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Mississippi Breakdown:
A New Look at the Mississippi Old Time Fiddle Music Traditions

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

Jamison Hollister

April 2012

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ABSTRACT

This is a cultural study that focuses on the fiddle music of Mississippi. It includes both Anglo and African American roots. Also, the white blues fiddle traditions of Mississippi are examined and analyzed.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my incredible family and all of their support they have given me over the years. Also, to my partner McGhee, she is my best friend and the love of my life. Every day is better because of these people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the staff at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, especially Ted Ownby, David Wharton, Charles Wilson, and Katie McKee for their support, guidance and understanding over the years. Also, Greg Johnson, Scott Barretta and Jake Fussell were instrumental in guiding me along my way.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

I began playing fiddle as a high school student while growing up in the Delta town of Greenville, Mississippi. As a fiddle player, I naturally became interested in the state's fiddle and other string style music traditions. I am a Mississippi native who has always been interested in the musical heritage of Mississippi, but was for the longest time oblivious to the fact that there was even a fiddle tradition worth noting. This is due to the relatively little attention given to the state's music in any capacity other than blues and rock and roll. While I intend in no way to downplay the significance of the blues, I want to point out that other music styles have been treated with considerably less attention. One only needs to search for a book or film on Mississippi centered blues and blues culture in order to find a wellspring of information and scholarship. Furthermore, several museums are dedicated to preserving the blues in addition to a recently created Blues Trail that includes markers at blues sites around the state. All of this is great for preservation of blues music and promotion of blues tourism, however it does come at the expense of neglecting other musical expressions, such as the old time fiddle traditions.

This personal discovery of Mississippi old time fiddle music led me to question why it had been largely forgotten. I sought out both commercial

recordings and field recordings, some of which are somewhat difficult to come by. My search also led me to find pockets of people interested in preserving the tunes and performing music original to the state. These people are dedicated but are unfortunately small in number. This is not the case when considering fiddle music across the South. Why, then, has the old time music of Mississippi not been treated with the same attention as that of other states, such as West Virginia or North Carolina? Neighboring Louisiana has a vibrant traditional music scene in the southern Cajun part of the state that the youth readily participates in. My contention is that Mississippi's musical identity has been largely shaped by what is remembered and more importantly the way it is remembered. The music of a culture is ultimately shaped so much by that culture's self-perceived identity. In other words, the music is influenced by the way a particular group wishes to be seen, both internally and by others on the outside looking in.

This search continued further and I discovered the African American influence on what is considered to be Anglo or simply, white, old time music. While most people with an adequate background in music history are aware that the banjo is an African influenced instrument, the fact that fiddle music was shaped by African Americans remains virtually un-discussed, certainly in any popular sense. Countless accounts of plantation life and even the WPA Slave Narratives demonstrate that black fiddlers were ubiquitous and often more common than banjo players.¹ Blacks and whites lived and worked alongside each other in myriad ways, for several hundred years. The resulting interaction

¹ Much of this information can be found in *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* by Dena Epstein and *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* by Cecilia Conway.

between black and white has shaped music in many ways, most of which are undocumented and lost to time. The important thing to remember is that the African American pre-blues fiddle music *is* old time music.

The lack of coherent documentation is what ultimately troubles me with all of these themes. There is work on black and white cultural interchange. Likewise, there are a few articles written on Mississippi old time fiddle music. However, there has yet to be a study that focuses on the wider scope and takes more obscure performers into account. For example, most Jimmie Rodgers biographies discuss his interaction with black musicians, but fail to mention the other documented accounts of this interchange among other performers. Elvis is another example of an artist that is considered to be “black-influenced.” There are a few catch-all musicians that are used to demonstrate the existence of black/white musical interchange, most of whom are not centered in Mississippi. A collective of Mississippi fiddle players, black and white, has yet to cross my path. Furthermore, there has yet to be a Mississippi-based study that analyzes the way music industry pressures, with consideration to identity and black/white interchange, have shaped the state’s music. Famous artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and Elvis were by no means the first, let alone only, Mississippi musicians to associate with, and eventually play like, their African American neighbors.

Mississippi is in many ways typical and in others atypical within the context of the South and in the study of music. For many, the thought of the magnolia state conjures images of horrible racial violence. For others, it harkens

visions of sharecropping blacks singing the blues while the successful white landowners collected the rent. From antebellum slavery, through Jim Crow, to the Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi has been at the center of vehement racism. Scholars and the media have justifiably latched on to these images and stories. A more nuanced and balanced view needs to be explored. While most visions from outsiders and Mississippians alike are steeped in truth, they are also tainted with myth. There were times when blacks and whites knowingly or unknowingly shared their culture with each other. In *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, Tony Russell notes that most scholarship on music, especially in the South, tends to emphasize the differences rather than the similarities between black and white musicians. This is not to say that differences do not exist, for they certainly do. Differences in culture and everyday existence undoubtedly lead to musical variations and discrepancies. Focusing on the differences also neglects the poor white southerners who were in the same socioeconomic boat as their black counterparts. This group is often overlooked in scholarship as well, according to Bill Malone in *Country Music U.S.A.*² The way music and identity work in symbiosis is useful in understanding the poor white Mississippian in relation the black counterpart as well. Most of the white fiddlers who have been recorded or interviewed fall into this paradigm of poor and white. Therefore, using their perspectives and music may further the study of this regular historical silence.³

² Malone, Bill C. *Country Music U.S.A.*

³ Rankin, Tom. Liner Notes; Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History. "Series 439-WPA Collection."

Ultimately, I find these instances of mutual admiration and interaction useful in furthering our understanding of the true history of the state and the South. Music may represent one of the few places where interaction between the south's two major races was able to interact and learn and borrow from each other. My intentions are not to downplay racism, but rather to emphasize the too often forgotten positives. From a cultural and educational perspective, it is important that southerners, white and black alike, see that they share a common thread. This is especially important for children to understand. Many white children may think that blues music is not their history, and therefore not important. Likewise, black children may see no importance in the study of what came to be known as country music. These styles are both influenced by the other culture with the common ground of old time music.

The research that has been undertaken on the various areas of my interest have been done in a separate manner. Those works that do have most of the elements of fiddle music, black/white interchange and identity, rarely discuss those events or occurrences in Mississippi. My goal is to combine the methods of successful secondary works with my own primary research in order to create a coherent picture of Mississippi old time music. Recent music scholarship has begun to reshape the ideas of folk music as a construct, often with urban roots. Similarly, the notions of folk authenticity have been challenged in works such as Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk*. These two concepts work together to truly question musical identity as a social construct and how it has been shaped. Some of the earlier works in music history that I have found

useful are the works of Bill Malone and Tony Russell. They have laid the groundwork for much of the music scholarship that has been done by more recent scholars. Most notably, the more recent works of Patrick Huber, Gavin Campbell and Karl Miller have been useful in understanding the notions of much folk music as having commercial roots. These works are important because by emphasizing the creation of the folk cannon, they demonstrate the way folk and racial identities play out. The identities become significant when they are acted out and become a reality. My chapter on white blues stresses the importance of these socially constructed identities.

The contrasting question would then concern why white musicians kept the old time traditions as a more universally celebrated part of their culture. In his bibliography in *Country Music U.S.A.*, Bill Malone laments the lack of scholarship focused on the “white plain folk” in comparison to the wealth of information and successful research in African American studies.⁴ In much the same way that African American culture has been assessed and analyzed through the medium of folk culture and music, scholars could analyze the common white folk societies using the same methods, such as fiddle music.⁵

Some of the best resources for information is the WPA files located at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, which houses numerous interviews and other documents rooted in fieldwork. There is an accumulation of interviews and other fieldwork related documents to sort through. Perusing these

⁴ Malone, Bill. *Country Music U.S.A.*, 466.

⁵ Particularly, Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* is a good resource for understanding how folk culture and music can shape an identity.

archives can turn up surprising details and demonstrate the diverse nature of Mississippi's music. When analyzed critically, these documents also show the mindset of the various fieldworkers, simply by what they chose to include and omit. Likewise, their descriptions of musicians, fiddle contests, and other sundry events point out their knowledge of the culture they are documenting.

The secondary sources all provide various insights and tools in order to tackle the greater goal of studying Mississippi's old time music history. Primarily, it is historical, musical and cultural studies works that work together to provide the necessary base of scholarship. Their treatment of the subject best suits the goals of the thesis. However, the music itself must not be neglected. While I do not intend to do a significant amount of niche ethnomusicological work, some degree of analysis of the recordings will be useful. Likewise, other scholars such as Jeff Titon in his book *Early Downhome Blues* have used advertising to support claims of the way these recordings were marketed. The various portrayals in ads of hillbilly and race recordings, as they became known, are key components when trying to understand the larger goals and mindset of the record industry. Likewise, they should also provide insight into the social structures of American society and values at large.

The record industry is only one side of the coin when studying folk music. The other side is that of the early folklorists and the ways they shaped folk music and folk studies all over the South. The goals of the early folklorists were diverse, but there are several themes that many of them shared. One was the almost quixotic desire to discover the authentic. The ideals of authenticity are often

shaped by nostalgic yearnings. Unfortunately, these yearnings had the tendency to overlook the folk that the folklorists were studying. This mission for authenticity is by no means antiquated in any popular sense, thus meriting attention of its own. Many modern depictions of country and blues artists are just as guilty of harboring a sense of nostalgia. This can be found in everything from scholarly works on the blues to music and cultural festivals all over the South and the internationally as a whole. Nostalgia and authenticity are so closely related that they tend to run each other aground in the quest for the truth. What folklore studies often present is much like what we are faced with when viewing a documentary photograph: what the folklorist wants to put in the frame. That which is left out, the documentary silences, are what is useful to study. Most of the sounds have been heard; it is the silences that need revisiting.

There are primary records of fieldwork done under the umbrella of the WPA and the Library of Congress. In fact, these are some of the only records of fieldwork that emphasize old time music in Mississippi. Most of the recordings were made under the guidance of folklorists Herbert Halpert and Abbott Ferris.⁶ A sample of these recordings was released on vinyl on the album "Great Big Yam Potatoes: Anglo-American Fiddle Music from Mississippi." While this album, complete with liner notes, is excellent in providing an insight into these recordings, it is unfortunately out of print, thus inaccessible to the public at large. These appear to be the only commercially released field recordings focused specifically on the subject of Anglo fiddle music from Mississippi. There are other

⁶ Halpert, Herbert, *Liner Notes: Great Big Yam Potatoes*.

field recordings available that have fiddle music. These are found in compilations from Alan Lomax recordings. Likewise, there are two compilations of commercial recordings available from County Records entitled “Mississippi String Bands, Volumes 1 and 2.” The compilations from Document Records are similar to the County Records compilations and offer relatively little additional insight. These few field and commercial recordings should be analyzed together, in order to create a coherent picture of the whole era of music. The liner notes to many of these albums often provide information that provides a starting point for fact finding. Another aspect to consider is why there are so few recordings made. This is another area where the record companies play a major role in defining the genres and decide who to record and what they record.

The first chapter of this thesis, entitled Mississippi Fiddling, provides an overview of the state’s fiddling history. This chapter is arranged in a similar fashion to many works on fiddle music. It covers the themes that other scholarly works emphasize, such as roots of fiddle music, fiddle contests, politics, as well as commercial and field recordings. It is, in a way, a brief overview that holds Mississippi fiddle music to the same standard that other fiddle traditions are. The issues that are tackled in other states’ histories are shown to have the same significance that existed in Mississippi.

The fiddlers themselves are discussed in the second chapter. In an encyclopedic manner, the fiddlers are each given a brief musical biography. This section attempts to analyze every fiddler that was either commercially or field recorded. Naturally, some of the fiddlers have much more information than

others. This is expected in any historical analysis, as some of the fiddlers were better documented, played on more recordings, lived longer, or spoke with more documentarians. Nevertheless, this section discusses the fiddlers, black and white, who contributed to the canon of Mississippi fiddle music.

The third chapter analyzes white blues fiddle music - that is, blues music recorded by Caucasian fiddlers. The point of this original research is to explore the black and white interchange. The 1920s and 1930s were not a bright time for race relations in Mississippi, yet, here are white fiddlers recording music with the word "blues" in the title. Therefore, the chapter asks why these white fiddlers were playing "black" music. Furthermore, it makes sense to question not only the motivation, but also the abilities and understanding of the blues idiom amongst these white fiddlers.

Mississippi fiddle music deserves the attention and recognition it receives here. It is one of the first music styles that brought people of different races, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds together. The most important aspect of this study is to shed light on a relatively untapped subject and to provide research so that future generations of Mississippians and Americans alike can understand where their music came from and the forces that shaped three minute pop songs they listen to on the radio.

CHAPTER 2: MISSISSIPPI FIDDLE

The state of Mississippi is not typically acknowledged for its fiddling tradition. However, the state's rich history of fiddle music deserves study and analysis. Perceptions about the music of the Magnolia State vary, with the blues usually making the top of the list. However, the heritage of fiddling covers all races, socioeconomics and styles of music. Before the blues, there was fiddle music.

One of the most important factors to consider when studying this folk music is to consider the arbitrary nature of categorization. Unfortunately, music tends to quickly lend itself to categorization, especially when monetary or cultural gains are considered. Therefore, the purpose here of utilizing categories is to demonstrate and point out their subjective tendencies. In order to accomplish this goal, the same categorical framework must be used. For instance, to categorize 1930s Mississippi as a predominantly rural state would be accurate in some instances and inaccurate in others. If rural is indicated by and agriculture-based economy, then, yes, Mississippi was rural at this time. However, there was a road system, access to consumer goods, education, and radio, all of which worked against the isolation expected when using the term. Therefore,

categorization operates here to work within the existing framework, while simultaneously pointing out its frequent inaccuracy.

Roots

In the early part of the nation's history, slave musicians played fiddle music to entertain themselves, or even their masters. Musicians in West and Central Africa played one-string fiddles, known as *goje*. They can be constructed from gourds.⁷ In the New World, slaves played European style violins and were accompanied by a plethora of other instruments, many of them homemade, to create much of what is now known as old time music. Fiddles played alongside banjos, quills, fifes, tambourines and other percussion instruments. The first report of slave fiddlers in the New World was in the West Indies in 1694. One was reported in Virginia in the 1690s.⁸ The first reported sighting of a banjo in Mississippi was in the 1830s on the Sunflower River.⁹ Studying banjo music alongside fiddle music is important, because the two instruments were regularly paired together. This long history makes African American fiddling one of the oldest pre-colonial American music traditions there is.

While Mississippi's fiddling tradition does not have the antiquity of other states such as Virginia, its roots still run deep. Both white and black musicians played within earshot of each other. The blacks and whites of Mississippi are not the only fiddlers in the state; there are Native American fiddlers as well. The

⁷ Hoffheimer, Michael, *Fiddle*, 315.

⁸ Conway, Cecilia, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 73.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59; Epstein, Dena, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, 38.

Choctaw Indians in Mississippi have their own fiddle music tradition that continues to the present. According to music scholar Chris Goertzen, who has done considerable research on several styles of fiddle playing, the Choctaw fiddlers in the state do not play differently than most white fiddlers. He claims that it is a continuation of fairly standard old time fiddling that had been appropriated for use in their own way, such as in certain ceremonies.¹⁰ These musicians continue to play fiddle music into the present. The entire Native American fiddling tradition is an entirely different area of study that deserves its own full scholarly attention. This substantiates rather than diminishes the importance of intercultural borrowing that fiddle music has long had in Mississippi. The Choctaw fiddlers are certainly a valuable source for future research.

