Fellowship Activity Report
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Overview

My project focused on the migration of traditional old-time fiddling from the Appalachian region throughout the southeastern United States. Being a fiddler, originally from Tennessee but living for a time in North Carolina before moving to Florida in 2000, I have experienced most of my life in the southeastern United States. I have listened to, played with, read about, learned from, and talked to many fiddlers over the years. Though this is a familiar subject, I still have much to learn. This experience enriched my life immeasurably and inspired me to continue my quest for fiddling knowledge.

We know from various accounts that this migration has been happening over several generations already (Joyce Cauthen, Charles Wolfe and others have written about this topic) but the interviews I did with the various fiddlers I visited presented some very interesting thoughts about the current status of old-time music in the southeast and about the recent past that has shaped these fiddlers. I completed sixteen interviews with fiddlers in Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia and the DVD’s of the video recordings are available for research in Berea’s archives. There was so much information covered that it would be impossible to detail it here but I will give a brief account of some of the main points in this report.

Tom and Kay Van Treese (Lamont, Florida) discussed the early days of the Florida State Fiddlers Association, contra dances in Tallahassee, wild late night jams, and the recordings and fiddlers that have inspired them to play this music. They, like many well-known old-time players, are both multi-instrumentalists and they take turns accompanying each other. One of the many topics covered was how difficult it is to maintain an accurate list of fiddle tune repertoire.

Allen Hood (St. Augustine, Florida) shared stories of visits with fiddlers from other regions – people like Alan Block and Tommy Bledsoe who have regularly migrated to Florida bringing their tunes and their connections to other places and sharing it with musicians here. Alan is also a teacher so we discussed teaching and learning methods at length. He frequents festivals and fiddle conventions, sharing and learning tunes along the way, much like the fiddlers that influenced him.

Lindsey Smith (Quincy, Florida) shared his passion for playing for dances and jamming with others, whether in his home state of North Carolina or in northwest Florida where he currently resides. His extensive repertoire includes many popular old-time tunes and many rare gems and he plays them with a unique rhythmic style. His migration is another one of the many that have carried this tradition south. He also discussed some of the string bands and other musicians that he has played with over the years and he talked about the interesting history of his fiddle.

Wayne C. Martin (Blountstown, Florida) and Jean Etheridge (Port St. Joe, Florida) were both born in Altha, Florida which is in Calhoun County (also where Vassar Clements was born). They play more of a bluegrass style than many of the others I visited. Their stories gave
accounts of historic bluegrass and folk festivals in the area, frustrations with living in isolated areas, and encounters with old country stars. Wayne studied for years with George Custer, nephew of Robert “Georgia Slim” Rutland, and he talked about the early days of twin fiddling and swing, and discussed George’s and his own fiddle pedagogy. Jean talked about going to festivals around the area and going on bluegrass cruises. She also told stories reflecting her lifelong love of music, talking about how she would sneak around to play her father’s guitar and fiddle when she was a young child.

Lloyd Baldwin (Branford, Florida) talked about learning old-time music with others in the Gainesville, Florida area when he was in college. The Wednesday night jams that he and his brother started many years ago are still carried on today. He lived for a while in Alabama and played with Jim and Joyce Cauthen and others there. From them he learned a tune he played (Chuckaluck) by Sam McCracken, an Alabama fiddler known for helping start the Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers Convention in Athens, Alabama. Lloyd also has learned many tunes from recordings of Arthur “Cush” Holston, a Florida old-time fiddler. Some of these Florida tunes sound surprisingly similar to standard Appalachian old-time tunes but with a different twist, giving us an idea of how tunes might have migrated and changed slightly in the process.

Chuck Levy (Gainesville, Florida) is perhaps better known for his banjo playing and teaching but he is also a fine fiddler. Having lived in Ohio before settling down in Florida many years ago, he is also one of the many that have brought the sounds and stories and connections from Appalachia to the deeper south. He played some traditional old-time tunes but also some of his own compositions and he shared the stories of what inspired him to compose them.

Kerry Blech (Gainesville, Florida) is known in the old-time community for his amazing wealth of knowledge about musicians and tunes. In his interview, he talked about some of his encounters with different musicians over the years and of some of the many festivals that he has frequented. Kerry is also sought after for his fiddling and he has been performing and teaching at workshops, camps and contests for years. He discussed the history of his fiddles, performing with his string band, and his own teaching method among other subjects. Kerry was born and raised in Ohio, where he started learning old-time music, and spent 20 years as an adult in the Seattle, Washington area, which has a huge old-time “scene.”

