

FIDDLING AS AN AVENUE OF BLACK-WHITE MUSICAL INTERCHANGE

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It is common for historians to view the development of American popular music in terms of the blending of African and European musical elements and the melding of folk and popular traditions. A textbook designed for use in university-level classes in popular music history, for example, states: "A distinctive popular tradition emerged only through cross-pollination of established European styles with white and African-American folk music. African-American music has been the primary catalyst in the evolutionary process. Change has come about mainly through the infusion of African elements into the prevailing popular style" (Campbell 1996, xiii). The well-known story of Sam Phillips, head of Sun Records in Memphis in the 1950s, whose search for a white singer who sounded black ultimately resulted in launching the career of Elvis Presley, is only the most calculated instance of this process at work.

Working backward from the present, we can see this pattern underlying the development of virtually all genres of popular music, including rap, rock, rhythm and blues, gospel, jazz, ragtime, and country. Blackface minstrelsy is often seen as the first manifestation of this process, but the roots of black-white musical interchange lie even deeper than that. The earliest meeting ground between white and black musicians was dance music played primarily on the fiddle. This merging of traditions began at least as early as the late seventeenth century and has had an impact that continues to the present. The threads of this interchange are woven

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throughout the fabric of southern American vernacular music, affecting a diverse range of musical genres, popular as well as folk.

This may seem like an odd claim to many people in the early twenty-first century, since fiddling now is almost exclusively the province of white culture. At fiddle contests, informal jam sessions, meetings of fiddlers' clubs, and dances where fiddle music is played, the racial makeup of both the performers and the audience is sure to be overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, white. That this has not always been the case is borne out by abundant evidence in the historical record of black fiddlers in both the North and the South from the late seventeenth into the twentieth century.

My own discovery of the long tradition of black fiddling came in the late 1970s during the course of research on the history of fiddling in New England. Much to my surprise, I encountered numerous references to black fiddlers, most from the colonial era but some who were active into the late nineteenth century. Even more surprising, references to these fiddlers were so casual and offhand that it was clear that in an earlier time, fiddling was an occupation that was commonly, if not exclusively, performed by African Americans (Wells 1978, 3).

Once I began to actively look for further evidence of black fiddling, I found it quite easily. American realist painter William Sidney Mount (1807–1868), who lived on Long Island and was himself a fiddler, painted many musical subjects. His work *Right and Left* (1850) is an elegant portrait of an African American who is playing the fiddle left-handed. Simon Bronner (1987, 16–19), in his work on the history of fiddling and dancing in New York State, mentions Alvah Belcher (ca. 1819–1900), an African-American fiddler who played for dances in Delaware County, New York, through the late nineteenth century.

It is clear that in the rural South black fiddlers remained a strong, if generally overlooked, presence throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century, with some remnants of the tradition continuing to the present. The commercial recording companies who exploited the markets for "race" and "hillbilly" records beginning in the 1920s recorded very little black string band music, presumably because it did not fit their notions of the tastes of their target audiences. Nevertheless, there is a handful of sound recordings of black fiddlers from the 78 rpm era. Some of these musicians played only blues, but others, such as Kentuckian Jim Booker, played classic southern fiddle breakdowns such as "Forked Deer" and "Grey Eagle."¹ Others, such as Georgians Andrew Baxter and

1. In one session for Gennett Records, circa May 1927, Booker, as a member of the otherwise white group Taylor's Kentucky Boys, recorded four breakdowns: "Grey Eagle," "Soldier's Joy," "Forked Deer," and "Maxwell Girl," the last-named a version of the well-known tune "Buffalo Gals."

Eddie Anthony, recorded a variety of styles of dance and other instrumental music.