Learning the Fiddle

Fiddlers learned to play by all different means; their brothers, cousins, fathers and grandfathers instructed them. Others learned by opening their ears at the local dances and events where older fiddlers could be heard. The most important factor, though, is that fiddling was taught and handed down. There were no instructional videos or mass marketed how-to books, so fiddling was largely an oral, or rather *aural* tradition. The vast majority of Mississippi fiddlers who have been interviewed learned their skills from family members.¹¹ The fiddle is an incredibly difficult instrument to play, let alone master. Therefore, the family unit may have served to aid in music instruction in addition to other traditional

¹⁰ Goertzen, Chris, Electronic Mail Correspondence with the Author.

¹¹ Rankin, Tom, *Liner Notes*.

roles and functions. In an interview with music scholar Tony Russell, Mississippi fiddler Hoyt Ming recalled how he learned to play the fiddle:

I first started – I was about 15 years old, and my daddy invited a stringband over home one night to play, you see. And they were good. And somehow I like the fiddler. So I began to think, well, I'd like to play the fiddle. So I managed to get hold of a secondhand fiddle – I just call it a fiddle – and in learning I'd pick out a simple piece, like, say, for instance, "Shortenin' Bread", something like that... you know easily accomplished. And I'd just pick out – the tune'd be in my head – and find the note on the fiddle. I'd just pick it out till I got it just like I wanted it. I'd keep on – instead of jumping from that to another piece and mixing up so many, I'd first learn one simple piece as well as I could. Then I'd learn another. Maybe it'd be a little bit harder, but I just kept on till I'd worked every piece out at a time.¹²

Ming describes how he learned to play by listening to other fiddlers around him, rather than by any classical or otherwise formal training. It was this aural tradition that flourished and bred new generations of fiddlers. This same process is nearly identical to many of the accounts by blues musicians, who also learned by seeing and hearing the other older musicians in their communities.

For many novice fiddlers, their first instrument was not a nicely crafted Italian violin. Often, fiddles were homemade. Perhaps they were carved by whittling and made to look like a nice violin. Other times, fiddles were made from

¹² Russell, Tony, *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 12-13.

any wood box that could act as a resonating chamber. A fiddle can be made in any shape and out of any resonating material. The earliest slave banjos and fiddles were constructed from gourds. The finest violin is, after all, simply a very carefully constructed wooden box. The most important aspect was that the fiddle was able to project a sound, thus being useful for either learning on, or even playing for dances and other forms of entertainment. Other homespun instruments that exist today are cigar box guitars and washtub basses.

Another element that tends to be a constant is that fiddling was largely a patriarchal endeavor. The majority of fiddlers interviewed are male. While there have been women fiddlers, there remains a common perception that men were fiddlers. In addition to providing income for a family, many men provided music and entertainment as well. Due to the affiliations with raucous behavior, the fiddle may have been considered too crude for femininity. Therefore, men handed down fiddle instruction and taught new generations of fiddlers.

Even though fiddling was largely patriarchal in practice, music as a whole was often a family activity. Often, in Victorian-era America, women were often encouraged to play other instruments, such as piano, mandolin and even guitar. Children were taught to sing in harmony with the adults. In this way, immediate and even extended families used music as a way to come together and share this certain bond.

An explanation for why fiddling has been a male-centered endeavor could be the associations with the devil. In the very least, fiddling was often accompanied by drinking, gambling, dancing and other vices or forms of

entertainment that some did not agree with. This applied to blacks and whites. According to John Szwed, “the distinction between sacred and secular music – the most significant native musical categories of the Negroes of the United States – was possibly set by the middle 1800s, and certainly before 1900.”¹³ This fits with the notion that Cecilia Conway presents by noting that “many strict evangelical sects held that banjos, fiddles, and other instruments were tools of the devil.”¹⁴ Folklorist Alan Lomax documented 86-year-old fiddler Alec Robertson in Coahoma County in 1942, who claimed that he had “fiddled for the devil for fifty seven years.”¹⁵ He went on to describe the rough and rowdy ways of the places he played at around the turn of the century.¹⁶ Likewise, the devil has played an important role in scholarship on the Delta blues musicians, where there was the constant need to wrestle with the preacher versus bluesman dichotomy.¹⁷

White fiddlers held many of the same apprehensions. Societal and religious pressure caused many a fiddler to retire his instrument. Music scholar Charles Wolfe notes:

They called the instrument ‘THE DEVIL S BOX’ because some thought it was sinful to play one. Sometimes in recent years, people would be tearing down old log cabins to get at the logs and they would find hidden in the wall an old beat-up fiddle. At first they puzzled about this, but then

¹³ Szwed, John F., *Musical Adaptation Among Afro-Americans*, 113.

¹⁴ Conway, Cecilia, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 75.

¹⁵ Lomax, Alan, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 158-159.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159-163.

¹⁷ Ferris, William, *Blues from the Delta*, 79-89.

people explained that the man who lived there was once a fine old-time fiddler, but that in later years he had gotten religion. In his zeal, he became convinced that he must turn back on his old life, and especially that devil's instrument, the fiddle.¹⁸

The white fiddlers in Mississippi shared the same convictions about playing around vice. For example, fiddler John Alexander Brown refused to play around excessive drinking. He claimed that he was always in control of himself.¹⁹

Fiddle Contests

Fiddle contests have a long history in America. Politically, they have served to reinforce ideals of masculinity and Anglo tradition. Culturally, they carried on family and regional traditions. Whimsically, they have served to entertain crowds at county fairs and community get-togethers. Regardless of the reason or intent behind the organization and execution of a fiddle contest, they have had many effects.

Starting in America in the 1700s, fiddle contests began to emerge. One such contest held in 1736 was advertised in the Virginia Gazette:

We hear from Hanover County, that on Tuesday next, (being St. Andrews Day), some merry-dispos'd Gentlemen of the said County, design to celebrate that Festival, by setting up divers Prizes to be contended for in the following Manner, (to wit) A neat Hunting Saddle, with a fine broadcloth

¹⁸ Wolfe, Charles, *The Devil's Box*, xv.

¹⁹ Rankin, Tom and Gary Stanton, *The Fiddlers and the Tunes*, 8.

Housing, fring'd and flowr'd &c. to be run for (the Quarter,) by any Number of Hors- es and Mares: A fine Cremona Fiddle to be plaid for, by any Number of Country Fiddlers, (Mr. Langford's Scholars excepted:) With divers other considerable Prizes, for Dancing, Singing, Foot-ball- play, Jumping, Wrestling, &c. particularly a fine pair of Silk Stock- ings to be given to the Handsomest Maid upon the Green, to be judg'd of by the Company. At Page's Warehouse, Commonly call'd Crutchfield in the said County of Hanover, where all Persons will find good Entertainment.²⁰

Already, fiddlers had to meet the criteria of the paradigm of what it means to be “country.” Here begins a tradition of country fiddlers, which is another word for fiddlers untrained in any formal capacity, and surely a reference to the exclusion of “Mr. Langford’s scholars.” Therefore, it is clear that the music of the vernacular fiddler has usually been considered old and country. Fiddle contests have been a way of preserving this old culture and heritage. They serve as living museums, and aid to provide that snippet of the past to which many humans are intrinsically drawn.

In the twentieth century, fiddle contests served other purposes, such as bolstering a sense of masculinity and whiteness among males. One of the best studies of fiddle contests as an avenue of masculinity can be found in Gavin Campbell’s *Music and the Making of the New South*. Campbell uses three different cultural events in Atlanta dating from the turn of the century to the mid

²⁰ Goertzen, Chris. *Balancing Local and National Approaches at American Fiddle Contests*, 353-354.

1930s to illustrate this point that fiddle contests served to bolster masculinity in the New South white community. These events were the opera season, the Colored Music Festival, and the Georgia Old-Time Fiddling Contest.²¹ The opera season served to bring the upper-class white southerners in step with the cosmopolitan cultural trends in the rest of the country, while the Colored Music Festival was an attempt by black leaders to prove the success of the cultural programs the former slave had created since the days of the plantation. Many of the same types of events were taking place in Mississippi, so it could be understood that they were being held for many of the same reasons. In addition to the fiddle contests, Mississippi residents also sought out what some would consider culturally stimulating activities, such as classical music, opera, and theater. WPA workers in Mississippi accounted for many of these events, which can be found in the WPA archive at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson.

One of the more persistent topics when studying race relations in the South has been white men's claim that they need to "protect" white women in the South from the black males. Hence, fiddle contests were a cultural, rather than outwardly violent way in which white males could get together and assert both their whiteness and their male standing. In regards to postbellum upper class white southern males, Campbell asserts " they understood that the emergence of a white working underclass presented the prospect of devastating intraracial

²¹ Campbell, Gavin, *Music and the Making of a New South*, 12-13.

conflict.”²² In other words, they did not want to “lose” white women of a lower class to the quickly-improving status of the New South black male.

Anglo tradition was yet another aspect of the southern fiddle contest. In a place in which the color line was recognized and usually adhered, a fiddle contest was a place where whites could take pride in what they perceived as their musical heritage. Automobile tycoon Henry Ford was one of the more famous proponents of fiddle contests. He sponsored fiddle contests across the country in large part to express his white supremacist views. Ford, like many other people of the time, viewed fiddling as one of the last bastions of America’s “whiteness.” To him and others, fiddle music was a way to “Keep Jazz from poisoning the country.”²³ Unfortunately, he and many others overlooked the significant contributions by the black fiddlers of African descent whose musicianship gave American old time fiddling much of its sound. These notions of the fiddle’s “whiteness” persist today. African Americans do not associate with the instrument on any large scale whatsoever and other ethnic groups do not seem to associate fiddle with African Americans in a stereotypical or any other sense. There are a few exceptions, such as Papa John Creach, who played with such popular artists as Frank Zappa, jazz violinists Stuff Smith and Leroy Jenkins, and blues performer Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown. There have been others, but the goal here is to note the rarity of popular black fiddlers or violinists.

²² Ibid., 104.

²³ Goertzen, Chris, *Balancing Local and National Approaches at American Fiddle Contests*, 334.

Mississippi was not short of its own fiddle contests. There are many accounts documented in reports turned in by Works Progress Administration field workers in the late 1930s.²⁴ One such event was accounted by field worker Elizabeth Comfort in Kosciusko, in Attala County.

Regularly every year during October- Sponsored by the Public School of Kosciusko, funds to go towards new books for their library. Fiddlers from “every neck of the woods” in our County come and enter the different contests, from the various interpretations of the fiddlers’ ability. Prizes are given by the different merchants of Kosciusko from their respective stores.

From early morning of one day to the wee hours of the next early morning, the time is given to this contest – a general gathering of the visitors on the streets around Court Square – dinner and supper spread from their own lunch boxes (trunks often) – wherever the law will allow such: in church yards, individual cars, City Park, etc. Promptly at 7:30 P.M. the fun begins. The Court Room on the second floor is packed to its capacity and there is really some fine music, not merely “turkey-in-the-straw”. While all this is going on upstairs, downstairs in the wide open 4-way hall other contests are being enjoyed, such as Clog dancing, Knocking the Back-step, cake-walking, acrobatic stunts, and leapfrogging. Tis a great day never to be forgotten by most of our citizens.

²⁴ Many of these documents are held in Jackson at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

This fiddle contest served the purpose of supporting the local public school's library. It is a safe assumption that the Kosciusko public school in 1939 was segregated and supposedly, all white. This is not to say that this event served the purpose of Jim Crow politics, but it did serve to strengthen the public school, thus the white community.

These contests also served as a way in which musicians could gain exposure and ultimately get discovered. For instance, in Winona, Mississippi, the local veterinarian Doc Bailey served as a talent scout for the record companies by hosting concerts as well as a fiddle contest.²⁵ At the contest a fiddler was in effect auditioning for a chance to make a recording. Beyond the local prestige associated with making a recording, it also offered a new way a musician could make money. The musicians who performed on early records were typically paid a fee for sides recorded that were used. In addition to this, a recording session would establish the performer as a recording musician, and he would be able to theoretically promote himself as such.

Fiddlin' Politics

Politicians utilized cultural tactics when campaigning in order to appeal to specific demographics. In many states fiddle music was also a way for politicians to strengthen their positions and relate to a fiddle music-loving crowd. In the book *Fiddlin' Georgia Crazy*, "Fiddlin'" John Carson, from Atlanta, Georgia, played for

²⁵ Ratcliffe, Philip, *Mississippi John Hurt*, 56-57.

political rallies throughout his entire career. In fact, it is reported that he even played at a lynching.²⁶

Many Mississippi residents heard fiddle music at political campaigns. Music scholar Chris Goetzen has documented the Mississippi politician Cecil McLeod, who used fiddle music to boost and bolster his campaigns in the late 1960s and 1970s. He spoke of the use fiddle playing played for both his personal enjoyment as well as his career:

Even when I ran for office in '67 and through the '70s, especially in the early '70s, I hadn't even thought about the effect that the fiddle would have when I was campaigning, because it was just something I liked to do. An[d] actually, when I was playing, I was playing because it relaxed me, and I thought there'd be a few folks out there it would entertain.... I wouldn't have you think that I ever entertained the idea that my being a good fiddler or mediocre fiddler or whatever made me better qualified to serve in the [Mississippi State] Senate. But when you're running, you go through the newspaper offices, radio stations, TV stations, and local printer to print up stuff to advertise, to get people to *remember* you to vote for you. Well, I was toting something around in that case that would help them remember who I was.²⁷

²⁶ Wiggins, Gene, *Fiddlin' Georgia Crazy*.

²⁷ Goertzen, Chris, *George Cecil McLeod, Mississippi's Fiddling Senator, and the Modern History of American Fiddling*, 343.

Senator McCleod was by no means the first Mississippi politician to utilize fiddle music to appeal to a particular demographic for political gains. The Carter Family, who recorded under the name “Carter Brothers and Son,” played for Senator Abernathy of Okalona, Mississippi. The Carters established a family band and played for Senator Abernathy’s political rallies.²⁸ The fiddler Hoyt Ming also recollected playing for political rallies.²⁹ It appears that, just like in other states such as Georgia, fiddling and politics went hand in hand in Mississippi in the early to mid twentieth century.

Commercial Recordings

Compared to other states, very few commercially available recordings of Mississippi fiddle music have been made. Bands such as Narmour and Smith, The Mississippi Possum Hunters, the Leake County Revelers and the Nations Brothers come to mind. White members composed these early string bands.³⁰ Companies made commercial recordings in the late 1920s and early 1930s during the first national wave of “hillbilly” recordings. By comparison, talent scouts recorded fiddlers from other states considerably more. For instance, the Georgia fiddlers such as John Carson and Gid Tanner were very popular and recorded a considerable number of sides.³¹

Black Mississippi fiddlers were also recorded, but were not marketed in the same way the white fiddlers were. By the 1920s, the record industry had two

²⁸ Russell, Tony, *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 10.

²⁹ Meade, Mary, *Album Review 1975*.

³⁰ Russell, Tony, *Liner Notes from Document Records*.

³¹ Wolfe, Charles, *The Devil’s Box*, xx.

categories that a fiddler could fall under: black or white. Regardless of the style of music, record companies marketed white fiddlers as *hillbillies*, or *old familiar tunes*, or *old time*. Black fiddlers were marketed under the umbrella of *race records*.³² There were the occasional crossover musicians, but with very few exceptions, these categories dominated how companies marketed fiddlers. Furthermore, in states such as Mississippi, interracial recording sessions were taboo, if not illegal. Integrated recording sessions did happen, but they were not advertised as such.³³

Record companies were not interested in breaking down racial barriers; they wanted to sell records. This meant that companies marketed the existing lines of the time that people drew, exploited and marketed. Black musicians were marketed as *blues* whether they played a true blues style or not. Likewise, white musicians were marketed as *hillbillies* whether they were playing “Anglo mountain music” or not.³⁴ It is these categories and these marketing perceptions that have caused the lack of recordings of the Mississippi fiddlers of both races. The record companies had something they were looking for. Much like today, they had an image that they were intent on selling, even at the expense of some multi-talented musician. The print advertisements for these records are perhaps the most telling. Jeff Tilton’s research on the subject is particularly illuminating,

³² Miller, Karl, *Segregating Sounds*, 187.

