

**APPALACHIAN MUSIC FELLOWSHIP
FINAL ACTIVITY REPORT
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Overview

Nearly all of my research days focused on Berea College's extraordinary collection of field recordings featuring old-time fiddling from Kentucky. I am a fiddler myself and have published extensively over the years on one or another aspect of Appalachian fiddling. I sometimes imagine myself as expert on Appalachian fiddling, but every expert has *lacunae* in his or her expertise, and a major *lacuna* for me has been Kentucky fiddling.

I spent a great deal of time and attention in the 1960s and 1970s documenting and learning from oldtime fiddlers in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. But I have never done fieldwork on fiddling in Kentucky, and I have little acquaintance with the extant archival resources other than collections of Kentucky fiddling at the Library of Congress. The Library's collections do contain, however, the extraordinary 1937 field recordings made by Alan Lomax of fiddling in eastern Kentucky. I listened with amazement at the consummate artistry of fiddlers like W.M. Stepp and Luther Strong and included them liberally on the documentary recording I edited from the Library of Congress collections, *American Fiddle Tunes* (published in 1971). So I knew Kentucky harbored fiddling worth learning much more about. During the period of this fellowship I have tried to make up for lost time by undertaking a total immersion in the archival sound recordings of Kentucky fiddling.

My immersion has focused principally on two very large collections of field recordings, those of Bruce Green and John Harrod. Both collections were created for the most part from the 1970s through the end of the century. Bruce Green's is excellent for its geographic sweep, ranging from far western Kentucky across a swath of southern and central Kentucky and into southeastern Kentucky, with a few ventures into the northeastern part of the state. John Harrod worked mostly in northeastern Kentucky, with additional forays into northern, central, and southeastern Kentucky. Between the two collectors, Kentucky oldtime fiddling was effectively mapped and charted over the last three decades of the 20th century.

Other collectors such as Steve Rice and Barbara Kunkle, have also contributed to the documentation of Kentucky fiddling. I have auditioned a couple of smaller collections and would happily explore more if time permitted. But the variety and sweep of the work of Bruce Green and John Harrod, documenting not only the extraordinary artists but the garden-variety home fiddlers of all the state's regions, probably indicates that listening to the other collections will augment but will not dramatically change the emerging cultural picture. Here are my observations about that overall picture. They are of course subject to change as I learn more, and it is also worth stipulating that the cultural variety and complexity of Kentucky fiddling means that all generalizations must be carefully qualified.

Repertory

The older generation of oldtime fiddlers in Kentucky – those who learned their art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – reveal the same extraordinary diversity of repertory that has turned up in field recordings of that generation from Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina. There are dozens of repertory items that turn up often in Kentucky, yet are rarely encountered in other parts of the Appalachians generally. This is particularly true of eastern Kentucky, which seems

to have both bred and conserved a large number of tunes that are virtually unique to the state. Almost all these tunes apparently unique to Kentucky are in the general “breakdown” category – 4/4 time tunes at a lively pace analogous to “reels” in much of the English-speaking world.

Some items that might seem to be unique to Kentucky are indeed rare items, but have also been recorded in other Appalachian states. These connections in the older repertory are sometimes obscured by different titles. A reel known in Ireland as “Over the Moor to Maggie” (and other titles) is played by the Hammons Family in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, in what I thought was the only early Appalachian representation for the tune, called “Waynesboro.” It turns up in the older Kentucky repertory, too, occasionally as “Waynesboro” but also as “Andrew Jackson” (Darley Fulks’s title for the tune). The multiple sets from West Virginia and Kentucky, using different titles, suggest an early diffusion of this tune in the Appalachians. And certain features of the tune appear among all the Appalachian versions in contradistinction to the current standard Irish version.

Similarly, a tune I had thought to be unique to the Hammons Family in West Virginia, “Big Scioto” (referring to the Scioto River in Ohio), was recorded as “Kentucky Winder” by John Salyer. The name “Kentucky Winder” remains a mystery to me, but the two sets of the tune itself are relatively close kin. And Sanford Kelly’s “Blackberry Blossom” (he calls it “the original Blackberry Blossom” to distinguish it from the well-known Arthur Smith tune) is close kin to “Yew Piney Mountain,” a distinctive (and, I had thought, unique) tune in the repertory of French Carpenter of Clay County in central West Virginia. Such examples of widely separated versions cropping up in archival collections are a cautionary example for us, warning us not to assume that everything is locally bred just because no other examples have yet been discovered beyond the locality.

