

Fiddle Music, Dance, and Community in New Hampshire

By Burt Feintuch

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In a state of many small towns and only a few big ones, the music of the fiddle often brings people together, creating moments of deep pleasure and of exuberant movement, lifting the realm of the ordinary into art. The music helps dancers find their groove, and it gathers listeners into unity. It links art and place, and it encourages notions of community. Of course, these are things that music can do, regardless of where it happens. But New Hampshire's fiddle music tells us something distinctive about how at least some citizens experience that sense of community. That, in turn, can tell us something about the state of community in the state of New Hampshire.

Last summer, I was one of three judges at a fiddlers' competition in Concord, on a plaza in front of the state historical society's museum, a block or two from the golden dome of the state capitol. The variety of styles and repertoires confounded us. The contest rules placed a premium on the music's danceability, its tempo, steady rhythm, and clear phrasing. But no one way of playing stood as an aural emblem of a distinctive New Hampshire tradition. We heard some, although not much, Franco-American music. Some contestants, mainly from neighboring Vermont, played in the straightforward northeastern style some people describe as Yankee. Irish and Scottish tunes and styles found their way into the mix. Music associated with the flourishing contra dance scene did the same. We heard examples of what I think of as a generalized northern contest style, highly technical and precise playing, more removed from the dance than some of the other players' offerings. Inevitably, someone from Massachusetts played a high-tech, contest style that transcended even what one might think of as New England playing.

The fact is that there is a lot of fiddling in New Hampshire. But it's not one music. That is, no single style can stand as distinctively ours. Although the music occasions feelings of community, it works in various ways for various groups. If the contest in the state's capitol represents the state's musical traditions, it tells us that the traditions are various, and it sends us to local settings to learn more.

On Wednesday nights, walk behind Marcel Robidas's house in Dover. Go to the small building he calls a barn, purpose-built for music. A dozen or more people will probably be there, men and women with fiddles, guitars, and other instruments. Someone pounds out the chords on the piano. There's singing, some perhaps French, mixed with country classics and other songs. When Marcel stands in front of the microphone, fiddle held tight, the music cascades. It derives from a number of streams of traditional tunes from French Canadian tradition merge with a general Northeast and Maritime repertoire. Marcel was born in Orange, Vermont to a family of Franco-American heritage, and his music, in those Wednesday night sessions in New Hampshire, has no single source, no single label. People these days tend to call Marcel a French fiddler. But he once mentioned to me that he never thought of himself as a French fiddler until people started coming around to interview him about his music. A night at Marcel's may have a French accent. But even there, it's not one music that's played. And if the people who come feel bound by the

music, when they go home they go to different places, implying that community and place of residence are not necessarily the same thing.

Head to the North Country, to Berlin to see Larry and Henry Riendeau. The majority of New Hampshire's Franco-American population comes from the province of Quebec, attracted by the once-thriving textile mills that remain ubiquitous features of the built landscape. The Riendeaus are Acadian in ancestry, though, rooted not in Quebec but in the Canadian Maritimes. Berlin, with its paper mill, is an old industrial place in a state that was once the most heavily industrialized in the nation. The Riendeau music is deeply anchored in family tradition. It helped, thanks to a late 1960s LP that featured Larry and Henry with their father, Louis, helping establish a canon of Franco-American fiddle music. Like many creative musicians, though, they have learned from whomever interested them, and their current repertoire includes tunes from Gerry Robichaud, the excellent New Brunswick fiddler who lives in Massachusetts, Canadian Ivan Hicks, a leading "Down East" fiddler, and from Winston Fitzgerald, who was an influential Cape Breton Scottish fiddler. The Riendeaus have long played their music in social clubs, kitchen breakdowns, hunting camps, and other local settings. Their music is based in Berlin, New Hampshire. But it connects them to other musicians and other places, reaching well beyond the state's boundaries. It's French in one sense, New Hampshire in another, and northern in yet another.

