Fiddle Music

Early American fiddle music was played by the colonists and the immigrants who brought their native music with them to America, playing on the easily carried violin or fiddle as it was known by folk musicians. New England fiddle music was influenced by Irish and Scottish music, while Southern styles developed their own traditions. Regional styles developed around the country, drawing from many nationalities as well as music performed by African-American musicians. Fiddle music continues to the present day and has contributed to both country music and bluegrass.

Fiddle Music in Missouri

The fiddle is the official musical instrument of the State of Missouri and the state is home to more fiddle contests than most states. The earliest fiddlers in Missouri were French settlers along the Mississippi River south of St. Louis, followed soon by British Americans and Scotch-Irish coming to the Ozarks, German-speaking immigrants along the Missouri River and to the north, Irish American railroad workers, as well as Native Americans and African American musicians. The Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery that embarked from St. Louis in 1804 on an epic journey to the Pacific Northwest included two fiddlers who played music to raise the spirits of the corps and also played for and sometimes with some of the Native American tribes they met on their epic journey. The fiddle tradition was celebrated by communities throughout the state, with tunes passed down to generations of family members at recurring community dances and festivals, and heard often on radio around the state when that medium became widespread in the 1920s and 30s.

There are three different regions of fiddle music in Missouri, although the borders are not exact and individual fiddlers borrow freely from neighboring styles. Fiddler and scholar Howard Marshall reports that the Ozark style in the southern part of the state “is sometimes called jig-bow, hoedown, or short-bow fiddling, all important for setting a good beat for dancing.” Little Dixie refers to central Missouri and its style was practiced first by British Americans and African Americans, after the early French years, and then later incorporated German-speaking immigrants who added waltzes, schottisches and polkas to the repertoire, and whose bowing style was sometimes called the “smooth school of fiddling” that suggested more use of longer bow strokes. The North Missouri style, also known as the North Missouri hornpipe style or Missouri Valley style, is known for its exceptionally clean bowing that was needed to play the complex melodies of hornpipes and reels.

Fiddle Music Bios

Lonnie Robertson

Lonnie Robertson (1908-1981) rose to the national stage in the golden age of live AM radio, performing live over stations in Virginia, Illinois, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas, and issuing numerous recordings that sold across North America. Robertson recorded and performed with his radio broadcast partner, Roy McGeorge, as well as with his wife, Thelma, and others. His radio career was focused in Springfield, Missouri's KWTO, a pioneer in country music programming and live "oprys." Lonnie and Thelma published several booklets of folk and gospel songs they performed on radio shows and records. Lonnie Robertson was also active in the fiddle contest scene, as a frequent champion and also as a contest judge. In the 1960s and 1970s, Lonnie was featured in folk festivals and documentaries.

Lonnie was born on the family farm at Longrun, in the green folds of Taney County, some fifty miles southeast of Springfield and near the Arkansas line. The Robertson family in Missouri began with Lonnie's grandfather coming from Georgia to Webster County in 1860. He began learning guitar as a child from local dance musicians and played for square dances and house parties. Lonnie began playing fiddle at thirteen when he inherited his father Jarrett's violin and began picking up tunes from radio broadcasts and records as well as participating in jam sessions and fiddling for dances. Born on January 8, Lonnie enjoyed fiddling the ironclad American square dance tune, "The Eighth of January," every year on his birthday.

Lonnie's first fiddle tunes were the big breakdowns for square dancing that every fiddler is expected to be able to play -- "Arkansas Traveler," "Tennessee Wagoner," and "Soldier's Joy." He also learned to play tunes from his father in "dischord" (scordatura, cross-tuning), such as "Arkansas Traveler," "Fisher's Hornpipe," "Drunkard's Hiccups," "Cluck Old Hen," "Dry and Dusty," "and "Cotton-Eyed Joe." Robertson's old-time square dance repertoire was vast and varied, and an important feature of his musical life, typical of most old-time fiddlers of his generation, is that he embraced a variety of styles and genres, from Jazz Age rags and foxtrots and the old-time square dances and waltzes of his youth, and the emerging genres of western swing and bluegrass music in the 1940s and 1950s.

