

Follow the band: playing old-time tunes
in new performance contexts

Gregory Hansen

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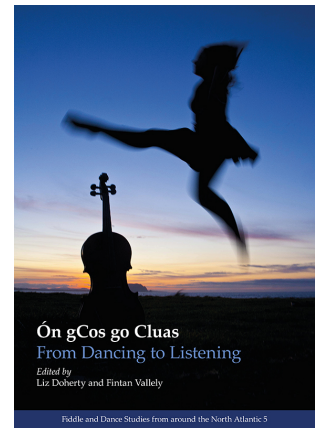
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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Performing authenticity in old-time fiddling

GREGORY HANSEN

It is the middle of the summer in 1988, and I'm in Jacksonville, Florida doing fieldwork for the Bureau of Florida Folklife Programs. For the past year, I've been working with this state agency to coordinate the Duval County Folk Arts in Education Program. The summer has opened up opportunities for fieldwork in this sprawling urban metropolis of nearly 1,000,000 people, located in the region known as 'The First Coast'. My fieldwork results will provide new resources for my work as a folklorist in residence within the county's school system, and I'm documenting traditional activities and folk artists and musicians to bring them into the schools for sessions that enhance the Florida Studies unit of the fourth-grade social studies curriculum.¹ I'm attending a weekly jam session of the Northeast Florida Bluegrass Association, and I'm impressed with the high level of musicianship and the friendliness of the kitchen pickers.

I make my rounds and meet an excellent banjo player, whose broad grin emerges under his bushy moustache. He explains that he'd enjoy coming into the classroom to teach students about banjo playing. We set up an interview, and within a week, I've recorded a session with Jack Piccalo. As we wind down from the interview, Jack modestly pauses and explains that he'd like to help but since he's not really from Florida, he thinks that there might be a better person to involve in the program. He explains that I really need to talk with his friend Richard Seaman and that he'll arrange the introduction.

That's how it started. Jack knew that I'd be interested in Richard not only because the fiddler was still playing old-time – rather than bluegrass – tunes from a Florida community but also because he was known for telling stories from Florida's tall tale tradition. I had read about house parties and fiddling of the early twentieth century, and I had read versions of traditional folktales collected from the Deep South and Florida. The opportunity to meet someone who has lived these experiences and was an active bearer of tradition was exciting. In the decade and a half that I knew Richard Seaman, I came to realise that if he had not existed, I couldn't have invited him as a stellar contributor to our public-sector folklore programming in Florida.

Staff folklorists, and our advisory board, understood and appreciated what Richard Seaman could contribute to the Bureau of Florida Folklife Programs' projects. We opened up stage time for him at the annual folk festival, and he also became a star performer in

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the Folklife in Education Programs that I coordinated. Later on, he was honoured with the Florida Folk Heritage Award from the Florida Department of State for his contributions as a fiddle player and storyteller. Over the Memorial Day weekend of 1994, I was helping with the Florida Folk Festival, and I reserved time to hear Richard and Jack play at the Stephen Foster Memorial State Park. I had served as a fieldworker, program coordinator, festival presenter, cultural interpreter, and even as a back-up guitar player for projects that involved Richard and Jack. As I headed down the hill under the grove of oaks on the banks of the Suwannee River, I finally felt that I could play another role. I was now a member of the audience who could watch his performance. As I left the lens cap on my camera and realised that I did not have to worry about recording, stage managing, or placing microphones that afternoon, I was able to listen to the emcee's introduction, Richard's stage patter, and enjoy the whole performance. I realised how Richard Seaman had developed an engaging way of presenting himself on stage. My epiphany was that his self-presentation cast himself as an interpreter of his own tradition. Using cues that Jack and I had provided, as well as his own experience playing with his country band the South Land Trail Riders, Richard had developed his stage patter and stories to frame his performances as highly contextualised representations of a fiddle tradition that was vibrant in rural central Florida during the 1910s and 1920s. He had crafted a presentation of old-time tunes that created a performance of authenticity.