³³ *Ibid.*, 217-222.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-222.

because it shows the nature of the advertisements and their shameless exploitation of racist ideals.³⁵ According to Karl Hagstrom Miller:

The industry expectation that black artists should record the blues was also propelled by a shift from minstrel to folkloric marketing strategies in the mid-1920s. The shift was subtle and always incomplete. It culminated at the same time that companies were enacting a number of other changes in their marketing of southern music; the inauguration of Southern recording expeditions; the separation of race and old-time selections from their pop catalogues; the expansion of minstrel imagery to advertise blues records; and the identification of what came to be known as rural or country blues. Even as companies expanded their minstrel marketing tactics, they increasingly identified rural southern blues as folk music.³⁶

These marketing strategies affected the song output of Mississippi musicians, black and white. For instance, the Mississippi Sheiks felt this shift. Upon meeting with talent scout Polk Brockman, Sam Chatmon indicated that “you take a fellow that can play anything, he can get a job more or less anywhere.”³⁷ What Chatmon meant was that a diverse range of repertoire could lead to higher pay. It was simple: those who could adapt and play what the talent buyers sought could make more money and sell more sides. Therefore it was the ability to adapt that could have been responsible for much of the Sheik’s success. In fact, for many

³⁵ Titon, Jeff Todd, *Early Downhome Blues*, 218-241.

³⁶ Miller, Karl, *Segregating Sound*, 222.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

years, the only black fiddlers in Mississippi who recorded in a commercial capacity were the Mississippi Sheiks, who began recording in the 1920s. Other black fiddlers who recorded did so at later dates and for field recording purposes. Other bands surely existed, but no known bands recorded with a fiddle, and no others were nearly as popular as the Sheiks.

Most Mississippi fiddlers were discovered in much the same way other folk musicians were found throughout the country - by a record storeowner. One person who was instrumental in making the early Mississippi recordings possible was a Winona veterinarian named Dr. A.M. "Doc" Bailey. In addition to providing health care for the local animals, Bailey also owned a retail store that sold electrical appliances as well as records and record players. In fact, he had a Victor franchise. It was commonplace for southern record salesmen such as Bailey to provide new local talent for their record companies in order to sell them at their store.³⁸

Doc Bailey is one of the unsung heroes of the Mississippi fiddle and old time music scene. He was the primary reason that many of the early recordings were made. He organized fiddle contests at the courthouse. It was through this that Okeh Records discovered Narmour and Smith. Later, he took musicians to Memphis in order to record for the Victor people. Without his ear for talent and connections with the producers of records, many of the old time bands would not have been recorded. Fiddlers such as Narmour and Smith, The Ray Brothers,

³⁸ Russell, Tony, *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 22.

The Mississippi Possum Hunters, and Clardy and Clements are a few of the artists whose recording careers can be attributed to Bailey.³⁹

Another talent scout responsible for Mississippi music recordings is H.C. Speir, who, like Bailey, sold records and record players in Jackson, Mississippi. He is responsible for coordinating the recording of Freeny's Barn Dance Band.⁴⁰ Speir is more commonly known in the blues research community as the man who facilitated the recordings of classic blues artists such as Skip James, Son House and Charley Patton. Tony Russell elucidates the nature of Speir's multifaceted ear for talent when describing a single week of recording sessions held in Jackson, Mississippi in December of 1930:

On Monday of that week the Mississippi Sheiks were at hand. On Tuesday the black singers Charley McCoy, Slim Duckett, and Peg Norwood; then the Freeny Band; then the Newton County Hillbillies (Avis Massengale and the Harrison brothers, Marcus and Andrew), and the black preacher Elder Curry. Uncle Dave Macon and Sam McGee appeared on the Wednesday to cut ten songs. The rest of the week saw a couple of gospel quartets, the return of the Sheiks and Elder Curry, and an obscure group called the Magnolia Trio. In five days almost a hundred masters were successfully made. Whether because of good planning, or excellent performances, or merely a sense of economy in Depression times, over three quarters of these Jackson recordings were commercially issued.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰ Russell, Tony, *The Freeny Story*.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

These first recordings comprise the early Mississippi commercial fiddle music canon. Other than these, there seems to be no significant commercially available recordings. After the first commercial recordings were made, the Great Depression struck. During this period, record sales slowed significantly and very few new artists were recorded or added to label rosters. The music industry made a massive reorganization, which included the creation of new record subsidiaries that made records more affordable. The record companies dropped many musicians and bands and made no more recordings. They kept only the strongest sellers in the fledgling economic times.⁴²

Field Recordings

The next fiddle recordings made in Mississippi were in the field. The great Depression had stifled the popular recording industry but had initiated the rise of field recordings that were made possible by the Works Progress Administration, brought about by New Deal funding. Bill Malone points out that the Great Depression “promoted the rediscovery and consequent romanticization of ‘the folk.’”⁴³ The Federal Writers Program handled the majority of the field recordings. Also, the Federal Theater Project and Federal Music Project gathered recordings as well.⁴⁴ Under the auspices of the WPA, a field recording expedition was led by folklorist Herbert Halpert, who was from New York. He was joined by Abbott Ferris, a Mississippi native. They recorded in 1939 from a “sound wagon” which

⁴² Malone, Bill C., *Country Music U.S.A.*, 93-94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁴ Filene, Benjamin, *Romancing the Folk*, 136-137.

held the recording equipment.⁴⁵ With this mobile recorder, they were able to visit every remote back road the state had to offer.

Their work did not consist of a meandering journey of chance and happenstance. Rather, the tour was concerted by the network of WPA field workers who had been collecting names and written fieldwork since 1936. There is documentation from the offices in Jackson, Mississippi and from Washington D.C. showing what the local fieldworkers were to look for. Therefore, this was a joint effort between Washington outsiders, such as Halpert, Mississippians like Ferris, and even more countless locals providing leads and insight. Ultimately, it was the locals who made the field recording session possible, along with the funding by the federal government.⁴⁶

On the field recording tour of 1939, Halpert was able to record fiddlers from an array of backgrounds and ages. For instance, the older fiddler John Alexander Brown, was nearly 80 years of age when he was recorded. Conversely, Enos Canoy was in his 30s.⁴⁷ Brown was recorded playing solo fiddle as he had learned it from those who had taught him. Canoy played with a band, which could demonstrate the shifting ways in which people listened to and performed music. It also points to how communities were able to support an entire band versus barely being able to compensate a lone fiddler and perhaps an accompanist.

⁴⁵ Rankin, Tom, *Liner Notes: Great Big Yam Potatoes*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

1939 was not a time in which Mississippi was culturally disconnected from the rest of the country. Sure, there were hamlets that saw significantly less traffic and visitors than others. These still exist by relative comparison. However, the advent of radio and roads contributed much to the demise of isolated rural life. Halpert's sound recording tour enabled one last chance for listeners to hear music in what could be loosely thought of as music prior to the radio. Whether or not fiddlers such as John Alexander Brown did or did not own or regularly listen to a radio is a detail hedging on trivial. Brown was able to perform music as he learned it at a much earlier date from other fiddlers. Also, he had not performed in public quite as much, so it can be imagined that he played much of what he learned at an earlier time.⁴⁸ By contrast, one of the fiddlers recorded during Halpert's tour indicated that he had played on the radio: John Hatcher. He played on a radio station in Jackson, Tennessee. Later, Enos Canoy and his band played on the radio in the 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁹

The next field recorder to capture Mississippi fiddling was Alan Lomax. Where Halpert was able to document the white fiddlers of the state, Lomax was able to collect the sounds and stories of the black fiddlers.⁵⁰ Perhaps Lomax and Halpert were looking for something different, which is one of the potential flaws of fieldwork and cultural analysis. In other words, Halpert was looking for white fiddlers, so he only asked about, sought out, and recorded white fiddlers. Likewise, Lomax sought out black musicians. Some New Deal workers took this

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lomax, Alan, *Blues From the Delta*.

opportunity to record a far broader spectrum of music. For example, worker Sidney Robertson recalled her instructions by Pete Seeger, which were to, “Record EVERYthing.... Don’t select, don’t omit, don’t concentrate on any single style. We know so little! Record *everything!*”⁵¹ Regardless of intentions, it is these early recordings that exist to analyze and demonstrate the styles of music that these musicians were performing.

Lomax traveled to Coahoma County in the Mississippi Delta and recorded Henry “Son” Simms playing fiddle with blues guitarist and singer Muddy Waters.⁵² This was one of the most important “discoveries” of Lomax’s career. Waters would go on to Chicago and become one of the most famous and iconic bluesmen of his generation.⁵³ Because black fiddlers were a rarity, it was very unique to record Simms playing the fiddle. Furthermore, his band, The Son Simms Four, was seemingly popular in the Coahoma County area, which was unlike the music in the rest of the country. In fact Benjamin Filene raises the interesting point of what was in the jukeboxes in Clarksdale where these musicians regularly played. In fact, folklorist Lewis Jones working with the Fisk University – Library of Congress project did collect the tunes in which people listened. There are 108 songs, only 20 of which were blues and only 2 of which could be deemed “country blues.” The rest of the songs were urban and new. Muddy Waters no doubt literally heard the success of these other musicians such as Louis Jordan, Fats Waller and Count Bassie, and wanted their level of

⁵¹ Pescatello, Ann M. *Charles Seeger: A Life in American Music*, 141.

⁵² Lomax, Alan, *Blues From the Delta*, 415.

⁵³ Filene, Benjamin, *Romancing the Folk*, 77-80.

success rather than fitting into Lomax's country blues paradigm.⁵⁴ Upon his move to Chicago, his success would prove this true.

Next, Lomax recorded north Mississippi multi instrumentalist Sid Hemphill playing fiddle alongside the black banjo player Lucius Smith. Hemphill and the rest of the north Mississippi musicians surprised Lomax, because many of the music traditions that were being practiced, such as African American fife and drum music, were not found elsewhere in the country.⁵⁵ Hemphill played tunes for Lomax that he had been playing for decades at square dances and parties for both blacks and whites in the area.⁵⁶

After Lomax, the most notable folklorist to publish findings about African American fiddle traditions in Mississippi was Bill Ferris, who recorded, interviewed and photographed black fiddler Tom Dumas in 1967. Unlike Hemphill, Dumas was not a staple in the musical community. Rather, he claimed that the blacks in his community did not like the fiddle because they deemed that it was "white people music."⁵⁷ Between Ferris and Lomax, there is a void of fieldwork in the realm of black fiddling in Mississippi. Meanwhile, the folk revival of the 1960s was in full swing and the Mississippi bluesmen, such as John Hurt, Son House, Skip James and Bukka White were being "discovered" and getting more attention than they had ever received.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁵ Lomax, Alan, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 332-333.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 334-340.

⁵⁷ Ferris, William, *Blues From the Delta*, 96-97.

⁵⁸ Filene, Benjamin, *Romancing the Folk*, 125.

A “Mississippi Style”

There is no way to definitively point to any particular aspect of Mississippi fiddling that could define a style, such as “Delta blues” or “Texas fiddling.” Many musicians would maintain that style is limited to individuals. Others would argue that there are clear styles that seem to develop regionally among musicians. In fact, both arguments have their place when studying Mississippi fiddle music. The argument claiming that individuals define a sound can clearly be heard in the unique recordings, such as Hoyt Ming and His Pep Steppers playing the “Indian War Whoop.” This recording is unique due to both the percussive element of the foot tapping as well as the tune itself. One will rarely hear old time fiddle with a voice as distinct. In fact, the song was re-recorded by John Hartford and Gillian Welch for the major motion picture, “Oh Brother Where Art Thou.” The “Indian War Whoop” can be heard during the mob tar and feathering scene. There are few recordings of other artists or individual tunes that can claim such unmistakable individuality. The John Hatcher recording of “Going Up to Hamburg” is also a unique tune, as well as his “Tishomingo County Blues.” The tune “My Little Dony” performed by Charles Long and Sam Neal features straw beating and has both old time and bluesy sounds.⁵⁹ All of these tunes are unique to the individuals playing them and stand out in relation to other more standard “Anglo” fiddle tunes.

The theory that a cohesive, or at least collective regional Mississippi sound can exist is much more difficult to describe, let alone prove. Nonetheless,

⁵⁹ Liner Notes, *Great Big Yam Potatoes*.

a few distinct aspects can be viewed as indicative of a greater picture. The first would be the blues element. Black or white, the advent of commercial blues recordings as well as localized, isolated performances affected every musician who heard these sounds. White or black fiddlers may have heard the songs and disliked the brazen sounds they heard; or conversely, they might have been drawn to the new sounds coming from the scratchy phonograph. There is little evidence that tells us exactly what these fiddlers listened to. What we know is that many white fiddle players recorded fiddle music that at least had the word “blues” in the title. Some of these recordings sound considerably blues-ier than others. The paradigm considered here to denote the relative blues-iness of a song is the scale and the melodic and rhythmic feel. The first relatively prominent recording of such was “Carroll County Blues” by the Carroll County, Mississippi duet Narmour and Smith. It could be ascertained that the relative success of this recording, or the simple fact that it was recorded and released, was enough to spawn other recordings and provide the catalyst necessary for others to follow suit. On the other hand, not every piece of fiddle music with “blues” in the title was necessarily a blues tune. Without placing too much emphasis on categorization and paradigms, some of the “blues” tunes were “blues” in title only. While categorization is not over-emphasized, it does serve a function when used judiciously. For example, Narmour and Smith’s “Limber Neck Blues” has no blues feel to it whatsoever. It is basically an Anglo influenced fiddle tune, with a misleading title. Therefore, the act of placing the word “blues” in the title of a song in no way makes it a blues tune.

Another element of Mississippi fiddling that may provide some clues about the folk, rather than the commercial recording, aspect is straw beating. Straw beating is a technique of accompaniment where the fiddler plays as usual and a second person rhythmically taps with straws or small sticks on the strings not being played. It was a way for rhythmic accompaniment to be made available without the inclusion of a second instrument. Straw beating can be heard on the Halpert field recordings on *Great Big Yam Potatoes*. In fact, there were two separate recordings of straw beating, one by Frank and Mollie Kittrell in Meridian, Mississippi and another by Charles Long and Sam Neal in Quitman, Mississippi.⁶⁰

However, straw beating is not heard on any of the commercial Mississippi fiddling recordings. Why is this so? It could be one of several factors. Perhaps, much like today, a relative degree of conformity was desired when producing records for sale. The record company may have wanted the string band, or the guitar/fiddle duet, or the guitar/banjo duet, or basically whatever was selling. Straw beating may have been quirky and unique, but too backwoods for a commercial recording to be successful. Likewise, a fiddler or string band may have wanted to conform and be guaranteed that his recording would be used, meaning he would be compensated. There is currently no way of knowing what the exact reason, if any, was that straw beating from Mississippi fiddlers was not recorded in a commercial capacity.

⁶⁰ Rankin, Tom, *Liner Notes*.

