

Introduction

Notes on Old-Time Fiddling and People's History

The Intention of Musick is not only to please the Ear, but to express Sentiments, strike the Imagination, affect the Mind, and command the Passions.

—Francesco Geminiani, *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (1751)

Fiddle appears in Noah Webster's 1806 *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, the first American dictionary. The word was defined two ways: as a noun, "a kind of musical instrument," and as a verb, "to play on a fiddle, trifle, do little, idle." A "fiddler" is "one who plays upon a fiddle, a trifler." Noah Webster, who knew that the fiddle and violin are the same instrument, offered a nicer definition of *violin*: "a sweet musical instrument, a fiddle." Both definitions refer to the same instrument, but in the language we see the paradoxes and emotions borne by fiddlers and fiddle music. You may hear that a violin is carried in a violin case and a fiddle in a gunnysack or that a violin has strings, whereas a fiddle has (in hillbilly dialect) "strangs." In February 1962, a *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reporter telephoned Leroy Canaday in Moberly to interview him about winning the state championship fiddle contest held the previous November at the Missouri Theater in Columbia. Asked the difference between a violinist and a fiddler, Canaday replied, "The length of your hair." The instrument is burdened with the humors of vernacular speech: "fiddling around" continues to be synonymous with wasting time or goofing off, and to "fiddle" with something means trying aimlessly or without skill to repair or use an object. In this book, the words *fiddle* and *violin* are both used. In most instances when speaking of the instrument itself, the word *violin* is used. *Fiddle* in most cases is used to indicate the act of playing the instrument in traditional or old-time ways in a vernacular musical performance.

Fiddle music, in repertoire and performance styles, appears by turns to be tradition bound and static or innovative and fluid, and it is transformed by countless performance styles and tune versions across all social and cultural boundaries. It is generally accepted that the violin/fiddle has been a principal musical instrument in American community life since the beginning, to be challenged in popularity only by the piano in the late nineteenth century and in the mid-twentieth century by the guitar. Perhaps the enduring popularity is due to the violin's versatility and capacity to satisfy. Perhaps its popularity is due to its sound, described as being close

to the sound of the human voice. Or perhaps it is popular due to its size and portability; in pioneer times, people brought violins from Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ireland in a flour sack or wrapped in a quilt, under a wagon seat or in a steamer trunk.

Although the violin has been the most common folk instrument since Missouri's colonial period (the mid- and later eighteenth century), people often say that it is the most difficult instrument to master. Yet the violin has been enjoyed by all kinds of people, possessing all levels of musicianship and musical literacy, and in every kind of family and social setting. The violin has been enjoyed across the landscape in city and suburb, village and family farm, as accompaniment for congregational hymn singing or special music at funeral services and wedding parties.

The fiddle has its foes, too. Some conservative religious groups have believed the violin to be a dangerous thing, calling it "the devil's box" and "Satan's tool"; they declare that the rhythms and emotions of social dancing and fiddling lead people to break taboos and sample forbidden fruit, vices leading parishioners astray. Across Missouri in early times, some conservative ministers railed against musical instruments and banned them from church services. An Ozark legend tells of hiding the family fiddle inside a wall when the preacher came for Sunday dinner; years later, with the old people gone, the violin reappeared as the cabin was being demolished. Some fundamentalists refer to scripture to fortify their condemnations, but there seem to be no specific proscriptions against musical instruments in the Bible. For most Americans, the violin is welcome in church; indeed, as Rev. Rowland Hill wrote in 1802, "The Devil should not have all the best tunes." In the mid-1900s in Dixon, Allen and Waldo Helton were playing fiddle tunes on the town square for passersby. As recalled by Warren Helton in 2011, a preacher came along, a friend of the Heltons who enjoyed old-time fiddling, and stood listening to the brothers play fiddles together and finally said, "I'll tell you *what*—if I stay here any longer, I've got to *dance!*" And he said, "Them Helton boys, they's just a *fiddling* people into hell!"