Attention from folklorists and other scholars has likewise been scattered, but as more people have become intrigued with the subject of black fiddling, numerous field recordings of African-American fiddlers from various parts of the South have come to light. Fisk University professor John Work III recorded the black fiddle and banjo duo Frank Patterson and Nathan Frazier in Nashville in 1942 for the Library of Congress. Three years later, independent field-worker Robert "Stu" Jamison recorded another middle Tennessee black fiddle and banjo team, John Lusk (fiddle) and Murph Gribble (banjo), again for the Library of Congress.² Midwestern collector and enthusiast Robert Christeson recorded black Missouri fiddler Bill Driver in the 1950s.³

More recent fieldwork, since the 1970s, has helped broaden our understanding of the once-flourishing black fiddling tradition. Interviews with older twentieth-century white southern fiddlers indicate the degree to which black fiddlers were commonplace in the early decades of the century. Charles Wolfe interviewed Kentucky fiddler Richard Burnett in 1973. Burnett, who was born in 1883, responded to a question about whether there were many blacks playing old-time music when he was a young man:

Oh yeah. Yeah. Bled Coffey here in town [Monticello, Kentucky], he was a fiddler during the Civil War, and the Bertram boys here, Cooge [or Cuje] Bertram was a good fiddler. He was raised in Corbin [Kentucky]. Yes sir, there were a lot of black men playin' old time music. Bled Coffey was the best fiddler in the county. Been dead for years. I played many a tune with him—used to play with me, oh, sixty year ago. He'd play any o' the old songs that I did. The old-fashioned tunes, like "Cripple Creek," "Sourwood Mountain," "Soldier's Joy," "Fire on the Mountain"—them old-fashioned tunes is about what he played. (Quoted in Wolfe 1973, 7)

Folklorist Bobby Fulcher, working on the Cumberland Plateau in north-central Tennessee, also encountered many stories about Cuje Bertram. Fulcher eventually located Bertram in Indianapolis and interviewed him in 1980 (Fulcher 1987). In 1975, another Tennessee folklorist, Robert Cogswell, recorded African-American fiddler Walter Grier. Grier was living in Nashville at the time but was originally from Walter Hill, Tennessee, a small community north of Murfreesboro, where fiddler Frank Patterson had lived. These recordings have recently been deposit-

2. A portion of the extant recordings by Frazier and Patterson and Gribble and Lusk was issued on *Altamont: Black Stringband Music from the Library of Congress*.

3. Six selections by Driver were issued on *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*, a double-LP set of Christeson's field recordings.

ed at the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University. Diligent fieldwork by Kip Lornell in North Carolina in the 1970s resulted in the discovery of a still-active black string band, cousins Joe and Odell Thompson. The Thompsons made one commercial recording as a duo (*Old Time Music from the North Carolina Piedmont*), prior to Odell's death in 1994, and Joe has since made a solo recording (*Family Tradition*). They also appeared at the 1988 Tennessee Banjo Institute, where they were interviewed for the Center for Popular Music (*Thompson Family Interview* 1988).

Other musicians and work could be mentioned. It is clear that scholars and enthusiasts today have been able to perceive a tradition that is a mere shadow of its former self; however, the point of this article is not to look at black fiddling as a historical curiosity but rather to look at it as an old, long-lasting, and deeply influential locus of musical and cultural interchange.

The tradition of black fiddling has its roots in slave culture. Dena Epstein's book *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (1977) brought to light a wealth of documentation of black fiddling in the antebellum South. Epstein demonstrates that the violin was the first instrument of European origin to be noted in use by slaves and that it was being played by slaves in Virginia at least as early as the 1690s (80). Eileen Southern likewise wrote extensively of the fiddle and its use in dance traditions among slaves in *Music of Black Americans* (1983). The record of slave fiddling was so strong, in fact, that Southern became convinced of the primacy of blacks as dance musicians in antebellum America: "[S]lave musicians had established the tradition of providing dance music for white America, and it was to be some time before blacks were seriously challenged in that field" (99). Research by Robert Winans in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) ex-slave narratives shows that the fiddle was the musical instrument most often mentioned by former slaves, occurring nearly twice as often as its closest rival, the banjo (Winans 1990, 44).