Figure 1 Richard Seaman at his home in Jacksonville, August 1998 *Photo by Gregory Hansen, courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.*

Folklorists who create festivals have noted the effects on artists who perform their music in new contexts. Joe Wilson and Lee Udall delineate a continuum of levels of awareness of folk artists who may be involved in staging traditional culture.² They write

that performing in a folk festival setting can be a novel experience for folk musicians, and that the experience of performing in events affects their awareness of themselves as traditional artists. Most performers negotiate an understanding of what their involvement represents in relation to the interests of the festival organisers and the expectations of the audience. In the cultural critique of public representations of folklife, writers ask that public folklorists consider how their mediation of culture may alter the participant's own sense of self in relation to the significance of the tradition that is showcased on stage.³ In Seaman's presentations, he used his accounts of memories, personal experience narratives, tall tales, and jokes to create a context for his tunes, seeking to create vivid images of rural life that would provide listeners with a sense of what it was like to hear the old-time fiddle tunes in their original context at a Florida frolic.

I had finished a master's degree in folklore before I took the job in Florida in 1987. When I returned to the academy seven years later, I discovered that many of the concepts that were so vital to public folklorists' sense of cultural representation had been critiqued, problematised, and were about to be deconstructed. It went further than the idea that 'folk' was an anachronistic term. The appeal of Richard's performance resonated with my ideas about old-time fiddling, revivalist, tradition, and representation. What seemed like abstract, but relatively stable concepts, however, suddenly became much more complex with the new scholarship I was to read. Although it's important to look at our assumptions when using academic constructs, I'm not comfortable with all of the consequences of the intense cultural critique of keywords in the study of expressive culture. Problematising terms, such as authenticity, tends to leave important ideas open to further critique and vulnerable to air quotes.

I now realise that blending elements of Seaman's own vernacular theory of folklore with the discourse of the academic theorist provides us with a more useful way to understand the significance of placing old-time tunes in new contexts. As expressed by Richard Seaman, his fiddle tunes – and their related cultural complex – shows that old-time fiddling is a dynamic form of music. The tunes are expressions of a system of creativity that allows musicians to blend older styles and techniques with contemporary artistic resources. The rich and vibrant quality of this system provides new ways to think about authenticity when crafting new performances of the older traditions of fiddling.

Richard's tunes and tales allowed him to create something new from something old. The idea of old-time now can be seen as a dynamic resource rather than a static repository of anachronistic lore. When Richard drew from his historical and cultural resources to craft an eloquent presentation of his music, he was using a system of creativity that allowed him to make new presentations in new setting in a way that was comfortable and natural to a skilled performer. His performances weren't highly contrived, restaged presentations that distorted the natural context of Florida fiddling. Rather, his performances in schools and folklife festivals can be seen as authentic representations of a vibrant tradition. Playing tunes and telling stories in front of an audience isn't an unusual or out-of-context activity. Rather, he developed his presentations by creatively drawing from a storehouse of artistic resources to craft a representation of his music that contemporary audiences could experience for themselves. The central challenge, as he understood it, was to present fiddle tunes in a

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way that allowed his listeners to understand how they were integral to life in his home community of Kissimmee Park, ‘way back yonder’ around in the early 1900s. Whereas the listeners in his home community understood the context for the house parties because they experienced it and danced at the frolics, the audience at a folk festival almost 100 years later was composed primarily of residents of an urbanised Florida who had never attended square dances held in a neighbour’s home. His first neighbours understood the daily routine of living in a rural community. The audience at a folk festival needed a vivid understanding of why a Saturday night dance provided welcome relief from the hard work of farming and ranching.