Old friends: fiddlers Art Galbraith and Lonnie Robertson, and guitarist Tilford Jones, after an afternoon jam session at the Robertson home in Springfield, Missouri, November 1975. (Photo by Howard Marshall)

Collector-scholar R.P. Christeson, who published two landmark books of fiddle tunes, considered Lonnie Robertson "the best Missouri fiddler I ever heard."[i] Historian Charles Wolfe wrote that, for many people in south Missouri, "the name Lonnie Robertson has become synonymous with old-time fiddling." Robertson is among the most-documented and recorded Midwest fiddlers, featured in Drew Beisswenger and Gordon McCann's Ozarks Fiddle Music (Mel Bay Publications, 2008), Howard Marshall's Fiddler's Dream (University of Missouri Press,

2012), and other publications. Christeson said of Robertson: “He knew an inordinate number of good tunes, could play them all well, and probably took more tunes to the cemetery than any other Missouri fiddler.” When Howard Marshall recorded Lonnie Robertson at his home in Springfield for the Smithsonian Institution in 1975, he was in his prime and performing in festivals and making records. His favorite venue remained the "music party" (jam session) with friends in the comfort and conviviality of a front parlor, porch, or kitchen. Indeed, the jam session, whether private or public, continues to be the strong heart in the ongoing love of music-making across all genres.

Howard (Rusty) Marshall

Fiddler Howard Marshall (born 1944) from Moberly, Missouri, is Professor Emeritus of Art History and Archaeology, former director of the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and former Folklife Specialist in the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. He is author of numerous books and articles, including *Play Me Something Quick and Devilish* and *Fiddler’s Dream* and is awaiting the publication of a third book on fiddling from His ancestors came to Missouri from Virginia and North Carolina and he notes that there has been a fiddler in every generation of his family since at least 1830.

Roger Netherton

Roger Netherton (b. 1996) describes himself on Facebook as "a folk, old-time, and swing violinist," and he is one of Missouri's more creative young fiddlers and multi-instrumentalists. He is known for his devotion to fiddling for contra dances, success in fiddle contests, and appearances in campground sessions and on stage at festivals such as those at Clifftop, West Virginia, Battleground, Indiana, and Winfield, Kansas. Netherton received classical training in piano and violin as a child in St. Louis, and at eleven began studying and learning old-time fiddling. He had the good fortune to have supportive parents, Dana and Robin, who took an active interest in helping Roger explore the various corners and genres of the fiddling world, taking him to jam sessions, dances, concerts, workshops, festivals, contests, and St. Louis Folk School events. Robin often records and photographs his performances, helps maintain a website, and posts her videos to internet sites such as YouTube.

Roger was welcomed into the bustling old-time music community in the St. Louis metro area. A key element in Roger's early success was the support of master guitar accompanists such as Roy Farwell, and keyboard player Rich Egan, who often perform with Netherton at contra dances and performances. Geoff Seitz, St. Louis's best-known old-time fiddler and proprietor of Seitz Violin Shop, met Roger early in the lad's exploration of fiddling. Geoff recalled his meeting Netherton: "Roger Netherton is one of those rare, talented people who pick up a musical instrument and in short time is not only playing it well, but playing it better than most. Roger has continued to get better and better, winning contests, playing outstanding concerts, and being a fan favorite at square and contra dances. He does all of this with grace and humility, never putting on airs, just a class act."[ii]

After high school, Netherton attended the University of Missouri in Columbia with a scholarship to study mathematics and statistics, and graduated with honors in 2017. He is employed as a data analyst at a St. Louis company.

Roger performs with a variety of bands and accompanists and travels extensively to fiddle for contra and square dances. In November 2020, Netherton wrote about his journey into the old-time fiddle world: “My ear was trained through listening to and playing many hours of fiddle music, not from playing 20 minutes of violin in school every other day. For other things, such as my posture and my left hand technique, I completely ignored my teachers' requests and

maintained my preferred (terrible) posture. In my early 20s, I straightened that out, since more ergonomic technique is required for playing jazz (and playing any style faster), and I was also worried about physical longevity if I were to stick with the technique I was using. Of course, I don't recommend following this route, because it was and is a real pain to un-learn bad technique. Although I listened to certain fiddlers a lot via CD player (Geoff Seitz, Rhys Jones, Bob Walters, Pete McMahan), I didn't spend very much time learning in person from anyone. Most of my development came from playing in jam sessions and for dances, and listening to CDs. I believe that in order to learn a style, listening to it is just as important as practicing it. As a teen I would listen quite obsessively to one old-time CD or another, often fixating for multiple days on certain tracks that I just couldn't get enough of, before moving on to something else. I have always enjoyed playing for contra dances. I love watching the dancers enjoying themselves. I enjoy playing the music itself, but I especially enjoy being able to express the tune in different ways during the many repetitions that occur during an 8 or 10-minute dance. And as I've grown and developed as a contra dance musician, I have become fascinated with learning different ways to change the energy level and dynamic contour of the music to elevate the experience of the dancers.”

Like many fiddlers who read music, Netherton pulls tunes he likes from books as well as recordings and jam sessions. He plays interesting versions of classics from Missouri and the Midwest, such as "Old Jeff City" ("Katon's Hornpipe") and tunes associated with Nebraska's Bob Walters, worked out with personal touches and variations, but he learns most of his repertoire from listening, not reading.

