

## FIDDLE TUNES OF THE OLD FRONTIER

[This essay was delivered by Alan Jabbour as the Joseph Schick Lecture at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, December 6, 2001.]

It is a pleasure being at Indiana State University to give the Schick lecture. The connection with Professor Schick seems apt, because my lecture was born in an English Department in 1963, where I had begun graduate work in medieval English literature. Professor Holger Nygard's ballad seminar at Duke University inspired me to launch a project in 1965 to document and study traditional fiddling in the Upper South. Over several years I made field recordings of older traditional fiddlers, transcribed their tunes and bowing patterns, and pored over comparative data in the form of manuscripts, print publications, and published and archival sound recordings from the United States and the British Isles. I had been trained classically on the violin as a youth, so I not only collected recordings but also apprenticed myself with my new masters. In short, I became both a student of fiddling and a fiddler.

My original quest was to document the fiddling of the American Upper South, and in my comparative studies I sought to uncover the history and derivation of the Upper South tradition I had encountered. The region of my work stretched from the North Carolina Piedmont westward and northwestward into the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia, the Alleghany Mountains of western Virginia, and the Alleghany Plateau of West Virginia. Within this larger region I found tunes and tune forms that could also be encountered in the northern United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland. But I also encountered a large and vigorous repertory that seemed to be born in and confined to the region where I was working. A distinctive repertory and style suggested what I might have guessed anyway: that the Upper South is a distinctive cultural region in the world of fiddling. This repertory and style seemed concentrated in the Piedmont and Appalachian regions of North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as the trans-Alleghany West. I came to think of it as associated with the old frontier of westward expansion in the Upper South of the later 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence the title of this presentation, "Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier."

Originally my mental model to explain the history of the fiddling I encountered was much like most people's model. I assumed that fiddling originated in the British Isles and was brought to what is now the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The repertory, I presumed, was imported from the Old World – though of course additions to the repertory were composed later in America. The style, likewise, was British, though doubtless there were later stylistic developments that bore the American brand. Essentially, I viewed the fiddling I was recording from older Southern fiddlers in the 1960s as a lineal descendant from British originals – as echoes of the Old World with a lively admixture from the New.

In time, as I documented the fiddling from the Upper South more broadly and immersed myself extensively in early publications and manuscripts of fiddle tunes, my mental

model changed. The ideas with which I had begun my quest no longer seemed adequate to explain the evidence, and a new cultural model began to emerge in my mind that better explained what I had encountered. This paper is an account of that new model. Perhaps I can get at it best by listing a series of points where the original model and the evidence were at odds with each other.

POINT #1. I had imagined that the instrumental music tradition I was exploring dated back at least to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the British Isles. But the body of evidence seemed to stretch back only to the last half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, at which point there was a kind of cultural curtain. Beyond the curtain, instrumental folk music was different. To be sure, there were a few gossamer threads that dated from before the curtain – a few tunes, like “Greensleeves,” that survived from the Renaissance into the modern era. But by and large, the tunes from before the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century had a different character from the tunes after that point, and hardly any of the tunes from that earlier era survived. By contrast, any number of tunes from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century are still played today – tunes like “Soldier’s Joy,” “Fisher’s Hornpipe,” “McLeod’s Reel,” and “Lord McDonald’s Reel,” that have not only survived but can be described as the very backbone of the latterday fiddle repertory.

[PLAY “SOLDIER’S JOY” IN PUBLISHED FORM, THEN IN UPPER SOUTH STYLE]

The later 18<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be a revolutionary period for instrumental folk music, as it was revolutionary for so many other elements in our civilization. The new style of instrumental music that emerged included 6/8-time jigs and 4/4-time reels that accompanied group dances, and also a new class of 4/4-time tunes called “hornpipes” that accompanied solo fancy dances. A typical tune had two parts, each of which was repeated.

The favored instrument for this instrumental music revolution was the modern Italian-style violin, which had spread northward through Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a number of manufactories for making violins sprang up in Germany, France, and England, and they had the effect of democratizing the violin, making it available not just to professional musicians but to people from all walks of life. So I am inclined to attribute the revolution in instrumental music to the advent of the modern violin, as a widely diffused new instrument, combined with the general revolutionary spirit of the later 18<sup>th</sup> century in the British Isles and colonies.

POINT #2. I had originally imagined that fiddle music was developed in the British Isles, then exported to the New World. Thus we could think of the British tradition as an ancestor of the American tradition, just as the American ballad tradition derived from British balladry. But once I realized that the modern instrumental tradition dated from the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, rather than earlier, I had to acknowledge that all the modern regional styles of instrumental music in the English-speaking world seemed to date back to the same period. This included not only the English, Scottish, and Irish traditions, but the New World traditions as well. American tune collections in published

or manuscript form date from as early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – hardly later than the British written record. Indeed, some American instrumental tunes that can be dated as early as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century seem to have originated here in America. If there was any lag time at all between the Old World and New World flowering of this new class of fiddle tunes, it was surely no more than a generation. And though the cultural flow at first seemed to be primarily from Europe to the New World, one has to acknowledge a simultaneity in the timing, as if every region of the English-speaking world within a generation embraced the same instrumental music revolution.

