The Origins of the Texas-Style of Traditional Old Time Fiddling

Among the traditional old-time folk fiddling styles that are usually recognized in Anglo-American music, the one that is most distinctive, unique, and easily recognized is the Texas-Style of old-time fiddling. Named for its place of origin and evolution, it is also referred to as the "super style" and the "contest style". This is because it has become the standard for many of the fiddling contests in the United States, and more often than not, it is the Texas fiddler that is the top winner in fiddling contests throughout much of the country.

Much has been written about Texas fiddling by folklorists and ethnomusicologists, but none have adequately considered the topic involving the origins of the tradition, which will be the subject of this writing. There is the notion that the style is possibly an extension of Irish fiddling. Another idea offered the possibility that it came over from Europe by way of Cape Breton Island, down to Kentucky and then to Texas. More specifically, another suggestion was the possibility that famous Texas fiddler, Benny Thomasson visited the blind Kentucky fiddler, Ed Haley on several occasions back in the 1940’s and learned the long bow method of fiddling from him. Finally, there was the notion advanced by a Texas musician that an East Texas fiddler by the name of Ben Hooks was using the long bow method of fiddling very early in the 1900’s and through some form of diffusion process, could have been the beginning of the style. These are not much more than suggestions, and as such, fall short of addressing the main issue which is the origin of the tradition, a much more difficult and complex topic.

Folk fiddling in the U.S. in general can be traced back to the arrival of John Utie, a professional fiddler from England, who sailed up the James River on the Francis Bonaventure in 1620 and settled in Virginia. The arrival of Utie was the beginning of the transfer of an established Anglo-Irish tradition that would eventually manifest itself throughout much of Anglo-America in the many traditional fiddling styles that are recognized today. When and where the Texas-style had its earliest beginnings are not known. However, according to a number of early twentieth century newspaper articles, there was a distinctive and ongoing fiddling style in place by the 1920’s.

Unfortunately, there is no information as to the nature of the fiddling prior to the 1920’s. But

fiddlers in Texas history can be traced back to a time frame prior to the Civil War. There are

records and accounts that mention the names of fiddlers who were born in Texas before the Civil War, or immigrated to Texas early on. They include: Major L. Burns who was born in Tennessee in 1835 and moved to Montgomery County, Texas, about 1845; Reverend A. McGary, who was born in Huntsville in 1846; and a Civil War Veteran, Arch Bozzell of Parker County, just to name a few. An interesting name that should be added to this list is that of Joe Robertson. His birth date is not known but he is the grandfather of Alexander Campbell "Eck" Robertson, who was born in Arkansas in 1883. He ended up in Amarillo, and was a significant contributor to the Texas-style. In addition there is the story of Davy Crockett who was also a fiddler. He, along with John MacGregor, a bagpipe player from Nacogdoches, played the instrument in the Alamo when it was under siege by the Mexican Army. Unfortunately, nothing specific can be disclosed relative to the fiddle music that was performed by these people, other than to indicate that they were fiddlers, and that they performed fiddle music in Texas.

It isn't until the recordings of the 1920’s by Texas fiddlers, that substantive information becomes available and the style is available for public consumption. There is however, some evidence that helps in providing some insight (crude as it might be) into early Texas fiddling. For example, there is a 1907 photo of Eck Robertson with a fiddle and his wife, Nettie, with a guitar, that may indicate he was performing very early in the twentieth century, and doing so with guitar accompaniment.

Also, about the same time, in the backwoods of Deep East Texas, fiddlers often referred to the E, A, D, and G strings of the instrument as "tribble", "tenor", "counter", and "bass". This is

terminology used in Sacred Harp vocal music and might raise a question as to whether or not

there might have been a connection between it and folk fiddling. The Rev. A. McGary, originally from Huntsville, was a Campbellite preacher and a very good fiddler. He quit fiddling while he was a preacher and when he retired from preaching, he took up the fiddle again. He claims to have learned how to play fiddle from a Negro slave who belonged to his grandfather.