Other than the blues element and an active straw beating community, there are no other aspects of Mississippi fiddling that would give it a totally unique status among music historians. However, this is no reason to omit it completely from the canon of American fiddle music. Most other southern American Anglo fiddle styles are likewise similar in this regard. Fiddle records from the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate little regional distinction between Anglo fiddlers heard from Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Mississippi, West Virginia, Kentucky and a few others.⁶¹ Some of the more distinct recordings come from either Texas or Louisiana. In Texas, there is a fairly distinct touch of the western swing and Texas style ornamented fiddle playing. In Louisiana, listeners can hear the Acadian and Creole melodies and singing style. This is not to say that distinct recordings can only be found from Texas and Louisiana; rather, it means that they have the most consistently distinct regional sounds while the other southern states tend to have a more cohesive sound.

One of the most important aspects to keep in mind when studying recorded fiddle music from the 1920s and 1930s is that the Civil War had ended over fifty years prior. During the Civil War, men from all different parts of the country collided and shared. Likewise, after that, people constantly moved and relocated, as they do today. Furthermore, phonograph records reached the furthest back roads, the deepest hollers, and the most isolated hamlets across the country.

⁶¹ Sauber, Tom, Liner Notes, *Great Big Yam Potatoes*.

Many of the fiddlers recorded in 1939 during Halpert's Mississippi field recording tour claimed that they were from different states. For example, W.A. Bledsoe was from Lincoln County, Tennessee and both Charles Long and Sam Neal were from Choctaw County in Alabama.⁶² Other fiddlers spoke of how their families had moved to Mississippi. Others such as John Hatcher from Iuka, Mississippi took their fiddle playing regionally. Hatcher apparently played at fiddle contests in Corinth, Mississippi and Sheffield, Alabama. Furthermore, he played with a band, the Tishomingo County Jamboree Boys, which was a regular band on the radio station in Jackson, Tennessee.⁶³ Therefore, it is clear that these were not necessarily backwoods or isolated fiddlers; they were often worldly musicians who were very much in step with the rest of the country.

In conclusion to pinning down a "Mississippi style," perhaps mobility is the key factor. Whether it was sonic mobility with sounds and ideas of sounds traveling, or simply old-fashioned peripatetic movement, mobility gives Mississippi its fiddle sound. It is an amalgamation of all of its many past inhabitants who have contributed and modern musicians who continue to contribute to the rich fabric of culture and music.

⁶² Rankin, Tom, *Liner Notes*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.

CHAPTER 3: THE FIDDLERS

Mississippi's fiddlers run the gamut of racial backgrounds, socioeconomic circumstances, and levels of skill. The primary focus here is those fiddlers who were recorded and therefore have music that can be analyzed. Field workers such as Herbert Halpert, Alan Lomax, and Bill Ferris recorded some of them. Others were recorded on the race and hillbilly records that were produced in the 1920s and 1930s. A few of the black fiddlers listed here were unfortunately never recorded. However, their contribution to other artists who made recordings is intrinsically more important, because they were at least in some capacity remembered through the music of their descendents. Furthermore, the collection of recordings in which the fiddlers that can be analyzed is relatively scant.

Black Fiddlers

Black fiddlers are a rarity in comparison to their white contemporaries. Black fiddlers were rarely, if ever, recorded performing solo on a commercial recording. Much of what remains today are jug band recordings, such as those by the Mississippi Sheiks.⁶⁴ It is interesting to consider the Mississippi Sheiks a jug band, considering they did not play with a jug in the band. This would not be

⁶⁴ Hay, Fred J., *Black Musicians in Appalachia: An Introduction to Affrilachian Music*, 7.

the case in other jug band music, such as that of Gus Cannon. Their style should be considered a pre-blues or songster style of music. The Mississippi Sheiks could also be considered outright blues. In fact, they were listed in both “Old Familiar Tunes” listings, which was the term for predominantly white music as well as “race recordings,” which entailed mostly black artists. Many of their songs contained the word “blues” in the title as well as in stylistic content. While to the trained ear it would not be confused with other contemporary Delta style blues of the time, it could easily be considered to fall neatly within the blues idiom.⁶⁵

It is not useful to try to lump all black fiddlers (or musicians, for that matter) from Mississippi into the category of blues. They were not all blues fiddlers. Many of them played pre-blues music that would categorically run the gamut of genres.⁶⁶ In fact, most of the fiddlers discussed here played pre-blues music. While not very common, and largely undocumented, there were pockets of black society in Mississippi that enjoyed more traditional styles of music. In *Blues from the Delta*, author Bill Ferris interviews black fiddler Tom Dumas, who was originally from Walthall, in Webster County, Mississippi. In this interview, Dumas describes how common square dances and sacred harp singing were in the black and white communities. Of this, he said:

We never did go to white folks' dances, but we'd play for colored folks. We used to give dances about five nights out of every week. I played there

⁶⁵ Russell, Tony, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, 55-58.

⁶⁶ Wolfe, Charles, *Rural Black String Band Music*, 33.

from 1897 until 1904. I have sat in a corner many a night and played all night long. I used to pick a banjo and my daddy, he'd play the fiddle.⁶⁷

Dumas is one example of a black musician playing “white” music, or rather what is commonly thought of as white music. He was carrying on a tradition that far preceded the Civil War. Fiddlers such as Tom Dumas were not the only black musicians in Mississippi to continue very old musical styles that dated back to the times of slavery. One such musician was Sid Hemphill, who was recorded by Alan Lomax. Also in north Mississippi, there is a fife and drum tradition that exists in the present. Musicians such as Othar Turner and their families were some of the last bastions of African Americans who played traditional fife and drum music. Although Othar Turner is deceased, his family continues to host an annual fife and drum picnic as well as play their music at various festivals in the area. Many of the earliest recordings of the fife and drum music from this region were recorded by renowned documentarian Alan Lomax.

Historically, black fiddlers and banjo players were a commonplace. This can be read in journals discussing travels to the South, seen in paintings portraying black fiddlers, and finally, heard in the music that has been passed down from one generation of fiddlers to the next. Music historian Charles Wolfe says that, “without much doubt, the fiddle was the favorite instrument of both white and black rural musicians in the nineteenth century.”⁶⁸ Music scholar

⁶⁷ Ferris, William, *Blues From the Delta*, 96-97.

⁶⁸ Wolfe, Charles, *Rural Black String Band Music*, 33.

Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. also remarks on how common instruments were for slave musicians. He writes:

African-American song- even the spiritual, in some cases- was accompanied by instruments, among which were some of African origin: banjo, musical saw, reed flutes, drums (where they were not prohibited), sticks or bones, and rattles of various kinds. Instruments were also used as timekeepers for dancing.⁶⁹

Furthermore, Floyd notes that the fiddle and banjo were “ubiquitous in slave culture.” While banjo and fiddle prototypes were common in 18th and 19th century Senegambian music, the violin was one of the instruments that was a European contribution to the slave music.⁷⁰ On the fiddle, slaves would entertain themselves and their masters with music to accompany dances such as the Georgia Shuffle and the Virginia Breakdown.⁷¹

This chapter discusses but a few of the documented black fiddlers. We are not fortunate enough to have sound recordings of all of them. Some are only mentioned in passing in interviews with other musicians, such as Mississippi John Hurt, who recounted playing with black fiddlers in his early days:

Oh, well, we had our dances. We called them square dances. Hands up four. Ten Gallons, of I don't know what you call these little dances, why they two steppin'...Well, sometimes durin' the square dance time, I would go to play for the dance and run into a fiddler. There'd be a fiddler there.

⁶⁹ Floyd Jr., Samuel A., *The Power of Black Music*, 52.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Never played with two fiddlers. Had one from Louisiana and one lived around Allen here. He was from out around Duck Hill...Saturday nights we just get together and play and sing. After we got together with fiddle and guitar, well, we played for our dances a whole lots and then those white people, they'd have us play for them too.⁷²

This may describe either Bea Anderson or George Hanks, two black fiddlers with whom Hurt reportedly played.⁷³ No recordings exist of either of the fiddlers. However, it is important that they are not left off of the already paltry record.

Compendium of the Black Fiddlers

Bea Anderson

Played with Mississippi John Hurt in the Avalon, Mississippi area. According to local accounts, he moved to Mississippi from Louisiana due to the boll weevil. He was also a mandolin player. In fact, most of the accounts of Anderson by other residents include him playing the mandolin. Another resident claimed that he also played a banjo. Anderson and John Hurt played parties together for both black and white audiences. During which, he apparently played the lead parts, as Hurt claimed, "oh I used to play guitar, I never did try to learn

⁷² Grossman, Stefan. "...Scrapin' the Heart and Knockin' Them Back." *Sing Out!* Vol. 39 #4. March/April, 1996. p. 54.

⁷³ Ratcliffe, Philip R., *Mississippi John Hurt: His Life, His Times, His Blues*, 74.

the pickin’.” Unfortunately, there are no known recordings of him playing. He is reported to have died in 1938.⁷⁴

George Hanks

Much like Bea Anderson, Hanks also played with Mississippi John Hurt. He was from Duck Hill, Mississippi, which is near Winona. In addition to the fact that there are no known recordings of Hanks, there are no other records of him in writing either, other than his brief treatment in Philip Ratcliffe’s 2011 book on Mississippi John Hurt.⁷⁵

Tom Dumas

Dumas was raised in Webster County, Mississippi outside of the hill town of Walthall. In a 1967 interview, he told documentarian Bill Ferris about playing fiddle and banjo for black square dances with his father. His fiddle, he claimed, was purchased from Andrew Jackson and passed down through generations of fiddlers from his family. He said that in 1897 he “took it up and learned on it.” He quit playing it in 1904. In 1922 he moved to the community of Tutwiler, a town in the Mississippi Delta with a substantially larger black population than the largely white Walthall. He claimed that his black neighbors in Tutwiler did not like fiddling and considered it to be music for white people.⁷⁶ Tutwiler is incidentally the same town where W.C. Handy said he heard the blues for the first time in 1903, so it is

⁷⁴ Ibid, 74-76.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 74.

⁷⁶ Ferris, William, *Blues From the Delta*, 96-97.

easy to understand the musical tastes and styles with the black community in the town.⁷⁷

Sid Hemphill

A north Mississippi multi-instrumentalist, Hemphill played the fiddle for documentarian Alan Lomax. What Lomax discovered in the Senatobia area was something he had not expected: an active community of African American musicians engaging in what he considered nineteenth century music, such as fiddle music, fife and drum bands, and quill playing. Hemphill was particularly interesting due to the fact that he played nearly every imaginable instrument that was played in these various styles of music. In fact, he had a smokehouse full of instruments.⁷⁸ Lomax recalls:

... tow sacks hung from the rafters, but instead of smoked hams and sides of country bacon and skins of sausage, they were stuffed with musical instruments – drums, fiddles, mandolins, guitars, fifes, and cane panpipes, well protected by the gunnysacking against the damp. Sid proudly opened the bags and poured out before me a rural instrumentarium, most of which he had crafted with his own hands.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Cobb, James C., *The Most Southern Place of Earth*, 277.

⁷⁸ Lomax, Alan, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 314-315.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 315.

Hemphill descended from a musical family. His father was a fiddler as well as six of his siblings.⁸⁰ From his father he learned many of the older square dance tunes and breakdowns. Therefore, he was versed in various styles of the American folk canon. He played some local tunes as well that dealt with subjects such as a lynching that had occurred in Panola County. Strangely enough, the tune was commissioned to Hemphill by one of the members of the lynch mob; later, other members of the mob would request that he play the tune for them.⁸¹ Considering that the culture of violence in Mississippi against African Americans was this out in the open, it is surprising that musicians such as Hemphill were even allowed to travel and play music freely.

Lonnie Chatmon

Hailing from the famous Chatmon family of musicians from Bolton, Mississippi, Lonnie was a fiddler as well as a singer. He can be heard playing with guitarist Walter Vinson on the majority of the Mississippi Sheiks recordings.⁸² Considering the success of the Mississippi Sheiks, his fiddling may comprise the bulk of black Mississippi fiddle playing. In addition to playing various styles of fiddle in the Sheiks' wide range of material, Lonnie Chatmon

⁸⁰ Ibid, 333-334.

⁸¹ Ibid, 323.

⁸² Russell, Tony, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, 55; Smith, Chris, *Liner Notes for Mississippi Sheiks: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1-4*.

was able to read music, which sets him apart from most of the Mississippi fiddlers, black or white.⁸³

Chatmon's style is very clean and melodically driven. His deliberate and clean phrasing, opposed to the scratchy sounds that characterize much of blues fiddling, may be indicative of some classical training. He was not a musician who relied on intricate melodies and an abundance of notes, but rather one who held long notes and let the melody drive the song. It is perhaps this popular music sensibility that led to the Mississippi Sheiks success. He died from heart disease in the early 1940s.⁸⁴

Henry "Son" Simms

One of the most notable of the blues fiddlers, Son Simms was born in Hinds County in 1891.⁸⁵ He was "discovered" by documentarian Alan Lomax while playing with Muddy Waters Stovall's Plantation in Coahoma County, MS outside Clarksdale. Simms had a group called the Son Simms Four, a string band comprised of two guitars, a mandolin, and Simms on the fiddle. The Son Simms Four backed up Muddy Waters when Lomax came back for a second round of recordings in 1942.⁸⁶

However, it is Simms' career as a fiddler before the Lomax recordings that may be most interesting. He learned to play from his grandfather, Warren Scott,

⁸³ Smith, Chris, *Liner Notes for Mississippi Sheiks: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1-4*.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Wardlow, Gayle Dean. "Henry 'Son' Simms: 'Farrell Blues Mama, Sho' Don't Worry Me.'" *78 Quarterly* 1 no. 9 (n.d.): 13.

⁸⁶ Filene, Benjamin, *Romancing the Folk*, 76-77.

who had been a slave fiddler. He also played the piano, bass, mandolin and guitar.⁸⁷ Growing up, he became acquainted with a young blues guitarist, Charley Patton. He actually played with Patton as early as 1910.⁸⁸ Together, the two played throughout the 1920s in Coahoma County at frolics and dances. They would play upbeat breakdowns, led by the driving fiddle of Simms.⁸⁹ After playing these local dances, in 1930, they went on to record upwards of 28 sides for the Paramount record label in Grafton, Wisconsin.⁹⁰ However, prior to recording with Patton, Simms had a black string band called the Mississippi Cornshuckers with a guitarist named Percy Thomas. He also incorporated mandolin player Louis Ford and dancer "Pitty Pat." The Cornshuckers played throughout the 1920s in the Delta.⁹¹ Eventually, they would be known as the "Son Simms Four" when they recorded for Alan Lomax in the 1940s.⁹²

Later, after Waters' career blossomed upon his move to Chicago, Simms made the move as well. In addition to being one of the earliest recorded blues fiddlers, he is also credited with being one of the first fiddlers to electrify the instrument.

Black and White Songsters

A songster is a musician who plays all sorts of music in both the folk and commercial folk capacity. They have an indefinable style circling around all things

⁸⁷ Wardlow, Gayle Dean, *Henry "Son" Simms*, 13.

⁸⁸ Hoffheimer, Michael, *Encyclopedia of the Blues: Mississippi Delta Fiddling*, 317.

⁸⁹ Wardlow, Gayle Dean, *Henry "Son" Simms*, 14.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 16.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 16-18.

⁹² Lomax, Alan, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 414-416.

folk. For the sake of simplicity, the term “songster” is used here to describe the amalgamation on pre-blues music, blues, ragtime, American folk, popular music, and any other style of music that cannot be neatly organized into strict categories. The music of the songster begins somewhere in minstrelsy and ends somewhere in jazz. As a point of pride, they were “able to provide the appropriate music for any situation.”⁹³ Songsters are an integral part to the study of fiddle music. This is due to the fact that several of the fiddlers from Mississippi played with songsters. In a sense, they were the meeting ground between black and white cultures, and race and hillbilly records. In Mississippi, Sam Chatmon is one of the most notable, due to his involvement with the Mississippi Sheiks, who featured fiddling in nearly all of their early recordings.