The examples cited in the preceding paragraphs also invite us to consider where the lines of kinship seem strongest between Kentucky and its neighboring states. They seem to point to a special connection in repertory between eastern Kentucky and southern and central West Virginia. Other stylistic features that we will consider later in this report also point toward this special connection. Looking beyond this special connection, there seem to be important connections in fiddle repertory between eastern Kentucky and Virginia. Of course, Virginia once included West Virginia and in general had a major influence on the early shaping of Appalachian culture, and western Virginia also borders directly on eastern Kentucky, so it is not surprising that there should be important influences in the fiddle repertory.

In northern Kentucky, and to a lesser extent in northeast Kentucky and central and western Kentucky, there are also threads of repertory connection with Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. They show up sometimes in tunes borrowed from the Northern reel repertory, but more in hornpipes, waltzes, polkas, and schottisches. And western Kentucky also has strong ties (looking southward) to Tennessee and (looking westward) to Missouri and Arkansas.

Tune Genres

In terms of genres of tunes, the old “breakdown” category (what most of the English-speaking world calls “reels”) dominates, as it does throughout the Upland South. There are some tunes from the old hornpipe category, but – again, in common with the entire Upland South – the hornpipes tend to be sped up as they are absorbed into the ubiquitous reel-breakdown category. But there are also quite a few waltzes and a few schottisches and polkas throughout the state. 6/8-time tunes are rare but present. The 6/8 jigs and quadrilles of Northern tradition are virtually

unknown, and the old 6/8 quicksteps of the marching tradition are scarce. 4/4-time marches are less rare, and some, like “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” are widespread. A few are reworked 6/8 tunes, including one tune called “Coleman’s March” that has been picked up recently by the oldtime fiddle circles; it is a 4/4 version of the old Confederate tune “Bonny Blue Flag.” Finally, there are many fine examples of the genre of fiddle tune that we may call “airs” – slow tunes where the fiddle imitates the old unaccompanied vocal style for hymns or secular songs. “Old Churchyard” by Sanford Kelly is a fine example of the slow air genre.

Style

Like the rest of the Appalachians and (more broadly) the Upland South, Kentucky fiddlers offer a dazzling array of stylistic variety. There are plateaus of skill in Kentucky fiddling, at each of which one can play fiddle in a way that provides satisfaction to oneself and others. Thus there are not only virtuoso fiddlers with superb technique and an audience-drawing skill at music-making, but also lovely home fiddlers who entertain themselves, their family, and their friends and occasionally play at dances or other public occasions in their locality. Style varies to a degree depending on the plateau of accomplishment the fiddler has achieved. A healthy tradition, properly understood, includes all these strata of skill and stylistic preference.

Even in the same plateau of stylistic accomplishment, there is great stylistic variety in Kentucky fiddling. Performers on violin in the “classical” style, the modern Irish folk style, the Cape Breton style in Atlantic Canada, and the modern Texas contest style tend to sound more similar as skill improves, because they are becoming more and more proficient at producing a certain style and sound that is privileged as the “right” sound. But there is no single “right” sound in Kentucky fiddling, and the most highly skilled Kentucky fiddlers are surprisingly different in their performance style. They share this stylistic diversity with the older generation of fiddlers throughout the Upland South, and it is a telling piece of evidence for the larger cultural diversity of the region. Fiddlers such as John Salyer, Clyde Davenport, Darley Fulks, George Hawkins, Alva Greene, Sanford Kelly, Hiram Stamper, and Snake Chapman are instantly recognizable and distinguishable from one another because of their distinctive styles. Not enough has been made of the significance of this astonishing stylistic diversity, for it reveals an encouragement of the creation of different aesthetics by different musicians, and the relative discouragement of a single dominant style.

In the face of dazzling diversity, generalizations are a risky business. But certain traits do seem to emerge with enough regularity to suggest a larger trend or pattern. One is the widespread performance of tunes in a “crooked” manner. The classic fiddle tune in the English-speaking world has two parts or “strains,” each of which consists of four 4/4 bars (or eight 2/4 bars) and which is repeated before going on to the other strain. “Crooked” tunes add beats to or subtract beats from this melodic framework; the tune is thus steady in its beat but irregular in the number of total beats. Another form of “crookedness” occurs not at the beat level but at the level of the parts or “strains.” A strain may be performed with a repeat one time (a total of two times), then with a double repeat the next time (a total of three times).

