The difference between Texas fiddle and Western swing fiddle

The Texas fiddle style is not Western Swing, it is a traditional old-time fiddle style that evolved from the great Texas fiddlers like Benny Thomasson, Major Franklin, Eck Robertson the Solomons and many others. Benny said it best - he took the old tunes and "reworked them" adding variations and other parts. They are still the melody and even though players improvise on them, the improvisations are around the melody. Western Swing, on the other hand, is swing played on country instruments. While there are some old time fiddle elements to it, the improvisations are NOT melody oriented, just the opposite. They are often called "hot" fiddle solos a’la Venuti and Grappelli. If you listen to Benny, then Johnny Gimble, you'll hear two very different approaches to playing, especially improvising.

The biggest difference in Texas fiddle style and other old-time fiddle styles

1) The music is not primarily used for dancing, so feel and tempo are not tied to dancing. Many Texas tunes are slower, allowing more emphasis on melodic development and variation.

2) More variation in Texas playing, especially tunes that have more standard parts.

3) The backup in Texas fiddling uses different chord voicing to follow the fiddler whereas a lot of eastern fiddle styles use basic chords with more single note bass runs. Also different instrumentation, in Texas usually just guitars and sometimes tenor guitars, occasionally piano. The backup is heavier on the beat and the off beat, quite often playing with a feel of 4 beats per measure rather than two beats per measure.

By the 1990s and later, it became common for soloists to play less "ornamented melody" and more full blown improvising, sometimes to the degree that the solo has nothing to do with the singing melody and is in some ways more like a Jazz solo.

- Pete Martin, Petimar Press

The difference between Texas fiddle and Bluegrass fiddle

Texas style is a genre borne of old-time tunes combined with swing guitar playing which resulted in different, bluesier, jazzier note choices within the traditional tunes. Texas style fiddling doesn’t really exist without the proper guitar (and/or piano, and/or bass) accompaniment. When you put swing chords behind old-time tunes like, say Arkansas Traveler or Cripple Creek, it changes the way you, as a fiddler, decided what notes to play. The chords don’t just have the 1st, 3rd, and 5th degrees of the scale, as normal chords do. They might include the 2nd, or flat 7th, or 6th notes in the scale and therefore your ear grabs those sounds and translates them into improvisations that expand the tunes into what we now know as Texas style versions of the tunes. However, as a jam/group activity, Texas style is very fiddle-centric, in the sense that almost always, you’ll have just one fiddle in a jam, playing tunes as long as the fiddler chooses, with several rhythm guitar players and maybe a bass player and/or tenor guitar player in the mix. The fiddler is the only melody player in the group. Bluegrass is a different animal, both musically and systematically. Chords are more standard. Not a lot of swing chords, certainly, and note choices are more based on standard one, three, five, chord notes. Everyone in the jam or band has the opportunity to take a solo/lead/break during the song. And of course there is a singer to contend with, and a fiddler has to focus a lot of time on learning how to support a vocalist. Texas style has trained my ear to accept all kinds of note possibilities and that has been so beneficial to hearing the subtleties of all the other genres I love. I think that the weird mix of old-time and jazz that is Texas style prepared me to be open to hearing what works in so many other genres. It was a great way to start my fiddling career.

* Megan Lynch Chowning, FiddleStar

What is a jam session?

In Texas-style fiddle, the fiddler gradually builds a repertoire of memorized tunes to play at a jam session. Though fiddling is a form of folk music, it contains many of the same technical challenges found in classical music.

Fiddlers traditionally learn their tunes by ear either from recordings or other players, and play them in jam sessions and fiddle contests without sheet music. Memorizing the songs builds strengths that musicians carry for life. You might think more about the notes of the song, how they relate to the chord changes and how they fit with the rhythm.

Jam sessions are the centerpiece of fiddling communities. The fiddler and their accompanists sit in a circle and play tune after tune until it’s time for the next fiddler to play. Though jam sessions are a casual setting, there is a formal etiquette and a lot of interaction with the other musicians. Jams cultivate a very real peer-to-peer connection, and through this connection, fiddlers are motivated to learn more tunes, become better players and contribute as much as they can to the next jam session. These social circles bring together people who may have a lot in common or those who may have nothing else in common but fiddling.

Katie Glassman / Katie Glassman’s Fiddle School