Go to a town hall or grange building for one of the state's many contra dances. Callers chant instructions to longways lines of couple who progress up and down the line, swinging, balancing, promenading, their bodies propelled by the music. These days, it's nearly always a fiddle and a piano at the center of the music, joined perhaps by flute, accordion, guitar, bass, or other instruments. Once this was entertainment for social elites. Records from the late eighteenth century document, for instance, an African American in Portsmouth, Cuffee Whipple, who seems to have been a professional fiddler, playing for dancing by "the elite of the town." By the nineteenth century, such upper class "country dancing" was less the fashion, and the music seems to have found a more comfortable home in town halls and other local venues. Quadrille bands—featuring brass instruments, other wind instruments, and stringed instruments—supplied a range of dance musics. Two charismatic New Hampshire figures, first Ralph Page and then Dudley Laufman, figure prominently in twentieth century revivals of the music. The full story of contra dance remains to be written, but it is clearly a transatlantic story, a transformation of older dance forms, and its local inspirations were diverse—the physical education movement, Henry Ford's strong interest in replacing corrupt cosmopolitan dances with what seemed to him to be genuinely American forms, and (dare I say it), Massachusetts.

Contra dance has become a national form, but New Hampshire receives much credit as the center. It's associated with certain venues—people talk about going to Peterborough or Nelson or Dover—but the dancers come from all over. Dances are magnets that attract people who are spread out geographically. Many of them are professionals—computer programmers, counselors, and so forth. Many, as is true of much of the state's population these days, are not originally from New Hampshire. Some would have once happily described themselves as members of the counterculture. Dancers sometimes talk about the "dance community," but they refer less to a

locality than to their own mobility. Typically, they travel from many localities, and it is the dance itself—the event in the town hall or grange building—that creates a spirit of community. The music lifts the dancers, and the dance provides a kind of safe intimacy as people hold on to each other and swing.

Rodney Miller is one of New Hampshire's best-known contra dance fiddlers. Originally from Syracuse, New York, he moved to New Hampshire when he was twenty. He had some classical music training in school, and in New York he learned some jigs and reels from older musicians. His arrival in New Hampshire coincided with the contra dance revival, and at Pinewoods, a dance and music camp in Massachusetts, he was inspired, seeing that his music could drive the dancers. He met Dudley Laufman, the singular figure behind the current contra dance revival, and he played with Ralph Page, who had sparked an earlier revival in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. A violinmaker, Rodney is a virtuoso fiddler whose music ranges from traditional dance music to the more contemporary and improvisational. In an interview with fieldworker Jack Beard, he said, "It's really become a dance-oriented style. . . I think it was from the years of playing halls like Nelson [NH] where there's just small dance floors. You were sometimes playing without sound systems, but if you were using a sound system it was really a terrible sounding amp with a little pickup. But there was a lot of absorption on my part [of] the sounds of the dancing itself, so it became a part of my fiddle style." He is an emblem of New Hampshire for dance enthusiasts around the country, but he, too, comes from elsewhere.

It's easy enough to encounter fiddle music in New Hampshire. Contests at Weare and Stark join the Concord contest in attracting fiddlers from the region. The New Hampshire Strathspey and Reel Society meets monthly, playing a Scottish repertoire, under the direction of a Massachusetts musician. Irish sessions abound in bars, and master player Roger Burrige, born in England but apprenticed in Ireland, has a growing presence. Bluegrass groups are scattered across the landscape. Some fiddlers have found varied uses for their music and, as a consequence, can play across repertoires and styles. Nashua's Wilson Langlois, originally from outside Montreal, now in Nashua, plays old Quebecois tunes and swing-influenced music from his days with a dance combo. Harvey Tolman, from Marlborough, inspired by a festival in Massachusetts many years ago, a descendant of a musical dynasty in the southwestern part of New Hampshire plays mostly Cape Breton music. Many contra dance musicians play a good deal of Scottish and Irish music, thanks to the international growth of interest in fiddle musics from those places.

The music gives people reason to gather, and New Hampshire's comparatively small scale encourages people to do that. If anything characterizes the music, perhaps it's that small scale. There's a seductive temptation, in a state where historical consciousness runs high, to think of the music as old, but today's fiddle music is as much a reflection of various sorts of mobility as it is about continuity. Its various strands reflect an era in which ways of thinking about locality, identities, and culture are challenged by the ways in which people, information, and capital move. Some of the music's character has to do regional history, especially population movement from Canada to northern New England. Much of it is what folklorists and ethnomusicologists describe as revival music, music played outside its original cultural community. At a time when New Hampshire has seen a considerable influx of people from

elsewhere, and when statistics tell of the state's comparative affluence, the music's popularity might reflect a desire to create the kinds of communities many of us imagine once to have been here. Indeed, it would be very hard to say that the New Hampshire fiddle music is significantly different from Vermont's, or Maine's. It's here, though, in its varied forms and settings, and it brings people together. That makes us much better off than we would be without it.

On the author:

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