Jim Humble (Ooltewah, Tennessee) is a maker of fine violins (he is the father of my own fiddle!) and a fiddler himself. He talked about some of the many musicians and instrument makers that he has met over the years. He also discussed his own training and the fiddles that he has built. Before I left, he gave me some old Devil’s Box magazines from the 1970’s and 80’s, put out by The Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers Association. These magazines have a wealth of information in them – articles about different topics, transcriptions of tunes, listings of winners from different contests, and much more.

John Harrod (Owenton, Kentucky) has been an inspiration for me as a collector so it was exciting to meet him in person and to visit him in his home. He talked about his own history and also of some of the people that have inspired him, in collecting as well as fiddling. He shared his feelings about the importance of a “sense of place” and of understanding where the tunes come from. He also talked about Kentucky styles and how, when he was collecting in his early years, styles were more specific to the region. He discussed some of the distinctive mechanics of playing used (separate bowings for every note in many cases, with added notes
on other strings to create more string crossings) and how these stylistic details add syncopation.

**Greg Allen (Palmetto Bay, Florida)** was attending the Appalachian String Band Festival, more commonly known as Clifftop, when I interviewed him in West Virginia. He discussed fiddle contests versus jamming with other musicians and how different the two can be. He also talked about his own relocation to Florida years ago and how important the Florida State Fiddlers Association events were in terms of connecting him to other players in the area. His relocations over the years highlight the mobility of today’s population and how these “movers” transport culture with them from place to place.

**Sean Colledge (Chicago, Illinois)** lived in Tallahassee for years and that was where he first started learning to play the fiddle. He is an instrument maker now, building primarily cellos but he has built fiddles too. He talked about his apprenticeship with Irish fiddler James Kelly (Sean also plays Irish traditional music) and about learning to build instruments. He also discussed the community and social aspects of old-time music and compared these to his experiences as a classical guitar player.

**Jim Morris (Springfield, West Virginia)** is also a multi-instrumentalist and builder of instruments but his fiddles are a little different – cigar box fiddles! He talked about the history of cigar box instruments and how he has been able to trace them all the way back to the Civil War era. He also talked about his own history of learning to play and build instruments. In addition, he described some of the festivals he likes to attend and some of the people he has met and jammed with over the years.

**Jane Scott (Monticello, Florida)** is an active player and fiddle teacher, teaching primarily at the music store that she and her husband own and manage in Tallahassee. She talked about her childhood in Alabama and playing in the school orchestra. She also discussed her teaching style in detail and different resources that she finds helpful to students.

**Bob Murphy (Coconut Creek, FL)** lives in south Florida but I caught up with him when he was visiting his daughter in Tallahassee. He has been an active member of the Florida State Fiddlers Association for many years and regularly attends the Florida Folk Festival and the Florida Fiddlers Conventions. He talked about having a family band for years with his wife and his twins (twin, twin fiddlers!). He plays several styles – Cajun and Quebecois – in addition to old-time and he demonstrated the fancy percussive footwork which often accompanies Canadian Quebecois fiddling.

**Findings**

It is almost impossible to make generalizations or big summaries without leaving out some important details. I will do my best to fairly and accurately represent this important population in a way that is easy to read, touching on some of the many topics that this project explored.

Many of the fiddlers interviewed had family members that were involved in music in some way or another. Several of them started on guitar later in life and then switched over to fiddle. This is especially interesting to me as I have noticed that, with budget cuts affecting more and more arts programs in schools, strings programs are becoming sparse in many areas.
Guitar, however, is being taught more frequently in many schools these days so perhaps my findings here will provide some consolation and hope for the future.

Learning methods were very different for the fiddlers I interviewed. Several of the fiddlers stated at first that they were self-taught but then as the conversation continued, they talked about musicians that took them under their wing or played with them when they were learning. Only a few of them had taught others in a formal lesson setting, although I feel it is safe to say that they have all “taught” others informally in jams or concerts, whether they intended to or not (I know that I have learned from each of them, informally). Some of the fiddlers had taken more formal lessons and some had taught or currently teach lessons as well.

Of the fiddlers that had taught students in a formal lesson or workshop situation, there were many interesting findings. Some teach bowings while some just teach notes or tunes. One of the fiddlers (Allen Hood) described in detail how he would start a beginner. I was struck by how similar the description was to the way that a teacher would start a classical violin student, indicating that the basics of making sound on the instrument are very similar even across genres. I was also excited to discover their different ways of teaching tunes - forward chaining or backward chaining – and to relate these to my own graduate studies in music education.