That black fiddlers once were plentiful is quite clear. Much less clear is a sense of the music they played and what relationship it bore to that of their white counterparts. Names of tunes or dances are rarely given, but because in many historical accounts, black fiddlers were playing for white dancers, it seems safe to infer that the music played on those occasions was not markedly different from that of contemporary white fiddlers. In an account of amusements in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in the early nineteenth century, Samuel Roads wrote of a fiddler named Joe Brown, commonly known as "Black Joe," who had served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution: "When darkness prevented the enjoyment of outdoor games, the floors of the house were

sanded and everybody went in for a reel and a jig. Then Black Joe took up his fiddle and, sawing away, played the only tune he knew, until late into the night, keeping a constant accompaniment with his foot" (quoted in Wells 1978, 3). Southern (1983, 186) quotes from the narrative of a former plantation slave who was a fiddler and who mentions playing "Soldier's Joy," "Jimmy Long Josey," "Arkansas Traveler," and "Black-Eyed Susie," all tunes that one could expect to find in the repertoire of white southern fiddlers. More recent African-American fiddlers such as Alvah Belcher, Bled Coffey, Jim Booker, Bill Driver, and Joe Thompson seem to have shared a common repertoire with their white contemporaries, at least to a certain extent.

But at times when the slaves were permitted to engage in dances of their own, such as on weekends or Christmas, slave fiddlers also provided music for these affairs, and it is evident that there was something different going on musically than what might have been heard at a rural New England dance of the same era with a white fiddler in action. There often was a rhythmic element added either through the use of percussion instruments or through "patting Juba," the latter defined by Southern as "foot tapping, hand clapping, and thigh slapping, all in precise rhythm" (179). Southern quotes a description of a slave dance from an 1851 article: "I have a good fiddler, and keep him well supplied with catgut, and I make it his duty to play for the Negroes every Saturday night until twelve o'clock. . . . Charley's fiddle is always accompanied with Ihurod on the triangle and Sam to 'pat.'" (178).

Sometimes whites and blacks would celebrate together in circumstances less structured than those that obtained at formal balls. In recounting the celebration of Christmas on Chicora Wood Plantation in South Carolina in the 1850s, Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle (1976, 151–152) wrote:

And before we got up from the table, the dancing began in the piazza, a fiddle playing the gayest jigs, with two heavy sticks knocking to mark the time, and a triangle and bones rattling in the most exciting syncopated time; and all the young negroes on the plantation, and many from the other plantations belonging to papa, dancing, dancing, dancing. . . . They never stopped from the time they began in the morning, except while we were at meals, until ten o'clock at night. The dancers would change, one set go home and get their dinner, while another took the floor. Fiddler, stick-knocker, all would change; but the dance went on with the new set just as gaily as with the first. . . . This was a grand entertainment for all, white and black.

One suspects that there is more than a little romanticizing in Pringle's

account, but her descriptions of the percussion instruments that accompanied the fiddle are invaluable.

In addition to percussion, the instrument most often paired with the fiddle, and surely the most important, was the African-derived banjo (Winans 1990, 45). Slaves were combining the fiddle and banjo at least as early as 1774 (Epstein 1977, 115). I will return to further consideration of the banjo's role shortly.

Thus, a distinct sort of African-American musical tradition, one that combined elements of European- and African-derived practice, had become well-established prior to emancipation. Regarding this syncretization, Epstein notes: "As the eighteenth century progressed, increasing numbers of slaves in the islands and on the mainland learned to play Western instruments and to dance European dances, not necessarily as a substitute for their native recreations, but as a supplement to them. The descriptions of African and European musics and dancing existing side by side demonstrate the process by which acculturation proceeded" (80).

At the same time, it is clear that acculturation was working in both directions. In addition to events such as those recounted by Elizabeth Pringle, there exist some descriptions of white members of elite society dancing to "Negro jigs" at balls. These eyewitness accounts talk of loosely structured dancing that is in sharp contrast to the usual fare of formal minuets and country dances. Epstein quotes Nicholas Creswell, writing of a ball in Alexandria, Virginia, around 1775: "Betwixt the Country dances they have what I call everlasting jigs. A couple gets up and begins to dance a jig (to some Negro tune) others comes and cuts them out, and these dances always last as long as the Fiddler can play" (121).

