

Young Jake Krack

Tucked comfortably under his chin, Jake Krack's homemade fiddle resonates a melody that seems better suited for a back porch than for an interview in the college photography studio. As the occasional knocking of steam pipes overhead subsides, old-time fiddle tunes make their way from the fiddle Jake's father made for him.

Finding a break from a busy schedule that includes taking a full load of classes, working in the music archives in special collections, and practicing with the Berea College Bluegrass Music Ensemble, Jake arrives for our interview with fiddle in hand. He warms up while I set the studio lights and camera. The sound of horsehair bow on gut is warm, woody, and bright as his fingers settle into one of 400 tunes they've come to know.

Featured on television and radio—notably Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion," Jake is accustomed

to playing in studios. Only 20 years old, he's been playing traditional Appalachian music for 14 years, and in that time has recorded eight CD albums. He has already accrued a lifetime of achievements, including winning top honors in multiple fiddle contests, performing at the Kennedy Center, and being featured on CNN and in the *New York Times*. He patiently waits for me to set the cameras and lights properly. Although an annoying and erratic audio buzz threatens to ruin our interview, Jake continues playing, seemingly lost in the music.

"When I play, I go to another place; sometimes I go too far. I'll be playing at a contest, trying to win first place, and I'll go out, then come back and think, 'Where am I?'" says Jake. "It's scary when you do that on stage."

At last, we roll tape in the darkened studio, lit only by soft light that silhouettes Jake against the backdrop. Taking in the distinctive sounds of a traditional Appalachian melody jumping from his fiddle, I put away my questions, and just listen. Here is a traditional music that has survived generations in the same way that old myths are passed intact through the centuries, though rarely written down.

Traditional Appalachian music, which Jake calls 'old timey' music, shares common elements with other types of music that also make use of fiddle, banjo, and guitar. Bluegrass music is not traditional music, but combines elements of jazz with old time music. In old time music, each band member plays

Keeping the

By Jay Buckner

— Old Time Fiddler

simultaneously and together. What sets traditional Appalachian music apart is the way it is played and how it is learned.

His right wrist snaps off his bow as he runs through 'Ida Red,' a song played in a style he learned from master fiddler Lester McCumbers, who learned it from Senate Cottrell, 'an old man who lived down the road.' "With each of these old tunes there's a story and a tradition behind it," Jake explains. "I associate each tune with the experiences of the older man I learned it from."



Courtesy of Reed Krack

By the age of nine Jake Krack began playing old-time fiddle on stage.

The challenge of learning to play traditional Appalachian music is that it depends on being taught through a mentor-apprentice relationship. When Jake was three his father made him a cardboard-box fiddle; at the age of six, Jake took classical lessons. "I didn't enjoy it then," he says. "It's hard to enjoy something when you're first learning it. When I was nine, I started studying old time with Brad Leftwich. That's when it became fun, and I started to love the music."

From Leftwich, he learned about Melvin Wine and the Appalachian String-band Festival in West Virginia. "My family and I went there to meet Melvin for the first time, then we started visiting Melvin several times in a short period," Jake explains.

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Photo by Lindsay Bruner, '06

Traditions Alive

The trips became expensive, so the Kracks applied for an Indiana arts commission grant for \$5,000 to pay for trips to West Virginia. In return, Jake brought West Virginia's music back to Indiana.

As he progressed, Jake found himself immersed in a world of traditional music that few of his peers would understand. Uninterested in rock, country, or hip-hop, he focused his attention on traditional music. When he was 13, his family moved from their Indiana home to Nicut, West Virginia. By this time, Jake's father, Reed Krack, was already an accomplished fiddle-maker. On stage and in the studio, his mother, Dara, often accompanies Jake's fiddle with her old time guitar.

Although the music brought them to West Virginia, the terrain and the people made them stay. In the hills of Appalachia, Jake grew closer to the late, renowned master fiddler Melvin Wine, who became Jake's mentor and friend. Separated in age by 75 years, Jake and Melvin developed a close relationship throughout the decade that Jake studied with him. He thrived under Melvin's tutelage.

Growing up on the family farm in West Virginia, he also learned from master fiddlers Lester McCumbers and Bobby Taylor. "When I started learning, I made a promise to Melvin. I've now made a promise to Lester and Bobby, that if they teach me—and they've taught me for free—then I will preserve it, keep it going, and pass it on to somebody else," says Jake.

"Each of my mentors gave me different styles, but what they gave me



Gregg Begin, '04

Members of the Bluegrass Ensemble (left to right) Jonas Friddle, '04, Jake Krack, '07, Amber Field, '06, Megan Vaught, '07, and Ryan Blevins, '04, and BC Instructor Al White (not pictured).

that's most important is their life experiences," says Jake. "They taught me fiddle tunes and they taught me a way of life. All the things that happened during the teens and the twenties and the thirties and the forties, I didn't have to learn from a history book. I have gotten firsthand experience of the history from them."

Jake seems much older than twenty. It's apparent that the greatest influences in his life are old men full of wisdom and experience. Each time Jake goes home, he plays with Lester and Bobby, his remaining mentors. Melvin passed away nearly a year ago from a fatal stroke.

"Each of my mentors gave me different styles, but what they gave me that's most important is their life experiences. They taught me fiddle tunes and they taught me a way of life."

"I went there Saturday morning and stayed with Melvin. I even hugged him for a minute before he passed away at six o'clock on Sunday morning," says Jake, obviously still affected by the loss. "It was very hard because, after ten years, Melvin became like a grandfather to me. We weren't just master fiddler and student. It was a close relationship. People could see that when we played together. We were close friends."

At Berea College, Jake continues to absorb the experiences from old-timers. He chooses to have his hair cut at a small owner-operated barbershop behind the local drugstore because the barbers there are older men with stories to tell. "I'd rather go there than someplace cheaper. At the barbershop I get to sit down



Lindsay Bruner, '06

As part of his labor assignment, Jake works in special collections identifying and categorizing traditional mountain music.

there and listen to those three men talk," says Jake.

Jake still feels his late mentor's influence. He grins as he remembers working in the sound archives in the library, digitizing music onto CDs as part of his labor assignment. "I'm listening to tape after tape, when my supervisor comes in and says 'Here are some tunes you might like.' There were 60 tunes from Melvin Wine recorded on an occasion he came to Berea to play. I'd heard all of these tunes before, but sitting there, as part of my job listening to my mentor play for three hours. . . Well, that was heaven for me."

Harry Rice, Jake's supervisor in special collections, praises the sophomore for his workman-like attention to the details of his job. "He brings an uncanny knowledge and experience with him. He knows which version of a particular tune is better than another. He helps to identify tunes I may not know. Jake is contributing a great deal to making our Kentucky traditional music available to a wider audience."

As our interview ends, Jake hops onto his bicycle to ride across campus to Presser Hall for a rehearsal with the Bluegrass Music Ensemble, a five-piece bluegrass band directed by Berea College instructor Al White.

I walk back to the studio to turn off the lights, thinking that old voices may soften over time, but they have something worthwhile to say, and those 'worthy things' may best be said by the pull of a bow over strings.