Mississippi John Hurt is also a primary musician whom to focus attention. He was located in Avalon, which is in Carroll County, Mississippi. Avalon is a particularly interesting area to study for Mississippi music as a whole. Geographically, Avalon is quite literally where the hills meet the delta. The small community is on the bluffs that overlook the seemingly endless flat lands of the Mississippi Delta.

This geographic location is as significant as the formidable bluffs in comparison to the plateau-like delta, particularly on a social level. The hills of north Mississippi are historically more heavily populated by people of white, or Anglo descent. The largest per capita populations of African-Americans live in the Delta counties. Therefore, blacks living in white dominated areas would be

⁹³ Coolen, Michael. 1991. Senegambian influences of Afro-American musical culture. *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 1:1-18. p 9.

theoretically more subject to white influence, while blacks in the Delta would have a stronger, or at least larger, population of black people to interact and share culture with. Black Mississippians living in the hills, such as John Hurt were surrounded by predominantly white neighbors. This is not to say that John Hurt played for more white people than Delta blacks, who may have made much of their money by playing for predominantly white audiences. However, what it does show us is that blacks living in predominantly white areas would have less black neighbors to interact with.

White Fiddlers

The white fiddlers of Mississippi span a broad spectrum of locations and backgrounds. Some were professionals who made money from playing fiddle on recordings or with string bands, while others simply played for the love of music or to entertain themselves and their friends and neighbors. Some of the earliest commercial fiddle music from Mississippi included Narmour and Smith, The Mississippi Possum Hunters, The Nations Brothers, Ray Brothers, Floyd Ming's Pep Steppers, Freeny's Barn Dance Band and the Leake County Revelers.

These are the white fiddlers who were recorded and therefore made music that can be analyzed. There were, no doubt countless others whose music and stories are forgotten. The echoes of their fiddles resonate no more and are lost to the deaf ears of time. It is unfortunate that the occasional interview and a few recordings are the only way many of the fiddlers from Mississippi are remembered. The rest of the fiddlers are left only to stories and anecdotes. It is through these recordings, however, that these fiddlers are now immortalized in

what was once the grooves of wax or acetate discs, but is now simply digital ones and zeroes on a compact disc or an MP3 player.

The majority of the fiddlers listed here were recorded by Herbert Halpert in 1939. They were not commercial fiddlers recorded by record labels, but rather the fiddlers who comprised the corpus of local and regional entertainers. Being a “recording” fiddle player is by no means indicative of skill level or ability. Many of the fiddlers Halpert was able to capture are as equally adept as any fiddler recorded for commercial records, regardless of origin. However, the average fiddler in a largely rural setting, such as Mississippi, was a farmer first and played fiddle to entertain himself and others. Fiddling was a way to make extra money or at least socialize and acquire free food and alcohol. This is a common theme with the black musicians as well. Music was a way to get off the farm and away from the backbreaking labor that accompanied it.

The other fiddlers were “commercial” fiddlers, in the sense that record companies recorded them. Other than that, they were the lucky ones, who had the good fortune of being recorded. In the 1920s there were musicians who made their income by performing, touring and recording. More often, musicians toured with other organized troupes, such as medicine shows and tent shows. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that these Mississippi string bands were largely regional stars who made some recordings, then they went back to their jobs.

The knowledge of Mississippi fiddle music could not be possible without recognizing one of its greatest contributors. Music scholar Tony Russell

conducted most of the research in this field of documenting early commercial string band music in Mississippi. Without his vast body of work on the subject, there would be almost nothing to study, so his contribution is priceless.

When describing Mississippi commercial recording fiddler Willie Narmour, music historian Charles Wolfe describes the lack of information, yet significant contribution Narmour made to early recorded fiddle music:

Willie Narmour, the fascinating Mississippi fiddler, well deserves a chapter to himself: his repertoire and style exemplified in tunes like “Charleston #1” and “Carroll County Blues,” are perhaps the most unusual and distinctive of all the fiddlers discussed here. But Narmour died in 1961, long before anyone was interested in interviewing him, and what is really known about him and his music could be fitted onto one page.⁹⁴

Wolfe also refers to “the Mississippian W.E. Claunch, whose work is preserved on a series of small discs for the Library of Congress,” in a string of fiddlers, all of whom he lamented as being “great traditional fiddlers, who for various reasons, did not commercially record or forge a career in radio.”⁹⁵

These fiddlers and their various styles run the gamut of Anglo old time, pre blues, and blues, as well as some of the more popular styles of the time. One characteristic of the Mississippi fiddlers that sets them apart from other regional fiddlers is straw beating. Straw beating is accomplished by someone tapping the

⁹⁴ Wolfe, Charles, *The Devil's Box*, xxii.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, xxii.

fiddle strings while the fiddler plays as usual. There are other instances of straw beating in American fiddle music. However, the concentration of straw beating in Mississippi was unique in 1939, when Herbert Halpert witnessed the practice on his field recording tour.

Much like the field-recorded fiddler, even the commercially recorded fiddlers usually had another job in order to support their families. This was typically farming. It is the socioeconomic bonds that tie these fiddlers along with their black-fiddling neighbors together. As Bill Malone stated, “the South... was a folk culture. And while the reliance on the familiar was a trait that cut across social and economic lines, it was the strongest among the poorer classes, black and white.”⁹⁶ For many of these musicians, music was a way to make additional income.

Compendium of the White Fiddlers

W.A. Bledsoe

Originally from Lincoln County, Tennessee, Bledsoe was recorded in 1939 by Halpert when he was living in Meridian, Mississippi working as a Deputy Clerk. He began playing when he was only 10 or 12 years old, by sneaking his father’s fiddle out to practice while his father was at work. He said that it was not too long before he “could play just about as good as he could.” The tunes that ended up on *Great Big Yam Potatoes* are “Big Footed Nigger in the Sandy Lot” and “Farewell to Mary Ann.” The former tune he said he learned from his father,

⁹⁶ Malone, Bill C., *Country Music U.S.A.*, 3.

while the later was claimed to be taught by an uncle, both while he was younger in Tennessee.⁹⁷

John Alexander Brown

Brown was born in Itawamba County, Mississippi in 1872. Around the turn of the 20th century, he moved to luka, in Tishomingo County, in northeastern Mississippi. Like most of the other fiddlers, he learned the craft from his father. However, unlike other fiddlers, Brown did not play at rowdy parties where there was excessive drinking going on. He did play at dance parties in the luka area and was compensated for his efforts.⁹⁸

Of the many fiddlers Halpert recorded in Mississippi, he was perhaps one of the most enigmatic and interesting. With a long beard and a gentle obliging demeanor, he enchanted Halpert and Ferris. In the *Great Big Yam Potatoes* liner notes, it states that Brown was out working when the sound truck arrived. Afterwards, he said that he needed to get back home to work because he left his ox team out in the field.

Enos Canoy

Recorded by Halpert in Magee, Mississippi, in Simpson County. He is a special instance, because he was recorded with his family band, billed as the Canoy Band. They were regular performers in south Mississippi, playing at schools, political rallies, town fairs and dances. They would be considered a

⁹⁷ Rankin, Tom, and Gary Stanton. *The Fiddlers and the Tunes*. 10-11.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 8-9.

working band, which is an interesting dynamic for the demographic of musician Halpert intended to seek out.

Canoy learned to fiddle from his uncle, Love Kennedy, and fellow Simpson County musician, Robert Runnels. Like most others, Canoy was a farmer in 1939 who was sharecropping when he was recorded.⁹⁹

Andrew Carter

Andrew Carter was one of the fiddlers from the commercially recorded Carter Brothers and Son. They were one of the first family bands to record, making their debut in 1928.¹⁰⁰ Carter Brothers and Son featured the fiddle and vocals of George Carter with Andrew playing the fiddle and George's son, Jimmie, playing guitar. According to Jimmie Carter in an interview by music scholar Tony Russell, Andrew Carter was more of a violinist than a fiddler, who preferred to play waltzes and songs as opposed to breakdowns. This would most likely indicate some degree of formal training. He also noted that Andrew was the real singer between the brothers, and that the only reason George ended up singing on the recordings was due to the fact that the "lil' old microphone wouldn't take his voice at all," which suggests that he did in fact have a powerful singing voice.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ibid, 10-11.

¹⁰⁰ Russell, Tony, *20 Days in Mississippi*, 10.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 10.

George Carter

The brother of Andrew Carter, George Carter was born in November of 1867.¹⁰² Therefore at the time he recorded, which was in 1928, he would have been approximately 60 years old. George Carter's fiddling style could have been indicative of the turn of the century and all of the various musical styles that were coming into fruition, such as blues, ragtime and jazz. He taught his son Jimmie to play guitar when the boy was seven years old. George Carter died on September 8, 1946.

W.E. Claunch

Claunch was from Guntown, Mississippi, in Lee County and lived from 1884 to 1958. Claunch was recorded by Halpert and Ferris on May 10, 1939. He performed with his daughter, Christine Hagood, who accompanied him on guitar. In addition to playing fiddle, he also played piano, guitar, mandolin, banjo and the harmonica. In a later interview, his daughter Christine recalled playing with the extended family on a monthly and sometimes, weekly basis. She remarked that it was "one of the happiest memories" of her life.

Fiddle music was also a long standing tradition in the Claunch family. W.E. told Abbott Ferris in 1939 that "every Claunch there ever was could play." Like most of the fiddlers in Mississippi, he was by trade a farmer. Claunch, however, was slightly different from many of the others because he owned, rather than

¹⁰² Ibid., 9.

leased his land. His public performances included a theatre in Baldwin, Mississippi, where he played out front in order to draw a crowd for the new movies. He also claimed that he had “trooped” with a “circus.” Until his death in 1958, he was a regular performer in the community and shared his music with others eager to learn and listen.¹⁰³

Lonnie Ellis

Lonnie Ellis was born in 1895 in the community of Friendship, Mississippi, which is about 20 miles from the town of Winona. He was a member of the commercial recording group, The Mississippi Possum Hunters. This was one of the groups that was discovered by Doc Bailey, the local talent scout in Winona, and subsequently offered a recording opportunity. Much like many of the other fiddlers, Ellis was born into a family of musicians, with a father that fiddled, as well as four brothers who were musicians.¹⁰⁴

Leslie Freeny

The primary fiddler for Freeny’s Barn Dance Band, Leslie Freeny played with guitarist A.F. “Fonzo” Cannon. They started the band as early as 1913 in order to play for square dances. He was from a large community of Freenys, which was located about five miles outside of Carthage, Mississippi. Carthage is located in the central part of the state, Northeast of Jackson.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Rankin, Tom, and Gary Stanton. *The Fiddlers and the Tunes*, 5-7.

¹⁰⁴ Russell, Tony. *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 20.

¹⁰⁵ Russell, Tony, *The Freeny Story*, 15.

They were one of the bands recorded by record store owner H.C. Speir, who is most notably famous as a talent agent for the blues musicians. Guitarist A.F. Cannon reached out to Speir, who in turn, recorded the band for the Okeh label on December 16, 1930 in Jackson at the King Edward Hotel.¹⁰⁶

As the band's name would indicate, the majority of the tunes they recorded that day are dance tunes. Another version of a Freeny band was Freeny's Harmonizers, which did not include Leslie Freeny, but rather another fiddler named Ira Ellis.¹⁰⁷

Will Gilmer

Will Gilmer was the fiddler for the Leake County Revelers. According to Tony Russell, the Leake County Revelers were the most popular of all the Mississippi String Bands. They recorded 22 records, starting in April 1927 and ending in 1930. They were another band that was scouted by the Jackson, Mississippi record store owner, H.C. Speir.¹⁰⁸

As a string band in the 1920s and 1930s, the Revelers had shows that incorporated several acts into their shows. For instance, Gilmer, in addition to fiddling, also did a blackface comedy routine. The other guys in the band would also do comedy sketches, with characters such as a clown.¹⁰⁹

According to Russell, there are regional stories about Will Gilmer that portray the fiddler as an eccentric character with a habit for practical jokes, such

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁸ Russell, Tony, *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 26.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 27.

as stealing a billfold out of a man's pocket with a vacuum. Another story involves setting a cat on fire and letting it loose in a store in order to persuade the owner to cease the repeated playing of a certain record.¹¹⁰ Regardless of any truth, memory considers Will Gilmer to be one of the crazy, colorful fiddlers that fulfill the reputation for bizarre antics and a wild lifestyle.

John Hatcher

A contemporary of John Alexander Brown, Hatcher was also a Tishomingo County fiddler. He was from outside the small town of Burnsville, Mississippi. He was a regular at the dances and various fiddle contests in the area, which included one in Corinth, Mississippi. He also traveled to Sheffield, Alabama to play in contests as well as Jackson, Tennessee to play on a weekly radio show with his band, the Tishomingo County Jamboree Boys. Hatcher, in addition to being a farmer and wood hauler, made some of his income playing fiddle. This is a common story when studying these local fiddlers.

Of all the fiddlers recorded by Halpert and Ferris, Hatcher played some of the more interesting music. When studying Mississippi fiddle music, many common tunes are recycled by the various fiddlers. Hatcher, on the other hand, played an original tune "Tishomingo County Blues" as well as the obscure and aurally enchanting, if not to mention, expertly played, "Going Up to Hamburg." He claimed the tune was learned from Henry McGaughy and Jim Taylor, who were also from the Burnsville area. The song refers to the small town right across the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

Tennessee border (one still goes through Hamburg on Mississippi HWY 7, going toward Jackson, Tennessee).¹¹¹ The way he plays “Tishomingo County Blues” would indicate a diligent understanding of the blues idiom.

John Holloway

Like Lonnie Ellis, John Holloway was also a member of the Mississippi Possum Hunters. There is less of a historical record on Holloway, but what is known is that he was older than Ellis, which would indicate a birth date prior to 1895.¹¹²

Frank Kittrell

The Kittrells played for Halpert in 1939 like many of the other fiddlers. However, they utilized straw beating in their recordings, which is rarely heard in modern times. Straw beating involves one person playing the fiddle, while another person creates rhythmic accompaniment by playing straws and creating a drone on the lowest pitched string while the melody is played on the higher pitched strings. Frank Kittrell had worked as a sharecropper and had cut timber, but in 1939 was working for the WPA sponsored College Beautification Project.

Frank learned to play from his uncles as well as from attending dances and witnessing the music in motion. Likewise, he continued to take his music into the community in the 1940s and 1950s. He claimed to play with seven different

¹¹¹ Rankin, Tom and Abbott Ferris, Liner Notes, 7-8.

¹¹² Russell, Tony. *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 20.

bands until his death in 1953, which could help demonstrate the popularity of string bands in Mississippi at this time.¹¹³

Charles Long

Although Long was a native of Choctaw County, Alabama, where he was born in 1869, in 1939 he was living in Clarke County, Mississippi, near Quitman, where he had been for at least three decades. The *Great Big Yam Potatoes* liner notes make no indications that he learned from anyone in his family, which is unlike most of the other fiddlers in the compilation.

Long was one of the other fiddlers who had straw beating (by Sam Neal) to accompany him. He indicated that it was standard to have two things when he performed at a dance, “whiskey and a chair.” The presence of straw beating again suggests that it was common knowledge and practice to do so. Straw beating is not unique to Mississippi, but seems to have been utilized widely, especially at times when accompanying musicians were not available (or affordable).¹¹⁴

Avis Massengale

As a member of the Newton County Hillbillies, Avis Massengale recorded six tracks on December 16, 1930. He followed in the footsteps of both his father and grandfather, who were old time fiddlers as well. Massengale continued

¹¹³ Ibid, 9-10.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 13-14.

fiddling throughout his life and attended the 1975 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife as a performer.¹¹⁵

Hoyt Ming

The music of Hoyt Ming and His Pep Steppers is quite unique. Ming, who was born in Choctaw County, Mississippi on October 6, 1902, was not one of the older fiddlers to be recorded in the late 1920s.¹¹⁶ In fact, this would have made him one of the younger fiddlers. He was from a family of musicians and had several brothers that played musical instruments.