The older Upland South tradition is notable for the frequent appearance of crooked tunes – like Quebec, curiously, but unlike the rest of North America, Scotland, and Ireland, where crooked performances are unusual. Kentucky outdoes its own home region (with the possible exception of southern and central West Virginia) in the prevalence of crooked tunes among the older fiddlers. This includes both tunes that fiddlers always play in the same crooked way, and also tunes where the fiddler varies the crookedness from one time through to another. Some

renditions of some tunes feature both forms of crookedness – a veritable kaleidoscope of changing shapes for the same tune.

There is a special form of “crooked tune” that appears often in Kentucky fiddling and is shared with the older style of fiddling in central and southern West Virginia. We may call it “hanging notes.” The tune careens along its merry way, then suddenly pulls up on a single note and hangs there for an extra beat or two – as if it were stopping to survey where it finds itself. Then it resumes its pell-mell course. A fine example of this is Sanford Kelly’s performance of “Blackberry Blossom” (in the key of G), which hangs on the note D in the middle of the tune, then turns that hang-note into the matter out of which the second strain is developed. It is the same tune as “Yew Piney Mountain” in central West Virginia, and Sanford Kelly’s performance has the same hang-notes in the same place as French Carpenter’s West Virginia rendition of “Yew Piney Mountain” (though “Yew Piney Mountain” is played in the key of A, so the hang note is E). Another example is Darley Fulks’s rendition of “Rooshian Rabbit,” which opens with a great fanfare, then hangs on a high G for two beats before chasing off again. These “hanging notes” as a stylistic feature bespeak the old solo style of fiddling – it is much harder to do it with an ensemble. It also is evidence for strong cultural connections between central and southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky.

On the other hand, the bowing patterns of the Kentucky fiddlers show a bit less of the use of the complex “longbow” patterns than their Virginia and West Virginia counterparts. Kentucky fiddlers seem to favor styles that use either separate bow strokes for each note or pairs of notes on the same bowstroke. They are more sparing in the use of bowing patterns with three or four notes to a bowstroke. Of course no fiddler does all one style of bowstroke; most fiddlers mix the various bowing options into an intricate larger pattern. But the comparative lack of three-notes-on-a-stroke bowing means also that there is a bit less syncopation (especially the classic 3-3-2 pattern of syncopation) in the bowing patterns, compared to Virginia and West Virginia.

Interestingly, as if to compensate for this, many Kentucky fiddlers play tunes using melodic (not rhythmic) groupings in the 3-3-2 pattern – for instance, D-E-F#-D-E-F#-D-E. It is a musical device that also appeared in popular music through ragtime, but the Kentucky fiddle repertory featuring melodic syncopation includes many tunes that date from even earlier than country rags. It is actually possible (though unprovable) that this melodic device, well known in ragtime and jazz, originated at the grassroots in Kentucky and spread from Kentucky grassroots fiddlers (black and white) into country rags and then into popular ragtime style.

Overall the bowing patterns show strong relations with the Upland South in every direction. But the relative popularity of single-stroke bowing (one stroke for every note) also suggests significant subsidiary ties to Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley. Another trait suggests the same lines of cultural connection. In Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina there is a large class of tunes that begin with the high strain and then move on to the low strain. Every other region of the English-speaking world does this occasionally, but only in the Upland South is it a widespread and common practice. Kentucky tunes share somewhat in this propensity, but fewer tunes than in Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina begin on the upper strain. This trait, too, may bespeak alternate cultural threads connecting Kentucky to the Ohio Valley with its more Northern cultural influences.

Tune Transcriptions

From among of the many fiddle tunes I auditioned, I have transcribed twenty-five to feature interesting Kentucky tunes and variants and to highlight key elements of performance style. The transcriptions include bowing patterns – I have done my best to decode bowings from recordings that are sometimes not so well recorded and sometimes include other instruments accompanying the fiddler and obscuring the subtle sounds of bow articulation. They also include such culturally significant traits as unison notes, which appear often in Kentucky and throughout the Appalachian South. A “unison” features the playing of the same note simultaneously on two adjacent strings. Double stops and drone notes are also included where their presence seems to be an important component of the music. But some fiddlers use drone frequently and in a random pattern that I have not fully reproduced, because its clutter can be a distraction to readers of the transcription.

In addition to the transcriptions and related audio files, a forthcoming analyses for each tune will include key, tunings, speed, pitch, and a discussion of the tune history of each tune and the stylistic features of each performance.