Another fiddle teacher (Kerry Blech) talked about how certain tunes can be used to teach different techniques. He talked about how he has used the tune Sail Away Ladies to teach certain bowing techniques in a way that the student relates what they are doing musically to the lyrics and the sound or rhythm of the words. This connection between music and language is not surprising as many traditional music styles seem to echo the dialect or the accents of the people in that area.

Several of the fiddlers mentioned watching videos on You Tube or using the Appalachian Digital Archives or other modern resources as listening or learning tools; however, most of the conversations regarding learning and teaching were either focused on oral person-to-person transmission or learning by ear from recordings. Workshops, as described by many of those interviewed, tended to be taught by ear, phrase by phrase, in a call and response manner. This indicated that, though resources and modern technology are highly valued, most of the learning that is taking place is still rooted in the oral tradition, much like what we know of learning styles from past generations.

The styles were so different between the fiddlers that I interviewed, each having their own very distinct style. There were several common threads between those I interviewed and Appalachian old-time fiddlers - very syncopated rhythms, accents on off-beats and slurs on the ends of phrases to give strength to anticipated downbeats. There were many fiddlers that discussed and played in cross-tunings and there were a fair share of crooked tunes. Many of the same variation techniques were employed like changing octaves, using double stops, grace notes and hammer-ons.

Repertoire was discussed at length and there was definitely a connection between the fiddlers I visited and Appalachian fiddlers in this regard. There were also some tunes that were more unique to this area, some considered Alabama, Georgia and even Florida tunes. Some original compositions in the traditional style were also shared and there were discussions of how the style stays alive and relevant, despite being very much rooted in the past.

There was a shared worry that, with all of the access that we have to so many different styles, some of the distinctiveness of style that previous fiddlers had will be lost. Along these
same lines, it was interesting that many of the fiddlers I interviewed played other styles in addition to old-time. Part of this seemed to be the result of Florida’s “snow bird” visits (many northerners winter in the warmer climates, sharing elements of their cultures with them when they come). These migrations create an interesting mix of sounds and styles, leaving traces of their impact for years to follow. Another possible reason for this intermingling of styles is that our population in this country is becoming more and more culturally diverse. It makes sense that our traditional American music would gradually absorb some of these different sounds.

Contests were viewed skeptically, even by those that had participated often and successfully. Most of the fiddlers I interviewed said that they would rather be jamming with others in a campground than winning a contest and several talked about how contest fiddling is almost a different style entirely. Many acknowledged the role that fiddle contests have in bringing musicians together, providing a place where newcomers could come to meet others in the area with similar interests.

There was also much discussion about the Florida State Fiddlers Association. Many of these fiddlers are members and several have held official roles in the organization or helped to get it started. The annual conventions have featured different special guests over the years, bringing in people from around the country to lead workshops. Some of the fiddlers recounted such visits and they also talked about how important (and fun) it was to be able to connect regularly with musicians from around the state and region. Festivals were also lauded for being places where musicians could connect with others and share tunes. These “connectors” play an important role in keeping the tradition alive.

Perhaps the most important role in the art of music making is the maker of the actual musical instrument. Several instrument makers were interviewed and their reflections on learning this art were fascinating. Their stories of interactions with different musicians over the years gave me a sense that the art of fiddling and fiddle building is in good hands. I have always enjoyed the idea of making music out of found objects and how this is reflected in our old-time traditions (spoons, washboards, wash tub basses, etc.) but I never dreamed that I would be able to explore that with this project. Jim Morris made this connection possible with his beautiful cigar-box fiddles and I was so appreciative of his art that I now own one of his creations.

Though there were many common themes, common tunes, and similar stories, each of the fiddlers I interviewed sounded so distinctly different from the others. Even fiddlers that lived close to one another had very different styles. Perhaps this is due to the many outside influences and the increased mobility of people in general. Bowing seemed to be one of the main factors in this individualized sound but even the melodies were somewhat different from one fiddler to the next. Often fiddlers would cite their source for learning certain tunes and still, their renditions would sound different from the original, indicating that they had made the music their own.

Connections seemed to take center stage in almost every interview. Whether it was regarding connections to the past, connections to place, connections to nature, connections between music and language or even just connections to other musicians, this seemed to be a very important recurring topic. The associations, festivals, camps, conventions and events which serve as “connectors” then seem to be of paramount importance. For a population that is much more mobile than in generations past, perhaps these connections are even more necessary.
More research on all of these subjects is necessary before major conclusions can be drawn and I intend to continue to add to my collection and to write about the many aspects of this in more detail. I hope that others will find the collection helpful and will use it for their own research as well. I welcome further discussion and ideas that others may share regarding this collection and this topic.

Thanks

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