For other groups, fiddling has been held in high regard, important not only among the British American settlers from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas (often Scotch-Irish people), but also for the early French miners and farmers, as well as for African Americans, German-speaking immigrants, Cherokee and other tribal groups, Irish immigrant railroad laborers, and virtually every other community of immigrants. These and other musical and cultural traditions intersected and cross-pollinated among neighbors in pioneer communities. Although this book is not a study of ethnic groups in Missouri, when we look into the facts and pungent legendry of grassroots history and music, these ethnic elements of cultural and social background matter.

I have always been impressed by how many people I meet, whether in Montana or England, who know fiddle tunes like "Sally Goodin" and



Calling the violin the devil's instrument is nothing new, and it is not uncommon to hear of fiddlers with supernatural powers granted in Faustian bargains with Satan, violins inhabited by spirits, or encounters between fiddlers and devilish forces. In the early 1700s, Italian maestro Giuseppe Tartini dreamed that Satan offered him fiddling glory in exchange for his soul; Tartini took the deal. (Louis-Leopold Boilly, 1824, courtesy David Cavins)

"Leather Britches." I am often surprised by how many people know that Missouri is a big fiddling state. Perhaps this is because we have more fiddlers' contests than most states and is due to the celebrity of Missouri fiddlers, spanning styles and eras, such as Cleo Persinger, Casey Jones, Dale Potter, Cyril Stinnett, Dusty Rhodes, Lonnie Robertson, Warren Helton, Vesta Johnson, Taylor McBaine, Pete McMahan, Lyman Enloe, Art Galbraith, Claude Williams, Gene Goforth, Bob Holt, John Hartford, Fred Stoneking, Kelly Jones, Rhonda Vincent, Walt Koken (originally from St. Louis), Geoff Seitz, Mike Hartgrove, Charlie Walden, Travis Inman, Aleta Stoneking, Junior Marriott, Matt Wyatt, and Justin Branum. Perhaps we benefit because of Missouri's geographical position as a significant settlement area and gateway in the westward expansion of the nation. Perhaps it is because of Missouri's luck in having a history of people interested in collecting, conserving, disseminating, and writing about the musical heritage of the state.

Early settlers moving west took violins with them, and many communities kept moving until they reached the West Coast; there are many fiddlers today in California, Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington, and other western states whose families came from Missouri. Missouri is as much a microcosm and funnel in vernacular American music as it is in the history of westward migration by river and trail.



A violin brought to Boone County, probably from Kentucky or Virginia in pioneer times. The original wood case is in the style of the 1700s with a brass-hinged lid and brass handle. There is no latch to secure the top or interior padding because cases like this were typically used for storing a violin at home rather than protection during travel. A red felt bag helped protect the instrument from dust and dings. (Private collection)

In the 1980s' apex of interest in old-time fiddling, politicians and aficionados campaigned to name "the fiddle" as the official state musical instrument. In July 1987, Governor John Ashcroft signed the decree: "The fiddle is selected for and shall be known as the official musical instrument of the state of Missouri."¹ Whether such legislated "state" icons as the Missouri state insect (honeybee), state mineral (galena), and state dinosaur (*Hypsibema missouriense*) serve a purpose beyond narcissism and a boost for country music shows is seldom mentioned. I took part in the campaign and shook the governor's hand, but I would have preferred the word *violin* rather than *fiddle*, and I wondered if the word *violin* might have helped the bill gain support among legislators from districts and groups who did not, in the majority, have affection for square dances and old-time fiddlers' contests. Nevertheless, declaration of the fiddle as our state musical instrument suggests that there is pride in Missouri's fiddling heritage and concern that we recognize and nourish this great tradition. Not too long after, in 1995, the square dance was declared Missouri's official "state American folk dance."²

People involved in community festivals, whether a centennial celebration or a harvest fest, discover that famous sons or daughters played the fiddle or enjoyed fiddle music. For example, the town of Marceline, in putting together an annual celebration to honor its favorite son, Walt Disney (1901–1966), hosted fiddlers' contests in part because research shows that Walt's father, Elias Disney, was a fiddle player of Irish ancestry. The Disney family farmed in the Marceline area for several years, and downtown Marceline, Walt's boyhood home, was the model for "Main Street U.S.A." at Disneyland in California. Around 1915, when Walt was a child, he rode in the farm wagon with his father to their neighbors' farm, where Elias Disney fiddled for house dances and jam sessions.