As Epstein observes, the dancing described by Creswell contained "elements usually ascribed to African dancing: couples succeeding each other in demonstrating their ability, with the dance lasting as long as the energy of the participants." Although in this instance the fiddler's race is not given, it is clear that both the dance and the accompanying "Negro tune" to which it was performed were a departure from the usual practice for members of this social set. The occasion provided the "ladies dressed and powdered to the life" (as Creswell described them) the chance to engage in something that was perhaps a wee bit naughty, something, as Creswell characterized it, that "looks more like a Bacchanalian dance than one in a polite assembly" (121). Is it too much of a stretch to compare an event such as this, and Creswell's reaction to it, to white teenagers dancing to rock and roll in the 1950s and earning their parents' disapproval in so doing?

There also exist in print three tunes from the late eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries that are identified as “Negro” tunes. The earliest, titled “Pompey Ran Away,” is from the first volume of James Aird’s *A Selection of Scotch, English, Irish and Foreign Airs Adapted to the Fife, Violin, or German-Flute*, published in Glasgow, Scotland ([ca. 1782], 57). Another tune, “Congo—A Jig,” comes from an eighteenth-century manuscript of the Bolling family of Virginia (Darling 1972, 11). The last, titled simply “Negro Dance,” appears in the first number of *Riley’s Flute Melodies*, published in New York about 1814–1816 (Riley [ca. 1814–1816] 1973, 31).

These pieces were certainly heavily filtered through European musical sensibilities on their journeys from live performance to musical notation, meaning that one should not assume that the melodic and metrical details accurately represent African-American musical practice. Indeed, we cannot be certain whether they were attempts at notating tunes played by blacks or just pieces composed in imitation of them. But the structure and melodic compass of the three pieces present some tantalizing possibilities. Each strain of melody is only four bars long, unlike the typical eight-bar sections of most British, Irish, and American fiddle tunes. All are printed with three strains, although in “Negro Dance” and “Congo,” one of the three strains is a variation of one of the others. Melodically, they are fairly circumscribed, consisting of short kernels of melody repeated over and over. “Pompey Ran Away” is particularly distinctive in this regard, consisting of three melodic ideas, each of which is only two bars long and all of which can be viewed as variations on a single motive. Each tune spans an octave, or slightly more, but much of the melody is centered around the tonic, from a fifth below to a third above. Excursions into higher registers seem to be done more for color than anything else. In short, these tunes exhibit characteristics that Eileen Southern (1983, 16) ascribes to African melodic practice and that seem well suited for accompanying the type of dancing described by Creswell and others.

Whether these pieces are accurate representations of early African-American dance tunes, the existence of these tunes in print indicates a strong interest in black music on the part of the white compilers of the collections. Someone was intrigued enough by black dance music to attempt either to transcribe pieces that they heard or to write tunes in imitation. The pieces indicate that cultural exchange was working in both directions, and they provide early documentation of white attempts to absorb African-American music and musical elements.

Can we trace this influence and interchange through time? It is difficult to show any direct links from tunes such as “Pompey Ran Away” to later southern fiddling, but certainly, there are southern fiddle tunes that depart from the standard AABB fiddle tune pattern (in which A and B are

eight-bar strains). "Lost John," recorded in August 1929 in Chicago by white Alabama fiddler Charlie Stripling, consists of a few short, loosely defined melodic motives that are played no set number of times. The entire performance has something of an improvisatory feel. The tune "Lost John" is often thought to have originated in black tradition. Richard Burnett, who recorded "Lost John" in November 1926 in Atlanta, told Charles Wolfe that he learned the piece "from an old Negro somewhere or other" (Wolfe 1973, 7).⁴ In August 1927 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the African-American duo of Andrew and Jim Baxter, from Georgia, recorded a tune called "The Moore Girl" for Victor Records. The melody likewise consists of short kernels, repeated over and over. However, this is a "train piece"; that is, it is a bit of programmatic music that imitates the sounds of a railroad train. This effect likely has more to do with the way the melody is shaped than with any possible link to older, African tune structures or melodic practice.