But each region came up with its own version of the revolution, containing its own special repertory and its own performance style. In effect, the revolution was pan-regional, but at the same time it was regionally branded. The Scottish version of the revolution invented what we now think of as the classic Scottish instrumental repertory and style. The Irish repertory likewise had its own tunes and style—or family of styles. The New England and Mid-Atlantic regions likewise had their distinctive features. Rather than seeming like ancestors and descendants, these various regional traditions came to seem more like cultural cousins – differing among themselves, but all related and all born of the same generation.

The tradition of the Upper South, which had been the original object of my focus, seemed at first to present a slightly different case. In the North there were always some fiddlers who could read music, but fiddlers in the Southern states were never music-readers. Thus the print and manuscript record was absent for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, except for publications from the minstrel stage, which contained a hard-to-sort-out mixture of Southern folk music and new popular compositions. But then I discovered a collection of tunes entitled Virginia Reels, published in Baltimore in 1839, before the rise in popularity of the minstrel stage. The collection was assembled by George P. Knauff, who was then serving as a music master and proprietor of a “Music and Fancy Store” in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Knauff clearly did not compose the tunes; rather, he compiled the collection by transcribing local fiddle tunes and adding a simple left-hand accompaniment. His young lady students on piano could thus practice piano using tunes they might already have heard locally. A good half of the tunes in this 1839 publication from Southside Virginia are tunes I recorded from older fiddlers over a century later. A few are of British origin or have Northern analogs, but the many tunes and titles of purely Virginia vintage suggest that there was a well established fiddle tradition in the Upper South, with its own characteristic repertory and tune contours, by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus I came to believe that the Upper South, too, was one of the cousins of the instrumental music revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

[PLAY “GEORGE BOOKER” AND “FORKED DEER” AS EXAMPLES OF OLD WORLD AND VIRGINIA TRADITION]

POINT #3. I had supposed that the repertory and style in the Upper South were originally British, and then by new composition and gradual stylistic evolution became more regionally distinctive. But as the other elements of my original model were eroded, I began to contemplate the possibility that the Southern fiddling style I was documenting

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century took shape much earlier than I had originally imagined. In particular, I reflected on the bowing patterns I had been laboriously transcribing from my fiddling mentors. Many of them used bowing patterns in which were imbedded elaborate forms of syncopation. Now it should be stipulated that syncopation has many forms. Any performance that establishes one rhythmic pattern, then superimposes a different pattern in contradistinction to the original pattern, is using syncopation. But the syncopated bowing patterns of my fiddling mentors were precisely what we all think of as “American syncopation,” appearing in jazz and popular music and commonly presumed to be an African American contribution to our musical heritage.

[PLAY “FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN” TO ILLUSTRATE THE COMMON SYNCOPATED PATTERN]

This syncopated pattern – the grouping of eight notes into subgroups of 3-3-2 – is the classic syncopation of American popular music. Most people assume it came from jazz, or perhaps from blues or even ragtime. But these forms are all products of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century. When did the fiddlers of the Upper South begin doing these syncopated patterns? And where did they get the idea? Is it an African American contribution?

We can begin answering this puzzle by noting that the bowing pattern I just demonstrated occurs widely throughout the American South. What is more, it occurs in the oldest field recordings from widely separated areas of the South. My mentor Henry Reed was born in 1884 in Monroe County, West Virginia, and learned his fiddling style before the turn of the century from old men in his local area. He used this syncopated pattern constantly – so much that it can be described as imbedded in his fundamental style. It is not an added feature or an ornament, but a basic feature of his playing. One could say that he couldn’t avoid using it. One can find the same identical pattern in the playing of older fiddlers from Virginia to Texas whose style took shape before the advent of recordings and radio. Such a broad distribution among fiddlers who learned their art before the turn of the century can best be accounted for by supposing that the pattern spread with the settlement of the trans-Alleghany West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Looking beyond the region to compare with the bowing patterns of other regional cousins, we find that Northern American fiddling styles do not use this bowing pattern—though in places such as Terre Haute that reflect overlapping cultural regions, one might find a whiff of it. Nor is it a central feature of any of the British regional styles, though one can find it occasionally as a stylistic variant in Irish fiddling. Only in the Upper South is it a hallmark of the regional style – a cultural indicator so constant and predictable that it could be used as a sort of cultural shibboleth.