Debates continue over what precisely is "old-time music." However people define the term, the notion of *old-time* is awkward and eventually of little use in thinking about the dynamics and permutations of living heritage. What may be considered old-time fiddling in the Ozarks may be different from what is considered old-time fiddling in Canada, West Texas, or Connecticut. Old-time music is sometimes tied to music from preindustrial times, but this idea is too limiting, as is the hazy notion that traditional music is found in backwoods rural isolation and musical illiteracy. The word *traditional* is useful, but it has its own problems of shifting meanings and definitions. Terms like *folk* are standard among scholars, but *vernacular* covers more ground and may better convey the scope and mood of our discussion of music that is wide ranging and about change as much as stability, evolution as much as replication.³

Themes of this book do not always settle easily into chronology, because historical timelines are awkward in music that varies by community, region, and cultural pattern more than by the turn of eras. Cultural traditions and folk and vernacular music ebb and flow, forward and back, through memory and time, stalling and restarting, reshaping and evolving, like a stream with many currents and tributaries. This river from a distance appears placid, but it reveals swirling layers and many colors.

There have been golden ages of fiddling. Some point to the eighteenth century, when the British repertoire held sway, Thomas Jefferson and his brother Randolph fiddled for soirees and dances in colonial Virginia, and dancing masters brought the minuet and cotillion to the frontier. Another golden age goes back to the earliest settlements in Missouri—the Old French District south of St. Louis or the nests of Kentucky and Virginia frontiersmen and farmers with their hornpipes, reels, and jigs in Missouri's Little Dixie region. Some look to the 1830s and 1840s, when German immigrants brought the waltz, schottische, and polka, vastly increasing the shared repertoire of dance types and tunes. Some look to the ebullient minstrel age through the Civil War period, when new tunes entered the fiddler's repertoire, or to the great era of railroad building with its itinerant Irish fiddlers, or to the later years of the century when the New York



From Oregon and Howell Counties, in the 1930s the Rhodes family were barnstormers who carried on minstrel and vaudeville traditions. Here they pose in cowboy outfits as “Slim Rhodes and His Mother’s Best Mountaineers” in the early 1940s when they performed on WMC Radio in Memphis, Tennessee. “Speck” Rhodes assumes the comic role of a hillbilly yokel; he would later become famous with the *Porter Wagoner Show*. *Left to right: Perry (Dusty) Rhodes (violin), Bea Rhodes (mandolin), Ethmer (Slim) Rhodes (the children’s father, guitar), and Gilbert (Speck) Rhodes (standup bass).* (Courtesy Ed McKinney)

City music-publishing district called Tin Pan Alley began to paper the nation with songs, rags, and two-steps in sheet music that would sift into the old-time fiddler's repertoire. The wealth of fiddling and excitement among young people, including a modest but significant resurgence of interest in old-time square dancing, suggests that we might be in the midst of another golden age right now.

People worry about the loss of traditions. If anything in fiddling is endangered, probably it is the very local, regional, and ethnic styles. There is no mistaking the fact that tunes taken primarily from books and electronic media and styles of performance from national fiddling competitions are forcing changes. Although vernacular fiddle music shares with classical music a problem of shrinking audiences, whether audiences decline or grow depends on people in the tradition more than external forces. People interested in fiddle and dance care about the persistence of cultural heritage, the hue and texture of age. So we are caught in a dilemma: admiration for the music and the patina of the good old days and, at the same time, admiration for the creativity, technology, and skills of today. Dynamic changes occur within and beyond old traditions; we hope that talented young musicians will make the music their own. This seems a puzzle, but it is not. Those interested in traditional artistic expression of any kind tend to be more concerned with continuity than change, with old rather than new.