There may be a stronger link from these early "Negro jigs" to the tunes popularized on the blackface minstrel stage. These tunes, also usually called generically "Negro jigs" or "Ethiopian jigs," began to appear in print in the 1840s in collections such as *Howe's School for the Violin* (Howe 1843) and *Ole Bull Violin Instruction Book* (1845). A full consideration of this genre of music is beyond the present scope, but Dale Cockrell (1997, 86–87) has offered some thoughts about the mixed racial origins of minstrel tunes: "'Fiddle tunes' like 'Jim Crow,' 'Jim Along Josey,' 'Zip Coon,' and other minstrel standards of the time were sung, heard, danced to, and loved by both blacks and whites, and were doubtlessly made together as well."

On another level, Alan Jabbour (1996, 254–255) has argued that African-American influence can be seen in the bowing patterns found in southern fiddling and that this helped give a distinctive flavor to the region's fiddle music. He notes that among (white) fiddlers from the Upper South, there is "a preference for bowing patterns that syncopate the musical texture—groupings of notes in a complex fabric of threes and twos, stylized anticipations of the beat, and other devices closely resembling the syncopations characteristic of twentieth-century American popular music." He also argues that these patterns do not appear in southern fiddling as a result of influence from popular styles, but that the flow of influence worked in the opposite direction: "The syncopated patterns are an African-American contribution to folk fiddling—and ultimately, through fiddling, to the popular musical idiom of the civilization at large."

4. Burnett plays banjo and Leonard Rutherford plays the fiddle on the track.

Another aspect of the African-American impact on southern fiddling is the association of the fiddle with another instrument in the South—the banjo. Dena Epstein (1975) has demonstrated conclusively the African origins of the banjo. She has also shown, as previously noted, that slaves were the first to play fiddle and banjo together and that they were doing so as early as 1774. Robert Winans and others have discussed the adoption and adaptation of the banjo, and the techniques for playing it, by white minstrel performers who learned directly from black musicians. Winans (1976) further hypothesizes that these elements from black folk tradition were passed through the filter of the minstrel stage to white folk tradition and influenced the development of the mountain string band. Cecelia Conway (1995), through her fieldwork with black string musicians in the North Carolina Piedmont, also concludes that black tradition was a key factor in introducing the banjo and its techniques and tunings to mountain whites but that the contact was more direct and did not depend on the intervention of minstrelsy.

Thomas Carter, in a study of the development of the white string band in the New River Valley section of the Blue Ridge, notes that it matters little by what path the banjo arrived in the hands of white folk musicians—and I suspect that it was a bit of both—and that the real importance lies in recognizing the impact that this African-American instrument has had. Carter ably demonstrates the stylistic change that occurred in the late nineteenth century in the move from a solo fiddle to an ensemble tradition with a corresponding shift “from a melodically complex to a more rhythmically sophisticated fiddle music.” The catalyst for this change, he concludes, “was the five-string banjo” (Carter 1990, 64).

Returning to a consideration of black dance musicians and their repertoire apart from the classic AABB fiddle tunes learned, and presumably adapted, from their masters, we have already seen that fiddle music was one of the primary sources of dance music for blacks throughout the antebellum period and continuing in some quarters long afterward. But what new directions did black dance music take following emancipation?

Although pianos were mentioned only rarely in the ex-slave narratives, they began to achieve popularity following the Civil War and, beginning probably in the 1870s, they began to displace string bands in providing music for dancing. Eileen Southern (1983, 309) argues that early black piano rag music was “a natural outgrowth of dance-music practices among black folk.” She points out that “slaves danced in antebellum times to the music of fiddles and banjos, the percussive element being provided by the foot stomping of the musicians and the ‘juba patting’ of the bystanders. In piano-rag music, the left hand took over the task of

stomping and patting while the right hand performed syncopated melodies, using motives reminiscent of fiddle and banjo tunes.”

