Berea College Sound Archives Fellowship
Final Activity Report

John McCurley
July 2010

Listening

At the beginning of my Fellowship work I had the primary intention of finding many fiddle tunes that were stylistically representative of different regions within Kentucky. In conversation with the geographic divisions formulated by fiddle scholars, Jeff Titon and John Harrod, my analysis is that Kentucky can be divided into approximately four to five geographic regions that map onto distinct stylistic differences: (1) northeastern Kentucky, where the defining local style has been influenced by French culture and now bears resemblance to the Cape Breton fiddle style of Canada; (2) southeastern Kentucky, where Scotch Irish influence predominates; (3) central Kentucky, where bluegrass and blues traditions are most pronounced; (4) south central Kentucky, where the rhythms of African American culture prevail over the more melodic focus of tunes in the northern part of the state; and (5) western Kentucky, where the musical traditions are least well documented.

The fiddlers I have listened to are as follows:

North East: J.P. Fraley, Darley, Fulks, Ed Haley, Buddy Thomas, George Hawkins, Alva Greene

South East: Estill Bingham, Manon Campbell, John Salyer, Hiram Stamper, William Stepp, Luther Strong

Central: Doc Roberts, Lella Todd, Walter McNew

South Central: Clyde Davenport, Isham Monday, Leonard Rutherford

West: Bobby Prather

I initially tried to divide my listening evenly between musicians from these different regions, but this did not progress as I had thought it would. Firstly, there were only a few western Kentucky fiddlers among the Archive recordings. Secondly, given my desire to highlight lesser-known tunes popular in Kentucky, much of the music of central Kentucky, in particular the music of Doc Roberts, is not ideal given the commercialization of much of that region’s music. Additionally, a good portion of the recorded music from the central region is of a character more akin to blues and bluegrass than variations on old-time music. As a result, I have spent a large amount of time listening to fiddlers from the northeastern, southeastern, and south central regions – particularly Isham Monday, Darley Fuhlks, Clyde Davenport, John Salyer, and William Stepp.

Reading

In addition to the listening and re-listening process, I found much of value in print material, interview transcripts and recordings. Donald Beisswenger’s *Fiddling Way out Yonder* provided much insight into the lifestyle of old-time fiddlers during the inter-war period and Great Depression. In addition to highlighting the physical trials of hiking from gig to gig and the variety of music and venues in which Melvin Wine learned to play, I found the information on Melvin’s bowing styles to be illuminating. In fact, many of them map onto the tunes I have listened to quite well. John Harrod’s audio recorded interviews with Darley Fulks and Jeff Titon’s video recorded discussions with Clyde Davenport have also been very useful in capturing the set of background traditions that accompany old time music. Both Darley and Clyde seem to
want to pass on not only the music that shaped their worlds, but the Appalachian tropes apparent in their storytelling, as well as the art of storytelling itself.

**Learning To Play the Tunes**

During time away from the archive I set about learning many tunes that I believe stand out either as being derived from a single source, like Clyde Davenport’s *Five Miles from Town*, or demonstrate highly original settings such as Isham Monday’s version of *Soldier’s Joy*. Learning to play these tunes in a manner similar to these musicians has been very challenging, as my own fiddle background stems (albeit indirectly) from the Round Peak style popularized by Tommy Jarrell in the 60s and 70s in North Carolina. More often than not the Round Peak bowing patterns do not map onto those used by these Kentucky fiddlers, which is not surprising.

**Project Work After Berea**

Looking back over the month spent in the Berea Archives, I believe my instructional website project is on-track to be completed largely in the format it was originally proposed, but with a few tweaks. When I arrived I was under the impression that I would learn a number of ‘Kentucky’ fiddle tunes, or tunes that were demonstrably of Kentucky origin and attempt to re-popularize some of these tunes via the website. The website will still be created according to the guidelines laid-out previously, but most of the tunes featured there will not necessarily be of a Kentucky origin as I had previously conceived.

What will be featured are mostly tunes that are present in the repertoires of several different regions in the United States and that could, in theory, depending on how fine-grained an analysis you wanted to do, be traced back to a time when many of the states where they are now played did not exist. But in practice even this would not be possible in the vast majority of cases, as there is not recorded documentation that traces the development of any fiddle tune from the 18th century until contemporary times. Rather, the ‘Kentucky’ tunes I will be featuring will be interpretations of tunes whose origins are obscured by time, but that have found homes throughout different regions in Kentucky for at least a century. Perhaps one notable exception is Clyde Davenport’s “Five Miles from Town” for which he’s the only known source.

Selected tunes and fiddlers by Kentucky region:

**Northeast:**
“Rat’s Gone to Rest” by George Lee Hawkins
“Turkey Gobbler” by Luther Strong
“The Blind Man’s Lament” by Alva Greene

**Southeast:**
“Rabbit” by Estill Bingham
“The Brushy Fork of John’s Creek” by Hiram Stamper
“Callahan” by William Stepp

**Central:**
“Deer Walk” by Doc Roberts
“Flop-Eared Mule” by Walter McNew

**South Central:**
“Soldier’s Joy” by Isham Monday
“Five Miles From Town” by Clyde Davenport
The next stage of my project will involve a considerable amount of web design and will probably take at least a month to complete. During this time I will continue to learn to play tunes researched in the archives and continue my correspondence with Jeff Titon, Erika Brady, and John Harrod. What I hope to develop from this correspondence is a more refined idea of how I ought to go about determining which fiddlers to consider as candidates for recording. Each of these people has experience with field recording and I believe each will have insight into which regions of Appalachia have nurtured distinct fiddling styles and may be able to point me in the direction of contemporary fiddlers whose playing is especially representative. Afterwards comes the actual video recording, which could take a couple or several months; it is hard to say how long this stage will last until I know the fiddlers I will record.

As the first module of my project comes to a close, I am curious to see how the fiddlers I ultimately contact will react when they receive the source recordings I send them. I wonder if they will try to mimic exactly the playing styles of the fiddlers in the recordings in the way that they may have with the masters of their own regional styles, or if each fiddler will manage to interpret the tunes and express them in his or her own respective musical dialect. I hope that if and when I send a fiddler a tune played in a Kentucky style that he or she already knows a variant of, that he or she can meaningfully retranslate the tune from a Kentucky style rather than relying on knowledge of the tune as it evolved in another region. This is an important issue I will almost certainly have to deal with, but one that seems surmountable.