Figure 2 Jack Piccalo and Richard Seaman performing at the Florida Folk Festival, White Springs, May 1993 *Photo by Peter Gallagher, courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.*

Creating an understanding of the music within its context became the central theme in Richard Seaman’s presentations. In his home community, he thought of himself mainly as a musician who brought the music to a frolic, noting that the term musician was used rather loosely to describe anyone who could ‘play but one tune’.⁴ In the new contexts of public folklore programmes, his sense of self expanded, and he came also to see himself as a historian. His task required him to play his tunes and tell his tales in front of an audience. But at the close of the twentieth century, he also recognised that his presentations had to be about the music – rather than simply performances of the music. His self-concept as a musician

changed as a result of his involvement in public folklore programs. He accomplished it elegantly by using an important component of the old-time fiddling tradition. Namely, he had an ample supply of ‘fiddle-lore’.⁵

Richard’s fiddle-lore was an integral element of his stage performances. He used tall tales, personal experience narratives, folk beliefs, and traditional concepts about fiddling to contextualise his tunes. To initiate his performances, he would pick up on the contextual clues offered by many emcees by explaining where he was from and how he learned the tunes in rural Osceola County. At his performance on the amphitheatre stage of the Florida Folk Festival, he explained,

We’re going to try to play a few old-time fiddle tunes that was popular way back in the first of the century. Maybe some of you’ve heard them and some of them you haven’t. But the old fiddle tunes was played many years ago in our part of the country, where we would go to a square dance and get out there and dance all night long.⁶

The tradition of dancing and holding house parties, here, constitute the relevant fiddle-lore that provides a context for his music tradition. A major element of his fiddle-lore included more than thirty tall tales that he used in performance. He learned the stories within the state’s oral tradition, and most of the stories spun around humorous, even surreal exaggerations, of the commonplace knowledge of farming, gardening, hunting, and fishing. He used the stories to ‘paint a picture [in the] mind of what it used to be like in 1910 and ’12, way back yonder’.⁷ Frequently, he would blur the line between history and fantasy when illustrating these tableaux:

I started my playing down below Kissimmee, many years ago. And, of course, there’s nothing spectacular to be raised on a farm. We had something to eat, and we had a lot of freedom. And on the farm, my sister had a place down there that was the richest place in the state of Florida. We had to plant corn on the run. The soil was so rich that that kernel of corn would sprout and run up your britches leg before you’d get out of there.⁸

Understanding why terms like ‘old-time fiddling’, ‘revivalist’, ‘tradition’, and ‘representation’ are useful for understanding his fiddling became more complicated the more I worked with Richard Seaman. One major challenge was to understand, and perhaps reconceptualise, why ‘authenticity’ is relevant for understanding his fiddling. The term has been problematised from a number of angles. Deconstructionists noted its contrived and socially constructed nature early on, and they critiqued how the term can be a seemingly arbitrary marker of cultural expression.⁹ Other writers followed suit. They explored the highly value-laden elements inherent in the idea of authenticity, critiquing how it has been used to privilege one form of cultural expression over another, exclude some artists from serious scholarly consideration, assert a romanticised view of history, and even foment jingoist ideologies.¹⁰ When scholars deconstruct the term only to discard it, however, they obscure important ideas that come into play when we consider why the term is important within communities. I’m not comfortable with erasing the distinction between the authentic and the fake.¹¹ If we

examine Richard Seaman's fiddling in relation to three related spheres, authenticity becomes a useful construct. What's at stake when we describe his tunes and tales as authentic? Is his performance of old-time tunes in new contexts authentic? How does his own engagement with music connect to authenticity on a personal level?

When discussing authenticity, it's important to begin with a somewhat obvious assertion. Namely, 'authentic' is an adjective. In the abstract theorising that comes from making generalisations, it's too easy to forget that discourse about 'the authentic' needs to be connected to specific aspects of cultural expression. The big question is what's at stake when we consider authenticity in relation to Richard Seaman's old-time fiddling. We know that 'old-time' is a highly contrived term that comes from unique historical circumstances. Fiddlers wouldn't have labelled their music 'old-time' until the early part of the twentieth century because the term was invented primarily as a marketing device. Over the century, however, the term has acquired a depth of meaning. The term has been adopted by fiddlers such as Richard. It's contrived, but so are all definitions. Terms acquire meaning and become part of a lexicon when they acquire rich symbolic resonance within a speech community. Authenticity matters in old-time fiddling because it describes important components of a tradition's significance.