Clatterbuck family band, near New Bloomfield, ca. 1940. *Left to right:* Herbert Clatterbuck (violin), Jasper Barrow (with violin he built), Lula Lawson Clatterbuck (guitar), and Guy Barrow (cello). The cello, called a "bass" by most traditional musicians until recently, was familiar as rhythm for fiddling in the 1800s. (Courtesy Vernon Clatterbuck)



At Virgil Smith's sixtieth-anniversary party in 1993, in Montgomery City. *Left to right:* Kenny Applebee (guitar), Smith, Dwight Grover, Taylor McBaine, and Joe Stevens (guitar).

As a folk tradition, fiddling is an aural and oral culture. The music, its customs and informal history, is dependent on human interaction and *listening* as the channels of sustenance and transmission. As "ear music," fiddling is passed down through time in person-to-person interaction, informal apprenticeship, and imitation of admired models. And, it is also true that, since colonial times, fiddling has had a fascinating duality: musically educated "note musicians" play the melodies alongside the often self-taught "ear musicians."

In the past generation or two of fiddle scholarship, interdisciplinary approaches, grounded in fields such as folklore, anthropology, cultural geography, ethnomusicology, and American studies, have helped bring new perspectives to collection and interpretation of traditions in fiddle and dance. Field research, based on observation, continues to be important, and recording devices are vital in conserving glimpses and echoes after the people are gone. There is recognition of the need to listen closely to the testimony of oral history and memory, however impressionistic and incomplete it may be.

In the formation and transmissions of local legends such as "the Boonville races" (the Battle of Boonville during the Civil War), the essential truth of the story usually remains consistently trustworthy. Specific details are lost. Most people recognize that a report of an event in a newspaper is apt to be no more "true" than the recollection of a dancer or fiddler who was there. Nor is the history book more true. All these sources of recollection and interpretation represent different and parallel realities of the same

cultural phenomena. Whether it is played at a fish fry, in a classroom, or for the new generation of square dancers, the violin has been part and parcel of our lives for hundreds of years and fortunately shows no signs of vanishing anytime soon.

Principal Regional Styles in Missouri Fiddling Today

Well, if there were two or three people crossing the creek—and everybody's seen these old *riffles*, with rocks on them, you know, so you can step on the rocks, to where you can get your feet wet. Each person would get across the *creek* all right; they'd all get to the same place. But they'd all step on different rocks getting there. And that's kind of the way it is with *music*, you know. A lot of people can get there. But they kind of take a little different route doing it.

—Earl Ball, December 6, 2007

Stylistic categories, no matter how artificial, help organize, identify, and appreciate variety and difference. Educated listeners hear a fiddler as a “square-dance” fiddler or a “bluegrass” fiddler, just as they can hear that baroque or romantic music, or psychedelic rock and reggae, are not the same styles or genres. But sorting out styles of old-time Missouri fiddlers, or fiddlers anywhere, is complex and confusing, because the music is as variable as the individuals who produce it. Furthermore, in vernacular music, styles reflect cultural and geographic regions, localities, ethnic groups, and families.

Some styles call for the tune to be played the same way each time through. Others call for variations. Some styles emphasize playing the “original” version of a tune (some fiddlers call this “playing the tune the way it was written”), but what this means is that fiddlers in that style play the tune the way they heard it played by a respected elder, or as played on a 1920s 78-rpm record by an influential fiddler. It is part of the folk tradition to think that one's way of playing music is the best or the “traditional” way. Different styles can be striking when listening to performers at an event such as a fiddlers' contest representing different customs.

When a style values innovation and improvisation, as in jazz, the melody is their jumping-off place. But interpretations and variations can be so overwhelming that one may lose track of the core of the melody. Other styles value perfection, note-by-note imitation, as in many of today's top contest-style fiddlers; they eliminate oddities, extra beats, dropped beats,