Casting our net even wider, we may encounter the same precise syncopated pattern from Africa and the Mediterranean to musical styles as far away as India. But it seems clear that it came into the fiddling of the Upper South through African American influence. If one examines the historical record from the Upper South more closely, it becomes clear that the fiddle in places like Virginia was the favorite instrument of Black as well as White instrumentalists in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. One comparative study of

runaway slave posters by banjo scholar Robert Winans notes that the instrument mentioned far more often than any other instrument in describing the capabilities of runaway slaves was the fiddle. (The Africa-derived banjo and the flute are tied for a distant second.) Fiddle and banjo continued to be central to the African American tradition of the Upper South till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when piano and guitar began to replace fiddle and banjo as the most favored instruments.

So we know that Whites and Blacks were all playing the fiddle in the Upper South during the Early Republic period. In fact, they were playing it in roughly equal numbers, and we also know from historical accounts that they were often playing it together or in each other's presence. It was a revolutionary period, and the evidence seems to me compelling that African-American fiddlers simply added this signature syncopation to the bowing patterns on the fiddle. White fiddlers quickly embraced it, and it quickly moved from being an ethnic innovation to being a regional standard. The pattern could have been present as an abstract pattern in African tradition, and also (though quite recessively) in European tradition.

Once it had become a regional hallmark, shared by Black and White fiddlers, it spread in three ways. First, it spread directly through western migration – to a degree by Blacks but, more importantly, by Whites who had incorporated the syncopated bowing patterns into their own playing and cultural values. Second, it spread into wider popular consciousness through the minstrel stage of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And third, African American musicians transferred the same patterns to other instruments, like guitar and piano, thus reintroducing the patterns in all the successive waves of folk-rooted popular music, including ragtime, blues, and jazz in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century it had become a general American pattern of syncopation, and by later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all the world would recognize the pattern as a stylistic hallmark of American music.

POINT #4. The African American contribution is a profound part of the regional culture of the Upper South. But there is a hint of another cultural contribution that warrants our attention as well. To explain this point I will need to return to a description of the features of a typical fiddle tune in the English-speaking world.

A typical fiddle tune has two sections – let's call them "strains." Each strain typically has sixteen beats – or steps, if one is dancing. The typical tune performance calls for the fiddler to repeat each strain once before going on to the other strain. I hope this audience will forgive my repeated cautionary use of the word "typical." Fiddling tradition, especially in the Upper South, allows for considerable latitude in these matters, so some tunes may contain three or four parts, and some of the strains are shortened or elongated from the norm. But to summarize, a performance of a tune all the way through from beginning to end will typically consume sixty-four beats. Many dance figures in square, longways, and solo fancy dances are timed in multiples to coincide with the tune's progress from part to part.

When a tune consists of two strains, there is a sort of musical calculus dictating that one of the strains be in a lower-pitched range, and the other in a higher-pitched range. For

most of the musical regions of the English-speaking world, the first strain typically is the low strain, and the second strain is the high strain. Furthermore, though ideally one might imagine that both parts of a tune are equally distinctive, in practice the lower strain tends to be the more distinctive strain, while the high strain is more likely to be “filler.”

[PLAY “GEORGE BOOKER” AS AN EXAMPLE.]

It is not unknown in Ireland, Scotland, Canada, or New England to have a tune beginning on the high strain. But it is unusual and uncharacteristic. There is in fact only one musical region of the English-speaking world where a large class of fiddle tunes inverts the usual pattern. In the Upper South thousands of fiddle tunes begin on the high strain, then continue next to the low strain. What is more, the high strain is typically the more musically characteristic and important strain—the strain that identifies the tune. The low strain is more likely to have the “filler.” And the contour of the high strain is often a descending contour, giving the whole tune a feeling of descent rather than ascent. A number of these descending tunes in the Upper South repertory are named after creeks and rivers, and it is hard to resist making the metaphorical connection between the descending tune and the creeks and rivers of the Upland South.

[PLAY “SANDY BOYS”]

This tune contour seems to date from the same period as the syncopation pattern discussed above. Several tunes in Knauff’s 1839 Virginia Reels collection follow this contour, so it was clearly well established before the explosion of the minstrel stage in the 1840s. The pattern drifted from the fiddle to the banjo, and thence into many Upland South folksongs of a lively or playful nature. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was firmly established in the musical ethos of the South, appearing even in new instrumental genres like rags and blues. It did not crowd out the low-to-high pattern that predominates in all other regions, but simply coexisted with the other pattern as a vigorous alternative. But most new tunes in the Upper South during the 19<sup>th</sup> century followed this new native pattern for the tune contour.