This brings us back to Jabbour’s hypothesis regarding syncopation as an element in early southern fiddling and lends support to his idea that this syncopation in fiddling predated ragtime and jazz. Certainly, there are many examples of what could be termed folk or rural ragtime on records, played by both white and black musicians.⁵ Although it could be argued that the country musicians were playing music that was influenced by the formal composed ragtime of Scott Joplin, James Scott, and others, it is more likely that what they were playing was a natural outgrowth of older rural dance music.

Blues factors into the picture as well, as an influence not only on regional fiddle traditions but also on the commercial forms that grew out of them, such as western swing and bluegrass. The sliding intonation of blues guitarists and blues forms had a direct impact on white southern fiddling. This can be seen as early as the 1920s in the work of players such as white Mississippi fiddler Willie Narmour, who recorded extensively with his guitarist partner Shel Smith. Narmour and Smith’s “Carroll County Blues” (recorded on March 11, 1929, in Atlanta), for example, was a very popular and influential recording. In the 1930s, Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith from Tennessee rose to great popularity on the Grand Ole Opry and on records playing a blues-influenced style that featured much sliding into and out of notes. Texas fiddler Bob Wills, the driving force behind the creation of western swing, learned much of his music as a young man from black musicians and incorporated many elements of blues and other black music into his playing (Townsend 1976, 3–6). Kentuckian Bill Monroe, the acknowledged founder of bluegrass music, also was profoundly influenced as a young man by a black musician, Arnold Shultz, and drew heavily on the blues in forging his style of music. Of the sixteen sides that Monroe and his band The Blue Grass Boys recorded in their first sessions for Victor, for instance, six were blues numbers (Rosenberg 1974, 29).

In summary, the following points are important for seeing the big picture.

1. Slaves were playing fiddles for white dances as early as the 1690s and presumably learned—and possibly adapted—the prevailing popular dance repertoire.
2. Black fiddlers also played tunes that were more African in charac-

5. See, for example, “Dallas Rag,” recorded on December 6, 1927, in Dallas by the Dallas String Band, a black group featuring the mandolin playing of Coley Jones, and “There’s a Brown Skin Gal Down the Road Somewhere,” recorded on August 12, 1929, also in Dallas, by white Texas fiddler Eck Robertson.

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- ter—"Negro jigs"—which do not conform to the standard British, Irish, American fiddle-tune mold but which may have influenced later southern fiddling, both white and black.
3. The combination of fiddle and banjo grew out of slave culture, and slaves were playing fiddles and banjos together at least as early as 1774.
 4. Syncopated bowing patterns, which were likely borrowed from black fiddling, strongly influenced the development of a particularly southern version of fiddling and later other forms of popular music.
 5. White minstrels adapted black instruments, techniques, and repertoire and combined them with European musical elements to form a popular synthesis of African and European musics.
 6. Minstrelsy impacted later white folk tradition.
 7. The continuing black string band tradition also influenced white folk tradition.
 8. In late-nineteenth-century black urban communities, piano-based music supplanted the older fiddle and banjo dance music, leading to the development of ragtime.
 9. The blues exerted a strong influence on white southern fiddling and, ultimately, on commercial genres that grew out of it.

The key point is that dance music played on the fiddle provided one of the earliest, most long lasting, and most deeply influential musical and cultural meeting points between African and European peoples. Long before minstrelsy, long before white music publishers codified and popularized the black oral tradition of ragtime, long before the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band made the first jazz records, long before Sam Phillips began his search for a white kid who sounded black—in short, long before any of the more well-known mergings of white and black musical traditions that have given our popular music the shape it has today, white and black fiddlers were swapping tunes with each other and providing a foundation for much of what came later.

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