Roger's participation in Missouri's quixotic and cliquish fiddle contest scene was like everyone else's, a learning experience. Already a solid old-time fiddler and rapidly learning tunes and techniques, by 2012 he was becoming a successful competitor. In August that year, Robin took Roger on a three-day excursion to three of the better-known hard-core Missouri contests. They chose well, taking in annual contests of long history and different character - the Montgomery County Old Threshers Festival contest in Montgomery City, St. James, and the Missouri state championships at the State Fair in Sedalia. In contests, Roger generally plays in an Appalachian style, rather than the currently-dominant Texas-based "contest style." While he does well on the contest circuit, Netherton decided that it was a lot more fun playing fiddle at dances and jam sessions than going to contests. He has, however, become a regular and successful competitor in major contests such as those at festivals such as Clifftop, WVA and Winfield, Kansas.
Roger produced a CD in 2018 called Roger Netherton and it features a number of unusual tunes, such as "John Stenson's No. 2" (popularized in Missouri by Cathy Barton and Dave Para at their Big Muddy Festivals), Midwestern tunes such as "Ol' Bob" (from Gary Harrison, Illinois), intriguing interpretations of old standards, such as his take on an unusual version of "Durang's Hornpipe," and his own composition, "Blue Moon Waltz." During year one of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, Roger Netherton began presenting informal, one-man concerts on YouTube, playing a range of tunes on violin, guitar, and mandolin, and discussing tune history. In the live programs, Netherton responds to viewer's and listener's comments in real time.

Article on Fiddling

Notes on Old-Time Fiddling and People's History

by Howard Marshall

"Fiddling, that's my pan of berries!"
-- Missouri fiddler Taylor McBaine

The violin / fiddle has been a principal musical instrument in American community life since the beginning, challenged in popularity only by the piano in the late nineteenth century and in the twentieth century by the guitar.

Fiddle music appears by turns to be tradition-bound and static, but it is daily transformed by countless performance styles and tune versions that span all social and cultural boundaries. While the violin has been the most common folk instrument since colonial times, people often say that it is the most difficult instrument to master. And 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, special music at funeral services and wedding parties.

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 emigrants. These and other musical and cultural traditions intersected and cross-pollinated in pioneer communities.
Perhaps the violin's enduring popularity is due to the violin's versatility, perhaps due to its sound, or perhaps due to its size and portability (in pioneer times, people brought violins from Virginia and Pennsylvania and Ireland in a flour sack or wrapped in a quilt, under a wagon seat or in a steamer trunk).

I have always been impressed by how many people, whether in Montana or England, know fiddle tunes like "Sally Gooden" and "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 fiddle contests than most states and due to the celebrity of Missouri fiddlers spanning styles and eras. No doubt Missouri benefits because of its geographical position as a significant settlement area and gateway to the nation's west. 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.

Missouri has had a number of legendary fiddlers from the 1800s into the 2000s. Their music and stories have been conserved and documented in publications, archives, and recordings. Much of their music remains active in the repertoires of today's fiddlers. Among notable players of former times whose music continues to be celebrated and performed is Lonnie Robertson of Springfield, in one of the "plains" quadrants of southwest Missouri's Ozarks region.

Lonnie Robertson (1908-1981) rose to the national stage in the golden age of live AM radio, performing live over stations in Virginia, Illinois, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas, and issuing numerous recordings that sold across North America. Robertson recorded

and performed with his radio broadcast partner, Roy McGeorge, as well as with his wife, Thelma, and others. His radio career was focused on Springfield, Missouri's KWTO, a pioneer in country music programming and live "oprys." Lonnie and Thelma published several booklets of folk and gospel songs they performed on radio shows and records. Lonnie Robertson was also active in the fiddle contest scene, as a frequent champion and also as a contest judge. In the 1960s and 1970s, Lonnie was featured in folk festivals and documentaries.

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Collector-scholar R.P. Christeson, who published two landmark books of fiddle tunes, considered Lonnie Robertson "the best Missouri fiddler I ever heard."[ii] Historian Charles Wolfe wrote that, for many people in south Missouri, "the name Lonnie Robertson has become synonymous with old-time fiddling."[ii] Robertson is among the most-documented and recorded Midwest fiddlers, featured in Drew Beisswenger and Gordon McCann's Ozarks Fiddle Music (Mel Bay Publications, 2008), Howard Marshall's Fiddler's Dream (University of Missouri Press, 2012), and other publications. Christeson said of Robertson: "He knew an inordinate number of good tunes, could play them all well, and probably took more tunes to the cemetery than any other Missouri fiddler."[ii] When I recorded Lonnie Robertson at his home in Springfield for the Smithsonian Institution in 1975, he was in his prime and performing in festivals and making records. His favorite venue remained the "music party" (jam session) with friends in the comfort and conviviality of a front parlor, porch, or kitchen. Indeed, the jam session, whether private or public, continues to be the strong heart in the ongoing love of music-making across all genres.

