously providing Maple with access to a constant stream of new, exciting ideas.

We've come to see the point of Maple, beyond our simple mantra to "have fun and be awesome," as helping to foster a new generation of empowered, capable, experienced leaders in the morris community. Many Maplers have grown into these roles in the five years since we first set up camp outside Montreal in 2005: Maple members now participate actively on the Marlboro Ale committee and teach morris workshops at Pinewoods, and many more have leadership roles on their home teams. Maple events, while still riproaring weekends of song, dance and silliness, now also serve as a venue for the sharing of ideas and experiences, contributing to an increasing range of morris knowledge and proficiency.

Our biggest challenge to come will be accommodating the continual increase in attendance without changing the fundamental nature of what Maple has always been about—being an open, supportive, and fun environment for younger dancers to dance, play and discuss morris. We truly believe that an emphasis on inclusiveness and community-building is the only way to accomplish this. As always, if you know a young dancer who may be interested in what we're doing, please encourage them to get in touch with us at maplemorris@maplemorris.com.

We're proud of what we've accomplished in our short five years, but we couldn't have done it without the support and encouragement from the dance community in general, and from CDSS in particular. No matter what, we're determined to take the same goodwill and love of dance that we inherited and ensure that those in the future get to grow up the same way.

Justin Morrison and Stefan Read both live in Toronto where they dance with the famous Toronto Morris Men. They are second-generation dancers and have been active in music and dance since childhood. They, with Adam Brown and Stephanie Phillips, founded Maple Morris in 2005.