Decoration Day Research

While I have been working on the sound recordings of Kentucky fiddling, Karen has been delving into the special collections to research the Upland South tradition usually known as Decoration Day and allied traditions such as “funeralizing.” We expect to publish a book on this topic next year, and the book will include a number of references and quotations that Karen has discovered in her work here. Special Collections contains many relevant collections to this research, and she has used the Josiah Combs Collection, the Leonard Roberts Collection, the D.K. Wilgus Collection, the Terry Allebaugh / Disputanta Project Collection, the Religious Survey Collection (1931-32, 1935), and a number of individual books housed in Special Collections. This is in fact research for both of us, though she is taking the lead in pursuing it.

In connection with our Decoration Day research, we auditioned a number of field recordings in the William Tallmadge Collection and other collections featuring the lining-out hymn/song “Village Churchyard,” which we plan to feature in our book. We had hoped to explore other materials from the rich hymnody collections at Berea, but time did not permit. We are grateful for all these helpful discoveries for our Decoration Day research, and we will cite Special Collections and Archives with gratitude for all that we are able to use in the book, which we hope will appear in the spring of 2009, published by The University of North Carolina Press.

In connection with our Decoration Day research, we have used two Saturdays and a Sunday (when Special Collections is not open) to canvass the cemeteries of the region for cultural features of interest, including evidence of the practice of Decoration Day. Karen has taken a large number of high-resolution color photographs of cemeteries in Jackson, Rockcastle, Clay, and Madison Counties – primarily Jackson County – and I have created detailed fieldnotes that serve as a guide through the collection. The collection includes attention to a number of special features of Kentucky cemeteries. For example, there are two excellent examples of gravehouses right along US 421, a number of false crypts (box crypts) and grave covers, and interesting examples of concrete headstones imbedded with marbles and other objects. Following Karen’s use of the Disputanta Collection, we visited and photographed the cemeteries and churches (and the old post office) that are featured in that collection. It is a small collection, but we are happy to share a copy of it with Special Collections.

Recommendations

Having worked so extensively with the large collections of Bruce Greene and John Harrod, I have come to realize how enormously important their contribution has been to our knowledge of Kentucky fiddling. What is more, as collectors they have had a beneficial influence on the tradition itself over the past thirty years. Their interest as documentarians has clearly encouraged and stimulated a generation of older fiddlers who have been our connecting thread to a rich and varied cultural tradition. They have not only documented but arranged for public events and media products that have shared the amazing artistry of these fiddlers. The local communities and the music communities of the state have already been profoundly influenced by the work of these collectors, and a wider community of younger musicians is now looking to this great Kentucky fiddling repertory for artistic inspiration. While I was in Berea, I participated in a jam in which a younger musician asked me if I knew “Jeff Sturgeon,” a tune he had just learned from a musician outside Kentucky. I knew, thanks to my work in Special Collections, that the tune my acquaintance had just learned came originally from John Salyer of Pike County, and that we all had not only John Salyer but Bruce Greene to thank for its being saved to live again in the heads and instruments of Kentucky musicians.

So now is the time – while they are still vigorous and not too much time has elapsed – for someone to record a set of thorough, in-depth interviews with Bruce Greene and John Harrod, probing for whatever additional information and insight they can offer about their long and sustained encounters with Kentucky fiddling and folk music. They are not just random documentarians. They are themselves an important part of the music history of Kentucky.

I also want to recommend that Special Collections continue to develop and expand its efforts to share the collections online. What they have already posted online has been enormously helpful to me, and I am pleased to be able to augment it very modestly with my own contributions as a result of this research fellowship. I also see and have personally experienced again and again, in my interactions with people around the country and abroad, the beneficial results of our placing collections online at the Library of Congress. Placing collections online will have the effect of ensuring that the Special Collections of Berea College Library are in the thick of the emerging cultural conversation of musicians and music researchers everywhere. Online collections will be the key source materials for future researchers and musicians, and they will also attract the next generation to visit and use the rest of the collections in person.

Thanks

I am deeply grateful to the Anne Ray Charitable Trust for the financial support that made possible our extended research stay in the extraordinary Special Collections within the Berea College Library. We researchers are often reduced to seizing a day here and sneaking a week there to carry out our research, but the Appalachian Music Fellowship provides time for research in depth, and for us it has yielded all we had hoped for and more. Let me conclude this report with special words of praise for Harry Rice, Shannon Wilson, John Bondurant, Jaime Bradley, and Grace Sears for their unfailing helpfulness in matching our needs with their deep and wide-ranging knowledge of the holdings. Thanks to all of them, and to the general Library staff and the student assistants, for making us feel so welcome and serving us so well. It has been a joy for Karen and me to be assisted by such skilled and attentive professionals.