Because much traditional music is learned as "ear music," rather than by musicians reading "chicken scratches" (written music), tunes as well as performance techniques are often passed from one person to another. Fiddle music depends on human interaction; listening and watching are the historic channels of sustenance and transmission. As "ear music," fiddling is passed down through person-to-person interaction, informal apprenticeship, and imitation of admired models.

We need to listen to the testimony of oral history and memory, however impressionistic and incomplete they may be. In the transmission of local legends like "the Boonville races" (the Battle of Boonville during the Civil War) the essential core of the story normally remains

trustworthy. Newspaper accounts at the time are apt to be no more “true” than the recollections of people who were there.

But we shouldn't stress ear music too much in terms of how people learn this music because, since the 1800s, published music for fiddle tunes has been available. People with music-reading skills learned tunes and played them at dances and various events, and "ear musicians" listened and learned tunes and techniques -- just as, by the same token, composers and music publishers picked up melodies from listening to ear-musician. Moreover, we have had commercial recordings of authentic fiddle music since the late 1890s, and recordings of various kinds continue to be a significant source of learning tunes as well as how to perform them. If we add modern self-teaching guides and the Suzuki method, fiddle camps, college courses, archives, and technology of the digital age and cyberspace, options for learning how to play fiddle music are endless.

During the 1980s, an 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.”[ii] I took part in the campaign, 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 who did not, in the majority, have affection for square dances or bluegrass festivals. Nevertheless, declaration of the instrument as our state musical instrument suggests that there is pride in Missouri’s heritage of traditional fiddling and violin playing of more formal and classical kinds, and interest in recognizing this great tradition.

People involved in community festivals, whether a centennial celebration or harvest fest, discover that famous sons or daughters played 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. In around 1915, when Walt was a child, he rode in the farm wagon with his father to their neighbor's 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 pre-Industrial 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.[ii] Cultural traditions and folk and vernacular music ebb and flow, forward and back, through memory and time, stalling and restarting, re-shaping and evolving, like a river of many currents and tributaries.

There have been golden ages of fiddling. Some point to the eighteenth century, when the British repertoire held sway and 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 age of railroad building with its itinerant Irish and war-veteran fiddlers, or to the later years of the century when the New York City's Tin Pan Alley music publishing district began to paper the nation with songs, rags, and two steps in sheet music that would sift into the old-time fiddler's repertoire. 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 pushing changes. But change has always been there in this dynamic music that depends so heavily upon memory and custom. So we have a dilemma -- admiration for the patina of echo of former times, and, at the same time, admiration for the creativity and skills of today. Change occurs within and beyond old traditions, and musicians make the music their own.

Whether it's played at a fish fry, a classroom, or for the new generation of square dancers, the energy of the violin has been part and parcel of our lives for hundreds of years, and fortunately shows no signs of vanishing.

Tunes in Time

There are various kinds of melodies in the fiddler's repertoire, and most are music for traditional dances. One category is tunes inherited from Great Britain and Europe in colonial and early national times. Most of these are of unknown authorship and they became popular through oral and aural transmission from person to person. "Soldier's Joy" ("King's Head") and "Leather Britches" ("Lord McDonald's Reel") are prime examples of reels for square dancing of British Isles origins, played by every Missouri fiddler of my acquaintance. We often think of these tunes as anonymous, but their composers' names have simply been lost in time.

Fiddle tunes often have alternate titles "Lead Out" (pronounced "leed") comes from an old Scottish reel that gravitated to the 1830s minstrel stage and eventually recorded in every format from Edison cylinders to compact disc and heard in radio broadcasts and at countless stage shows, square dances, fiddle contests, and jam sessions. An ironclad of the bluegrass and old-time fiddle scene, "Lead Out" has the most alternate titles of any tune I know. It traces back to Scotland in the 1750s as "Miss Farqhuarson's Reel" (1757) and "Lady Botinscoth's Reel" and through the centuries since accrued titles such as "Richmond Blues" (for a home guard brigade in colonial Virginia), "The Duke of York," "My Love is But a Lassie Yet," "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," "Crooked Stovepipe," "Hair in the Butter," "Scrap Iron," "Buffalo Nickel," "Sledge Hammer," "Chinky Pin," "Crumb Creek Posey," "The Farmer Had a Dog," "Fourth of July." "I'm My Momma's Darling," "Jackson's Fancy," Love Somebody Yes I Do," "Midnight Serenade," "Old Kingdom," "Soapsuds Over the Fence," "Sweet Sixteen," "Yellow Eyed Cat," "Leesil," "Lead Out" (its most commonplace title, popularized by Nashville fiddler Tommy Jackson's 1950s-1960s records), and my personal favorite, "Too Young to Marry."