In *The Spirit of Folk Art*, Henry Glassie writes that questions about discussions of authenticity in folklore should include consideration of two related aspects. Authenticity includes ways that an individual form of artistic expression connects to wider patterns of tradition that have continuity over time.¹² These criteria are the ideas crystallised in Dan Ben-Amos's seven strands of tradition,¹³ and it's clear that Richard's tunes and tales are consistent with forms of folk expression rooted specifically in Florida's history and diffused across North America largely from European influences and sources. In the most conservative formulations, his tunes are authentic traditions.¹⁴ Glassie's discussion of authenticity in folklore also follows the folkloristic interest in social and cultural patterns. Authenticity connects an individual's tradition to particular cultural styles of creativity. Although there are individual aesthetic criteria within any fiddling tradition, Richard's style is characteristic of a distinctive old-time style. His predominant use of short-bow, heavily rhythmic shuffles, strong use of double-stops, and a range of techniques are all elements of vital musical tradition. The old-time tradition centres around the hoedowns played for squared dances, and fiddlers sharing his style would also recognise his waltzes as old-time.

The critiques of authenticity, however, become more useful when we consider authenticity in relation to the social contexts for the music. Is playing at festivals and public folklore events an authentic context for old-time fiddling? Curiously, some of the writers who have critiqued the contrivances inherent in the idea of 'authentic tradition' have also remarked on the contrived nature of folklife programming that stages tradition to a wider public.¹⁵ Although the social context of a house party is different from the ambiance that surrounds a folk festival stage, it's equally problematic to privilege one sphere as a 'natural context' and the other as 'artificial' without considering the venue in relation to a deeper understanding of the art form that is spotlighted on a stage. Old-time fiddling is a good case in point. Chris Goertzen in his comprehensive study of fiddle contests clearly demonstrates that house parties are not the only contexts for old-time fiddling. Fiddle contests are not recent

inventions, and Goertzen notes that the early context for fiddling also included contests and exhibitions.¹⁶ The history of American fiddle contests stretches to at least the 1736 competition held in Hanover County, Virginia, and old-time fiddling includes much more than simply playing dance music.¹⁷ Richard recalls attending and performing at contests throughout his career, and he even competed in the Florida State Fiddlers' Contest at the Florida Folk Festival when he was in his 90s. Richard's performances at folk festivals can be seen as authentic representations of a tradition not only because he played traditional tunes at these events, but also because he derived his techniques for self-presentation from an array of traditional resources that comprise the storehouse of techniques used by fiddlers in similar events. His telling of tall tales, for example, is complicit with an older tradition of featuring a liar's contest along with a fiddling competition.¹⁸

There is value to interrogating ideas about authenticity. The idea of a pure stream of oral/aural tradition is problematic.¹⁹ The old-time tunes in any fiddler's repertoire do not spring forth from a communal wellspring of tradition as many old-time tunes have their origins in sheet music, minstrel shows and Vaudeville, and in formal musical composition. As scholarship on revivalism has demonstrated, the introduction of new media doesn't pollute a tradition, and most fiddlers continue to learn new tunes from recordings.²⁰

The mediation between individual musical expression and audience expectations brings us to one final element of authenticity. Authenticity also is resonant with deeply personal ideas about creative expression. The highly subjective qualities of authenticity in this realm resist generalisation. Highly skilled revivalists can master old-time string band music, and their virtuoso playing will be recognised by the old masters, in turn, as authentic.²¹ All fiddlers work to bridge their own individual aesthetic with the wider community aesthetics within which they learn their instruments. For Richard Seaman, a good fiddler in his home community was one who satisfied his own creativity aspirations by learning enough tunes to be recognised as a musician.²² Fiddling is authentic if it displays the aesthetic values that satisfy the fiddler's own tastes and meet the needs and expectations of dancers.²³ Developing his own sense of musicality in relation to wider aesthetic values within the community, Richard internalised his own sense of connecting authenticity with musical skill.