The original recordings of Hoyt Ming and His Pep Steppers were made in Memphis, Tennessee on February 13, 1928 for Ralph Peer of the Victor Recording Company. This recording demonstrated the family element of fiddle music as it featured his wife, Rozelle Ming, playing guitar and his brother, Troy Ming, playing the mandolin. One of the more unique features of these recordings are the rhythmic foot stomping of Rozelle Ming, which also lent the band its name.¹¹⁷

Jim Myers

Myers was born in 1901. Also recorded in Magee, Mississippi, Jim Myers can be heard beating straws with Enos Canoy. He played with Enos Canoy's band from time to time. He learned to play fiddle from what he claimed to be a

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 41.

¹¹⁶ Russell, Tony, *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

cousin. He said “I learned to play when I was small, about nine years old. Well, I had a cousin that worked for Dad, made his home with Mother and Dad on the farm. He was an orphan boy. And I- he played fiddle- I took a notion I wanted to fiddle.”

From this interview, it is not clear whether the cousin was related and brought in by the family after being orphaned or a non-related orphan brought in that he referred to as his “cousin.” Nevertheless, he was taught by this cousin of mysterious background to play the fiddle. Only one piece he played, “Old Field Rabbit,” was included in the *Great Big Yams* recording. The liner notes suggest that it is “evidently a song in the Afro-American tradition.”¹¹⁸

Willie Narmour

From Carroll County, Mississippi, Narmour resided in the town of Avalon. He played with guitarist Shel Smith, forming the fiddle/guitar duet Narmour and Smith. They were most notably known for their recording of the instrumental piece, “Carroll County Blues.” Narmour is also credited as a contemporary of the famous Mississippi John Hurt. It is said that Narmour was responsible for letting the record companies know about Hurt, who in turn went on to recording several sides.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 12.

Sheldon Nations

Sheldon Nations was the fiddler for the duet The Nations Brothers that recorded commercially in 1935. He and his brother Marshall, who played guitar, recorded in Jackson, Mississippi. They recorded ten songs that day, which was October 13.¹¹⁹

The Nations Brothers recordings are unique for two reasons. The first is the date. 1935 was not a typical time for an unknown group to make its debut recording. By 1935, most of the recording artists had been dropped by the record labels if they were not high volume sellers. Therefore, it was a rare occasion for a group to be making its first recording. Secondly, they played three blues fiddle tunes, or at least tunes that had blues in the title.¹²⁰ Considering the fact that they only recorded ten tunes that day, it is notable that three of those mentioned the blues.

William E. Ray

William E. Ray was a member of another brother duet, The Ray Brothers. The brothers were from Choctaw County Mississippi. They recorded ten songs in Memphis in 1930. The songs, however, were recorded on two separate dates: May 28 and November 21.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Russell, Tony. *Mississippi String Bands 2: The Nations Brothers*, 1-2.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

¹²¹ Tony Russell. *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 41-42.

Stephen B. Tucker

As perhaps the oldest fiddler ever recorded from Mississippi, Tucker provides insight into the fiddle music of the 19th Century. He was taught the fiddle from one of his brothers, who was a Civil War veteran.

This is particularly interesting, because the Civil War was a time for young men of all ages from across the South, not to mention the country, and share ideas as well as music. His brother was a veteran of this war, so he would have theoretically learned tunes while he was in the service. Therefore, Tucker's fiddle tunes could be the product of Civil War collaboration.

Like many of the other Mississippi fiddlers, he had played while accompanied by straws, but did not prefer that accompaniment. Likewise, Tucker had played for local ears throughout the years at picnics, frolics, dances and with local bands. Furthermore, he had competed in, and won, various fiddle contests. His explanation for winning: "I was the oldest and ugliest man."¹²²

Hardy Sharp

Born in 1884 in Newton County, Mississippi, Sharp was recorded in Meridian. He claimed that he learned to play on his older brother's fiddle by watching older fiddlers in the area play.

He played on the radio with a group called "The Old Time Fiddlers" in Meridian. This is a detail that should be emphasized. The fact that his band was called "Old Time" reiterates the perception of this music. When considering the

¹²² Ibid, 12-13.

chronology, these songs were considered old in 1939 and they were likewise considered old way before then.¹²³

¹²³ Ibid, 14-15.

CHAPTER 4:
WHITE BLUES FIDDLE

“Negro entered the white man as profoundly as the white man entered the Negro- subtly influencing every gesture, every word, every emotion and idea, every attitude.”

–W.J. Cash

The white blues tradition is most likely as old, or nearly as old, as the black blues tradition. White musicians have been appropriating black music since the first slaves were brought to the New World and brought their music with them. Likewise, it is generally agreed upon that the blues is influenced by white music. The blues, therefore, is a synthesis of borrowing, taking and giving. What most scholars would consider country music borrows from black music.¹²⁴

Jimmie Rogers, a Mississippian and the first country star, borrowed heavily from the black musicians he worked alongside on the railroads. Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music, attributes much of his music to the black musician he played with as a child. Many of the other early country stars, such as Uncle Dave Macon, got their start imitating black musicians in minstrel shows, vaudeville and other Jim Crow era entertainment. The Columbus, Georgia duet, Darby and

¹²⁴ Malone, Bill C., *Country Music U.S.A.*, 5; Russell, Tony, *Blacks, Whites and Blues*, 9. Malone and Russell both state that there was very little separation of white and black music and culture in the South. They indicate that it is this interchange of ideas that gives Southern music much of its unique appeal.

Tarlton was also popular in this time with their song “Columbus Stockade Blues.” The bluesy slurs of the resonator steel guitar highlight their sound.¹²⁵

One of the most influential white blues performers was Jimmie Rogers from Meridian, Mississippi. He spent the early part of his life laboring as a railroad worker. As a white man, he was introduced to the music of his black contemporaries. They no doubt had railroad chants, which could have sounded like other work songs of the day. Dating back to the antebellum period, there were work songs, ring shouts and, later, spirituals. These work songs are indicative of African American music from this era. Blues scholar Bill Ferris states that “work songs are a common part of black culture in both West Africa and the New World and are used to coordinate groups of laborers.”¹²⁶ Rogers would have heard and perhaps participated in this music with his fellow workers. Furthermore, working on a railroad would have provided more mobility than the average person. Railroad workers could travel and be exposed to different places around the country. Different work camps could be spheres of new material and a location for exchange. Much of this interaction built and contributed to his canon of music, which included classic American folk songs as well as the recently developed blues idiom. The music of Jimmie Rogers is simply an avenue for understanding this interaction. Bill Malone writes:

In the four hundred years that have passed, white musicians have continually drawn on black sources for rejuvenation and sustenance.

¹²⁵ Russell, Tony. *Blacks, Whites and Blues*, 59-77.

¹²⁶ Ferris, William, *Blues from the Delta*, 31-36. Ferris said that work songs were a means of “pacing” work in the days before mechanization. He also states that the “parallels between verses of blues and work songs suggest the two forms are closely related.”

Anywhere that blacks and whites mingled in the United States, in field, factory, or mine, on railroad section gangs, in juke joints or taverns, at camp meetings or in church, at county fairs or on street corners, the potential existed for mutual cultural transmission.¹²⁷

He wrote and preformed a considerable number of tunes that were to become popular music sensations of the time. He was, in essence, America's first country star. Furthermore, he was a popular music star of the time. He and other performers, such as the Carter Family, intrigued America's listening ears on radio waves.¹²⁸

Perhaps one of the more original musical ideas that Rogers contributed was the blue yodel. This is a seemingly bizarre combination of blues, European yodeling, and country. Yodeling was heard in the traveling shows that traveled the nation. These early tent shows were like modern day television variety shows with circus performers, blackface minstrelsy, popular musicians, strange performers from around the world, and anything else imaginable. There were Tyrolese yodelers that were heard by minstrel performers, as well as other early country and blues performers.¹²⁹ In turn, Rogers incorporated these yodels into country and blues music seamlessly. It feels strangely natural when it is heard. This blue yodeling has found its way into the bluegrass music of Bill Monroe and,

¹²⁷ Malone, Bill, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 77-91. Malone states, "no other hillbilly star of the twenties rivaled Rogers in popularity. He was one of the few country performers to receive any notice in the major trade publications, and his records, which sold more widely than those of any other hillbilly, exceeded the sales of most pop performers in the Victor catalogue," 84.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 87.

even into the popular sounds of the 1960s and 1970s Americana-rock band, The Band, in their hit song “Cripple Creek” (which is also the name of a classic American folk song)¹³⁰. Therefore, one can see how Alp yodeling made its way into other forms of music, and how early country and blues music was not just a one-dimensional folk process, but instead a global exchange of music and ideas.

What was the draw for white performers to play blues music? Why would they go against all societal norms and cross the threshold of the color line? Maybe blues music appealed to their pocketbooks in the sense that it was a more profitable genre than “hillbilly” performances. Or, perhaps, they were drawn to the sound and the feel of blues music.¹³¹ The list could go on and the answers are most likely as diverse as the performers themselves. Oftentimes, it is the intent of scholars to categorize and lump people together. However, when it comes to music, individual expression and intent must always be considered, even at the expense of forming paradigmatic constructs. Regardless of the reason that white musicians began appropriating the music of their black contemporaries, the fact remains that they did borrow, and heavily at that.

The South’s white fiddlers were no different. This is especially true in Mississippi. This likely began with the Narmour and Smith recording of “Carroll

¹³⁰ Monroe yodels in several songs. An example of a blues yodel can be found in his rendition on “In the Pines,” where there is a bluesy harmonized yodel for the chorus.

¹³¹ Several music history scholars have addressed this phenomenon of white appropriation of the blues. Bill Malone, Tony Russell, and Bill Ferris are a few of these. There seems to be no clear catch-all to lump musicians in. Money and stylistic preference are two of the answers that seem to be recurring.

County Blues,” on March 11, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia.¹³² Narmour and Smith was a white fiddle/guitar duo hailing from Avalon, MS. Avalon is also home to famed black songster Mississippi John Hurt. There are many stories regarding how the duo came to pen the “original” tune released on Okeh Records in 1929. One story is that Narmour heard the tune from a black farmhand who was whistling the tune. After hearing the tune he composed it on the fiddle. The other theory about “Carroll County Blues” is that Narmour heard it from a white farmer under the guidance of the Winona veterinarian and music promoter, Doc Bailey. Bailey was responsible for much of the music in the area, including hosting a fiddle contest. Lastly, many residents in the Avalon area attribute the tune to an older fiddler named Gene Clardy. Several years his senior, Clardy was one of the musicians who taught Narmour how to fiddle.¹³³ He actually recorded four sides of his own, not including “Carroll County Blues.” Clardy died after being stabbed to death at a mid-1930s dance.¹³⁴ While the origins of the tune remain unclear, we know without dispute that it was a popular tune to play locally. In fact, many musicians continue to play “Carroll County Blues” in contemporary times. It is one of the most well known of the early commercial Mississippi fiddle recordings.

¹³² Wells, Paul F., *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1/2 (Spring – Autumn, 2003), 135-147. Wells writes that this was a “very popular and influential recording,” (144). He does not indicate whether or not this was the first white blues fiddle recording; however the early date on which it was recorded would indicate that it would have definitely been *one* of the first of its kind, if not *the* first.

¹³³ Ratcliffe, Philip R., *Mississippi John Hurt: His Life, His Times, His Blues*, 75. Ratcliffe also includes in his notes that, “Gene Clardy and Stan Clements recorded four titles for Vocalion in Memphis on February 18, 1930” (277).

¹³⁴ Russell, Tony, *Country Music Records*, 112-113.

Once “Carroll County Blues” had been recorded with relative success, other musicians followed suit to pay homage to their respective counties by way of the blues fiddle. The Leake County Revelers recorded “Leake County Blues,” and the Nations Brothers played “Lincoln County Blues.”¹³⁵ John Hatcher, a fiddler from Iuka, Mississippi, recorded “Tishomingo County Blues” as a field recording by Herbert Halpert. According to Hatcher, a man named Jim Henry Boley, a Tishomingo County fiddler who did not record in any capacity, had composed his own tune titled “Lee County Blues.”¹³⁶ This phenomenon of blues fiddle tunes, all similarly titled, can tell us two things about Mississippi fiddle music. First, Mississippi was by no means a state of isolated rural places. There were roads and many forms of communication as well as interchange between musicians. The advent of the radio on rural populations can never be underestimated, as it provided a portal to the rest of the world and society at large. Before radio, phonograph record players were available to anyone willing to spend the extra money. Many scholars have noted the significance of both the phonograph and radio on rural areas.¹³⁷ These hamlets, once isolated, were in step with the rest of the country and even the world as ideas were spread and the gradual increase in homogenization of popular culture arose. Jeff Titon

¹³⁵ “Leake County Blues” was not recorded, but documented in the Liner Notes of *Great Big Yam Potatoes*.

¹³⁶ Rankin, Tom. Liner Notes: “Documenting a People’s Music,” *Great Big Yam Potatoes: Anglo American Fiddle Music from Mississippi*. Miss. Dept. of Archives and History, 1985. AH-002.

¹³⁷ Campbell, Gavin, *Music and the Making of the New South*, 135; Wolfe, Charles, *The Devil’s Box*, xx; Titon, Jeff Todd, *Early Downhome Blues*, 43. All of these scholars recognize the influence of radio and recorded music on other musicians in vastly different cultural and geographical regions.

writes, "Once blues records became available in the 1920s, guitarists familiar with the idiom could learn from them."¹³⁸ Therefore, locale of a fiddler was made moot because they could listen from anywhere they could take a radio. Likewise, once a person had access to the radio, he or she had access to the world.

Secondly, these "county" blues titles suggest that the blues was a style popular enough to both races to be deemed worthy for a basis of performing or composing. Rather than dismiss blues on the basis of white racial identity, white audiences embraced the genre, at least for commercial reasons. This is a stark contrast to the ideas held by such Americans as Henry Ford, who promoted fiddle contests to help promote white identity and solidarity. He believed that the popular music of the time, which was largely created by black and Jewish musicians and songwriters, was "perverting the nation's moral standards."¹³⁹

Using white blues fiddle music as an example of Anglo/Afro musical synthesis is enough to demonstrate the strength of interracial musical exchange. In fact, some scholars maintain that fiddle music is one of the strongest aspects of black/white musical exchange.¹⁴⁰ Simply stated, fiddle music as an avenue to understand black and white musical exchange is multifaceted. According to Paul Wells, it is the earliest exchange of musical ideas:

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

¹³⁸ Titon, Jeff Todd, *Early Downhome Blues*, 43.

¹³⁹ Campbell, Gavin, *Music and the Making of the New South*, 135.

¹⁴⁰ Wells, Paul. *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 23, 135-147.

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 throughout the fabric of southern American vernacular music, affecting a diverse range of musical genres, popular as well as folk.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, the syncopated rhythms of old time fiddle music are largely attributed to African roots. According to Gerald Milnes, it utilizes “African and European rhythmic, melodic, and vocal traditions, while using melodic forms that display Celtic, Anglo, Germanic, and African emotion and influence.”¹⁴² Therefore, a global understanding of old time music is more appropriate than the worn notion that it is a continuation of an Anglo/Scots/Irish, trans-Atlantic tradition.