We have tunes brought to America by German-speaking immigrants. The most common of these are tunes that go with dances, such as the schottische, the polka, and most enduring, the waltz. Perhaps the best-known polka was composed in 1853 by a New York City dancing master (based on an old Bohemian waltz), Allen Dodworth, called "Jenny Lind Polka" ("Heel and Toe Polka")[ii]

We have tunes that came into the broader fiddle repertoire from African American fiddlers in Missouri, such as popular radio and dance fiddlers of the 1920s and 1930s such as Phil Hancock (Rolla), Tommy Johnson (Granby), Bill Katon (south Callaway County), Bill Driver and Bill Burdick (Jefferson City), Bud Summers and Ace Donnel (Monroe County), and later, the jazz fiddler Claude Williams of Kansas City.[ii]

We often think of fiddle music as brought in the memories of musicians coming from the Old Country, and our oldest tunes were. But most of the tunes in a Missouri fiddler's repertoire in 2021 are American in origin, and many can be traced to known fiddlers or composers. So, another category is dance tunes of American origin.

Among mainstays in Missouri is "Durang's Hornpipe, "composed by a circus performer, artist, and musician named Hoffmaster in 1785 in honor of John Durang, the nation's most famous hornpipe dancer. Durang worked in the circus of John Bill Ricketts in the New York-Philadelphia-Washington circuit, as a dancer, actor, puppeteer, rope walker, acrobat, and blackface performer.[ii] Like many composed tunes, "Durang's Hornpipe" was passed along the grapevine of oral and aural tradition and went into in the fiddlers' repertoire. The hornpipe was a solo step-dance in a dotted rhythm that apparently evolved among sailors in the British Navy who danced the figures on shipboard to entertain themselves. The dance became popular in carnivals, circuses, stage shows, minstrelsy, and, later, vaudeville, where young, lithe, male hornpipe dancers were featured. The hornpipe dance faded into obscurity in the early 1900s, with the notable exception of its continued popularity in Irish dancing. As a result, the old dotted rhythm of the true British Isles hornpipe has been mostly lost, and among old-time and bluegrass fiddlers, hornpipes are now fiddled like reels ("breakdowns," "hoedowns"). When a dance goes out of style, the tune type that went with it tends to change or be lost.

We have numerous tunes that were composed and popularized in swing and western swing music and among Nashville musicians. Tunes such as the omnipresent two-step, "Faded Love," were popularized through records and radio in the 1940s and 1950s. Some are original and some are surprisingly old. The melody for the Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys' hit of 1940, "Faded Love," is derived from "Darling Nelly Gray," a sentimental ballad composed by Benjamin Hamby in 1856.

The old-time square dance favorite, "The 8th of January" derives from the Battle New Orleans in January 1815 at the end of the War of 1812 with Great Britain. American volunteers commanded by Tennessee's Andrew Jackson defeated a far larger army of British soldiers. As legend has it, in the days before the battle, as the armies were encamped near each other, American fiddlers heard British Army bagpipers playing this tune and began playing it. Without knowing a title, the Americans began calling it "The 8th of January" to commemorate their victory. In the 1940s, Arkansas balladeer, composer, and high school teacher James C. Morris (stage name, "Jimmy Driftwood") penned lyrics to the fiddle tune and called the resulting song, "The Battle of New Orleans," and in 1959 the Nashville crooner Johnny Horton's recording of "The Battle of New Orleans" became a Top Forty hit on the pop charts.

Some Styles of Fiddle Performance in Missouri

> “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. But they'd all step on different rocks getting there. And that's kind of the way it is with fiddle music, you know.

A lot of different fiddlers can get there. But they kind of take a little different route doing it."

-- Humansville fiddler Earl Ball, 2007

There are a number of categories or styles of fiddling. Categories help us organize, identify, and appreciate variety and difference. By listening we can hear a fiddler as a "square dance" fiddler or an "Irish" fiddler or a "bluegrass" fiddler, just as we can hear that rock and reggae are not the same styles or genres. Sorting out styles of fiddling is confusing because music is variable as the individuals who produce it. But in traditional fiddling, different styles often evolved in different cultural and geographic regions, ethnic groups, and even in 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 on a 1920s 78 rpm record. When a style values innovation and improvisation, as in jazz and the more creative frontiers of bluegrass, the melody is the jumping-off place. Other styles value perfection, note by note imitation, as in the controlled variations of many of contest fiddlers; they eliminate oddities, extra beats, dropped beats, and squawky bowings, because judges consider these things to be "mistakes."