So where did this high-to-low preference in the tune contour come from? One is faced with the following logical choice: Either they made it up, or they got it from somewhere. But though people on rare occasion do radically new things never before encountered, more often they get their inspiration somewhere. So we must begin by considering the options for inspiring this musical idea. It exists in British and Northern European tradition – but only as an occasional alternative to the customary pattern. So it is hard to account for its sudden popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Upper South by referring to a few vagrant British originals. Nor does Africa provide an explanation – African music seems to have no comparable tradition in tune contours.

There remains one other major cultural tradition that had an influence on the Upper South in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. We tend to picture American Indian traditions as isolated from the new emerging society of the Upper South in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the evidence suggests much more sustained cultural interaction in the early

South than in the West later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was extensive intermarriage in the South between American Indians and both Whites and Blacks. And although we are not used to thinking about American Indian influence in the musical realm, there are many examples of American Indian cultural influence on Southern life in other realms, such as foodways and material culture.

The fact is that American Indian music of the Eastern Woodlands and Plains favors a descending tune contour. Today's American Indian powwows are an excellent contemporary window into the same musical tradition, and one can hear thousands of tunes that follow the same overall melodic contour as the Upper South fiddle tunes. It is worth reminding ourselves that powwow tunes are dance music, and they are often sung using vocables instead of words. In effect, they are tunes of a class and function comparable to the fiddle tunes of British-American tradition. We cannot prove this cultural influence on fiddling from the world of American Indian culture, and the evidence is more tenuous than in the case of syncopation and African American influence. But no other cultural influence is in sight that can account for those thousands of fiddle tunes of the Upper South that, in contradistinction to all other regions of the English-speaking world, start at the top of the tune and cascade down.

The concept of syncretism is useful to invoke at this point. When two cultures come into close contact, or one is superimposed on the other, syncretism is the cultural sorting process whereby cultural traits found in both cultures are selected for survival or heightened emphasis. We should remind ourselves that the trait of a descending musical contour exists in British tradition, though it is infrequent and recessive. So one may imagine this to be a case of a syncretic marriage between a recessive musical trait in a dominant culture and a dominant musical trait in a recessive culture. If so, the marriage was fruitful, and the progeny number in the thousands today.

But our flights into the realm of genetic metaphor are still flights of fancy. It seems to me that such questions of cultural history, drawn from close interpretation of the folk art itself, should be the stock in trade of folklorists. But we have done far too little to pursue large cultural questions such as this. It is astonishing that cultural traits of such prominence and distinctiveness as these traits in the fiddle tunes of the Upper South have been utterly ignored by folklorists and ethnomusicologists. I will confess to oscillating – with both the syncopation story and the descending contour story—between the triumphal sense of having identified features of great cultural importance, and the anxious sense of being the only one in the world who thinks these traits are of any consequence.

Be that as it may, it's now time to summarize. The evidence I encountered in the oldtime fiddle tunes of the Upper South, both through fieldwork and through comparative study of the extant manuscript and print record, led me gradually to modify my original assumptions. I now believe that the fiddle-tune repertory and styles of the modern English-speaking world arose in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They constituted a revolution in instrumental folk music, and in the dances that instrumental folk music accompanied. The advent and democratization of the modern violin spurred the

revolution, but the revolution also occurred during and was probably stimulated by a period of more widespread social and political revolution in both the British Isles and America.

The revolution occurred roughly simultaneously in all regions of the English-speaking world, so that the modern repertoires and styles might better be considered cultural cousins than ancestors and descendants of each other, even if some of the cousins are from New World regions. But each region developed its version of the new revolution, tapping into regional and ethnic musical tastes and preferences. In the Upper South, the emergent style contained two salient features that seem to reflect the non-European ethnic components of the regional mix. Certain patterns of syncopation reflect African American participation in the revolution, and a proclivity for starting tunes with the high strain and favoring a descending melodic contour may reflect the recessive contribution of American Indian musical tastes. These elements developed early and were already part of the regional style when the minstrel stage began the long historical process of funneling African American and general Southern folk musical ideas into the larger vortex of American popular music. Thus our fiddle tunes of the old frontier may be tidy but compelling examples of the great New World synthesis of European, African, and American Indian cultural traditions into an emergent New World style.

I'll close this Schick lecture by invoking Emerson. His 1837 Phi Beta Kappa lecture, entitled "The American Scholar," called for a new revolutionary style and trumpeted: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." As an alternative, Emerson counseled attention to the extraordinary buried within the ordinary:

"The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. . . . What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat . . . show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking . . . in these suburbs and extremities of nature . . ."

As he spoke, the fiddle tunes of the old frontier were forging a new style and a new meaning on the anvil of grassroots creativity. And although more time elapsed before folklore organized itself as a discipline, the pursuit of meaning through folklore answers well Emerson's challenge to the American scholar to find "the highest spiritual cause" in the art of ordinary people.

[END WITH "DUCKS ON THE POND"]