The blues component of MS fiddle music, black or white, is the one that may set it apart from other regional styles around the country. In the *Great Big Yam Potatoes* liner notes, Tom Sauber addresses this issue. He believes that the “blues and idiosyncratic pieces” should not mislead listeners into “thinking that they are representative of all Mississippi fiddling.”¹⁴³ He is certainly correct in this line of thinking; the scant number of recordings should in no way serve as a blanket for Mississippi fiddle music as a whole. However, it is important to

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 136.

¹⁴² Milnes, Gerald. *Play of a Fiddle*, 7.

¹⁴³ Sauber, Tom. *Fiddling Style in Mississippi*.

remember that the “blues and idiosyncratic” tunes are what set some Mississippi fiddle players apart from other regional fiddlers.

The blues is one of the unfortunate cultural gifts resulting from an oppressed group of people. The black freedmen (and freed-women) suffered intolerable disgraces at the expense of their white neighbors’ financial and political gain. Through this misfortune came a new burgeoning music: the blues.¹⁴⁴ This new style of music was then appropriated by both black and white in both rural and metropolitan settings.¹⁴⁵ It is this give and take of music and culture that defines much of what it is to be southern. Given the depth of Mississippi’s blues tradition, it is no wonder that these exchanges came to be.

In an interview with Tony Russell, Hoyt Ming (of Hoyt Ming and His Pep Steppers) addressed the blues in Mississippi fiddling. Interestingly, he also notes how many of the “blues” tunes had no indication that they were blues in anything other than title:

A blues is a kind of a- I call it sort of lonesome- there’s another name for it, kind of a haunting sort of a little.... Like a fellow say “blue, down and out” – you know, they have a little different sound music from others. And I think that’s where they get it- you know, the time back in the war days and all, during the 1918, they were going off to the war and things were kind of blue and so on, and they just began to put out pieces called the blues. Say if you’re off somewhere, way away from home, get lonesome, and you

¹⁴⁴ Cobb, James C., *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 277-279.

¹⁴⁵ Russell, Tony, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, 102.

write a song, it'll have a blues, like, kind of, 'cause you're blue you know. And they fix a song that way, go to singing it, they'll call it a "blues" and it'll be a different type, come under a different name. But when it got started, why, it just began to spread, you know. And of course all the blues didn't sound alike. Maybe some of the blues didn't sound so haunting or lonesome like. But it became so popular that some of the would name it the blues anyway. So that's a whole lot the way the blues got started.¹⁴⁶

In a recent interview, Mississippi native and acclaimed country music star, Marty Stuart, also addresses this phenomenon:

Well, when I was starting to play, my grandpa Stuart was an old time fiddle player. His name was Levi Lincoln Stuart. And I went down to his house, I think in 1974, and was about 14 years old, and recorded him. And he was getting pretty old and he was pretty scratchy, but you could see into how he played. And he spoke of an old Choctaw fiddler, and he just called him Old Mosely, from around Neshoba County somewhere that he listened to as a boy coming up. And if you go on You Tube, I think it's called Marty Stuart in Philadelphia, MS. It's a little documentary and it's got recordings of my grandpa playing. There's that, and when I first got serious about playing there was a gospel bluegrass band in my town called the Paige

¹⁴⁶ Russell, Tony, *Ten Days in Mississippi*, 16.

Family Gospel Singers. And the banjo player, leader of the band was called Marzell, M.A.R.Z.E.L.L. Paige. His wife was called Audine. And Marzell's brother, they called him Doc Paige. He lived down around Hinds County, I think. And Doc Paige was an old time such fiddle player. He was rough and raw, but had a good soul about his playing. And the thing that comes to me as a 12 year old kid living in the early 70's thinking about playing bluegrass in the state of Mississippi, you could round up the whole bluegrass and old time community and put them in your car. In the whole state there just weren't that many people involved in it. And up in Winston County there was a fellow named Lethel Jackson. L.E.T.H.E.L, and he's still alive. His son is named Carl Jackson, kind of a banjo whiz. And Lethel had a pretty good handle on old time and bluegrass fiddle playing. And the thing that I've noticed about what little there is to listen to those fellows is, and I think the best representation of the proponents of, kind of the next generation, there's a fellow over on the edge of Alabama named Jim Brock. He is a great Southern fiddle player. Up in North Mississippi there was Red Taylor. The fellow who played with Jerry Lee Lewis, still does, is named Kenny Lovelace. And on Jerry Lee's country recordings, Kenny plays the fiddle, he's an Alabama guy. But still, the thing about every one of those fiddle players that we talked about in the past 3 or 4 minutes have in common is that Southern blues feel to it that I did not feel in Appalachian fiddle players or, you know, the Western fiddle players on the other side of the Mississippi River. And there was a Southern, there was a

bluesy echo, whether they were playing a breakdown tune, or a singing piece, or a waltz. The blues was the thing that set the Mississippi fiddle players apart, in my opinion.¹⁴⁷

Both Ming and Stuart have differing attitudes toward the usage of blues expression in Mississippi fiddle music. Ming points out that the term blues was often used incorrectly. Stuart notes how the blues seems to regularly inhabit the fiddle music of the state. Regardless of any agenda, clearly, there is a common thread that seems to bind the Mississippi fiddlers: the blues.

Breakdown and Comparison of White MS Blues Fiddle Tunes

The purpose of breaking the tunes down and analyzing their basic structure and overall tendencies to be bluesy or not is twofold - to demonstrate an understanding of the blues elements in fiddle tunes from both a musical and marketing standpoint. Some of the tunes are rather bluesy in nature, while some have no quality of the blues at all. The tunes to be analyzed are as follows:

1. "Avalon Blues" Narmour and Smith
2. "Bankhead Blues" Nations Brothers
3. "Carroll County Blues" Narmour and Smith
4. "Dry Town Blues" Leake County Revelers

¹⁴⁷ Interview with author, October, 11, 2011.

5. "Leake County Blues" Leake County Revelers
6. "Lee County Blues" Jim Henry Boley (not recorded- see John Hatcher Liner Notes)
7. "Limber Neck Blues" Narmour and Smith
8. "Lincoln County Blues" Nations Brothers
9. "Lonesome Blues" Leake County Revelers
10. "Railroad Blues" Nations Brothers
11. "Tequila Hop Blues" Narmour and Smith
12. "Tishomingo County Blues" John Hatcher
13. "Thirty First Street Blues" Leake County Revelers
14. "Traveling Blues" Freeny's Harmonizers
15. "Tupelo Blues" Floyd Ming's Pep Steppers

Fiddle music, just like classical music, has its own language of esoteric terms. One such array of terms is a reference to "parts." These tunes are broken down into various parts, such as A, B and C. These parts refer to the different parts of the melody. For instance, the "A" part might be played for four measures, then the "B" part will be played for four measures. After the "B" part has been played, the fiddler will play the "A" part again. In this regard, fiddle tunes are repetitive. However, many fiddlers improvise and play variations of the melody with each passing part. Therefore, it may not be possible to dictate a precise version of a particular part.

Parts can be thought of in terms of rhyme schemes in a poem, or the way a pop song may have a repetitive chorus with differently worded verses that sound similar. For example, the children's song, "Row, Row, Row, Your Boat," can be broken down into parts:

A Part: Row, Row, Row Your Boat / Gently down the stream

B Part: Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily / Life is but a dream

Fiddle tunes commonly arranged in this way, where an A part is a verse and a B part is a chorus. Many of these fiddle tunes follow this logic. Some of them do not and tend to have a free flowing quality. This could be due to several reasons. Perhaps the tune needs a mixing of parts to have a proper flow of sound. Or, perhaps the musicians were nervous and just played anxiously to get through the recordings. Whatever the reason, some of the fiddle tunes represented here are more difficult to follow than others on a structural basis.

Attempting to describe what some might call the bluesiness of a particular work of music involves several factors. One of the most important would be the notes of the musical scale that can make a song elicit a blues feel. Most notably, these are the third and seventh tones of the scale. A major scale is the do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do. The "dos" are the first and last notes in the scale. Therefore, the "mi" and "ti" are the third and seventh tones. In the blues scale, these two tones would be flattened one tone. This is not to say that all blues have these flattened

thirds and sevenths. However, it is a recurring theme of blues music.¹⁴⁸ Often, these flattened thirds and sevenths are played over or in conjunction with major tones. It is this contrast that may give a particular melody a “blues” feel or sound.

Another aspect of blues that is important for this study is the drone. This is where many musicologists could disagree. When describing fiddle music, a drone effect could be attributed to the Anglo aspect of music such as the bagpipes. Conversely, when explaining blues music, the African element could be exploited. Both of these explanations have merit and foundation. However, the drone is found in all styles of music across the globe. It can be heard in Indian classical music. The Australian didgeridoo drones as well as the hurdy gurdy. Tuvian throat singing and Gregorian chant music both have beautiful drone-like qualities. Therefore, it is important to consider that the sound of the drone is an innate human musical element.

This chapter analyzes the use in these recordings of blue notes as well as the drone. Furthermore, the rhythm is addressed because it can affect the blues element of a piece of music as well. A fast paced rhythm would tend to downplay the bluesy nature of a melody and give it more of a “dance” feel. Most of the rhythms here are in a 4/4 time signature. There is a certain back-step or staggered feel to several of the tunes, which is where the melody may have a time signature that contrasts to the rhythm. Jeff Titon describes this point by saying, “although instrumental accompaniments provide a four beat measure in

¹⁴⁸ Titon, Jeff Todd, *Early Downhome Blues*, 137-174. Ethnomusicologists, such as Titon and David Evans, have broken down blues into considerably more specific terms. The intention here is to give an overview on the general bluesiness of the tunes rather than a comprehensive analysis.

4/4, the melodies sometimes suggest a four beat measure in 12/8, that is, four groups of triplets, each beat being divided into three equal parts.¹⁴⁹ In several of the tunes studied here, the melody changes on the second beat of a new measure, rather than the first. Therefore, the staggered feel of the melody in a particular tune is simply where the melody overlaps the 4/4 quality of the rhythm.

1. “Avalon Blues,” Narmour and Smith

Key of G

This tune has very little blues feel. The rhythm, which is played by a guitar, is very upbeat. Melodically, the tune sounds more European than most of their other tunes. “Avalon Blues” shares more of a similarity with the melody of “Listen to the Mockingbird” than any rural blues music from Mississippi. It even has a strangely Mexican Huasteca-like choppy phrasing. Nevertheless, it shares little or nothing melodically or rhythmically with African American influenced rural blues, like the very bluesy sounding “Carroll County Blues,” also by Narmour and Smith.

There is also a second variation on the tune that has basically the same melody, but has an even more Mexican sounding phrasing. This tune is bluesy in title only.

2. “Bankhead Blues,” Nations Brothers

Key of D.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 145.

This is a very lively upbeat blues tune. It shares some similarity with Carroll County Blues. The guitar plays the rhythm, and stays mostly on the tonic chord for the entire time. The basic rhythm plays 3 beats of D, then changes for a half beat.

Structurally, it shares characteristics with other blues tunes due to the somewhat strange changes from part to part. For instance, one part will begin on the fourth measure of another part i.e. BBBA. There is a staggered feel in the melody, because it starts the next part without finishing the first.

The C part is different than the other two parts. It shares a similarity with the Narmour and Smith tune “Carroll County Blues,” rhythmically, melodically and structurally.

3. “Carroll County Blues,” Narmour and Smith

Key of G

“Carroll County Blues” is a very lively and upbeat tune. It is one of the more famous white blues fiddle tunes, especially from Mississippi. It is most likely the first blues tune recorded for commercial recordings by a white fiddler.

Narmour, the fiddler, plays the melody with a “backstep” feel. The backstep is when the A part melody holds out another beat (5 instead of 4) in a particular part. This gives the staggered feel and the indescribable strangeness in the rhythm. “Carroll County Blues” is not the only tune that Narmour and Smith play with a staggered melody/rhythm. In “Captain George Has Your Money Come,” the duet utilizes this same technique. This tune, however, is not as bluesy at

“Carroll County Blues.” Its A part shares some similarity in the with the A part of the Floyd Ming tune “Tupelo Blues.” Later, Ming would play “Carroll County Blues,” indicating that Narmour could have inspired his fiddling at some point.

Being the first Mississippi blues fiddle tune recorded by a white man is what separates this song from the rest. Since it was the first, it was also a potential catalyst for many of the other tunes with at least the word “blues” in the title to follow suit. Many of the “blues” fiddle tunes are, in fact, not bluesy at all. Carroll County Blues is more suited to comparison with folk blues, or what Jeff Titon would refer to as “early downhome blues.” This folk blues is different than the popular blues that Peter Muir has explored.

Interestingly, there is more than one “Carroll County Blues.” “Carroll County Blues Two” and “Carroll County Blues Three” are completely different from the original. Narmour and Smith have several tunes that they have recorded multiple versions.

The second “Carroll County Blues” has the same feel as the original tune. Melodically, the A part has the same repetitive phrasing that is found on the original. Rhythmically, it is nearly the same, due to the solid driving guitar playing a 4/4 rhythm that barely accents the first and third beats more than the second and fourth. “Avalon Blues” has essentially the same rhythm, with the exception that it has a faster tempo. “Carroll County Blues Two” has a quick, turnaround-like B part. This B part has the melodic feel of a reel, rather than a blues tune.

The third “Carroll County Blues” has, much like the other two variations, the same basic rhythmic accompaniment. The most similar aspect of this tune is

the B part, which has the same bouncy feel that the original has. It also has the same resolution that the original has. The A part to “Carroll County Blues Three” is fairly innocuous and bland. It sounds more like a backup part to a song than a tune that stands on its own.

4. “Dry Town Blues,” Leake County Revelers

Key of G

This tune does not have a quality that would make it considered a blues tune. It sounds more like a ragtime or square dance tune. The A part is a driving major sounding melody. The A part rhythm plays a I, IV, V progression. The B part plays a I, V progression. The driving quality of both the melody and rhythm sound like a square dance style tune that could be heard in any other region of the country, such as Appalachia. Therefore, the word “blues” in the title is not only misleading, it is a misnomer. Perhaps this song is indicative of marketing at some point in the sale and trade of commercial music. It also has very long A parts and a very small and less often occurring B part.

5. “Leake County Blues,” Leake County Revelers

Key of C

This tune does have the characteristics of the blues in most of the parts. A high fifth tone is heard on most of the first and third beats of every A part measure (it is a 2/4 time signature). This fifth tone is recurring and gives the tune its blues feel. The structure of the primary part of the tune is: AAABBBBAAA(B

rest). The fourth measure is a B part instead of an A part. This is what gives the song the either “stepping back” or even “steeping forward” feel, that can give any tune a blues sound.

This primary part of the tune is repeated eight times. For the first three and last three times (total of six) the melody is basically identical. However, for the fourth and fifth time a variation of the melody is played. The rhythm does not change, and this variation is played nearly identical both times through. The variation simply includes more ornamentation in a bluesy manner. Therefore, at this point the tune does not lose any of its inherent bluesiness.

The second part of the tune acts more as a bridge, than a C part. After the primary part of the tune has repeated itself eight times, the bridge part begins. It has the quality of a waltz or a more popular tune (or perhaps a popular blues tune) with a major, rather than blues oriented feel. This part has an AAAB structure and repeats itself once, for a total of two times through. After this part, the original melody plays through one final time.

“Leake County Blues” is an interesting tune because it clearly combines elements of a rural folk blues sound with a more popular sound in the bridge section. Viewed in this light, this tune embodies much of what is important to consider when listening to white blues music, or any blues music for that matter: that both black and white people were listening to both rural folk music as well as popular music of the time.