Styles in fiddling are defined by at least two indicators: the bowing, and how a fiddler decides to elaborate and ornament a tune. To be sure, there are other facets, such as repertoire, backup, and prevailing dancing traditions – do they like their waltzes fast or slow? Do they like two-steps? Will they request a schottische? And there is phrasing, overall expression and approach to a tune that almost becomes instinctive.

In Missouri, we broadly hear three styles of old-time fiddling: Ozarks, Little Dixie, and North Missouri. These styles evolved from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s and are tied to cultural and geographic regions and settlement history. These three main styles generally line up with and reflect the cultural heritage of these major cultural-geographic regions, but borders are vague, ever-changing, and atypical examples abound. Ozark, Little Dixie, and North Missouri styles are founded on older habits and performances, but they evolved through screens and layers of new music and emerged as über styles based in the mid-1900s on repertoire and performance preferences. One would not consider these styles today to be "ethnic" fiddle styles, but their regions show the influences of ethnicity in early settlement times. Fiddlers added rags and swing tunes to their repertoires of old British Isles tunes and dance tunes from German-speaking immigrants, and over time these tunes became lumped together with the inherited repertoire; all became "old-time fiddle tunes."

Ozark fiddling is sometimes called "jig bow," "saw stroke," "hoedown" or "short bow" fiddling -- all terms used by Ozark fiddlers themselves. Such terms indicate the tendency of many fiddlers in the large and complicated region to use short bow strokes, but, of course, fiddlers all over the globe also use short bow strokes, so this formulation is unsatisfying. More important is the tendency among Ozark players to use bow strokes in combination with heavy rhythm, double stops, and a "sawing" effect or shuffle bow -- important in setting a firm beat for dancing.

Little Dixie is a loosely defined region in central and northeastern Missouri, mainly settled by British-Americans and African Americans from the Upland South, particularly lowland and piedmont areas of North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky, bounded by the Missouri River on the south and Mississippi on the east. The region is culturally and geologically between the Ozark Highland on the south and the Corn Belt on the north.[ii]

Little Dixie bowing is generally called "long bow" (a misnomer) and often explained as the “smooth school of fiddling” -- legato bowing, a term that suggests smooth playing and comparatively longer bow strokes in phrasing. It often sounds like a fiddler is playing long, seamless strokes – but, in actuality, the fiddler is changing bow directions so subtly that the bow changes may be inaudible. "Long bow” is also important in styles such as swing, bluegrass, and the style predominant at The National Oldtime Fiddler’s Contest in Idaho. The fiddler plays “slurs” (two or more notes on one bow), with the groups of notes interspersed with single strokes.[ii] Few fiddlers actually make use of the entire length of the bow, but this is the goal for many who play the Little Dixie style. Phrasing is the key, because phrasing lends character to fiddling in different traditions as well as lending special qualities to an individual’s playing within a tradition.[ii]

In the Little Dixie area, the fiddling also reflects influence of Germanic polkas in the repertoire and emphasizes a fusion of Old Stock American with African American fiddling due to the high population historically of African American musicians here. Among other facets of Little Dixie style – found elsewhere, but more important here – are playing unisons, octaves, and double stops (meaning two strings at one time).[ii]

A third broad style from early times in Missouri is called North Missouri Style or Missouri Valley Style. In regard to fiddle styles, the region comprises most of western Missouri above the Kansas City area and northwestern Missouri, and its principal towns are Kirksville, Chillicothe, and St. Joseph. Charlie Walden, a foremost advocate of this style, uses the term Missouri Valley Style and writes that it is marked by “exceptionally clean, notey playing of complex hornpipes and reels, many of which can be traced to Cole's … fiddlers from all over Missouri play a lot of this typically American 19th Century repertoire but it's most pervasive in northwest Missouri.”[ii]
The expression “Missouri Valley” can be confusing to people unfamiliar with the Missouri River corridor from St. Louis west to its upper reaches in North Dakota and Montana. A good portion of the lower river, joined by the Mississippi at St. Louis, runs through old French and German settlements as well as Little Dixie before curving north at Kansas City; the river then becomes the boundary separating Missouri from Kansas and then Nebraska. North Missouri’s post-Civil War settlement was substantially from northeast and eastern states such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, and from Europe. Much of the rural and small-town landscape is indistinguishable from southern Iowa. The terms "long bow" and "hornpipe" are used to describe both North Missouri and Little Dixie fiddling, and these regions share much.