Decades after we first met, I was driving through Jacksonville a few years after he had died just one month short of his 98th birthday. I drove past his modest home in the Murray Hill section of Avondale. Reflecting on the stories he told about house parties and the jam sessions he held in his home, I began to connect Jack Piccalo's views about Richard's music history to my own involvement in his story. Richard, Jack, and I all divided this history into two main eras. The first was the old-time context that Richard referenced by talking about the dances held 'back home'. In Richard's imagery, the music was rooted in community life. The dances were held once or twice a month, and neighbours understood the frolics through direct experience and involvement. I recalled how the rich stories of his first-hand accounts of the house parties vividly brought to life what I had only read about in books and articles. This era contrasted with the big change in his life, which Richard characterised as 'after moving to Jacksonville'. During the eight decades that he lived in the city, it grew from less than 30,000 people into a sprawling metropolis. By the twenty-first

century, old-time frolics had faded away, even in people's memories, and house parties had been transformed into a few bluegrass jam sessions. The music was now much more rooted in mass media, and most Floridians connected fiddling to snippets of pop songs such as 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia'. In the New World, music was always available at the touch of the dial, as Richard reminded me, and it was far different from the community where music was literally home-made. I understood why Richard used his music, his stories, and his recollections to explain his own experiences to the new generation. I drove past the house, slowed down but didn't stop, and began to understand how his own ideas of authenticity could connect music experiences in both of the eras he experienced.

Notes

- ¹ Gregory Hansen, *A Florida Fiddler: The Life and Times of Richard Seaman* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), p. 150.
- ² Joe Wilson and Lee Udall, *Folk Festivals: A Handbook for Organisation and Management* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), pp. 20–22.
- ³ Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, vol. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 106; Richard Bauman, Inta Carpenter, and Patricia Sawin, *Reflections on the Folklife Festival: An Ethnography of Participant Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Folklore Institute, 1992); Richard Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture of Quebec* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 216.
- ⁴ Hansen, p. 26.
- ⁵ Louie W. Atteberry, 'The Fiddle Tune: An American Artifact', in *Readings in American Folklore*, ed. by Jan Harold Brunvand (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 324–333.
- ⁶ Hansen, p. 183.
- ⁷ Hansen, p. 189.
- ⁸ Hansen, p. 11.
- ⁹ Handler, 1988.
- ¹⁰ Abrahams, Roger, 'Powerful Promises of Regeneration or Living Well with History', in *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*, ed. by Mary Hufford (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press [A Publication of the American Folklore Society], 1994), p. 81; Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).
- ¹¹ Bendix, 1997.
- ¹² Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams [for the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe], 1989), p. 31.
- ¹³ Dan Ben-Amos, 'The Seven Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 21, no. 2/3, (1984), 97–131.
- ¹⁴ Gregory Hansen, 'The Relevance of "Authentic Tradition" in Studying an Oldtime Fiddler from Florida', *Southern Folklore*, 53, no. 2 (1996), 67–89.
- ¹⁵ Bauman, 1986, p. 78; Handler, 1988; Richard Price and Sally Price, *On the Mall: Presenting Maroon Tradition-Bearers at the 1992 Festival of American Folklife* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

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¹⁶ Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests*, American Made Music Series (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁷ Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, revd edn (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), p. 11.

¹⁸ Goertzen, p. 27.

¹⁹ Abrahams, p. 78.

²⁰ Neil Rosenberg, ed., *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

²¹ Alan Jabbour, 'Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier', in *Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies From Around the North Atlantic 2*, ed. by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2008), p. 7.

²² Hansen, p. 163.

²³ The idea of authenticity as a mode of performance is connected to Dell Hymes's configuration of 'tradition' as a way of performing. His essay 'Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth' provides this important configuration of a strand of tradition. See Dell Hymes, 'Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth', *Journal of American Folklore*, 88, no. 350 (1975), 345–369.