6. “Lee County Blues,” Jim Henry Boley

This tune was never recorded, so there is no description. However, in the interest of thoroughly discussing fiddle tunes named blues, it is included among the others that were recorded.

7. “Limber Neck Blues” Narmour and Smith

Key of D

Narmour and Smith were an interesting duo, due to the eclectic combination of material they performed. This tune has very little blues sound or feel in the melody. It shares the same rhythm that many of their other tunes have, which is comprised of a medium tempo driving and steady guitar. Again, the guitar emphasizes most of the beats equally, with the slightest of accents on the first and third beats.

The melody is a jumpy and lively sounding reel, with a European or, even Irish sounding feel.

8. “Lincoln County Blues,” Nations Brothers

Key of D

Much like the Leake County Revelers “Leake County Blues,” The Nations Brothers’ “Lincoln County Blues” also has a very bluesy feel. The emphasis of the fifth tone is again found in the first phrases of the A part. Another aspect that works to give it this feel is the rhythmic drone of the D chord on the guitar as the

primary drive, which is found in much blues music that features the fiddle/guitar combination.

The structure of “Lincoln County Blues” is similar to many white blues fiddle tunes. It has an AAAABBBB structure that comprises the bulk of the tune. The first three A’s are a consistent melody in conjunction with the rhythm of the guitar. On the fourth A, the melody tapers off and hold a note that leads neatly into the B part of the melody. This back-step feel is found again and again in the Mississippi white blues fiddle tunes.

In the middle of the recording, there is a playful “jump” in the rhythm guitar that the fiddle, which is playing the melody, follows. The guitar accents all four beats, over which the fiddler plays two notes back and forth in a musical “see-saw” before playing a slurry, bluesy passage. This gives “Lincoln County Blues” a very happy feel, which is one of those indescribable elements in music that can rarely be quantified without a thoughtful listen.

9. “Lonesome Blues,” Leake County Revelers

Key of C

This is yet another tune that has very little blues other than in the title. In fact, it shares more resemblance to the interestingly titled “Monkey in the Dogcart.” There are two aspects that give this tune very little bluesy feel. The first is the upbeat tempo. Nothing about the recording of this tune sounds “Lonesome” or “Blues-y.” The other aspect is the melodic emphasis on the third tone. It is the first and most dominant note of the A part of the tune. The third tone is what

makes a major (i.e. “happy sounding”) chord “sound major.” The emphasis of a flattened third is what gives a melody a bluesy feel. Also, the flattened third tone is what makes a minor (i.e. “sad sounding”) chord sound minor. The first and fifth tones compliment each other in a benign way when considering major or minor sounds.

The B part of “Lonesome Blues” is basically a variation of the A part melody that is played an octave lower. Instead of using the high open E string as a drone string, the low G string is used, which also tends to sound considerably more major. “Lonesome Blues” is also similar to “Monkey in the Dogcart” in this regard, which also shares a B part that is very similar melodically to the A part and an octave lower. The most noticeable difference is that “Lonesome Blues” is around thirty beats per minute slower.

10. “Railroad Blues” Nations Brothers

Key of D

The “Railroad Blues” is an interesting synthesis of a train mimic tune and the blues. The A part has the “chugging” rhythm of a train. The B part has a definite blues feel and would be considered an upbeat blues tune on its own. The Nations Brothers were really able to capture the essence of the blues feel in their blues tunes.

Interestingly enough, “Railroad Blues” predated the famed “Orange Blossom Special.” The “Orange Blossom Special” is one of the most famous American fiddle tunes that has ever been composed and recorded. Everyone

from beginner fiddle players to country music legend Johnny Cash has played their rendition of this tune.

11. “Tequila Hop Blues” Narmour and Smith

Key of D

One of the more interesting tunes recorded by any of the artists, duos or bands. “Tequila hop Blues” has a melody that is very bluesy and is played rather high on the fiddle. The rhythm guitar is similar to “Carroll County Blues” and many of the other tunes by Narmour and Smith. The chord structure of the melody is unusual, and it has the feel that the B part actually changes key.

The A part of the tune has a high, howling melody that reaches the high D note and is played in second position on the fiddle. “Tequila Hop Blues” has a backstep feel and it is at times difficult to gain a sense of the timing between A and B parts. This unusual timing is indicative of both Narmour and Smith, and many other white Mississippi blues performers.

12. “Tishomingo County Blues” John Hatcher

Key of D

“Tishomingo County Blues” is unique for two reasons. The first is that the recording is solo fiddle instrumentation. The second is that it was a field recording rather than a commercial recording. This automatically puts the creation of the tune in the hands of the folk and takes away the potential for a

record company to change the title, or change the way it was played, or any other potential commercial marring that may have taken place.

There are three parts to “Tishomingo County Blues.” The structure is AABCC. This is a solo fiddle instrumental, so it is automatically different than the rest of the tunes that have an accompanying instrument(s). However, the rhythm can be played with guitar accompaniment. The majority of the tune has a simple I chord (D) rhythm played repeatedly, with a V (A) change in the B part. This sounds correct, while keeping up with the sounds of the majority of white blues fiddle tunes. The transfer of solo fiddle to fiddle/guitar duet allows it to be analyzed with the rest of the commercial recordings of Mississippi fiddle music.

13. “Thirty First Street Blues” Leake County Revelers

Key of F or E

This tune is unusual compared to the rest of the Mississippi blues fiddle canon. It is a song, rather than an instrumental. “Thirty First Street Blues” begins with the fiddle leading the melody, which is more similar to a popular blues song or any other popular song of the time. In a folk blues capacity, this song is represented in title only.

After the entire melody, which is the equivalent of a verse, is played one time through, the singing begins. The singing is actually more of a yodel, which would indicate a similarity with a more popular country singer, such as Jimmie Rogers. Following a short yodeling section, there is a spoken dialogue part. This type of dialogue frequented recordings of this era.

“Stop that thing boy, stop that thing. Haven’t I done told you that I was blue?”

“How come? How come?”

“Well because (...indecipherable)”

The song then begins, which has multiple harmony parts as well as yodeling call and response. Furthermore, the melody has a I IV III change in the rhythm, which is more representative of a popular song than a folk song. “Thirty First Street Blues” is indicative of the influence of popular music on Mississippi string band music. Other tracks by the Leake County Revelers demonstrate this versatility as well. In fact, they were as versatile as any of the other string bands recording at that time, regardless of regional origin. Bob Wills recorded a tune by this title as well.

14. “Traveling Blues,” Freeny’s Harmonizers

Key of F or E

This song has more of a popular sound, with the rhythm indicating a more ragtime or popular blues sounding song. It begins with the guitar and banjo playing a ragtime like upbeat stomp with the fiddle playing the melody two times through. Then the song is sung.

Song Lyrics:

I lay around feeling blue

Don't know what in the world I'm going to do
Roaming round, gambling around
all around in lonesome town
Nobody knows and nobody cares
How I may linger, how I may fare
Travelling around, feeling blue
Got those traveling blues

After this, the fiddle plays the melody several times through again.

There is nothing indicating this song as anything other than a popular sounding song. It has the thematic lyric structure of any popular blues song, whether it originates in a Tin Pan Alley or a Western Swing style song. The chord structure in the rhythm have a very typical ragtime feel, with several I, I7, II, V changes. There is also a major VI in the turnaround, which is commonly found in much ragtime and popular blues music.

15. "Tupelo Blues," Floyd Ming's Pep Steppers

Key of B or C

"Tupelo Blues" is yet another instrumental tune by a Mississippi string band with the word "blues" in the title. There is some element of a blues feel in the melody itself. However, the instrumentation and upbeat tempo show no indication that the tune was inspired by anything other than a square dance. Like most of the other Ming tunes, "Tupelo Blues" features the lively stomping in the

recording on the first and third beats. The rest of the rhythm is by a guitar and a mandolin. The mandolin is played very loosely and rhythmically, like most of the mandolin rhythm that is found in string band music of the same era. The driving mandolin “chop” is found mostly with the music of Bill Monroe and most mandolin music thereafter.

Another feature of “Tupelo Blues” is the calls or “hollers” said during the recording. It is difficult to decipher exactly who is saying what in these recordings, but the calls definitely give the feeling of a square dance or house party. Interestingly, if the melody is taken separately from entire rhythmic accompaniment, it has a much more bluesy feel.

Conclusion of Analysis

The number of tunes here that one can classify as either bluesy or not-bluesy divides about equally. Therefore, it would be safe to say that the word “blues” in a song title can be misleading, especially in the canon of Mississippi fiddle tunes that are played by white performers. Some of the tunes that did not make the cut as a “blues” tune have elements of blues, but overall do not consistently have a blues feel. The performers or record companies may have included “blues” in the song titles in order to sell more sides. Likewise, the performers may have included blues in order to appear more appealing and heighten their chances of recording more sides, thus making more money. Regardless of the reason, this analysis demonstrates that by and large the white fiddlers were recording under the popular blanket title of the blues. However,

many were capable of playing very bluesy fiddle, and this conclusion in no way indicates the frequency in which they performed true blues tunes or the depth at which they were influenced by their black musical contemporaries and the blues they played.

CHAPTER 5:

THE CURRENT STATE OF MISSISSIPPI FIDDLE MUSIC

Mississippi now has a scene of fiddlers in the state who play old time, bluegrass, country, and Irish fiddle styles, as well as others. This scene is relatively small, by comparison to other states. However, Mississippi's fiddling tradition is not dead. In fact, there are pockets of people interested in the continuance and preservation of fiddling and old time music in the Magnolia State. In New Albany, the Mississippi Fiddle Contest is held annually. Also, there is the Mississippi Old Time Music Association. They host the Great Big Yam festival every year, whose name is a throwback to the collection of recordings made by Herbert Halpert in 1939. Furthermore, there are several get-togethers around the state for those fortunate enough to be "in the know." The scene is here, it is just somewhat difficult to visualize, due to the lack of popular support that other states have.

For fans of the blues, there are several large festivals held across the state. The Juke Joint Festival in Clarksdale and the Delta Blues Festival in Greenville attract thousands of visitors annually, from Mississippi, as well as many international blues enthusiasts. There are countless other festivals across the state that attract large numbers of tourists as well. There is a well-established Blues Trail, which provides visitors with physical landmarks around the state and

showcases various sites of blues history interest. Furthermore, there are museums that focus on blues music, history and culture. There are museums in Clarksdale, Leland, not to mention the relatively new B.B. King Museum in Indianola. Needless to say, a blues enthusiast will find more than enough music, historical sites and museums to stay well occupied in Mississippi.

Unfortunately, this is not true of Mississippi's country music legacy, which includes old time fiddle music. There is a newly established Country Music Trail, which has been made possible by supporters such as Mississippi native and country star, Marty Stuart. The Country Music Trail will showcase such talent as Jimmie Rogers, Elvis, and even Stuart. In addition to these well-known names, there are other amazing individuals who have contributed to country music such as Carl Jackson and songwriter Paul Overstreet. Unfortunately, there is still a void in Mississippi's musical legacy. The old time fiddle music was, and still is, crucial in understanding the full breadth of Mississippi's music and culture. In addition to showing how people of the state perceive themselves, fiddle music tells us much about family history and migration patterns.

There is no clear answer to old time fiddle music's relatively scant amount of attention. The purpose of exposing this void is not to provide any answers of potential cultural activism. Likewise, this exposition is not intended to draw attention away from any other style of music, such as blues, which is crucial to the state's self identification. Rather, the idea of who these fiddlers are needs to change. They were not all white. The African American fiddle tradition is perhaps one of the most scholarly lacking aspects of the United States musical history.

Countless reports about antebellum plantation life include the incidence of slave fiddlers. Unfortunately, that is one scholarly battle that may be lost to the unerring strength of time. However, it is the responsibility of scholars to always consider the silences, rather than that, which is always heard.

CHAPTER 6:

PHOTOGRAPHS

With two exceptions, I took the following photos. These are two events, which are indicative of the Mississippi old time music scene. The first is the Down From the Hills festival in New Albany, Mississippi. It is a contest, so many of the musicians here are competitive and looking to win cash prizes. The second event is a relaxed backyard jam in Mendenhall, Mississippi hosted by Johnny Rawls at his home. These two events show the varying instances in which fiddle music is played in contemporary Mississippi.

New Albany, 2010

I took the following photos at the Mississippi Old Time Fiddle Contest in New Albany in 2010. At this particular event, I acted as a participant/observer. I acted as a fieldworker by discussing fiddle music with many of the participants that were there and photographed the event. As a participant, I took part in the fiddle contest, winning 3rd place. By doing both, I was able to show the other fiddlers that I understood the fiddle music, while gaining trust and insight into their musical past.



Figure 1. Wayne Carter

Wayne Carter, descendant of the group Carter Brothers and Son. He is playing a fiddle that he constructed himself.



Figure 2. Young Male Fiddler

This photo demonstrates that fiddling has not been lost on the youth of Mississippi.



Figure 3. Young Female Fiddler

Here, a young female fiddler is shown among other youth, thus demonstrating that there are groups of young people, male and female, who are practicing fiddle music.



Figure 4. Men and Women

Here are two females playing banjo and mandolin, thus showing that old time music is not strictly a patriarchal endeavor in the 21st century.



Figure 5. Mandolin Half

Wayne Jerrolds, a Tennessee fiddler, won first place at the contest in 2010.

Here, he shows the mandolin half of his mandolin/fiddle that he made.



Figure 6. Fiddle Half

Here is the fiddle half of his mandolin/fiddle.



Figure 7. Side View

Here, you can see how the mandolin/fiddle is constructed, as well as his belt bow holder he constructed.



Figure 8. Author Performing

This is me participating in the contest, backed by Doug Anderson.

Photo by Jake Fussell, 2010.



Figure 9. Author

This is me after winning 3rd place at the 2010 Mississippi Fiddle Contest.

Photo by Jake Fussell, 2010.

Mendenhall, 2009

This was a backyard musical gathering of friends. This is how many of the musicians spend their weekends. They gather at a different persons home and play music all day. On this particular occasion, former Mississippi Highway Patrolman Johnny Rawls hosted the event at his home in the country in Mendenhall. In addition to music, it is customary to bring a dish, so the potluck is both musical and prandial.



Figure 10. Johnny Rawls

Here, Johnny Rawls is shown playing banjo in the foreground. Note how the cars are parked off of the gravel road and the varying ages of the musicians.



Figure 11. Pat O'Mire

Here are men and women all playing music together. The fiddler in the center is Pat O'Mire. The man on the far right is accompanying with a snare drum.



Figure 12. Accordion

In addition to fiddle, Pat O'Mire brought a Cajun accordion.



Figure 13. Banjo and Mandolin



Figure 14. Woman Playing Mandolin

The women shown here are playing mandolins.



Figure 15. Backyard Jam

Here is an overview of everyone playing together in the backyard.



Figure 16. Washtub Bass

This is a homemade washtub bass. It has almost the same presence and volume as an upright bass played *pizzicato*.



Figure 17. Potluck

Between songs, everyone ate the various dishes that were brought, potluck style.

CHAPTER 7:

AFTERWARD

As a Mississippi fiddler, my journey never really ends. Whenever I play the fiddle, I am carrying the torch of those before me. Wherever I go, I take the tradition, like my great grandfather's fiddle, with me. When I listen to the old scratchy recordings, I am reminded time and time again that I am not the first and will not be the last Mississippian to play fiddle. This, I take comfort in. This is the comfort in knowing that the music I love and respect is carried on by those who follow me, just as it was by those who preceded me. I find solace in knowing that my voice is but a fleeting echo, buried deep within the resilient stone and mortar of the walls of time.

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