While all American fiddle styles share much, each style has its own character, audience, and contexts. In fact, there are many genres of traditional violin playing. Other prominent genres of fiddle music that have made their places in Missouri music include Irish fiddling, country, bluegrass, and contest fiddling. We also have fiddlers devoted to other genres, such as minstrel fiddling and Cajun fiddling.

"Irish fiddling" (a.k.a. Celtic fiddling) from Ireland underwent a revival in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s through the 78 rpm records of influential Irish emigrant fiddlers in cities such as New York and Chicago, such as the Sligo masters, Michael Coleman, James Morrison, and Paddy Killoran. Their records rekindled interest in traditional Irish fiddling in Ireland as well as in the U.S.A. In addition, Irish musicians had world-class collections of tunes transcribed from ear musicians, such as Francis O'Neill's early 1900s books, and his books (they include a few tunes O'Neill collected in Missouri) continue to be extraordinary sources for learning. Today Irish fiddling is a significant part of Missouri's traditional music scene.[ii]

What we think of as country music (a.k.a. country and western) grew out of old-time string band and vocal music and opry stage shows, and became a distinct category in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Based in Nashville, Tennessee, country has undergone changes and developed a commercial industry around it. While instrumentalists are important (e.g., guitarist Chet Atkins, and fiddlers such as Johnny Rivers and Missouri's Dale Potter), country owes its popularity to classic country singers such as Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, and Missouri's Porter Waggoner. Fiddlers in country music, as in bluegrass music, are role players in ensembles, rather than being the principal musician as in old-time square dance music.

Western swing is often considered a subset of country music. Western swing emerged in the early 1930s in Texas dance halls, and radio programs, and records, with the jazzy, syncopated music of Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies and, soon after, the influential dance band, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. The fiddle style is sometimes characterized as an amalgam of old-time and early jazz, and highly improvisational; among jazz-influenced fiddlers in the Bob Wills ensembles were Jesse Ashlock and, later, Johnny Gimble.

Bluegrass evolved in the 1940s. At first called "hillbilly music," bluegrass owes its early success to radio programs, records, and concerts by Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys (Monroe was from western Kentucky), Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys, Missouri's Dillards band, and others. The bulk of the bluegrass repertoire consists of vocal music, and fiddlers and banjoists serve roles in an ensemble. The fiddler may take a solo in a song or play a breakdown or waltz, but for the most part the bluegrass fiddler provides backup and accent for the group's songs. While the violin has always been important in this music, the five-string banjo is more important in defining the genre; a bluegrass band must have a banjo player, but a fiddler is optional. Bluegrass styles, while founded on old-time fiddling, incorporated elements of blues, western swing, and early jazz (jazz fiddler Joe Venuti is often mentioned as influential in bluegrass fiddling). Unlike old-time fiddling, bluegrass is not dance music but concert music performed for listening audiences.

Another kind if traditional fiddling that has become a distinct genre is broadly called "contest fiddling." Fiddle contests, where fiddlers perform tunes on stage for judges and audiences, have been around since colonial times, but they accrued special character and importance in the 1960s and 1970s. There are several kinds of contest fiddling, principally a Southern Appalachian old-time contest style heard at major contests such as those at Galax, Virginia, and an essentially Texas-based contest style that evolved in Texas and eventually came dominate most fiddle contests from the Midwest to California. While the Appalachian contest style is considered "old-time," the Texas-based contest style incorporates elements of western swing, purposeful individual improvisations, and its main venues are contests such as those at Weiser, Idaho. Contest styles of fiddling, like bluegrass music, grew out of cultural-geographic regions; they became nationalized and internationalized and are heard across the globe.

The effects of such things as growing musical literacy, piano lessons, high school marching bands, sheet music and tune books, commercial records, mail order catalogs, ragtime, early jazz, all the marvels of cyberspace and the digital age, have given us a continually evolving, dynamic world of fiddling.

The Future

Missouri is fortunate in having a number of young fiddlers making their marks in the current generation. Their music is becoming increasingly known through performances in fiddlers conventions, festivals, recordings, internet videos, and fiddle contests. In many ways, their

youthful creativity, personal interpretations, and performance choices are grounded on the bedrock of traditional fiddling they inherit. Among the notable young fiddlers of 2021 is Roger Netherton of St. Louis.

Roger Netherton. (Courtesy Netherton)

Roger Netherton describes himself on Facebook as "a folk, old-time, and swing violinist," and he is one of Missouri's more creative young fiddlers and multi-instrumentalists. He is known for his devotion to fiddling for contra dances, success in fiddle contests, and appearances in campground sessions and on stage at festivals such as those at Clifftop, West Virginia, Battleground, Indiana, and Winfield, Kansas.