The Texas-style of old-time fiddling is difficult to describe with words unless there is some music to reinforce or underline the descriptive analysis. In any event, Texas fiddling involves generous use of the bow, employing all manner of bowing strokes and manipulations, along with well coordinated wrist and forearm action, coupled with an amazing finger action by the hand making the notes on the finger board (flashy fingering). The Texas fiddler emphasizes the down bow stroke in contrast to the Appalachian "shove and pull" style that emphasizes the up-bow stroke. The result is a very articulate, clean, and rich sound, cluttered and embellished with slurs, slides, double stops, and octave shifts. According to Tom Nall, retired history professor at Stephen F. Austin State University, it is the most "baroque" of fiddling styles. This rather unique quality stems, in part at least, from the fact that it evolved at a time when square dancing was declining and fiddle music in Texas was being fashioned more for listening and entertainment. In executing a tune, the Texas fiddler avoids the repetition of the two-part Appalachian fiddle tune in favor of those tunes that are complex and exceed the two-part limit. Also, the Texas fiddler uses improvisation; enough improvisation to remain within easy reach of the melody line, but never deviating too far from the melody line to render it unrecognizable. What emerges in this and practically any other Texas-style rendition, is a continuous set of highly ornamental variations that does not totally obscure the melody. The result is a harmonic framework or structure that has been the basis for contest standards used in contest fiddling not only in Texas but throughout much of the U.S.

The bowing technique that is necessary to obtain the effect as described above, is often referred to as the long bow, a technique that Eck Robertson used in his 1922 recording of “Sally Goodin”. Because this tune was such an interesting and radical departure from other fiddle tunes that were recorded in the 1920’s, there are some who maintain that this was the actual beginning of the Texas-style of old-time fiddling. This is hardly the case. Robertson should be credited more with "jump starting" country music during the early 1920’s and not single-handedly creating the Texas style of old-time fiddling. Moreover, “Sally Goodin” was the only tune he recorded that involved using the "long bow" technique. For the most part, all but “Sally Goodin” and a few other recordings by Robertson sound more like Appalachian fiddling with its attendant "shove and pull" bowing action. The long bow at this point may be considered as just one stage in a rather complex, ongoing evolutionary process that ultimately results in a bowing technique that combines the long bow movement with other manipulations and actions that now characterize the baroque signature of Texas fiddling.

Aside from “Sally Goodin”, Robertson recorded several tunes on the Victor and Brunswick record labels. There were two sessions, one in 1922 and again in 1929. However, from each session, only a small number have survived to become an integral part of the Texas tradition as it is recognized today. Among the fiddle tunes from the 1922 session that favor the Texas style (other than “Sally Goodin”) are “Ragtime Annie”, “Done Gone”, and a medley, “Sally Johnson/Billy in the Low Ground”. The quality of these recordings was remarkable in spite of the primitive acoustic recording technology. Also, the quality was no doubt enhanced by Robertson's clean, precise, and articulate fiddling ability. There is very little difference in the way in which the tunes are performed today compared to Robertson's recordings.

One of the more interesting tunes from the 1922 session other than “Sally Goodin”, was “Done Gone”. This is because, as recorded, it was in B flat, had three parts, one part in G minor, and used piano accompaniment. Also, the fact that one part of the tune is in a lengthy G minor key makes it a rather unusual one for fiddlers because not many of the tunes performed back in 1922-23 had a minor key part. “Done Gone”, as well as the other tunes mentioned above, as performed today, are virtually unchanged from the time of the first recordings.

Robertson's 1929 recording session was also a productive one. Among those tunes that have

become a part of the Texas tradition are “Brilliancy Medley”, or just “Brilliancy”, “There's a

Brownskin Girl Down the Road Somewhere” (known today as simply, “Brownskin Gal”), and

“Brown's Kelly Waltz”, or “Kelly Waltz”. The original recording of “Brilliancy” was a medley of several fiddle tunes and included “Durang's Hornpipe”, “Drunken Billy Goat”, and “Wake Up Susan”.