Netherton (b. 1996) received classical training in piano and violin as a child in St. Louis, and at eleven began studying and learning old-time fiddling. He had the good fortune to have supportive parents, Dana and Robin, who took an active interest in helping Roger explore the various corners and genres of the fiddling world, taking him to jam sessions, dances, concerts, workshops, festivals, contests, and St. Louis Folk School events. Robin often records and photographs his performances, helps maintain a website, and posts her videos to internet sites such as YouTube.

Roger was welcomed into the bustling old-time music community in the St. Louis metro area. A key element in Roger's early success was the support of master guitar accompanists such as Roy Farwell, and keyboard player Rich Egan, who often perform with Netherton at contra dances and performances. Geoff Seitz, St. Louis's best-known old-time fiddler and proprietor of Seitz Violin Shop, met Roger early in the lad's exploration of fiddling. I asked Geoff to recall his meeting Netherton. "Roger Netherton is one of those rare, talented people who pick up a musical instrument and in short time is not only playing it well but playing it better than most. Roger has continued to get better and better, winning contests, playing outstanding concerts, and being a fan favorite at square and contra dances. He does all of this with grace and humility, never putting on airs, just a class act."[ii]

After high school, Netherton attended the University of Missouri in Columbia with a scholarship to study mathematics and statistics and graduated with honors in 2017. He is employed as a data analyst at a St. Louis company.

Roger performs with a variety of bands and accompanists and travels extensively to fiddle for contra and square dances. In November 2020, Netherton wrote some comments about his journey into the old-time fiddle world.

> "My ear was trained through listening to and playing many hours of fiddle music, not from playing 20 minutes of violin in school every other day. For other things, such as my posture and my left-hand technique, I completely ignored my teachers' requests and maintained my preferred (terrible) posture. In my early 20s, I straightened that out, since more ergonomic technique is required for playing jazz (and playing any style faster), and I was also worried about physical longevity if I were to stick with the technique I was using. Of course, I don't recommend following this route, because it was and is a real pain to un-learn bad technique.
>
> Although I listened to certain fiddlers a lot via CD player (Geoff Seitz, Rhys Jones, Bob Walters, Pete McMahan), I didn't spend very much time learning in person from anyone. Most of my development came from playing in jam sessions and for dances and listening to CDs. I believe that in order to learn a style, listening to it is just as important as practicing it. As a teen I would listen quite obsessively to one old-time CD or another, often fixating for multiple days on certain tracks that I just couldn't get enough of, before moving on to something else.
>
> I have always enjoyed playing for contra dances. I love watching the dancers enjoying themselves. I enjoy playing the music itself, but I especially enjoy being able to express the tune in different ways during the many repetitions that occur during an 8 or 10-minute dance. And as I've grown and developed as a contra dance musician, I have become fascinated with learning different ways to change the energy level and dynamic contour of the music to elevate the experience of the dancers."[ii]

Like many fiddlers who read music, Netherton pulls tunes he likes from books as well as recordings and jam sessions. He plays interesting versions of classics from Missouri and the Midwest, such as "Old Jeff City" ("Katon's Hornpipe") and tunes associated with Nebraska's Bob Walters, worked out with personal touches and variations, but he learns most of his repertoire from listening, not reading.

Roger's participation in Missouri's quixotic and cliquish fiddle contest scene was like everyone else's, a learning experience. Already a solid old-time fiddler and rapidly learning tunes and techniques, by 2012 he was becoming a successful competitor. In August that year, Robin took Roger on a three-day excursion to three of the better-known hard-core Missouri contests. They chose well, taking in annual contests of long history and different character -- the Montgomery County Old Threshers Festival contest in Montgomery City, St. James, and the Missouri state championships at the State Fair in Sedalia. In contests, Roger generally plays in an Appalachian style, rather than the currently dominant Texas-based "contest style." While he does well on the contest circuit, Netherton decided that it was a lot more fun playing fiddle at dances and jam sessions than going to contests. He has, however, become a regular and successful competitor in major contests such as those at festivals such as Clifftop, WVA and Winfield, Kansas.

Roger produced a CD in 2018 called Roger Netherton and it features a number of unusual tunes, such as "John Stenson's No. 2" (popularized in Missouri by Cathy Barton and Dave Para at their Big Muddy Festivals), Midwestern tunes such as "Ol' Bob" (from Gary Harrison, Illinois),

intriguing interpretations of old standards, such as his take on an unusual version of "Durang's Hornpipe," and his own composition, "Blue Moon Waltz."[ii]

During year one of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, Roger Netherton began presenting informal, one-man concerts on YouTube, playing a range of tunes on violin, guitar, and mandolin, and discussing tune history. In the live programs, Netherton responds to viewer's and listener's comments in real time. Well done, Roger!

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